

THE IMMIGRANT'S POINT OF VIEW

Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

English Language Arts A.4.3 – Read and discuss literary and nonliterary texts in order to understand human experience

- Identify and summarize main ideas and key points from literature, informational texts, and other print and non print sources.

English Language Arts A.4.4 – Read to acquire information

- Summarize key details of informational texts, connecting new information to prior knowledge.

Social Studies B.4.1 – Identify and examine various sources of information that are used for constructing an understanding of the past, such as artifacts, documents, letters, diaries, maps, textbooks, photos, paintings, architecture, oral presentations, graphs, and charts.

Social Studies B.4.3 – Examine biographies, stories, narratives, and folk tales to understand the lives of ordinary and extraordinary people, place them in time and context, and explain their relationship to important historical events.

Social Studies B.8.4 – Explain how and why events may be interpreted differently depending upon the perspectives of participating witnesses, reporters, and historians.

Below is an excerpt from *The Rise of David Levinsky* by Abraham Cahan. Although this is a fictional novel, it is based upon Abraham Cahan's own experiences as an immigrant. Cahan was born in Russia, but came to the United States as a young man of twenty-two years in 1882. Cahan grew up in modern-day Lithuania in a town called Vilna. His father was a teacher and his grandfather a rabbi. After arriving in the United States, Cahan began writing for a Jewish-Russian weekly newspaper called *Russky Yevrey*. Fifteen years after settling in America he founded his own newspaper for Jewish immigrants, the *New York Jewish Daily Forward*. He also wrote three novels in English: *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896); *The White Terror and the Red* (1905); and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). *The Rise of David Levinsky* is Cahan's best known work. In this novel, he talks about the experience of becoming an American – a social, ethnic, and linguistic change for the immigrant. Through Cahan's writing, we learn the perspective of the immigrant. Read the excerpt for yourself and answer the questions.

I *vividly* recall the feeling, for example, with which I greeted the first cat I saw on American soil. It was on the Hoboken pier, while the *steerage* passengers were being marched to the ferry. A large, black, well-fed feline stood in a corner, eying the crowd of new-comers. The sight of it gave me a thrill of joy. 'Look! There is a cat!' I said to Gitelson [his

friend]. And in my heart I added, 'Just like those at home!' For the moment the little animal made America real to me . . .

We were ferried over to Castle Garden. The harsh manner of the immigration officers was a *grievous* surprise to me . . . 'They are not a bit better than *Cossacks*,' I remarked to Gitelson . . . These unfriendly voices flavored all America with a spirit of icy *inhospitality* that sent a chill through my very soul.

Many of the other immigrants were met by relatives, friends. There were cries of joy, tears, embraces, kisses. All of which *intensified* my sense of loneliness and dread of the New World . . . Gitelson, who like myself had no friends in New York, never left my side. He was even more timid than I. It seemed as though he were holding on to me for dear life. This had the effect of *putting me on my mettle*.

'Cheer up, old man!' I said, with *bravado*. 'America is not the place to be a *ninny* in. Come, pull yourself together.' In truth, I addressed the *exhortations* as much to myself as to him; and so far, at least, as I was concerned, my words had the desired effect.

I led the way out of the big Immigrant Station . . .

Where were we to go? What were we to do? . . . I *mustered* courage to approach a policeman, something I should never have been bold enough to do at home . . . With his coat of blue cloth, starched linen collar, and white gloves, he reminded me of anything but the policemen of my town. I *addressed him* in Yiddish, making it as near an approach to German as I knew how, but my efforts were lost on him. He shook his head . . . he then pointed his club in the direction of Broadway and strutted off *majestically*.

At this moment a voice *hailed* us in Yiddish. Facing about, we *beheld* a middle-aged man with huge, round, perpendicular nostrils and a huge, round, deep dimple in his chin that looked like a third nostril. *Prosperity* was written all over his smooth-shaven face and broad-shouldered, stocky figure.

He was literally aglow with diamonds and *self-satisfaction*. But he was unmistakably one of our people. It was like coming across a human being in the jungle . . .

'God Himself has sent you to us,' I began, acting as the spokesman; but he *gave no heed* to me. His eyes were eagerly fixed on Gitelson and his tatters.

