

Interpreting Political Cartoons 1



People and Government

When the United States of America celebrated its one hundredth birthday, the country was in the midst of a five-year economic depression. Jobs were scarce, and those who were considering immigrating to America may have wondered if the “American experiment” with democratic government would live up to its promise. As prosperity began to resurface after 1878, immigrants took renewed interest in the United States. In the decade of the 1880s, more than five million immigrants came to the United States. They came to escape poverty, tyranny, and forced military service. Drawn by their hope and the idea of fertile land, nearly one million of them came from eastern and southern Europe alone. Others came from Ireland and western Europe.

The political cartoon below was drawn by Joseph Keppler, who was also an immigrant.

The cartoon on this page gives one view of the immigrant experience. Study the cartoon and answer the questions that follow.



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Source: Allen Nevins. *A Century Of Political Cartoons: Caricature in the United States from 1800 to 1900*. New York, 1944.

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Analyzing the Cartoon

1. How does the cartoonist let you know that the immigrants come from many different countries and different socioeconomic groups? Explain. _____

2. Identify the item or items that the cartoonist uses to symbolize each of the following:
a. The United States _____
b. Dangerous conditions in other countries _____
c. The promise of life in the United States _____

3. What are the immigrants trying to escape? _____

How do you know? _____

4. Which images in the cartoon help you identify the attitude of the cartoonist toward immigrants? Explain. _____

5. The sign beside the door of the Ark says, "Free Education Free Land Free Speech Free Ballot and Free LUNCH." What do you think the cartoonist may have been trying to convey by capitalizing the word LUNCH? _____

6. Are stereotypical components of the line of immigrants generally positive or negative? _____

Critical Thinking

7. The sign above the door of the ship says "Ark of Refuge" and the clouds on the horizon are dark and menacing. In what ways are these images symbolic? _____

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