

Harlem in Ink

Trace how 1920s Harlem shapes a letter's form, style, and point of view.

11.RL.3.A "Explain the influence of the historical and cultural context on form, style, and point of view of texts that represent diverse voices and perspectives."

NAME _____

DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK _____ Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline details that reveal the historical or cultural setting, and circle three choices in the letter form or musical style that show how that setting shapes the narrator's point of view.

Fictional Letter from Harlem, 1926

Dateline: Harlem, October 1926

Dear Lottie,

I write after closing time at the 135th Street library, where I shelve books beside Mr. Schomburg's growing collection. Back in Georgia, I had to hide my poems under the mattress. Here, readers ask for new magazines before their ink is dry. Still, the landlord raised Mama's rent again, and the elevator in our building stops only when it feels like it. Tonight I will take this letter to the post office, then ride the crowded train north to our apartment. I want you to know Harlem is not one bright song. It is music, work, worry, and room to speak.

On Saturday, Mr. Reed, a barber from Virginia, read one of my verses and frowned at its loose lines. "A poem ought to keep time," he said, tapping his razor strap. I answered that Duke Ellington's band did not march in a straight line either. At the rent party downstairs, a woman sang blues about a husband who had gone west for work. Her verses repeated like footsteps, then bent around a joke. I copied her rhythm in my notebook, not because sorrow is pretty, but because it tells the truth in a language our neighbors recognize. In Harlem, even an argument about rhyme carried the sound of migration.

Your cousin may imagine cities erase the color line. I cannot write that lie. The library welcomes me, yet publishers print fewer writers who sound like us, and police question boys who gather on corners. So I make this letter both report and invitation. I name the crowded rooms, the unpaid bills, and the piano rolling through the floorboards. I also send my poem, folded inside. If you come, bring your stories from Georgia. The people here are building a chorus, but no chorus is honest when one voice must sing for everyone. Write back in your own words, not the words you think a northern girl wants to hear.

Your cousin, Evelyn

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE _____ Use the passage

- 1** How does the letter form fit the narrator's historical situation and purpose? Use two details from the passage.

- 2** How do references to Duke Ellington, blues, and a rent party shape the style of the passage?

- 3** Identify one detail that challenges the narrator's hopeful view of Harlem. How does it affect the narrator's point of view?

- 4** Why does the narrator compare Harlem's people to a chorus and ask Lottie to write in her own words?

Write a 120–150 word fictional letter or diary entry set in the Harlem context supplied by the reading. Use at least two style choices that connect this context to the speaker’s point of view. Then explain those two connections in 3–4 sentences. Do not present your invented narrator as a real historical witness.

Write 120–150 body words; greetings, dateline, and closing are outside the count. Use readable letter or diary formatting and context details from the passage.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Explain context and craft

In 3-4 sentences, connect two specific style choices to historical/cultural details and explain the resulting point of view. These sentences are outside the message word count.

PART 1 • READ AND MARK

Underline details that reveal the historical or cultural setting, and circle three choices in the letter form or musical style that show how that setting shapes the narrator's point of view. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 • ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does the letter form fit the narrator's historical situation and purpose? Use two details from the passage.	The narrator writes to a cousin in Georgia, reflecting migration to Harlem, and uses the letter as both a report about Harlem and an invitation for the cousin to bring her own stories.
2	How do references to Duke Ellington, blues, and a rent party shape the style of the passage?	They give the passage a musical, rhythmic style. The narrator values loose lines, repetition, and rhythms that reflect Harlem's Black cultural life.
3	Identify one detail that challenges the narrator's hopeful view of Harlem. How does it affect the narrator's point of view?	Possible details include rising rent, poor housing, publishers printing fewer writers like the narrator, or police questioning boys. These details make the narrator's view realistic and critical, not simply celebratory.
4	Why does the narrator compare Harlem's people to a chorus and ask Lottie to write in her own words?	The narrator believes Harlem needs many honest voices and perspectives. She does not want one person or one version of life to represent everyone.

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Dateline: Harlem, October 1926

Dear Lottie,

The library shelves are crowded, and so is our room. I like one kind of crowding better than the other. Today a reader asked for poems about people who sound like us, and I carried the request home as carefully as a borrowed book.

Downstairs, the rent-party piano keeps repeating a phrase. Again it rises, again it falls, and again somebody laughs over the keys. I have started a poem with that returning beat. Music does not pay every bill, but it gives the room a language large enough for worry and delight.

Do not picture Harlem as a place where unfairness disappears. Picture a place where we keep answering it. Write about Georgia in your own rhythm; a letter should carry your voice, not borrow mine.

Your cousin, Evelyn

Context and craft

The repeated “again” draws on the letter’s rent-party music and gives the speaker a persistent, communal voice. The crowded-shelves/crowded-room contrast connects cultural opportunity with housing pressure, making her hopeful without erasing difficulty. Addressing Lottie directly keeps the migration experience personal and invites a distinct Southern perspective rather than claiming to speak for everyone.

TEACHER ASSESSMENT NOTES

Both letters are newly authored historical fiction, not archival quotations. Model body: 127 words, excluding dateline, greeting, closing, and explanation. Accept other purposeful choices supported by the supplied context. Do not grade one narrator as representing all Black experiences. NYPL records confirm that the 135th Street branch acquired Arturo Schomburg’s collection in 1926:

<https://www.nypl.org/spotlight/schomburg-centennial/timeline>. Rent-party music and migration supply context within the fictional source; students need no absent enclosure or outside poem to answer the questions.