

TOPIC: Pre-Famine Ireland

SUBJECT/GRADE LEVEL: Social Studies, Grade 9.

TITLE: An Englishman Looks at Pre-Famine Ireland: William Thackeray

AIM QUESTION: How does your social position shape your views about pre-famine Ireland?

NEW YORK STATE SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS:

World History: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history, and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

TEACHER BACKGROUND: William Thackeray was a writer best known for exploring what he considered to be the moral and social pretensions of Victorian England. His most famous work is the novel *Vanity Fair*, published in 1847. Thackeray was born in Calcutta, India in 1811. He went to school in London and later traveled widely across in Europe. Thackeray visited Ireland in 1842 and kept a notebook describing his trip. Thackeray died in 1863. His Irish notebooks were published in 1869.

The sections of Thackeray's accounts of life in pre-famine Ireland included in this lesson focus on his descriptions of the Irish peasantry and town dwellers. Typically, Thackeray describes "troops of slatternly, ruffian-looking fellows..., dirty heads..., beggars..., and troops of children." It is not clear if Thackeray believes there is a solution to the problems afflicting Ireland. For example, he reports on a Protestant who claims that he "wants to better the condition of these people," but Thackeray notes that this same man "obstinately refuses to hold communion with those he is desirous to convert." He is also skeptical about government action, noting that the "poor-house, newly established, cannot hold a fifth part of the poverty of this great town."

2.4 An Englishman Looks at Pre-Famine Ireland

AIM: : How does your social position shape your views about pre-famine Ireland?

ASSESSMENT:

- Students will demonstrate the importance of examining and respecting multiple perspectives when explaining historical events.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to examine and explain the significance of primary source documents.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to explain and address bias in personal accounts of the past.

DO NOW ACTIVITY: Examine the ACTIVITY SHEET: An Englishman Looks at Pre-Famine Ireland and answer the question that accompanies the Do Now assignment.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: If an outsider came to visit your community and wrote descriptions of what he or she witnessed, do you think they would be reliable reports? Explain.

TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY: In your opinion, as a novelist and an Englishman, can William Thackeray be considered a reliable commentator on conditions in pre-famine Ireland? Explain.

ACTIVITY: Examine excerpts from William Makepeace Thackeray (1869). The Irish Sketch Book of 1842. London: Smith, Elder. As you read the passages, consider the following questions:

What is the tone expressed in each passage?

Is Thackeray sympathetic to the people he is describing?

In your opinion are Thackeray's descriptions reliable? Explain.

In your opinion, should historians accept Thackeray's conclusions about life in pre-famine Ireland? Explain.

SUMMARY QUESTION: In your opinion, should historians accept Thackeray's conclusions about life in pre-famine Ireland? Explain.

HOMEWORK: In the 19th century before photography was well developed, artists drew pictures to illustrate newspaper articles. Draw a picture of one of the scenes depicted by William Thackeray in The Irish Sketch Book of 1842.

APPLICATION:

- There has been widespread debate over the causes of poverty and the effectiveness of social welfare programs in New York State and the United States. In your opinion, are positions in this debate based primarily on objective considerations or on the social position of the commentators? Explain.

PROJECT: Write descriptions of neighborhoods in the community, town, or city where you live and illustrate them with drawings or photographs. In a concluding essay, discuss whether you believe your descriptions are based primarily on objective considerations or on your social position in the community.

REFLECTIONS: Teachers recommended comparing Thackerary's account of conditions in pre-famine Ireland with the reports by De Tocqueville. They focused class discussion on evaluating the reliability of contemporary reports and the ways that historians sift evidence and understand multiple perspectives. Sometimes teachers compared Thackerary's descriptions of the poor with contemporary attitudes. Often students introduced the comparisons.

(EDITED VERSION)

ACTIVITY SHEET: An Englishman Looks at Pre-Famine Ireland

A) William Thackeray was a writer best known for exploring what he considered to be the moral and social pretensions of Victorian England. His most famous work is the novel *Vanity Fair*, published in 1847. Thackeray was born in Calcutta, India in 1811. He went to school in London and later traveled widely across in Europe. Thackeray visited Ireland in 1842 and kept a notebook describing his trip. Thackeray died in 1863. His Irish notebooks were published in 1869. In your opinion, as a novelist and an Englishman, can William Thackeray be considered a reliable commentator on conditions in pre-famine Ireland? Explain.

B) Excerpts from William Makepeace Thackeray (1869). *The Irish Sketch Book of 1842* (London: Smith, Elder).

As you read the passages below, consider the following questions:

- 1- What is the tone expressed in each passage?
- 2- Is Thackeray sympathetic to the people he is describing?
- 3- In your opinion are Thackeray's descriptions reliable? Explain.
- 4- In your opinion, should historians accept Thackeray's conclusions about life in pre-famine Ireland? Explain.