‘You’re a tailor, aren’t you?’ he questioned him.

My steerage companion nodded. ‘I’m a ladies’ tailor, but I have worked on men’s clothing, too,’ he said . . .

‘A ladies’ tailor?’ the well-dressed stranger echoed, with *ill-concealed* delight. ‘Very well; come along. I have work for you.’

As I learned *subsequently*, the man who *accosted* us on State Street was a cloak contractor, and his presence in the neighborhood of Castle Garden was anything but a matter of chance. He came there quite often, in fact, his purpose being *to angle for* cheap labor among the newly arrived immigrants.

As we *resumed* our walk up Broadway the *bejeweled* man turned to me.

‘And what was your *occupation*? You have no trade, have you?’

‘I read Talmud,’ I said, confusedly.

‘I see, but that’s no business in America,’ he declared. ‘Any relatives here?’ ‘Well, don’t worry. You will be all right. If a fellow isn’t lazy nor a fool he has no reason to be sorry he came to America. It’ll be all right . . .’

When we reached the General Post-Office . . . our guide bade us stop.

‘Walk straight ahead,’ he said to me, waving his hand toward Park Row. ‘Just keep walking until you see a lot of Jewish people. It isn’t far from here.’ With which he slipped a silver quarter into my hand and made Gitelson *bid me good-by*.

The two then boarded a big red horse-car . . .

My heart sank within me. I may safely say that the half-hour that followed is one of the worst I experienced in all the thirty-odd years of my life in this country.

With twenty-nine cents in my pocket . . . I set forth in the direction of East Broadway.

- 1) The narrator of this novel is an immigrant named David Levinsky. His character is a Russian Jew who had immigrated to the United States. What is one thing that David remembers most about his first few hours in America?

- 2) Try to remember a time when you were introduced to something completely new – like your first day at kindergarten, or your first visit to an amusement park. What are the sights, sounds, feelings, etc. that you remember most about that experience?

- 3) From Levinsky's description of his first few hours in America can you get a sense of what challenges new arrivals faced? Name at least two challenges faced by Levinsky.

- 4) What do you predict will happen to Levinsky's friend Gitelson?

- 5) What do you think will happen to Levinsky?

Point of View Activity

Choose a partner with whom to complete the next part of the activity. One person will take on the character of the newspaper reporter who wrote the *Harper's Weekly* story (used in the Immigrant Processing Station activity) while the other will take on the character of David Levinsky. First, one partner will ask the following questions of the other. That person will respond as if he or she is the reporter. Then, the second person will answer the same questions from the point of view of an immigrant, in this case, David Levinsky. Write down each other's answers and hand them in.

- 1) Are the officials at Castle Garden helpful and friendly?
- 2) Is there much help available for new immigrant arrivals?
- 3) Would you describe the immigrants' first few hours in America as overwhelmingly happy and hopeful or overwhelmingly frightening?

In a think-aloud discussion, talk about how the answers given from the point of view of the *Harper's Weekly* reporter differed from the answers given from the point of view of David Levinsky. Ask students to consider why the opinions of an American reporter and a newly arrived immigrant differ.

Glossary

- Vividly** – Clearly, intensely
Steerage – The section of a passenger ship near the rudder that provided the cheapest passenger accommodations
Grievous – Disturbing, upsetting
Cossacks – Members of the Russian military known for their brutality
Inhospitality – Unfriendliness, the state of being unwelcoming
Intensified – Made stronger, increased
Putting me on my mettle – Preparing me to accept a challenge
Bravado – A false show of courage
Ninny – Fool
Exhortations – Encouraging words
Mustered – Pulled together, gathered
Addressed him – Spoke to him
Majestically – In a grand manner
Hailed – Called to
Beheld – Gazed at
Prosperity – Financial success, wealth
Self-satisfaction – A feeling of being happy with or proud of yourself
Gave no heed – Paid no attention
Ill-concealed – Not well hidden, obvious
Subsequently – At a later time
Accosted – Approached boldly
To angle for – To try to get something, but not be clear about your intentions
Resumed – Continued
Bejeweled – Wearing a lot of jewelry
Occupation -- Job
Bid me good-bye – Said good-bye to me