Burlesque and Striptease in 1930s New York City

Assignment Goals

- to think critically about sexuality and its relationship to gender and work.
- to practice using information from primary sources and digital sources.
- to practice designing a text based on a thesis statement.
- to practice developing examples and illustrations.

The Writing Situation (1 hour)
It is July 13, 1939 in New York City. You have just visited the World’s Fair in Queens, where, along with General Motors’ Futurama and Elektro, the amazing Westinghouse Moto-Man, you witnessed several shows featuring women in various states of undress, especially in the Fair’s Amusements Area. You have decided that you will write a letter to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia taking a stand on whether burlesque shows at the 1939 World’s Fair need to be censored.

Step 1: Getting into Character (5 minutes)
Choose ONE of the following three personas:

A. Mary Etta Rowland
Mary Etta started in burlesque as chorus girl when she was 15 years old. Her first show was called “The Social Follies.” During the beginning of her career, she worked the East Coast burlesque circuit, traveling by train, staying at cheap hotels and performing three shows a day. Each show lasted three hours. Each show required that Mary Etta change costumes 12 times. She earned $50 dollars per week.

At 20, Mary Etta established herself in New York City. Her fame as a burlesque queen was established when she began to cover herself head to toe in gilt paint and wearing a golden G-string for her Roman Empire act, which earned her the nickname “Golden Girl.” She soon became one of the biggest stars of Minsky’s Burlesque, where she performed for three years and was arrested twice during police raids.

Mary Etta is now 24 years old and lives in a large apartment in the West End with her friend Anna and Anna’s 7-year old son, Jimmy. She is engaged to four-times-married Lord Walter Runciman, a British millionaire.
Michael is now 42 years old and the police captain of New York’s 7th Precinct on the Lower East Side. He has also become a Third Degree Knight of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal service and charitable organization that staunchly promotes the practice of Roman Catholicism. A religious traditionalist, he abstains from eating meat on Fridays, fasts from midnight before receiving Holy Communion, and requires that his wife wear a headcovering while in church. He has four children, Ryan (16), John (14), Patrick (12), and Mary (8).

Cassandra Brown
Cassandra is a 20-year old African-American jazz singer and song-writer. She got her love of jazz from her dad, who played trumpet in a jazz band. Both her parents died in a fire when she was 8 years old and so she was sent to an orphanage run by Roman Catholic nuns in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. In 1933, at the age of 14, she joined the chorus line of Harlem’s Cotton Club and left before the club closed in 1936. She then worked days as a secretary for a few months until she was talent-spotted at a singing contest. She now sings for Chick Webb’s band at Harlem’s Renaissance Casino and Ballroom. Her dream is to become a famous vocalist like Billie Holiday.

Cassandra believes women should be proud and strong but never lose their femininity. Accordingly, her show-business gowns are rich and flirtatious but never vulgar. She also has a great sense of fun, which is shown in her song titles; her two latest, for example, are entitled “Your Feet’s Too Big,” and “Beautiful but Dumb.”

These days, Cassandra has been having trouble reconciling her strict religious upbringing both with her outgoing, bubbly personality and her deep passion for jazz.
Step 2: Exploring the world of burlesque and the 1939 World’s Fair (25 minutes)
Working individually (or with a partner), use the links under the Web Resources section (below) to explore the world of burlesque and the 1939 World’s Fair and to gather information to support your argument.

Writing the letter (30 minutes)
From your person’s perspective (Mary Etta, or Captain Mullen, or Cassandra), write a letter to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, arguing either that

a) the shows featuring semi-naked women are inartistic and depraved. You demand that they be removed from the World’s Fair

OR that

b) the shows featuring scantily-clad, young beauties were fun and engaging. You applaud the decision to include them in the World’s Fair.

Don’t forget: the arguments in your letter must follow logically from your persona!

