

The Voice

by **Kia Penso**

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OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	* Ages 14+ * Grades 9+
Genre/s	* Short essay
Length	438 words
Content Advisories	* Indirect allusion to racism * Story deals with being blind
One Sentence Summary	The author recalls a tense moment on the streets of Washington, D.C. when no one stopped to help a frustrated blind woman until two men unexpectedly intervened.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Topics * Stopping to help others in need * Disability / navigating the world with a disability * Social and economic issues in Washington, D.C. that affect Black communities in particular * Altruism
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Themes * Action vs. inaction * Not making assumptions about people * The different ways in which people are rendered invisible (economic or social status, disability, ethnicity, gender, age, etc.)

Lesson Planning	
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	<p>History of segregation in Washington, D.C. “Segregation and Concentrated Poverty in the Nation’s Capital” https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2015/03/24/segregation-and-concentrated-poverty-in-the-nations-capital/ (https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2015/03/24/segregation-and-concentrated-poverty-in-the-nations-capital/)</p> <p>Washington D.C’s building with slave labor and restorative justice efforts: https://www.npr.org/2017/04/28/526085106/georgetown-university-to-offer-slave-descendants-preferential-admissions</p>
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * <i>Parable of the Sower</i> by Octavia Butler (novel) * <i>She is Not Invisible</i> by Marcus Sedgwick (novel) * “I, Too, Sing America” by Langston Hughes (poem) * “A Chant of Darkness” by Helen Keller (poem) * “Helen Keller” by Langston Hughes (poem)
Author and Artists Information	<p>Kia Penso is a writer and editor raised in Jamaica and living in Washington, DC.</p> <p>Rosalind Helfand was the Managing Editor of Literature for Life (renamed Locavore Lit LA) and is a photographer.</p>
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	<p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10. (http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/9-10/5/)5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3</p>

Author Biography

Kia Penso was born in New York City and raised in Kingston, Jamaica. She earned her PhD in English from the University of California, Santa Barbara and later her MS from Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. Her study of an American poet, *Wallace Stevens, Harmonium, and the Whole of Harmonium*, was published in 1991. She has worked as a writer and editor in California, the Caribbean,

New York City, and Washington, DC where she lives. She has worked extensively as an editor and writer for national and global organizations.

Artist Biography

Rosalind Helfand was the Managing Editor of Literature for Life (renamed Locavore Lit LA) and is a photographer.

SYNOPSIS

In this short essay, a blind woman in Washington, D.C. seeks to cross the street and is frustrated by the cobblestones. The writer and others look on but do not move to help. They are locked in indecision about whether and how to assist when two men on bicycles stop at the corner. The writer observes that the men, who are black, appear to be poor and to have had hard lives. She calls them the “Invisible People of D.C.” The onlookers are looking away when, contrary to their expectations, the men are the ones who finally call out to reassure the blind woman, and help her across the street.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic and Main Ideas

How well do we pay attention to the plights of others (human or animal) in our daily lives? Write about a time you noticed a stranger in need but did not help them. Describe the scene and the person. Describe what you thought and felt in that moment.

Then, write about a time you noticed a stranger in need but did help them. Again, describe the scene and the person, and what you thought and felt in that moment. Why did you help?

If you could go back in time, would you help the person you didn't? Why or why not?

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following passage from “Voices”:

“Two black guys on bicycles came down the street and stopped at the corner, waiting to cross. Not span-dex-and-water-bottle cyclists, but I-can’t afford-a-car cyclists. One of them had dreadlocks.”

In a 10-minute journaling exercise, write about the kinds of assumptions, both conscious and un-conscious, that we make about people based on how they appear (or, if we can’t see them, their name, gender, sexuality, or other indicators that we use to try to establish an idea of someone’s identity). Is this right? If you couldn’t see someone and knew nothing about them other than what they had to say or how they acted towards you, how might that change your perception of them?

As a class, discuss how we make assumptions and the ethics of this. How does seeing what someone looks like, or noting other things about them before we actually get to know them, change our perspective? How can we avoid this trap?

Consider how not seeing can be both literal and figurative. How do we sometimes choose not to see people or something that is happening near us?

Universal Themes

Look up the concept of altruism. In your journal, summarize what it means then reflect on whether it’s possible to be totally altruistic. Why help others if there’s no clear benefit?

As a class, discuss whether the cyclists in “Voices” were being altruistic.

Then discuss whether it’s possible to be totally altruistic and what would motivate someone to be altruistic.

Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
scene	irregularly	Lou Rawls
expected	hazard	The Stylistics (1970s soul music group)
progress	dreaded	The O’Jays (R&B group)

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
randomly	whacking	The Temptations (1960s-70s music group; Mowtown Records)
frustration	vaguely	The Ink Spots (1930-40s American pop group)
courthouse	cobblestones	
pavement	consumed (obsessed)	
stamping	uttering	
miserable	livid	
dreadlocks	spandex	
intimate	velvety	
reassuring	baritone	
hesitant	rich (full)	
marvelous	reluctantly	

Vocabulary Activity Options

1. What does “livid” mean? In a journal exercise, explain what it means and discuss how the meaning of “livid” is different from the words “angry” and “enraged.”

After writing about the different meanings, write about a time when you specifically felt livid.

2. What words are used in “Voices” to describe how voices sound?

After brainstorming a list of words as a class, break the class into teams of 4-5 and compete to see which team can list the most words describing how voices sound in 5-minutes. At the end of the time period, list the words on the board, count them up, and declare the winning team.

3. List all the action words that reveal how the blind woman is feeling.

Then, write a short story about a time you were upset or agitated (but did not resort to physical violence). Reveal how you felt only through your actions in the story. Include words that you listed in “Voices” in your story.

