

Young Portrait Explorers: Henrietta Lacks



Learning Objective: Discover the life of Henrietta Lacks through Kadir Nelson’s vibrant portrait and learn about her **legacy** (or her important place in history).

Portrait Discussion:

Spend 30 seconds letting your eyes wander from the top of the painting to the bottom.

Clothing: Look closely at Henrietta Lacks’s clothing. What is she wearing in this painting?

What colors and shapes do you see? Her deep red dress is covered in a flower pattern. The flowers on her dress represent **cells** (or the tiny structures that make up a person’s body). Henrietta Lacks is best known for the unusual cells that scientists and doctors found in her body as she was being treated for cancer. These cells were so unique that they were named **HeLa cells** after **Henrietta Lacks**. What else is Henrietta Lacks wearing in this portrait? Did you notice her hat? What shape is it? The circles of her hat make up a **halo** (a circle of light surrounding the head of someone who is extraordinary). Artist Kadir Nelson painted a halo around Henrietta Lacks because he wanted everyone to know that she was special. What qualities make you special?

Background: What **patterns** (or shapes/designs that repeat) and colors can you find in the background? Can you spot the **intricate** (or detailed) blue shapes? Use your finger to trace the outline of one of these blue shapes. Did the shape that you traced resemble a flower? There are many flowers in this portrait, both on Lacks’s dress and in the background. Did you know that all living things (plants and flowers, animals, and humans) are made up of cells? Henrietta Lacks’s body was made up of cells, just like yours and mine. But her cells (or HeLa cells) were special. HeLa cells are able to continually make copies of themselves, similar to the way in which Kadir Nelson has repeated one shape to make a pattern.

Facial Expression: What emotion do you see in Henrietta Lacks’s face? Is she sad or happy? Henrietta Lacks was a warm and happy person, even though she was sick at the end of her life. She loved her family dearly and had a welcoming smile. Can you smile like Henrietta Lacks?

Pose: How is Henrietta Lacks standing? Her shoulders are back, her arms are crossed in front of her body, and her head is tilted up. Can you pose like Henrietta Lacks? How does it make you feel? Do you feel confident, strong, or brave? Henrietta Lacks was a strong and brave woman. Can you see what she is holding in her hand? Henrietta Lacks is holding a bible. She had a very strong faith that gave her strength to fight her illness. Do you have an object or a person that makes you feel brave or strong?

Historical Context: *Henrietta Lacks’s HeLa cells have allowed scientists to discover many new things about medicine and the human body, but Lacks herself was never able to see her cells help other people. Scientists experimented with the HeLa cells for many years but never asked permission or gave credit to Lacks and her family. In fact, it was a long time before her family even knew about the HeLa cells. If you were the main part of a scientific discovery, would you want to know about it? Henrietta Lacks was almost left out of scientific history, but fortunately we know her story. Thanks to artists like Kadir Nelson who painted her likeness and the many writers who wrote about Lacks, her legacy lives on.*

Related Children’s Books:

Little Doctors Cell Biology for Babies by Dr. Haitham Ahmed

Activity: Making Patterns

Materials:

Paper

Drawing utensil or a stamp and ink pad or paint

Instructions: Artist Kadir Nelson used flower patterns to represent HeLa cells. The flower pattern in the

background is large and blue, while the flower pattern on Henrietta Lacks’s dress is smaller. Now it’s your turn to create a pattern. What shapes will you use to make your pattern? Circles or triangles? Will your pattern be small or large?

Feel free to draw a pattern or use stamps to create one!



Henrietta Lacks (HeLa): The Mother of Modern Medicine by Kadir Nelson, oil on linen, 2017. Collection of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of African American History & Culture; gift from Kadir Nelson and the JKBN Group, LLC. © 2017 Kadir Nelson

Find the portrait on our website, here: https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2018.9