

Gnaw on the Gobbet

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The conceit is simple: you're a historian who finds a photograph or letter in a forgotten attic or archive. To share your discovery, you write three short paragraphs: one putting the piece in historical context, one analyzing the piece itself, and one assessing its place in the historical record.

That is the primary source analysis the British call a "gobbet." Gobbet literally means a piece of food and the goal is to chew on it. Adam first encountered gobbets as a student in Scotland, and we both appreciate their capacity to mold students into historians. One can write a gobbet on almost any primary source: a political cartoon, a recipe, a Parliamentary speech. Our favorite, for our Grade 10 Canadian History students, are excerpts culled from pages 17 and 46-47 of a book called *The Black Candle*.



Figure 1. *The Black Candle* by Emily F. Murphy.

The Black Candle was published in 1922 by Emily Murphy as an account of the drug trade which she claimed was then sweeping Canada. Here's the excerpt:

...A man or woman who becomes an addict seeks the company of those who use the drug, and avoids those of their own social status. This explains the amazing phenomenon of an educated gentlewoman consorting with the lowest classes of yellow and black men. It explains, too, why sometimes a white woman deserts...her half-caste infant, or on rare occasions brings it to the juvenile court for adoption.

Under the influence of drugs, the woman loses control of herself; her moral senses are blunted, and she becomes "a victim" in more senses than one. When she acquires the habit, she does not know what lies before her; later, she does not care.

A young woman who came to my office after her release from jail, complained bitterly that now, because she had become normal again, she was unable to attain motherhood. Physicians have since assured me that the woman's claim was correct; that drug-addiction leads to amenorrhoea [i.e. being unable to menstruate]...

In the face of a persistently falling birth-rate, drug addiction is of the utmost importance, and is another reason why the scourge [i.e. harmful thing] should be firmly dealt with in Canada.

Dr. C.W. Saleeby has recently pointed out that in Great Britain, in 1919, for the first time, the deaths have actually exceeded the births. He also points out that there are more Germans in Germany than there are Britons in the whole of our Empire, and contends that in a generation or so, these prolific Germans, with the equally prolific Russians, and the still more fertile yellow races, will wrest the leadership of the world from the British

Wise folk ought to think about these things for a while.⁷⁴

So how do our students "chew" on this? For their context paragraph, they are often initially stumped: they don't recall learning about a 1920s drug crisis! Some might remember Emily Murphy as one of the Famous Five or recall a *Canadian Heritage* minute we watched saying she was the first female magistrate in the British Empire. Most recognize that Murphy's book was published four years after the end of WWI as a "painful peace" gave way to the "roaring '20s".

Next comes analysis. Students look at Murphy, who appears to be a middle-aged white woman. They infer she is speaking to others of similar status and influence given the line "wise folk ought to think about these things." Most note the racial hierarchy implicit in "consorting with the lowest classes of yellow and black men." They remember a lesson about the appropriation of Chinese culture coinciding with the exclusion of Chinese people by the revised *Immigration Act* (1923). Some link Murphy's arguments to prohibition; some recognize fears connected to the Russian Revolution and World War One. Some recognize that Murphy cited 1919 for evidence about the British death-rate because that year was the height of the Spanish Flu.

To evaluate significance, students often note the excerpt's 1920s typicality (racism, classism, concerns about women reproducing). They may note its value in highlighting a generational divide, something students identified in previous classes when they contrasted the Persons Case with readings about flappers. Particularly savvy students are less taken with Murphy's status as a judge and activist, noting her scant use of evidence and narrow perspective.

We like that these excerpts from *The Black Candle* connect to some-but not all- topics from our unit, forcing students to select what from prior classes is relevant. We like that the format makes students be historians: questioning and analyzing, not accepting and reciting. Finally, we like the exercise of finding value in historical sources. Our school's Civics teacher calls these excerpts "historical fake news". True, but like much "fake news" they reveal the hopes and fears of a particular people at a particular time. That too is a valuable lesson.

⁷⁴ Emily F. Murphy, *The Black Candle* (B. Chung Published Works. Toronto: T. Allen, 1922), <https://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0056290>.