Evaluation
The letter’s overall quality will be evaluated based on whether

- The argument is organized around a clear, specific thesis.
- The organization is thoughtful and coherent.
- The development of the argument is concrete and effective.
- The expression of ideas is vivid and precise.
- The use of other people’s ideas is acknowledged.
- The elements of standard written English (grammar, punctuation, and mechanics) are handled competently.

Small Group Discussion (40 min): Meet with other members of your group. Start by briefly sharing sections of your letters. Then step back to discuss the activity, using the following questions as prompts. Be sure to save time to consider the pedagogy of this activity. At the end of this time, prepare one member of the group to share some of your thoughts with the larger group.

a) What could students learn from this activity about the status of burlesque and striptease in 1930s New York City? What other kinds of writing or presentation outcomes could this activity support?

b) What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the activity? Is it a good vehicle for developing student skills in inquiry and the exploration of complex primary sources?

c) How would you describe the pedagogy that informs this activity? What aspects of the activity help to make it effective? What skills and modes of thinking does this activity support? Do the electronic materials being engaged suit the goals of the activity? What can we learn from this activity about the kinds of inquiry assignments that work best when using new media resources?

d) How does the inquiry approach used in this activity compare with inquiry approaches you have used in your classes? What is similar? Different? What are the advantages and disadvantages of inquiry learning, in your experience? Where does it fit in the repertoire of teaching in your field?
Web Resources

I. Burlesque

A. Historical Background

  

- “Dirty Dancing: The rise and fall of American striptease” by Francine Gray
  

- “Minsky’s Burlesque” at *Wikipedia*
  
  [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minsky%27s_Burlesque](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minsky%27s_Burlesque)

B. Videos featuring burlesque acts

- Abbott and Costello performing *Who’s on First* (from the film *The Naughty Nineties*)
  
  **Note:** Bud Abbott and Lou Costello are a famous comedy duo who started in burlesque. *Who’s on first* is one of their most celebrated routines. It makes fun of the confusing nicknames given to contemporary baseball players. Costello plays a peanut vendor named Sebastian Dinwiddle and Abbott plays Dexter Broadhurst, the manager of the fictitious baseball team St. Louis Wolves.

  The names of the baseball players in Abbott and Costello's routine are

  On first base: Who
  On second base: What
  On third base: I Don’t Know
  In left field: Why
  In center field: Because
  The pitcher: Tomorrow
  The catcher: Today
  The shortstop: I Don't Care!

  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sShMA85pv8M&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sShMA85pv8M&feature=related)

- Gypsy Rose Lee
  
  **Note:** Gypsy Rose Lee was a burlesque entertainer who was famous for her witty striptease routine (see "Dirty Dancing: The rise and fall of American striptease” above). This is a sanitized version of her act from the film *Stage Door Canteen*.

  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-jEKVq38bY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-jEKVq38bY)

- Sally Rand
  
  **Note:** Sally Rand was a burlesque entertainer who was famous for her ostrich feather fan dance and her bubble dance. This is a short film of one her performances at 1934 Chicago World's Fair.

  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTEIWK9CaEs&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTEIWK9CaEs&feature=related)
C. Striptease Controversy

- *Time* magazine
  [http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,757765,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,757765,00.html)

- *New York Times* articles in the LaGuardia Library Databases
  Open a new window and go to the LaGuardia Library website [http://library.laguardia.edu/ee/](http://library.laguardia.edu/ee/)
  - Click on the link “Find articles & books online (subscription databases)”
  - Click on the link “New York City”
  - Click on the link “New York Times 1851-2005 (ProQuest Historical Newspapers)”

  Using the search box, find the following newspaper articles

  “Churches Demand End of Burlesque”
  “Moss Weighs Ban on 14 Burlesques”
  “La Guardia Backs Ban on Burlesque”

II. The 1939 World’s Fair

A. Background Information

- *1939 New York World’s Fair Tour* by Paul M. Van Dort
  [http://www.pmphoto.to/worlds_fair/wf_tour/index.htm](http://www.pmphoto.to/worlds_fair/wf_tour/index.htm)

- *Images from the 1939 New York World’s Fair* by Andrew F. Wood
  [http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/nywf.html](http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/nywf.html)

- *The Iconography of Hope: the 1939-40 New York World’s Fair*, a website from the program of American Studies at the University of Virginia
  [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/DISPLAY/39wf/front.htm](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/DISPLAY/39wf/front.htm)

- “1939 New York World’s Fair” at *Wikipedia*

B. Videos

Here are three reels taken by a man visiting the 1939 World’s Fair. We only know his last name: Medicus. For details on what you will find on each reel, please see the descriptions under the videos.