A) As we stopped for a moment in the place, troops of slatternly, ruffian-looking fellows assembled round the carriage, dirty heads peeped out of all the dirty windows, beggars came forward with a joke and a prayer, and troops of children raised their shouts and halloos. . . . I have never yet had the slightest sentiment of compassion for the very oldest or dirtiest of them, or been inclined to give them a penny : they come crawling around you with lying prayers and loathsome compliments, that make the stomach turn; they do not even disguise that they are lies; for refuse them, and the wretches turn off with a laugh and a joke, a miserable grinning cynicism that creates distrust and indifference, and must be, one would think, the very best way to close the purse, not to open it, for objects so unworthy.

How do all these people live? one can't help wondering; - these multifarious vagabonds, without work or workhouse, or means of subsistence? The Irish Poor Law says that there are twelve hundred thousand people in Ireland - a sixth of the population - who have no means of livelihood but charity, and whom the State, or individual members of it, must maintain. How can the State support such an enormous burden; or the twelve hundred thousand be supported? What a strange history it would be, could one but get it true,- that of the manner in which a score of these beggars have maintained themselves for a fortnight past! (pp. 36-37)

B) A dirty, old, contented, decrepit idler was lolling in the sun at a shop-door, and hundreds of the population of the dirty, old, decrepit, contented place were employed in the like way. . . . (O)ther male and female beggars were sitting on a wall looking into a stream; scores of ragamuffins, of course, round the carriage; and beggars galore at the door of the little ale-house or hotel. . . .

This is a curious country to see, and has curious inhabitants: for twenty miles there is no gentleman's house: gentlemen dare not live there (Ballyhale). . . . (I)t is common to see, by the side of one field that is well cultivated, another that is absolutely barren; and the whole tract is extremely wretched. . . . (A)t a chapel near Mullinavat is the spot where sixteen policemen were murdered in the tithe-campaign; farther on you come to a limekiln, where the guard of a mail-coach was seized and roasted alive. I saw here the first hedge-school I have seen: a crowd of half-savage looking lads and girls looked up from their studies in the ditch, their college or lecture room being in a mud cabin hard by. (pp. 41-42)

The Protestant wants to better the condition of these people: he says that the woes of the country are owing to its prevalent religion; and in order to carry his plans of amelioration into effect, he obstinately refuses to hold communion with those he is desirous to convert to what he believes are sounder principles and purer doctrines. (pp. 54-55)

C) Not far from the quays (in Cork) is an open space where the poor hold a market or bazaar. . . . (R)agged women chattering and crying their beggarly wares; ragged boys gloating over dirty apple- and pie-stalls; fish frying, and raw and stinking; clothes-booths, where you might buy a wardrobe for scarwcrows; old nail, hoops, bottles, and marine-wares; old battered furniture, that has been sold against starvation. In the streets round about this place, on a sunshiny day, all the black gaping windows and mouldy steps are covered with squatting lazy figures - women, with bare breasts, nursing babies, and learing a joke as you pass by - ragged children paddling everywhere.

The poor-house, newly established, cannot hold a fifth part of the poverty of this great town: the richer inhabitants are untiring in their charities, and the Catholic clergyman . . . took me to see a delivery of rice, at which he presides every day until the potatoes shall come in. This market, over which he presides so kindly, is held in an old bankrupt warehouse, and the rice is sold considerably under the prime cost to hundreds of struggling applicants who come when lucky enough to have the wherewithal to pay. (pp. 73-74)

(ADAPTED VERSION)

ACTIVITY SHEET: An Englishman Looks at Pre-Famine Ireland

A) William Thackeray was a writer best known for exploring what he considered to be the moral and social pretensions of Victorian England. His most famous work is the novel *Vanity Fair*, published in 1847. Thackeray was born in Calcutta, India in 1811. He went to school in London and later traveled widely across in Europe. Thackeray visited Ireland in 1842 and kept a notebook describing his trip. Thackeray died in 1863. His Irish notebooks were published in 1869. In your opinion, as a novelist and an Englishman, can William Thackeray be considered a reliable commentator on conditions in pre-famine Ireland? Explain.

B) Excerpts from William Makepeace Thackeray (1869). *The Irish Sketch Book of 1842* (London: Smith, Elder).

As you read the passages below, consider the following questions:

- 1- What is the tone expressed in each passage?
- 2- Is Thackeray sympathetic to the people he is describing?
- 3- In your opinion are Thackeray's descriptions reliable? Explain.
- 4- In your opinion, should historians accept Thackeray's conclusions about life in pre-famine Ireland? Explain.

A) We stopped for a moment. Troops of dirty, rough-looking fellows assembled round the carriage. Dirty heads peeped out of all the dirty windows. Beggars came forward with a joke and a prayer and troops of children raised their shouts and halloos.

I have never yet had the slightest sentiment of compassion for the very oldest or dirtiest of them, or been inclined to give them a penny. They come crawling around you with lying prayers and loathsome compliments that make the stomach turn. They do not even disguise that they are lies. Refuse them, and the wretches turn off with a laugh and a joke.

