

**Lesson for 8<sup>th</sup> grade Humanities**  
**The intersection of immigration, women’s rights, and the labor movement**  
**New York, early 1900s**

**Note:** This lesson could stand alone as a way to impart information about the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, but I intend to use it as a way to introduce a historical fiction novel we will read and discuss as a class. A teacher could use either of the two primary sources listed. However, I wanted to use both so I could model “how to look closely” and then give students practice by having them write silently. This is part of my ongoing effort to differentiate instruction for learners who do not always understand verbal directions on the first try – by modeling what I want them to do, and by calling on other students to model, I hope to prime all students for success when they undertake a new task.

Learning objectives:

- Students will practice looking at primary sources and answering/asking key questions, first with a teacher modeling how to look, and then independently.
- Students will get background information about Jewish and Italian immigrant garment workers in turn-of-the-century New York City.
- Students will prepare for a historical fiction novel they will read as homework, by developing questions about the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire.

Summary of lesson:

Students will look at two primary sources for clues about a historic event. For each source, students will describe a. information they can surmise and b. questions the piece raises. Then, with more background information from the teacher, they will consider and discuss the plight of female immigrant workers in 1911 New York. They will develop questions about the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire to provide a framework for their reading homework, the novel *Uprising*, by Margaret Peterson Haddix. (A summary of the novel can be found at the end of this lesson plan.)

Objectives of unit: Through a combination of primary, secondary, and fictional source material, students will learn about the connections between early 1900s European immigration, the women’s rights movement, and the labor movement. They will learn the origins of labor laws that exist today, and explore the connection between immigration and labor exploitation.

Key questions:

- What was it like to be a recent immigrant in the early 1900s?

- What kind of work could you get? Who worked – women, men, children?
- What were conditions like for families?
- What were conditions like in factories?
- What happened to change working conditions? How did workers spread the word?

Materials needed:

- Paper and pencils
- Laptop and digital projector
- White board, or pad of chart paper and markers
- Class set of copies of *Uprising* by Margaret Peterson Haddix

**Before the lesson:**

On the white board/chart paper, write the following questions:

*Who do you see?  
Where are they?  
What are they doing?  
When was this picture taken?  
What are they wearing?  
From what you see, can you infer  
anything about their religion, class,  
gender, etc?*

*Is there writing? What does it tell you?  
Are there any symbols? What do they tell  
you?  
Who do you think made this object?  
Why?  
What else do you want to know?*

**Begin the lesson** with the following image projected on the screen:



**Jewish family doing piecework in a NYC tenement, 1912**

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/nc12004003711/PP/>

**Tell students you will show them some images from American history.** Their job will be to act as detectives, looking deeply at these objects to ask questions and make guesses about the people depicted. They should imagine they will report these details to someone who won't see the documents, so they must be descriptive.

**Tell the students that you will model** how to look at sources by looking at the first image together, as a group. Point to the photo on the screen. Ask them to look quietly for thirty seconds, and then you will call on individuals to describe something they notice. At first, these observations may be general – it's black and white, old-fashioned, it's a family. As you pick up steam, refer students to the questions you have written up. Draw their attention to specific details: how is the little boy dressed? (note the yarmulke) See the sewing machine? Do you think they are sewing these objects for themselves? Ask

students what they want to know and repeat/rephrase their questions, writing them on the board if you wish.

**Spend about 5-10 minutes modeling a “close look” at this image,** with student observations. Then, **summarize students’ observations** and fill in any gaps: make sure to tell the students that the image is from 1912, the family is Jewish, they are in their tenement apartment, and they are doing “piecework,” finishing small, detailed garment components to earn extra money. You will need to explain some vocabulary, for instance: *garment, tenement, garter, piecework.*

**Give further information.** Explain that many garment factory workers brought home piecework because of the low pay at their “day” jobs. In spite of long hours, including weekends, adults could not earn enough to support their families – earning pennies a day – so children worked in the factories and the whole family might bring home work for extra money. Young girls and teenagers often worked in the garment “sweatshops.” Workers’ pay could be docked for taking too long in the bathroom, showing up a few minutes late, working too slowly, or just having a bad attitude. Because there were so many immigrants flooding to New York in search of jobs, it seemed impossible for individuals to change their working conditions – if you stood up to the boss, he could fire you and hire another desperate new immigrant in your place, and you would be left with no way to feed your family. There were few regulations about how workers should be treated – they rarely got time off, and the sweatshop factories were hot, crowded and full of dangerous machines and cramped passageways.

Many new immigrants did not speak or read English. They often lived in neighborhoods with other people from their old country, and worked at factories within walking distance. Jewish and Italian immigrants to New York, especially, lived near others from their home countries and published newspapers and pamphlets in Yiddish and Italian. This helped new immigrants adjust and support one another. However, communicating with the bosses was another matter. The language barrier made it difficult for immigrants to get legal help or find another job when they were treated poorly.

**Now tell students that you will put up a new image.** Their task: to take a “close look.” They will do just what you did as a class, only silently. They will have 5 minutes to look at the image and write down everything they notice, things they can infer, and questions they have. There are no right answers, and they won’t share everything on the page; the point is to capture all of their ideas and questions. Remind them of the questions you have written on the board, if they need ideas about what to look for.

