

# ***DAMN.:*** **THE ART AND IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING**

Est. Time: 45-90 minutes

Subjects: Art, ELA, Social Studies

Age Range: High School

See the full lesson [here!](#)

★ *TEACHROCK* ★



How do Kendrick Lamar's album *DAMN.* and the work of photojournalist Gordon Parks tell stories that bring attention to social issues?

In this lesson you will:

- Explore Kendrick Lamar's album *DAMN.*, and its cultural impact
  - Examine the work and activism of Gordon Parks
  - Consider the art of storytelling and how it can be done through photos and music
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Consider or discuss with a friend or family member:

- In what ways can we tell stories? Where do you hear or learn stories?
  - Can you give an example of a story you find compelling? What makes it compelling? How is the story told? What does the storyteller do to make the work engaging or intriguing?
  - How can music tell stories?
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In 2017, rapper Kendrick Lamar released his fourth studio album, *DAMN*. It was the follow up to Lamar's magnum opus *To Pimp A Butterfly*, which garnered critical acclaim amongst fans, music critics, and even academics along with controversy. *DAMN*. was met with the same reception and earned Lamar a Pulitzer Prize for Music, the first non-jazz or classical album to win the prize.



In 2015, Lamar performed his hit song “Alright” at the BET Awards. Read Document 1 in **this handout**, which is a transcript of the reaction to Lamar’s BET Performance by the anchors of Fox News’ The Five.





Consider or discuss with another person:

- What are the show hosts' reaction to Kendrick Lamar's performance? Why don't they appreciate the performance?
  - If you were Lamar, how would you respond to their critique?
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## DNA

Read **Document 2 - “DNA”** in the handout. You may also listen to the song using any streaming platform or however you access music. Pay particular attention to the bridge of the song (around 1:40 in the song.)



Consider or discuss with another:

- Who do you think Lamar is addressing with this song?
  - In the bridge, where Lamar overlaps his vocals with a sample of Geraldo Rivera's critique of his 2015 BET performance, what do you think the intended effect is? What is Lamar's tone?
  - Why do you think Lamar included the snippet of the criticism from FOX News anchor Geraldo Rivera? Do you think the song serves as a response to it? If so, explain Lamar's position.
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*DAMN.* and the accompanying music videos were inspired by more than just Lamar's lived experiences. The music video for "ELEMENT." is composed of scenes directly inspired by the work of photojournalist, filmmaker, and activist Gordon Parks.

Read Document 3 - Gordon Parks in **the handout**, or watch 2-3 videos from **a series of interviews** with Gordon Parks from the *Visionary Project*.





Using the platform **Google Arts and Culture**, look through the images of Gordon Parks' notable photo essay for Life Magazine "A Harlem Family."

Published in 1967, the photo essay focused on the life of the Fontenelle family who lived in poverty in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City.





Look through the images on **this handout** from the music video for “ELEMENT.” and the Gordon Parks’ image it’s inspired by. Take time to observe each set. Consider the emotions the images evoke and what stories Parks and the music video might be trying to tell.





Consider or discuss with another:

- What can we infer about America through Gordon Parks images?
  - What can we infer about America through the stills from the “ELEMENT.” video?
  - The quote at the bottom of Document 3 is from Gordon Parks who said, “I got fed up with hearing all these people, even Negroes, ask, ‘Why are those people rioting?’ My personal project was to show them why.” In what way might these photographs speak to Parks’ “Personal Project?”
  - Why might have Lamar sought inspiration from Parks’ work? What does this say about America today especially when viewing the work of Lamar and Parks’ side by side?
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# SUMMARY

- Telling stories, including those of lived experiences, provides windows into perspectives and experiences along with giving a voice to those who are marginalized
- The ways in which we tell stories vary as they can be told through music, photography, paintings, writing, film, - the possibilities in how stories are told are endless



# BE CREATIVE

Tell your own story! It can be about your own lived experience, a particular moment from your own life, your hometown, someone you know or look up to, a hobby, a passion, anything! Select a topic of focus and decide on a medium to tell your story (writing, photography, art piece, dance, song, film, slideshow, a podcast, even a Tiktok - any medium you think is best to tell your story). You may collaborate with a friend, peer, or other person on a project.



# BE CREATIVE

Research and create a presentation on one of Gordon Parks's most famous photographs, "American Gothic" (1942) which is a response piece to Grant Woods' 1930 iconic piece of the same name. Consider the following resources while you research the significance of the photograph:

- **An audio recording** from TIME Magazine in which Parks discusses the photograph.
- A New York Times **biography of Ella Watson**, the subject of the photograph.
- Information on Grant Wood's "American Gothic" (1930) from **Google Arts and Culture**, which inspired Park's image with the same name.



# BE CREATIVE

To help develop your project, consider the following questions:

- How are the two pieces similar? How are they different visually?
- Why do you think Parks chose to reference Wood's piece?
- How do these two pieces depict America?
- In what ways might Park's "American Gothic" provide commentary to Wood's "American Gothic"? Is he presenting anything Woods neglected?

# BE CURIOUS

Listen to *DAMN.* in its entirety. After listening, write a one page summary of the album. Pay attention to any motifs or repetitions of certain lines. What story is Kendrick Lamar trying to tell? How does the end of the album compare to the beginning?

According to Lamar, the album can be played in reverse (Starting with “DUCKWORTH.” and ending with “BLOOD.”). If you would like, you may listen to the Collector’s Edition of *DAMN.* which features the reverse tracklist, available on streaming platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music. Does the story change at all compared to the standard version of *DAMN.* (beginning with “BLOOD.” and “DUCKWORTH.”)? If so, how is it different when the order of the tracklist is reversed?



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