4. What words refer to non-sight sensations experienced by the woman in “The Voice”?

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. What is meant by the “Invisible People of D.C.” in “Voices”? Is it possible for a person to be in plain sight yet invisible to others? In your journal, reflect on these questions and write about situations where it might be possible for people to be invisible in plain sight — not just for you but for people living in your community. Discuss your responses as a class.
2. Why didn't the narrator of “Voices” stop to help the blind woman? Should they have?

As a class, discuss whether and when we're obligated to help others in need. What's the difference between being legally obligated to help others and simply helping because it's the right thing to do? If we don't always have to help others, why do we anyway?

3. What was the narrator's reaction to the bicyclers helping the blind woman? Why does the bicyclers' action stand out?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. What is the conflict in “Voices”? Cite evidence from the text to illustrate your answer.
2. Who are the characters in “Voices”? List each of them together with a brief character description based on clues from the text.
3. What makes the blind woman decide to trust the cyclists? Explain your answer citing evidence from the text.
4. Who is the most vivid character in “Voices”? Explain why.
5. How can the events and characters of “Voices” be interpreted as metaphors for life? Identify at least one metaphor and explain your answer.
6. What do the elements of the photograph illustrating “The Voice” represent from the story? Is the photograph a literal or figurative representation? Explain your answer.

Writing Exercise Options

Narrative

Imagine “Voices” told from the blind woman's perspective. Why is she angry? How did she end up in that place at that moment? What did she feel when the cyclist spoke? Why did she decide to trust him?

Rewrite “Voices” from the blind woman's perspective. Write about what she hears, what her tapping reveals, how she feels, and what she thinks. Include details of her backstory for the day as you imagine it.

Descriptive

How do you think the cyclists might have viewed the other people described in the story, including the narrator?

Rewrite “Voices” from the perspective of the cyclists, and include vivid imagery describing who they see and what is happening. Include their thoughts. What were they thinking when they stopped?

Analysis

Who are the “Invisible People of D.C.”? Research social and economic issues affecting people who live in Washington, D.C., as well as income and social status disparity.

In a three to five page essay, analyze in depth who is most affected by these disparities in Washington, D.C. and discuss how such disparities might render them “invisible” to people with greater social and economic advantages. Include in your analysis references to “Voices,” including the narrator’s assumptions about the cyclists based on how they were dressed.

Complementary Reading Text Option

Read following two poems by Langston Hughes, “I, Too” and “Helen Keller.”

I, Too **by Langston Hughes**

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,

“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.

Besides,
They’ll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Helen Keller
By Langston Hughes

She,
In the dark,
Found light
Brighter than many ever see. She,
Within herself,
Found loveliness, Through the soul’s own mastery.
And now the world receives From her dower:
The message of the strength
Of inner power.

Writing Exercise

In a short comparative essay, discuss in what ways the cyclists and the blind woman might relate to the poems citing examples from the stories and the poems. In what ways did they each exhibit strength?

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

Break the class into five groups and assign each group one of the five musical acts or singers mentioned in “Voices.” Ask each group to research and listen to samples of the music in their group. They must each choose one song that they believe best exemplifies the quality of voice that engendered calm and trust in the blind woman in “Voices.”

After choosing the songs, each group must present a clip from the song they chose and have one representative of the group explain why they chose it.

Classroom Activity Two

Break into groups of four students. Based on clues given in “Voices,” attempt to pinpoint the location of the intersection described in the story. Then, map out the scene — include all of the people mentioned, the buildings, trees, etc.

Then, come back together as a class and present each group’s map — where did they pinpoint the action of the story? How did they map out everything? Choose the map that best reflects how the class imagines the scene.

Next, turn the strongest map into a painted wall mural (this can be on butcher paper covering the wall). Assign groups to work on the various elements of the mural such as the people, the buildings, the background, etc.

Home Activity

Conduct a mini-study to discover when family members and/or friends have made the decision to help a human or animal in need and acted on that decision. Devise 3-5 questions to ask each of 3-5 people for your study and conduct oral interviews. Take notes on the participants’ responses. Include questions about when these events happened and what motivated them to take action. What was the outcome of their actions? Was there a reward or not? Would they do it again? Why or why not.

After conducting the interviews, write a 3-5 page report that includes a comparative analysis of the participants’ responses.

Guest Speaker

Option One: Invite the author and / or artist to come and speak with your class.

Option Two: Invite a member of the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition to come and speak with your class about bicycle culture in Los Angeles.

Option Three: Invite a member of the Braille Institute to come and speak with your class about their services and how people who are or become blind navigate the world (including the tech world and cell phones) and how students can be sensitive to their needs. The member can also touch on the varying degrees of blindness and what it means to be legally blind.

Field Trip

Option One: Take a trip to the Braille Institute in Los Angeles and learn about their services and how people who are or become blind navigate the world and how students can be sensitive to their needs.

Option Two: Visit The Bicycle Kitchen in Los Angeles and learn about their Los Angeles bicycle riding culture, the value of bicycle riding, and their services for cyclists.

Writing Exercise:

Take notes during the field trip. Then, spend 5-10 minutes writing a journal entry that discusses how your view of the blind woman or the bicyclers in “Voices” has changed or expanded based on what you learned during the field trip.

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Writing Exercise

In “The Voice,” small words of encouragement motivate the woman to keep going in a moment of hopelessness. In a one-page response, describe an instance when this was true for you—when you were either the voice of encouragement or its receiver. Include sensory details to give the reader a sense of place.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in Text Type and Purposes standards 1-3.)

Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 9-10 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.6: Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career-readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10. (http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/9-10/5/)5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in Text Type and Purposes standards 1-3.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in Text Type and Purposes standards 1-3.)

Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.