

“The Bowery”

The Basics

Time Required

1 class period

Subject Areas

Middle School Humanities

Development of the Industrial U.S., 1870-1900

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

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The Lesson

Introduction

America’s urbanization since the time of the Civil War led to crowded and ethnically diverse cities. Where large mansions were built in the mid-1800s, cities began to erode. The wealthy moved out of crowded downtowns as transportation improved and once elegant living spaces were taken over by the poor working class. One such area in New York City was the Bowery, a street in Manhattan that divides Chinatown and Little Italy from the Lower East Side. Although it is now enjoying an improved status, at the end of the nineteenth century it was considered a place of low life, bars, and crime.

“The Bowery” was written for the musical comedy *A Trip to Chinatown* in 1891. Although set in San Francisco, the song is about New York City and it conveys the perception of both the danger and the excitement in the new urban areas.

Guiding Questions

How would the living conditions of a poor factory worker differ from a rich factory owner?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to identify the living conditions of tenement residents.

Preparation Instructions

Song used for this unit: “The Bowery”

Lesson Activities

After listening to a recording of “The Bowery,” discuss the following:

1. What feeling does the first verse give about New York?

It was a difficult night. “I’ll never go there anymore!”

2. Describe the incident of the second verse. What does “pulling your leg” mean?

A policeman chases away a man who claims to know the singer though it’s his first night in New York. When the cop asks if the man was pulling the singer’s leg (tricking him), the reply indicates that he

doesn't know what the phrase means. Then the policeman tells him to "Get off the Bow'ry," ostensibly for being ignorant about life there.

3. What is the misunderstood phrase in verse three?

"Cut it short" means to stop talking but the barber cuts the man's hair short.

4. In verse four what are the opposite meanings the singer of the song encounters?

"Held up" means robbed but the man says "knocked down" instead.

5. What does this song say about the Bowery?

It is strange, not easily understood, and a rough place to live.

Assessment

After the class discussion, assign the following topic for the students to write an essay.

Contrast the vision of America in *The White City* with the reality of slum living.

Extending the Lesson

1. Read "The Tenement House Blight" by Jacob Riis, *Atlantic Monthly* 83, no. 500 (1899): 761, 770–71. Write a short dialogue between the little boy who lived in this slum dwelling and the visitor from the song "The Bowrey." Use some of the new slang terms from the song in the dialogue.

2. Select a diagram of a tenement dwelling to show students. Have students draw the floor plan of an apartment house or hotel they have visited. Compare how crowded it is with the tenement diagram. Where would sun and air enter the rooms?

"The Bowery"

Oh! The night that I struck New York
I went out for a quiet walk
Folks who are "on to" the city say
Better by far that I took Broadway
But I was out to enjoy the sights
There was the Bow'ry ablaze with lights
I had one of the devil's own nights
I'll never go there any more

The Bowery! the Bowery!
They say such things and they do strange things
On the Bowery! The Bowery!
I'll never go there any more

I had walked but a block or two
When up came a fellow and me he knew
Then a policeman came walking by
Chased him away and I asked him, "Why?"
"Wasn't he pulling your leg?" said he
Said I, "He never laid hands on me!"
"Get off the Bow'ry, you yep!" said he
I'll never go there any more

The Bowery! the Bowery!
They say such things and they do strange things

On the Bowery! The Bowery!
I'll never go there any more

I went into an auction store
I never saw any thieves before
First he sold me a pair of socks
Then said he, "How much for the box"?
Someone said, "two dollars," I said "Three"
He emptied the box and gave it to me
"I sold you the box, not the socks," said he
I'll never go there any more

The Bowery! the Bowery!
They say such things and they do strange things
On the Bowery! The Bowery!
I'll never go there any more

I went into a concert hall,
I didn't have a good time at all
Just the minute that I sat down
Girls began singing "New Coon in Town"
I got up mad and spoke out free
"Somebody put that man out," said she
A man called a bouncer attended to me
I'll never go there anymore

The Bowery! the Bowery!
They say such things and they do strange things
On the Bowery! The Bowery!
I'll never go there any more

I went into a barber shop
He talked till I thought he would never stop
I said, "Cut it short," he misunderstood
Clipped down my hair just as close as he could
He shaved with a razor that scratched like a pin
Took off my whiskers and most of my chin;
That was the worst scrape I ever got in
I'll never go there any more

The Bowery! the Bowery!
They say such things and they do strange things
On the Bowery! The Bowery!
I'll never go there any more

I struck a place that they called a "dive"
I was in luck to get out alive
When the policeman heard my woes
Saw my black eyes and my battered nose
"You've been held up!" said the copper fly!
"No, sir! But I've been knocked down!" said I

Then he laughed, tho' I couldn't see why!
I'll never go there any more

The Bowery! the Bowery!
They say such things and they do strange things
On the Bowery! The Bowery!
I'll never go there any more