How do all these people live? One can't help wondering. The Irish Poor Law says that there are twelve hundred thousand people in Ireland - a sixth of the population - who have no means of livelihood but charity, and whom the State, or individual members of it, must maintain. How can the State support such an enormous burden? What a strange history it would be, the way these beggars have maintained themselves! (pp. 36-37)

B) This is a curious country to see, and has curious inhabitants. A dirty, old, contented, decrepit idler was lolling in the sun at a shop-door. Other male and female beggars were sitting on a wall looking into a stream. Scores of ragamuffins gathered around the carriage and beggars galore stood at the door of the little ale-house.

For twenty miles there is no gentleman's house. Gentlemen dare not live here. It is common to see, side by side, one field that is well cultivated and another that is absolutely barren.

At a chapel near here is the spot where sixteen policemen were murdered in the anti-Church tax riots. Further on you come to the place where the guard of a mail-coach was seized and roasted alive. I saw here the first hedge-school I have seen. It had a crowd of half-savage looking lads and girls. They looked up at me from their studies in the ditch. Their college or lecture room was a mud cabin. (pp. 41-42)

The Protestant wants to better the condition of these people. He says that the woes of the country are owing to its Catholic religion. Protestants refuse to hold communion with those he is desirous to convert. He believes his religion has sounder principles and purer doctrines. (pp. 54-55)

C) Not far from the dock in Cork is an open space where the poor hold a market or bazaar. Ragged women were chattering and trying to sell low quality wares. Ragged boys stood by dirty apple- and pie-stalls. Fish was frying. The whole place was raw and stinking. There was old battered furniture that has been sold against starvation. In the streets round about this place, on a sunshiny day, all the black gaping windows and mouldy steps are covered with squatting lazy figures. Women with bare breasts, nursing babies, joke as you pass by. Ragged children paddle everywhere. The poor-house, newly established, cannot hold a fifth part of the poverty of this great town. The richer inhabitants are untiring in their charities.

The Catholic clergyman took me to see a delivery of rice, at which he presides every day until the potatoes shall come in. This market, over which he presides so kindly, is held in an old bankrupt warehouse. The rice is sold considerably under cost to hundreds of struggling applicants who come when lucky enough to have the money to pay. (pp. 73-74)

(REWRITTEN VERSION)

ACTIVITY SHEET: An Englishman Looks at Pre-Famine Ireland

A) William Thackeray (1811-1863) was a novelist who wrote about the moral and social attitudes of people in 19th century England. His most famous work is the novel *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray was born in Calcutta, India. He went to school in London and later traveled widely across in Europe. Thackeray visited Ireland in 1842 and kept a notebook describing his trip. His Irish notebooks were published in 1869. In your opinion, as a novelist and an Englishman, can William Thackeray be considered a reliable commentator on conditions in pre-famine Ireland? Explain.

B) Excerpts from William Makepeace Thackeray (1869). *The Irish Sketch Book of 1842* (London: Smith, Elder).

As you read the passages below, consider the following questions:

- 1- What is the tone expressed in each passage?
- 2- Is Thackeray sympathetic to the people he is describing?
- 3- In your opinion are Thackeray's descriptions reliable? Explain.
- 4- In your opinion, should historians accept Thackeray's conclusions about life in pre-famine Ireland? Explain.

A) When our carriage stopped for a moment we were surrounded by dirty, rough looking people. Dirty heads peeped out of all the dirty windows. Beggars came forward with a joke and a prayer. Troops of children shouted at us.

I have never felt the slightest compassion for these people and I would not give them a penny. They make my stomach turn. They do not even disguise that their stories are lies. When I turned them down, they walked away with a laugh and a joke.

How do all these people live? One can't help wondering. One-sixth of the population of Ireland has no livelihood but charity. How can the government support such an enormous burden? What a strange story it would be to learn how these beggars stay alive!

B) Ireland and its people seemed strange to me. A hedge-school had a crowd of half-savage looking lads and girls. They looked up at me from their studies in the ditch. Their classroom was a mud cabin.

In one town that I passed through, I saw a dirty old man laying in the sun at a shop-door. Other beggars were sitting on a wall looking into a stream or standing at the door of the little ale-house.

Gentlemen dare not live in this part of Ireland. At a small church, sixteen policemen were murdered in anti-Church tax riots. At another place, the guard of a mail-coach was seized and burned alive.

The Protestants want to better the condition of these people. They say that the problems of the country are caused by its Catholic religion. They believe their religion has sounder principles and purer doctrines.

C) Near the dock in Cork is an open space where the poor have a market. Ragged women chatter with each other and try to sell low quality goods. Old battered furniture was being sold by people faced with starvation. Fish was frying and the whole place smelled.

On a sunny day, all the open windows and steps are covered with squatting lazy people. Women with bare breasts, nursing babies, joke as you pass by. Ragged children are everywhere. The local poor-house cannot handle one-fifth of the poor people of this great town.

The rich give much help to charity. The Catholic clergyman took me to see a delivery of rice. He distributes the rice to the hungry until the potato crop is ready. The rice is sold below cost to people who are when lucky enough to have the money to pay for it.