

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

In 1964, the artist Norman Rockwell painted a powerful image titled "The Problem We All Live With." This painting tells the true story of a brave six-year-old girl named Ruby Bridges. During that time, many schools in the United States were "segregated." This meant that Black students and white students were forced to go to different schools. In 1960, Ruby became the very first Black student to attend William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans.

Look closely at the painting and list what you see.

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Look at Ruby's face and the way she is walking. If you were Ruby, what three emotions would you be feeling in this moment? Explain why you chose those words.

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Imagine you are standing on the sidewalk with Ruby. List three sounds you might hear. How do these sounds make you feel?

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# A HERO'S WALK



Norman Rockwell titled this painting The Problem We All Live With. Why do you think he chose that name? What is one thing we can do today to make sure everyone feels welcome at school.

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In the space, draw a time when you had to be brave or stand up for someone.

# Teacher's Guide: Norman Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With"

This guide is designed to help you lead a classroom through a deep dive into Ruby Bridges' story using Norman Rockwell's iconic 1964 painting. Suggested grades 4 to 6.

## Phase 1: Leading the Discussion

When discussing sensitive historical topics, use the "See, Think, Wonder" method to keep students grounded in the visual evidence before moving to emotional interpretation.

1. See: Ask, "What do you see?" (Only facts: a girl, men in suits, a tomato, a wall, colours, space, cropping, focal point, etc. ).
2. Think: Ask, "What do you think is happening?" (She is going to school; they are protecting her).
3. Wonder: Ask, "What does this make you wonder about our history?"

Teacher Tip: Acknowledge the graffiti on the wall briefly and age-appropriately. Explain that it represents the "unkind words" and "anger" of people who didn't want schools to change, emphasizing Ruby's bravery in the face of that noise.

## Phase 2: Analyzing Art Elements & Principles

Use these talking points / or ask guiding questions to help students understand how Rockwell "tells" the story through art:

- **Composition (Cropping):** Notice how the Marshals' heads are cut off. This is a focal point technique. It makes the adults look like a "human wall" of protection, while keeping the focus entirely on Ruby.
- **Colour (Contrast):** Ruby's dress is bright, crisp white. This creates high contrast against the dull, dirty grey wall. The white symbolizes her innocence and makes her stand out as a "light" in a dark situation.
- **Movement (Rhythm):** Look at the feet. Everyone is in the same "mid-stride" position. This creates a sense of rhythm and movement, showing that despite the obstacles, the group is moving forward and cannot be stopped.
- **Symbolism:** The yellow armbands and the star on the badge represent authority and law, while the "splat" of the tomato represents conflict.

- **Use of colour:** The soft, hazy colours of the wall make the scene feel like a piece of history. It looks like a memory or a news clipping. This makes the bold, solid colours of Ruby and the Marshals pop out even more. Notice there is a big difference between the "soft" colours (the peachy-tan wall and the Marshals' light grey suits) and the "harsh" reality of the situation (the red tomato splat and the graffiti). This contrast makes the viewer feel the tension of the scene.
- **Focal point:** In art, the focal point is the part of the picture that the artist wants you to look at first. Rockwell used several "tricks" to make Ruby the focal point: Contrast: He put her in a bright white dress against a dark, dull background. Framing: He placed her in the center, surrounded by the four tall Marshals who act like a "frame" around her. Cropping: By cutting off the Marshals' heads, he makes them less "human" and more like objects, ensuring your eyes land right on Ruby's face. By making the wall and the men's suits very light and similar in tone, Rockwell ensures they "fade" into the background. This leaves Ruby's bright white dress as the only crisp, clean thing in the frame, making her look even braver in a messy environment.

### Phase 3: The Worksheet Questions

These are the refined questions from our session, organized for a student handout:

