

Read Like This: Using Informational Text Strategies -- Political Cartoon Analysis Worksheet, Answer Key

Background: Railroad owners held extensive power and fortune in the 1870s in America. They used shady practices to increase their personal fortunes and win over their rivals. They used their economic power to get their way politically, and forced state and federal legislatures to increase their subsidies, give them more land, and protect them from taxes and regulations. Source: [U.S. History – Evidence 2: Frank Bellew, "The American Frankenstein," 1874](#)

Examine the political cartoon below to figure out what it is saying about Frankenstein and about America in the 1870s.

The American Frankenstein



Agriculture, commerce, and manufacture are all in my power," My interest is the higher law of American politics."

Cartoonists use five main elements to convey their point of view.

- Symbolism – using an object to stand for an idea.
- Exaggeration – overstating or magnifying a problem or a physical feature or habit.
- Captioning & labels for clarity and emphasis.
- Analogy – a comparison between two unlike things that share some characteristics.
- Irony – the difference between the way things are and the way things are expected to be.

1. Examine the cartoon carefully. Find the portion of the cartoon that most stands out. Most often, this will be a *caricature*, which is an exaggeration or distortion of a person or object with the goal of providing a comic effect.

- a. What is it? Describe it. Is it exaggerated? How?
A train which has morphed into a giant person. Its size is exaggerated, its feet are huge enough to trample people in its way. It is huge and intimidating. It is the main focus of the cartoon.
- b. What is it doing? Why did the cartoonist draw the caricature this way? The image seems to be a giant destroying all of the people in its wake. People are running from it in fear and it has already trampled some. It is powerful and strong like a giant.
- c. What other visual details do you see? People running and being trampled by its huge feet. One man is standing at attention and seems to have some kind of uniform on. Perhaps he is representative of the government which seems to be catering to the railroad's whims. Everyone else seems scared. Smoke stacks are billowing smoke in the back.
- d. Who might the people represent in the cartoon? The people represent the citizens of the United States who are being hurt and taken advantage of by the railroad industry—its workers and even other citizens who are helping it make money and grow more powerful.

2. Think about the title, “The American Frankenstein.” From what you know about the story of Frankenstein, the creator and his creature, what might the cartoonist be saying about the train coming to life as a huge monster?

- a. What is significant about the train coming to life? Much like Victor Frankenstein created a creature for noble reasons, so did the railroads began. Both, however, got too strong and did not care who they hurt.
- b. Why is the train so large? It needs to be large and exaggerated and scary—just like Frankenstein's monster was large and scary. The cartoonist wanted to scare the readers into realization of the power of the railroads.
- c. Why are the people scared? The train's size, it's weapon, its control over everyone in its sight. It also seemed to have the power of government behind it
- d. So the cartoon seems to be comparing the railroad industry to Frankenstein's creature. If it is an analogy, what unlike things is the cartoon comparing? What characteristics do they share? The cartoon compares the railroad industry with Frankenstein's creature. They share size, power, intimidation, control, and fear.

3. The caption of the cartoon reads, “Agriculture, commerce, and manufacture are all in my power. My interest is the higher law of American politics.”

- a. What does the caption say about the power of the railroads? The caption explains that the railroad has impacted and now controls most of the money in the US—it carries agriculture, it has its hands in commerce, and it is keeping the manufacturing industry alive.

- b. What is the “train” wielding? What words are written on the paddle? The train is wielding capital or money. It has huge resources and is not afraid to use them. It is paddling the citizens of the US and keeping them under its control with its economic resources.
- c. What does it mean that the train has the capital (money) to overpower the people in the cartoon? It is saying that this industry is in danger of creating a monopoly and endangering the lives of the citizens of the US if something isn't done to control it.
- d. What is the cartoonist worrying about concerning the power and money of the railroad industry in 1873? He is worried that nothing is being done to reign the railroads in and fears for what will happen to the country if it is not stopped.

4. What message does the cartoon convey?

- a. Why did Bellew call the railroad “The American Frankenstein”? It is like Victor's creature—out of control and running all over the country hurting and killing people.
- b. How does the cartoon convey through its depiction, title and caption the concern that the railroads had gotten too big? It uses images (the train made into a living breathing monster); the title (to remind us of the creature in the novel and what it did to others); and the caption to use words to explain its power and control over the US in the late 1880s.
- c. How does the cartoon depict the abuse of power by railroad officials? The main figure of the locomotive turned into a monster very graphically depicts what the cartoonist felt was happening in the US when the railroad had gained control over commerce and government and made a few men very wealthy.
- d. How does Bellew's use of Frankenstein's creature hone in the point he is making about the railroads?