

Activity: Observe and Interpret

Born in New York, Jacob Lawrence had only second-hand knowledge of the South, passed down from his Virginia-born mother and South Carolinian father. He remarked in 1961: "[In 1941] if you weren't born in the South, your parents were. Your life had a whole Southern flavor; it wasn't an alien experience to you even if you had never been there."

*In 1941, he and his wife, artist Gwendolyn Knight, traveled to New Orleans and were struck by the harsh segregation and bigotry they experienced. Lawrence began making paintings that documented the life of African Americans in New Orleans, including *Bar and Grill*. What information can we learn about segregation and life in the South in the early 1940s from this painting? What clues does Jacob Lawrence give us?*



Bar and Grill, 1941, Jacob Lawrence, gouache on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Observation: What do you see?

Describe the physical layout of the bar.

A wooden wall bisects the room, running floor to ceiling, from the entrance doors to the bar. The wall is not solid, and some light shines between the wooden slats. The wall does not bisect the room equally. The space on the left, where we see only White patrons, is larger than the room on the right side of the wall, reserved for Black customers. A long solid bar in the foreground of the painting links the two sides of the room. The bar appears to tilt up slightly at the right end of the composition, and coupled with the diagonal line of the ceiling sloping slightly downward, makes the room on the right appear smaller and more crowded.

What amenities are available to the customers on either side?

Notice the ceiling fan on the left side, available to cool the air for White customers only. Drinking glasses line a shelf behind the bar, yet are kept separate for Black and White customers. On the left, glasses are arranged in a pyramid; on the right, they are lined up. Paralleling the separate glassware are separate faucets or spigots, two on the right side of the



wall and two on the left. Each set has a spout with black tubing running down, outside of the frame.

How are the patrons depicted on either side of the dividing wall? Does their experience differ?

Behind the bar, a white barkeeper reads a newspaper on the left side of the painting, on the side of the house reserved for White patrons. Three men drink at the bar, the lines of their lapels, shirts and neckties contrasting with their black and white suits. Their faces seem serious and the angles of their bodies cause the eye to travel one to the next, then back to a figure in red and a scowling figure behind them.

As we turn our attention to the right side of the bar, we begin to note differences. The dark-skinned figures here are smaller in scale, which makes them seem both far away and child-like. The woman in red whose v-shaped neckline rhymes with the glass in front of her sits with eyes downcast. A man to her right smokes, but has no ashtray. Two figures near the door overlap with arms outstretched and interlocked fingers, perhaps dancing.

Interpretation: What does it mean?

Traveling to the South for the first time, Jacob Lawrence makes the deeply-entrenched segregation that he and his wife experienced abundantly clear. Black and White patrons in the bar are separated by a wall and made to use separate entrances, and the services (as symbolized by the barkeeper) appear to be more readily provided to White customers. Amenities, in the form of the ceiling fan and ashtray, are not available to Black patrons. Water faucets and glassware are kept separate. White customers are depicted as equal to one another in size and unified in the artist's use of color, and their facial expressions appear unwelcoming.