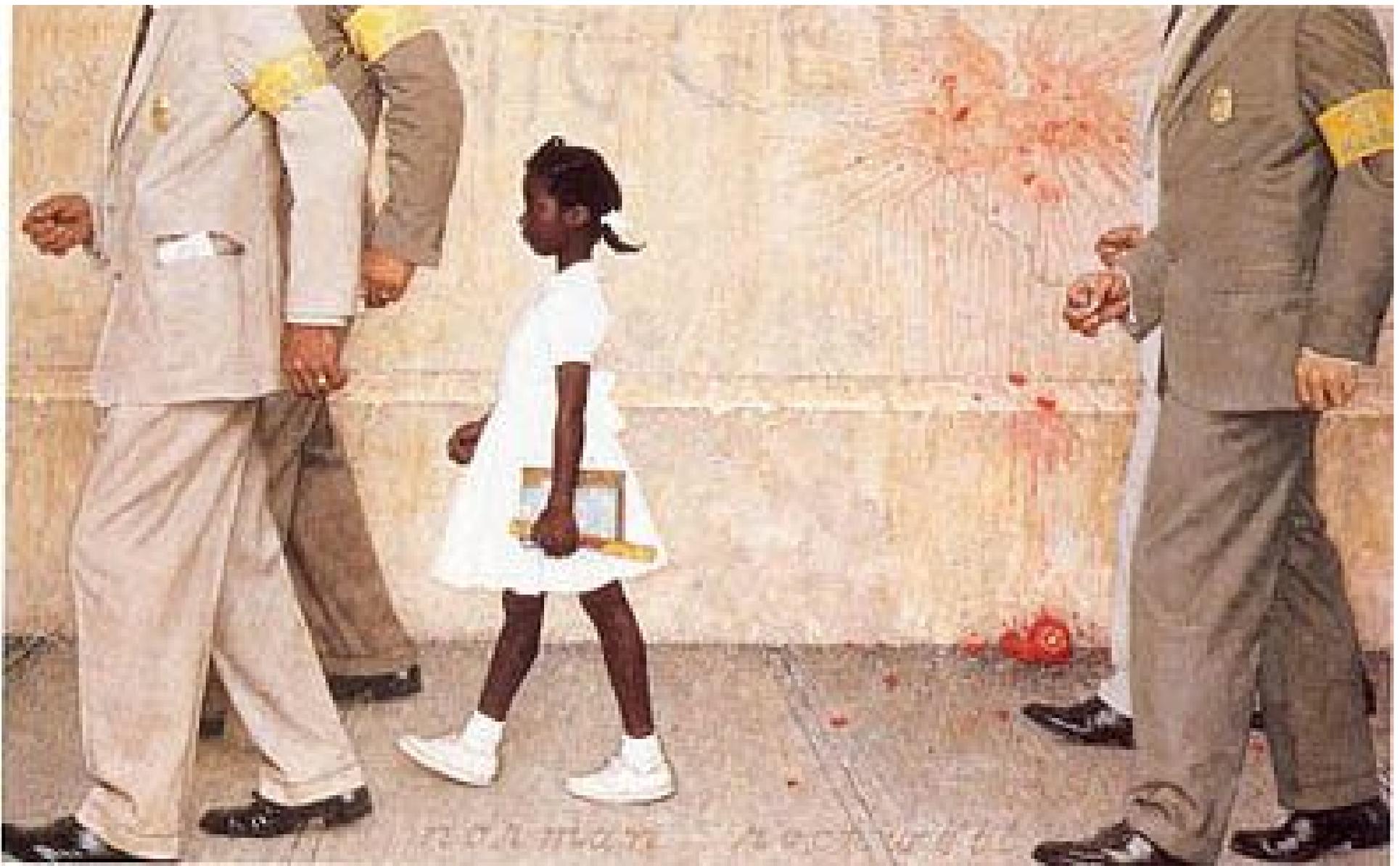
- **Visual Evidence:** How does the artist use colours and shapes to show that Ruby is the most important person in the picture?
- **Empathy:** Look at Ruby's face and the way she is walking. If you were Ruby, what three emotions would you be feeling? Explain why.
- **Sensory:** Imagine you are standing on the sidewalk with Ruby. List three sounds you might hear. How do these sounds make you feel?
- **Reflection:** The painting is titled *The Problem We All Live With*. Why do you think it has that name? What is one thing we can do today to make sure everyone feels welcome at school?

### Phase 4: Historical Context for Teachers

This is just a simple summary of the painting. You can find additional information to support the discussion.

- **The Subject:** Ruby Bridges was 6 years old in 1960 when she integrated William Frantz Elementary.
- **The Artist:** Rockwell painted this for *Look* magazine after leaving *The Saturday Evening Post*, specifically because he wanted to address social justice issues more directly.
- **The Medium:** Oil on canvas.

- Segregation: The law that kept people of different races apart.
- Integration: The act of bringing people of different races together (what Ruby was doing).
- Perspective: Both the physical angle of the painting (looking at Ruby from a child's height) and the way we understand someone else's feelings.
- The N-word. It is a racial slur written in graffiti directly above Ruby's head. In a classroom, this is a heavy moment. Many teachers choose to address it by saying:
  - a. "The Mean Word": Explain that there is a very hateful, "bad word" on the wall. You don't have to say it out loud, but you should explain that it was put there to make Ruby feel like she didn't belong.
  - b. The Power of the Slur: Discuss how the use of racial slurs was a tool of systemic racism. This language was not just "hurtful"; it was used to dehumanize Black people and reinforce a social hierarchy of white supremacy. In the context of this artwork, the word serves as a reminder of the hostile environment the artist is critiquing.
  - c. Ruby's Bravery: Point out that even though that word is right behind her head, Ruby doesn't look at it. She keeps her eyes forward. This shows her incredible strength and dignity.
- "KKK": A reference to the Ku Klux Klan, a hate group known for its history of racial violence. Its presence in the artwork symbolizes the intense hostility and threats Ruby Bridges faced from those who fought to maintain segregation.



Rockwell, N. (1964). *The problem we all live with* [Oil painting]. Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, MA, United States.

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