

## **Historical Disasters and the Great Chicago Fire**

### **The Basics**

#### **Time Required**

2-3 class periods

#### **Subject Areas**

High School English and Creative Writing

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

#### **Common Core Standards Addressed:**

Writing Standards for English Language Arts 6-12

#### **Author**

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### **The Lesson**

#### **Introduction**

The three songs of this lesson, “Billow of Fire,” “Lost and Saved,” and “Passing through the Fire,” were written in response to the Great Chicago Fire which happened on October 8, 1871. They are used as an example for the students to follow in researching a historical disaster. One song, “The Billow of Fire,” was written by P.P. Bliss, a popular Christian musician of the time period. He had a short career, dying at the age of 38 in a train wreck along with his wife. He was especially noted for his character songs and hymns. The other two songs, “Passing Through the Fire,” and “Lost and Saved,” were both composed by George F. Root, a rather prolific writer who was best known as a composer of sacred and patriotic music. He published over 500 pieces of music in his lifetime.

The Great Chicago Fire, the disaster which serves as a research model, is most widely connected to the rumor that Mrs. O’Leary’s Cow kicked over an oil lamp which sparked a fire that soon raged out of control. The fire, which occurred on October 8, 1871, burned over four square miles, including the business district, of Chicago, and 300 people lost their lives in the blaze. In addition to the loss of lives, approximately 90,000 people were left homeless. Despite the rumor of the cow, other factors have been established as contributing to the severity of the disaster. These factors include the fact that the busy city was built mostly of wood, there was a severe lack of precipitation, and October was unseasonably warm. A series of technological and human failures also disrupted the alarm system.

#### **Guiding Questions**

What do you know about the Great Chicago Fire?

How does a disaster affect the lives of people living in a city?

## **Learning Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- List the varieties and specific types of historical disasters
- Identify and list causes and results in relation to a particular disaster
- Identify any myths that might be connected to a particular disaster
- Learn from disasters to determine preventative measures
- Demonstrate ability to follow model and complete research
- Use creativity through production of a final writing piece
- Participate actively in a class discussion involving historical disasters
- Demonstrate ability to compare and contrast a variety of songs, and evaluate songs through answering questions

## **Preparation Instructions**

Songs used in this lesson:

“Billow of Fire” by P.P. Bliss (1871)

“Lost and Saved” by George F. Root (1871)

“Passing Through the Fire” by George F. Root (1871)

## **Lesson Activities**

- Begin with a discussion and review of the concept of historical disasters.
- Students will be introduced to the concept of basic research (research using newspapers, books, magazines, and the internet) and “Power” research which involves evaluation of music of the time period.
- Students will then be shown an example to follow for their research. As a class, we will discuss the causes, results and myths of the Great Chicago Fire. We will also listen to and evaluate three songs written at the time of the fire.
- After a discussion of the three songs, students will compare and contrast the three songs as a class (orally with teacher writing responses on the board)
- Following the compare and contrast activity, students will then be given their assignment, which is to write a 5 page short story where fiction meets reality. The students will need to research a historical disaster in the same way that the model was presented, create a character or characters and place them within the context of the event. Students will be informed that they may not change the ultimate outcome of the disaster, but must work within the confines of what their research has shown them.

### **Song discussion questions and activities:**

All three songs will be discussed separately and then will be compared and contrasted. All discussions will be completed orally as a class.

### **“The Billow of Fire”**

- What can be learned about the Great Chicago Fire from the song?
- What seems to be the tone of the song?
- Does the speaker seem positive or negative? What clues indicate this?
- What is meant by the lines in the chorus? Explain how it relates to the rest of the song.

### **“Passing Through the Fire”**

- What seems to be the tone of the song?
- Who is the speaker? What clues indicate this?
- How does the speaker seem to feel about the fire?
- What can one learn about the Great Chicago Fire from the song?

