

Interpreting Political Cartoons to Understand Progressivism

NCSS Thematic Strand: Time, Continuity, and Change

Grade Level: 6-12

Class Periods Required: 50-minute class period

Purpose, Background, and Context:

This lesson fits within a broader study of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency and the Progressive Era. While President of the United States, Roosevelt embarked on a policy of seeking to control corporations that had become huge and powerful. He and other progressives at the time felt these concentrations of power in, for example, the railroad and oil industries threatened US citizens with their power to control prices.

After Roosevelt left the presidency, he later decided to again seek the Presidency. He organized the Bull Moose Progressive Party as a vehicle to again put forth his progressive agenda. As was the case during his Presidency, Roosevelt and the Progressive Party expressed grave concern that there was a danger to the overall public good from concentration of economic power in the forms of monopolies and trusts. For Progressives, the president was the person who should lead the charge against powerful corporate interests.

The attached political cartoon, published in 1907 near the end of Roosevelt's Presidency, depicts him controlling trusts, both "good" ones and "bad" ones. In this lesson students analyze and interpret the cartoon to deepen and reinforce their understanding of trusts, concentration of economic power and Roosevelt and Progressive reformers intentions to control them of the sake of the common good.

Objectives & Student Outcomes:

Students will:

- ❖ "Understand that learning about the past requires the interpretation of sources" (NCSS Standards, p. 31);
- ❖ Understand how historical events and developments can be reconstructed using symbols contained in political cartoons. (NCSS Standards, p. 31);

- ❖ Use political cartoons to reconstruct Theodore Roosevelt’s attitude and policies toward big business. (NCSS Standards, p.32);
- ❖ “Presenting findings in oral, written, visual, or electronic formats” (NCSS Standards, p.33);
- ❖ Analyze a political cartoon and understand it in terms of beliefs held by those living in the past and connect these ideas to similar ideas proposed today.

Materials:

- ❖ Worksheet with political cartoons.
- ❖ Overhead projection of same political cartoon

Procedures:

DAY 1

Procedure 1:

Hand out worksheet to each student and in groups of 3-4. Have students look over the cartoon and answer the questions. Assign a representative from each group to report students’ responses to the questions.

Procedure 2:

Assign another group member to write their answer to one of the assigned questions on the board. In whole group discussion have the assigned recorder read their answers aloud. Tell students to write down other groups’ answers if they differ from their own group’s answers.

Procedure 3:

(Still in whole group discussion) Ask students the questions below:

Tell Teddy Bear story if not previously answered by students:

(Early in his first term (1902) Theodore ‘Teddy’ Roosevelt, was hunting in Mississippi with several companions. Roosevelt had not successfully killed a bear. So, his hosts actually caught a bear, tied it to a tree, and invited the President to shoot it. Roosevelt told his hosts that they would ‘Spare the bear!’ and that he would never shoot a “tethered” animal. The cartoonist Clifford Berryman depicted the scene in a cartoon which was published in *Washington Post*. Coincidentally, two shopkeepers had made for sale a soft bear-like toy, which they named ‘Teddy’s Bear.’ ” In their shop window they displayed side-by-side one of their toy “Teddy Bears” and a copy of Berryman’s cartoon. From there the United States

went “crazy” for Teddy Bears and the shopkeepers went made a fortune from selling the Bears. From then on Roosevelt throughout his political career was often depicted with alongside a bear in a host of political cartoons such as the one students analyze in this lesson plan.

- ❖ Based on your analysis of the cartoon and your small group discussion, how do you think Progressives viewed big business?
- ❖ What were “good trusts”? What were “bad trusts”?
- ❖ How did Theodore Roosevelt differently treat good trusts and bad trusts? How do you know?
- ❖ According to this cartoon, who should be in charge of “taking care” of big business?
- ❖ Ask if anyone has any other observations or questions about the cartoon.

Procedure 4:

Have students turn in their worksheets for assessment.

Assessment of Outcomes:

Analyze a political cartoon by successfully answering questions on a worksheet and through small and whole group discussion.

Teacher collects and checks whether or not students successfully answered the questions. Worksheets will be graded with either a (+) or (-) and will be handed back after graded.

Extensions and Adaptations:

- ❖ Have students create their own political cartoons reflecting Progressive values.
- ❖ Have students do research on school computers or at home to find other cartoons from other eras that convey similar ideas.
- ❖ Show students other cartoons expressing progressive ideas and have them compare and contrast them.

Resources:

“The President’s Dream of a Successful Hunt,” Clifford Kennedy Berryman (1907)
<http://www.picturehistoryprints.com/product/id/1152>

Digital History: Learn About the Progressive Era
<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/progressivism/index.cfm>

PBS American Experience: Presidential Politics Theodore Roosevelt

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tr-politics/>



1) Who is the man in the cartoon?

2) Why is he represented in this way (hunting, his attire, what he is doing)?

3) What do the bears represent?

4) What has the man done with the

bears? What could this represent?

5) (Bonus) Do you know what the small bear in the back represents?