

Little Orphan Annie: Leapin' Through the Depression by Joanna Boyd Richards

Materials Needed (adaptable according to activities selected): Access to internet, paper, printer; white-out; fine-tipped black felt-tip pens; access to Xerox machine; game of Monopoly™, form of blank check (instructions included in "Suggested Activities"), copies of *Little Orphan Annie* comics (reproducible from "Printable Items" or from the internet, or from "Recommended Resources." Additional resources about the 1930's and Depression era (media, books, magazines, etc) might also be helpful; a visit to your school media center coinciding with "Suggested Activities" could expand possibilities.

National Educational Standards Targeted:

English/Language Arts: 1, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12

Art: 4, 5

Economics: 3, 4, 6, 9, 10

History: US Era 8, standards 1, 2, 3

Note to Teachers: The multi-layered approach of this lesson allows for adaptability according to focus area and age group. If you are using *Little Orphan Annie* comics as the focus (i.e. studying it as a literary work), you will want to focus more on the **Literature Lesson** and less on the **Suggested Activities**. Those who are using *Little Orphan Annie* comics as a supplementary resource in support of other subjects, will likely want to skip over the **Literature Lesson** and simply utilize the **Suggested Activities**. Good luck and leapin' lizards!

Background Information:

Even during "Hard Times" and wartime in America, people have had the need to be entertained. The American people in the 1930s and 1940s were no different. They enjoyed many forms of entertainment, particularly those that were inexpensive.

As hard times ravaged the United States in the 1930s, an invincible figure came to buoy American spirits and his name was Superman. But even before this superhero made his debut, another sort of "domestic hero" made an appearance and stirred controversial admiration among Americans. Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie* debuted in 1924. Daddy Warbucks and Annie became a regular part of American culture and lore, inspiring a radio show, a movie, a Broadway musical, and a 1995 postage stamp. The derivation of Warbucks' name is from his making millions through munition sales in World War I and is said to be modeled after Samuel Insull, the famous capitalist achiever who was personal secretary to Thomas A. Edison before amassing millions in the utilities network. Warbucks worked as an industrialist, but became a philanthropist as well. Annie came along while Warbucks was away on business. Upon his return, he was taken with Annie and took her in permanently. He often intervened in Annie's life during crisis, and yet during later years of the comic strip, during the Great Depression, Annie often helped him as well.

Featured Comic Strips (see "Printable Items"):

December strips from 1934 (includes Christmas and New Year's): "Something Wrong," "Not So Good," "A Woman's Intuition," "Clearing Skies;" "A Hard Job," "Tomorrow," "Shucks! Is That All?" "A Hot Retreat;" "Facing the Facts," "Maw Green Nearly Weakens," "For Tomorrow We Diet," "New Hope"

Notes on Featured Comic Strips

As the title reflects, this lesson deals primarily with *Little Orphan Annie* and the strip's relationship to the Great Depression. It is important to note that Daddy Warbucks himself

fell upon hard times. Gray was criticized during the Roosevelt years for his arch-conservatism and strong faith in capitalism, as evidenced by Warbucks.

Literature Lesson (grades 7-12)

Point #1. Harold Gray, author and artist behind *Little Orphan Annie*, has been painted by some as naïve. Whether or not this is true would require intense biographical study—more so than what this lesson will cover. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that the speech utilized by the characters in *Little Orphan Annie* is rather simplistic. That is, the vocabulary is youthful and the characters are decidedly either good or evil.

- A. Have students recreate the speech (using comics provided in "Printable Items" with text whited out) utilizing sophisticated vocabulary and more nebulous characterizations. Have the students share what they come up with (you might wish to make overhead transparencies of their work for the class to read together).
- B. Have students make a list of terms used by Annie that are "youthful" (i.e. leapin lizards, whoppin big, sharp) and then come up with functional equivalents that are part of contemporary, youthful vernacular. You might use the blank comics again to have them insert these words and see how it changes the strip.

Point #2. The Dickens Connection. . .parallels can be made between the featured *Little Orphan Annie* comics from 1934 and the stories, characters, and settings of Charles Dickens. The most obvious in this case is the fact that the interaction between Annie and Daddy Warbucks occurs at Christmas time. Challenge students to find other correlations with Dickens and his works. (Obviously students will need to be given excerpts of Dickens or be assigned one of works in order to focus on this point).

Suggested Activities:

- 1) Xerox strips of the provided *Little Orphan Annie* samples (provided in "Printable Items") without any text (simply white-out the text on the strips you wish to use). Allow students to fill in new text according to what they've learned about the Depression era, the weapons industry at the time, and the storyline of *Little Orphan Annie*. (grades 3-12)
- 2) Ask students to write about a modern, fictional character who plays a similar role to that of Annie, someone who has a protector and/or benefactor who is not their parent (i.e. Polyanna, young Anakin Skywalker) (grades 6-12)
- 3) Another popular entertainment item contemporary to the *Little Orphan Annie* comic strip was the game of Monopoly™. Allow students to list the various ways one can acquire wealth in Monopoly™ and allow them to play the game. (grades 3-12)
- 4) Have students come up with their own "tycoon" of the depression era which parallels Daddy Warbucks. Have them create a character like Annie to compliment their tycoon. (The Monopoly activity is a good segue into this game, as it allows them to reflect on other industries, like the railroad, which prospered during the depression era). (grades 7-12)
- 5) Visit <http://www.forbes.com/lists/2005/fictional/02.html> read the description of Daddy Warbucks as one of Forbes Magazines richest---write a similar description for your character, or write the one for Daddy Warbucks in your own words. (grades 9-12)

- 6) Give students three "blank checks." Have them write checks to causes that Oliver Warbucks would have had an interest in helping. (They should research to see what philanthropic organizations really existed during the 1930's. Blank check template can be created by whitening out pertinent numbers on a real check and xeroxed). **(grades 5-12)**
- 7) Discuss the primitive nature of Gray's drawings; in particular note that the eyes of his characters have no pupils. Have students discuss this feature and try doing drawings in this style. **(grades 4-12)**

Printable Items

(In accompanying PDF document)

Recommended Resources

Gray, Harold. *Little Orphan Annie in the Great Depression*. Dover Publications, Inc., 1979: New York, New York.

Gray, Harold. *Little Orphan Annie, Volume 4, 1934*. Fantagraphics Books, 1992: Seattle, Washington.