

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.

Letter from Harlem, 1926

- ① 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.
- ② 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.
- ③ 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.

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?

3 YOUR TURN _____ Your own words

Write a 120 to 150 word literary message from a speaker living in a historical or cultural context. Choose a form, such as a letter, diary entry, speech, or text message, and use at least two style choices that reveal how the context shapes the speaker's point of view.

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)

Topaz, Utah, March 1943 Dear Ken, The wind has powdered our table with desert dust again, so I am writing with a handkerchief over the page. From our barrack window, the mountains look close enough to climb, but the fence cuts the plain into a hard square. Mother says to finish schoolwork before the stove loses its heat. Father folds the newspaper quietly when neighbors discuss the loyalty questionnaire. I used to write our address as Oakland, California. Now I write this camp number, then cross it out in my mind. At night, Mrs. Tanaka teaches us songs from before the removal. I copy their steady beat, not to make this place gentle, but to remember that our lives began beyond these guards. Please keep my baseball glove dry.

Accept answers that connect a specific setting detail to a choice in form, style, or point of view. For the open task, look for an identifiable context, a purposeful form, and style choices that reveal the speaker's perspective.