**Pass out paper and pencils.** Ask students if they need clarification about their task. When all are ready, **put this image up on the screen.** At this point, do not translate any of the words. Tell them they may begin writing.



**Die Fire Korbunes** <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/images/at0052.8s.jpg>

After two minutes, have them pause, and **give them the English translation** of the Yiddish “Die Fire Korbunes” - “The Fire Victims.” Tell them to resume writing, with this new information in mind. Does it change any of their observations or questions?

After a total of five minutes, **ask students to share their observations and questions.** Should the conversation stall or become repetitive, direct them back to the questions on the board. Allow for about 5-10 minutes of discussion.

**Now tell them that you will explain a bit more about this source.** The language shown is Yiddish, spoken by many Jews in New York. It was common, in Jewish history, for people to use songs to draw attention to social issues or political causes. In the U.S., these songs were printed in sheet music – this ornately decorated page would have been the cover to such a piece of sheet music. “Die Fire Korbunes” depicts an actual event – the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Give a little bit of background about the events of the fire, emphasizing the lack of safety precautions like sprinklers, sufficient fire escapes, unlocked doors, etc. One detail which catches kids’ attention: when the firefighters finally arrived, with trucks pulled by horses, the ladders and hoses did not reach up to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> floor, the very floors where exit by fire escape was impossible. Some women desperately jumped to their deaths. **Be sure to connect the information you give to the observations they made about the song sheet’s illustration, words, symbols, etc. Keep it brief – they will learn more about the event later on!**

**For Teachers: Information about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire**

Source: "Triangle Fire." *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*. 2010. Grolier Online. 8 Mar. 2010 <<http://gme.grolier.com/article?assetid=0294353-0>>.

The Triangle Fire was a disaster in New York City in which 146 garment workers died, most of them young women. The fire began late Saturday afternoon, Mar. 25, 1911, in a ten-story loft building. Feeding upon a careless accumulation of flammable rags and hazardously stored cleaning fluids, it quickly spread through the top three floors occupied by the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. About half of the nearly 1,000 employees were at their jobs, working overtime to fill orders that had piled up during a strike a few months earlier. The narrow, congested aisles and locked doors trapped many workers, preventing them from reaching the only fire escape, which was a single ladder on the roof that led down to a narrow rear court. Aroused citizens sponsored an investigation. At the investigators' urging, the state established a factory commission, whose work led to the enactment of a new, more effective industrial code and set the pattern for remedial factory legislation throughout the United States. In 2003, on the 92d anniversary of the fire, the building was made an official New York City landmark.

**Give students about two minutes to ask questions about this event.** Do not answer questions, just let them brainstorm. Refer them back to the song sheet – were any of their

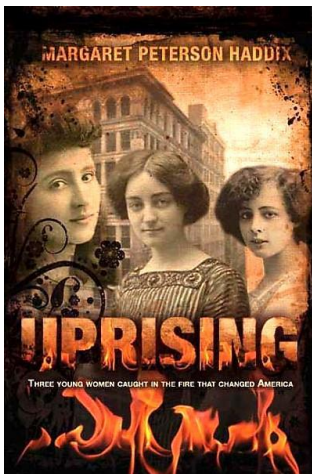
Jennifer Mason  
Cambridge Public Schools  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

questions about that source answered, now that they have some historical background?  
Why was this song written?

Most of the victims of the fire were Jewish and Italian, and they were young women and teenage girls.

**Tell students that they will have a chance to explore their questions, and to connect with this event through fiction, with your next class novel, *Uprising*, by Margaret Peterson Haddix.** *Uprising* follows the tragic stories of three fictional women – one Russian and Jewish, one Italian, and one upper-class American – whose lives are forever changed by the Triangle Factory. It tells the story of the events leading up to the fire, including efforts to unionize and improve the safety of the building – efforts that would not come into fruition until 146 young lives were lost. If there is time, read the flap of the book to give some background information.

**Hand out the books** and assign one chapter for homework. **Class dismissed!**



Review and cover art for *Uprising* obtained from Follett Library Resources, [www.titlewave.com](http://www.titlewave.com)

Review: **School Library Journal (September 1, 2007)**

Gr 6-8-This deftly crafted historical novel unfolds dramatically with an absorbing story and well-drawn characters who readily evoke empathy and compassion. Haddix has masterfully melded in-depth information about the history of immigration, the struggle for women's rights, the beginnings of the organized labor movement, and the horrific Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911 within a narrative that will simultaneously engross and educate its readers. The story is told from the alternating perspectives of Bella, an Italian

immigrant teen; Yetta, a Russian Jewish immigrant; and Jane, the daughter of an upper-class American businessman. Yetta is opinionated and aware of how immigrants, especially women, are mistreated. She is outspoken and ready to work toward improving conditions. Bella is a new immigrant and easily taken advantage of. She only wants to earn money to send home so the rest of her family can join her in America. Though wealthy, Jane is influenced by college girls who are starting to work for women's rights. The three girls meet during the strike at the Triangle factory. Jane bravely leaves home when she learns that her father was involved in trying to break the strike. This absorbing and informative read is a wonderful companion to Mary Jane Auch's *Ashes of Roses* (Holt, 2002).-Renee Steinberg, formerly at Fieldstone Middle School, Montvale, NJ  
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