Chapter 15 Lesson 1

Social Reform

ESSENTIAL QUESTION Why do societies change?

Developments in the early 1800s helped shape the social and cultural fabric of the United States.

Religion and Reform

SS.8.A.4.8, SS.8.A.4.9, SS.8.C.1.4, SS.8.E.2.1, LA.8.1.6.1, LA.8.1.6.2, LA.8.1.6.3

What was the effect of the Second Great Awakening?

Reverend James B. Finley described the scene this way:

"The noise was like the roar of Niagara [Falls]. The vast sea of human beings seemed to be agitated as if by a storm. . . . Some of the people were singing, others praying, some crying for mercy. . . . While witnessing these scenes, a peculiarly strange sensation, such as I had never felt before, came over me. My heart beat tumultuously [violently], my knees trembled, my lip quivered, and I felt as though I must fall to the ground."

—from Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley

Finley was describing an early nineteenth-century religious meeting called a revival. At this time, people traveled great distances to hear preachers speak and to pray, sing, weep, and shout. This wave of religious interest—known as the Second Great Awakening—stirred the nation. The first Great Awakening had spread through the colonies in the mid-1700s.

Also at this time, a new spirit of reform took hold in the United States. This spirit brought changes to American religion, education, and literature. Some reformers sought to improve society by forming utopias (yu • TOH • pee • uhs)—communities based on a vision of the perfect society. Most of these communities did not last. A few groups, such as the Mormons, did form lasting communities.

The Impact of Religion

Attending revivals often made men and women eager to reform their own lives and the world. Some people became involved in missionary work or social reform movements. Among those movements was the push to ban alcohol.

Connecticut minister Lyman Beecher was a leader of this movement. He wanted to protect society from "rum-selling, tippling folk, infidels, and ruff-scuff." Beecher and other reformers called for temperance, or drinking little or no alcohol. They used lectures, pamphlets, and revival-style rallies to warn people of the dangers of liquor.

The temperance movement persuaded Maine and some other states to outlaw the manufacture and sale of alcohol. States later repealed most of these laws.

Changing Education

Reformers also wanted to improve education. Most schools had little money, and many teachers lacked training. Some people opposed the idea of compulsory, or required, education.

In addition, some groups faced barriers to schooling. Parents often kept girls at home. They thought someone who was likely to become a wife and mother did not need much education. Many schools also denied African Americans the right to attend.

Massachusetts lawyer Horace Mann was a leader of educational reform. He believed education was a key to wealth and economic opportunity for all. Partly because of his efforts, in 1839 Massachusetts founded the nation's first state-supported normal school—a school for training high school graduates to become teachers. Other states soon adopted Mann's reforms.

New colleges and universities opened their doors during the age of reform. Most of them admitted only white men, but other groups also began winning access to higher education. Oberlin College of Ohio, for example, was founded in 1833. The college admitted both women and African Americans.

Helping People with Disabilities

Reformers also focused on teaching people with disabilities. Thomas Gallaudet (ga • luh • DEHT) developed a method to teach those with hearing impairments. He opened the Hartford School for the Deaf in Connecticut in 1817. At that same time, Samuel Gridley Howe was helping people with vision impairments. He printed books using an alphabet created by Louis Braille, which used raised letters a person could "read" with his or her fingers. Howe headed the Perkins Institute, a school for the visually impaired in Boston.

Schoolteacher Dorothea Dix began visiting prisons in 1841. She found some prisoners chained to the walls with little or no clothing, often in unheated cells. Dix also learned that some inmates were guilty of no crime. Instead, they were suffering from mental illnesses. Dix made it her life's work to educate the public about the poor conditions for prisoners and the mentally ill.

Describing How did Samuel Howe help people with vision impairments?

Florida CONNECTION

School Enrollment

In the mid-1800s, a growing number of children in Florida attended school. In 1850 just 13 percent of children aged 5–14 were enrolled in school. By 1870, that number had risen to 28 percent.

Culture Changes

SS.8.A.4.15

What type of American literature emerged in the 1820s?

Art and literature of the time reflected the changes in society and culture. American authors and artists developed their own style and explored American themes.

Writers such as Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau stressed the relationship between humans and nature and the importance of the individual conscience. This literary movement was known as Transcendentalism. In his works, Emerson urged people to listen to the inner voice of conscience and to overcome prejudice. Thoreau practiced civil disobedience (dihs • uh • BEE • dee • uhns)—refusal to obey laws he found unjust. For example, Thoreau went to jail in 1846 rather than pay a tax to support the Mexican American War.

In poetry, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote narrative, or story, poems such as the Song of Hiawatha. Walt Whitman captured the new American spirit and confidence in his Leaves of Grass. Emily Dickinson wrote hundreds of simple, deeply personal poems, many of which celebrated the natural world.

American artists also explored American topics and developed a purely American style. Beginning in the 1820s, a group of landscape painters known as the Hudson River School focused on scenes of the Hudson River Valley. Print-makers Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives created popular prints that celebrated holidays, sporting events, and rural life.

O Captain! My Captain!

BY WALT WHITMAN

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,

The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won,

The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,

While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;

But O heart! heart! heart!

O the bleeding drops of red,

Where on the deck my Captain lies,

Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;

Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,

For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,

For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;

Here Captain! dear father!

This arm beneath your head!

It is some dream that on the deck,

You’ve fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,

My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,

The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,

From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;

Exult O shores, and ring O bells!

But I with mournful tread,

Walk the deck my Captain lies,

Fallen cold and dead.

Walt Whitman's O Captain! My Captain! is rich in figurative language. The entire poem is an extended metaphor for the United States after the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln's assassination. In the metaphor, the captain is Lincoln, the voyage is the war and the ship is the United States.