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Teaching Social Studies and History: "The Drunkard's Progress"

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One of my favorite primary sources to use in my class is the 1846 Nathaniel Currier lithograph entitled "The Drunkard's Progress." My students encounter this image during our study of 19th century reform movements. I spend a full class period having them investigate the temperance movement, trying to piece together why the reform movement emerged at this time and how reformers communicated their views to the public. Students are then asked to assess the relative effectiveness of the different appeals, and "The Drunkard's Progress" is always at the center of their responses.

What is it about this image that makes it so engaging for students and effective in the classroom? The image tells a story that students seem to understand as they begin exploring early adulthood. The first step, "A glass with a Friend," could easily be them being offered alcohol, tobacco, or something else at a party with friends. My students also went through the *D.A.R.E.* anti-drug campaign in elementary school, so they quickly connect the early steps to peer pressure and attempts to fit in. "The Drunkard's Progress" almost forces students to make a personal connection to the material. If they haven't been in this situation, they're familiar with a peer or student who has!

Another aspect of "The Drunkard's Progress" that makes it incredibly useful in the classroom is the steps the drunkard experiences as he becomes more and more entangled in the world of "demon drink." Popularity is quickly replaced by poverty, isolation, a life of crime, and then suicide. The rapid progression from having a handle on life to an untimely demise always makes students laugh, but it presents a great opportunity for class discussion. This is the point in the lesson where we look at how the man is dressed in the first few steps and talk about what that reflects about his social status. Is this man a farmer, a laborer, or perhaps a clerk? We also attempt to contextualize the image at this point. Why would drunkenness, which was always frowned upon, become a major societal concern during the Industrial Revolution? How had the world of work changed in a way that made this more damaging than it might have been in the past? Beyond just the world of work, "The Drunkard's Progress" helps students understand the implications of the Market Revolution. Again, we look at the man's appearance. His clothes in the first 3 steps might reflect the increasing availability of consumer goods, and he is certainly well-dressed. Perhaps part of the danger of intemperance was that life was becoming more expensive for many Americans, and every penny spent on drink meant the family budget was stretched even closer to breaking. Observant students break out their magnifying glasses and examine the scene in the arch under the steps to the man's demise. The descent into intemperance impacts not just the man, but also his wife and child. Their idyllic middling life is ruined because of his poor decisions. The vignette also includes what might be a mill, indicating that the employer also suffers because of drink.

A major component of our U.S. History survey is having students make valid connections between the past and their lives. "The Drunkard's Progress" reminds many students of anti-drug or anti-smoking PSAs. They are familiar with the "Truth" ads that discourage tobacco use among teenagers, and they see similarities between those and "The Drunkard's Progress." They quickly identify the use of hyperbole, worst-case-scenario consequences, and the seemingly simple solution to "just say no." One student, familiar with the "Faces of Meth" anti-drug campaign, called "The Drunkard's Progress" a 19th century version of that—an attempt to dissuade unwanted behavior by showing the worst that could happen. Other students have made connections to the "You Drink, You Drive, You Lose" drunk driving campaign. These connections have led to class discussions about what motivates social reformers, how effective their efforts can be, and what factors limit their reach.

I will often pair "The Drunkard's Progress" with the "Cold Water Army Pledge" from the Connecticut Temperance Society:

The drink, that's in the drunkard's bowl,
Is not the drink for me;
It kills his body and his soul;
How sad a sight is he!
But there's a drink that God has given,
Distilling in the showers of heaven,
In measures large and free;

Oh, that's the drink for me.
~H. Reed[1]

By using these together, students develop an understanding that the push for temperance targeted different audiences, just like modern reform movements. At the end of the day, I hope that my students come away from the activity with a better appreciation of the efforts of reformers, an understanding of some of the methods they used to reach the American people, and how we can use historical artifacts to better understand the past. It's a good class when students comment that the fears of drunkenness in 19th century households was a lot like the fears of drug abuse and addiction in the 21st century.

Bibliography

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[1] "Cold Water Army Pledge," Connecticut Temperance Society, ca. 1845, Ms 73428, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT, https://chs.org/2011/06/cold-water-army/.