[http://www.archive.org/details/Medicusc1939_2](http://www.archive.org/details/Medicusc1939_2)

III. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia

A. Mayor LaGuardia’s biography from *NYC 100*, a site from the New York City government

B. Video Interview with Mayor LaGuardia from the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives
  [http://www.laguardiawagnerarchive.lagcc.cuny.edu/defaultb.htm](http://www.laguardiawagnerarchive.lagcc.cuny.edu/defaultb.htm)
IV. Sample Letter Format from the 1930s

Letter from National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader Walter White to athlete Jesse Owens urging him not to participate in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

My dear Mr. Owens:

Will you permit me to say that it was with deep regret that I read in the New York press today a statement attributed to you saying that you would participate in the 1936 Olympic games even if they are held in Germany under the Hitler regime. I trust you will not think me unduly officious in expressing the hope that this report is erroneous.

I fully realize how great a sacrifice it will be for you to give up the trip to Europe and to forgo the acclaim which your athletic prowess will unquestionably bring you. I realize equally well how hypocritical it is for certain Americans to point the finger of scorn at any other country for racial or any other kind of bigotry.

On the other hand, it is my firm conviction that the issue of participation in the 1936 Olympics, if held in Germany, under the present regime, transcends all other issues. Participation by American athletes, and especially by those of our own race which has suffered more than any other from American race hatred, would, I firmly believe, do irreparable harm. I take the liberty of sending you a copy of the remarks which I made at a meeting here in New York, at Mecca Temple, last evening. This sorry world of ours is apparently becoming in a fumbling way to realize what prejudice against any minority group does not only to other minorities but to the group which is in power. The very preeminence of American Negro athletes gives them an unparalleled opportunity to strike a blow at racial bigotry and to make other minority groups conscious of the sameness of their problems with ours and puts them under the moral obligation to think more clearly and to fight more vigorously against the wrongs from which we Negroes suffer.

But the moral issue involved is, in my opinion, far greater than immediate or future benefit to the Negro as a race. If the Hitlers and Mussolinis of the world are successful it is inevitable that dictatorships based upon prejudice will spread throughout the world, as indeed they are now spreading. Defeat of dictators before they become too firmly
entrenched would, on the other hand, deter nations which through fear or other unworthy emotions are tending towards dictatorships. Let me make this quite concrete. Anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic and anti-Negro prejudices are growing alarmingly throughout the United States. Should efforts towards recovery fail, there is no telling where America will go. There are some people who believe that a proletarian dictatorship will come. I do not believe this will happen and the course of history clearly indicates that it is not likely to happen. Instead, it is more probable that we would have a fascist dictatorship.

It is also historically true that such reactionary dictatorships pick out the most vulnerable group as its first victims. In the United States it would be the Negro who would be the chief and first sufferer, just as the Jews have been made the scapegoats of Hitlerism in Nazi Germany. Sinclair Lewis, in his last novel, IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE, has written what seems to me to be a very sound picture of what may happen.

I have written at greater length than I had intended at the outset. I hope, however, that you will not take offense at my writing you thus frankly with the hope that you will take the high stand that we should rise above personal benefit and help strike a blow at intolerance. I am sure that your stand will be applauded by many people in all parts of the world, as your participation under the present situation in Germany would alienate many high-minded people who are awakening to the dangers of intolerance wherever it raises its head.

Ever sincerely,

Secretary.

Mr. Jesse Owens
Ohio State University
Columbus,
Ohio.