### **“Lost and Saved”**

- What seems to be the tone of the song?
- Who is the speaker? What clues indicate this?
- What can one learn about the Great Chicago Fire from the song?
- The song appears to have a story. Summarize it.

### **Assessment**

Students will choose and research a historical disaster. They will also locate a song to enhance their understanding of the disaster and evaluate it. Following their research period, they will create a character or character and place them within the context of the disaster. They will write a 5-page short story where fiction meets reality.

### **Resources**

#### **Lyrics**

##### **“Billow of Fire”**

1.  
Hark the alarm, the clang of the bells!  
Signal of danger it rises and swells;  
Flashed like lightning illumine the sky,  
See the red glare as the flames mount on high!

##### **CHORUS**

Roll on, roll on, oh, billow of fire!  
Dash with thy fury waves higher and higher!  
Ours is a mansion abiding and sure,  
Ours is a kingdom eternal secure.

2.  
On like a fiend in its towering wrath,

On, and destruction alone points the path,  
"Mercy of Heaven" the sufferers wail,  
Feeble humanity naught can avail.

(CHORUS)

3.  
Thousands are homeless and quick in their cry,  
Heaven born charity yields a supply,  
Upward we glance in our terrible grief,  
"Give us this day," brings the promised relief.

(CHORUS)

4.  
Treasures have vanished and riches have flown,  
Hopes for the present life [--] and gone.  
Courage, oh, brother, yield not to despair,  
"God is our refuge" His kingdom we share.

(CHORUS)

"Lost and Saved"

1. Fairer than the lily, Sweeter than the rose,  
Was our little darling, at that autumn twilight's close;  
Sweetly she was sleeping in the angel's care,  
When we joined the footsteps thronging  
to the house of prayer.

chorus

Strange were the sounds when  
the service was through,  
Fierce the red glare that then burst on our view,  
Dreadful the words that rose higher and higher,  
Lost in the Fire! Lost in the Fire!

Quick we hasten'd homeward,  
But the flames were there,  
And the frighten'd crowd were  
surging here and ev'ry where.  
Oh, my precious darling, Who can save her now,  
For the roof is burning, and  
the chimneys sway and bow.

chorus 2

Still the strange sounds when  
the service was through.  
Still the fierce glare bursting red on our view,  
Still the dread words rising higher and higher,  
Lost in the Fire! Lost in the Fire!

When, oh sight of rapture! At the open door,  
Stood the little bare feet on  
the hard and heated floor,  
'Mama, come and take me. They said you were here,'  
Then we knew the angels saved her, for none else were near.

chorus 3

What tho' the sounds rush'd the wide city through.  
What tho' the glare was still bright in our view,  
Chang'd were the words that rose  
higher and higher,  
Saved from the Fire! Saved from the Fire!

“Passing Through the Fire”

1. Flames! flames! terrible flames!  
How they rise, how they mount, how they fly.  
The heavens are spread with a fierce lurid glare,  
Red heat is filling the earth with air,  
While, mercy! mercy! We hear the despairing ones cry.

chorus:

Passing thro' the fire! passing thro' the fire,  
And it is our Father's hand,  
Tho' we may not understand  
Why we're passing thro' the fire,  
passing thro' the fire!

2. Flames! flames! terrible flames!  
How they sweep, how they rush, how they roar.  
See the hideous tongues round the roof,  
tree and spire,  
As swells their wild carnival higher and higher,  
Till falling! crashing! Our glorious  
city's no more.

3. Flames! flames! terrible flames!  
What a fearful destruction they bring.  
What suffering and want in their train follow fast,  
As forth on the streets homeless

thousands are cast,  
But courage! courage! From the mid'st of the  
furnace we sing.

**Other resources:**

All sources used were web sources:

- <http://www.chicagohs.org/fire>. This website has a plethora of information!
- <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/today/oct09.html>
- <http://www.pdmusic.org/bliss.html>
- <http://www.pdmusic.org/root-gf.html>
- <http://civilwar.bluegrass.net/HomeFront/georgefrederickroot.html>