

Coney island essay



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Coney Island

1. Introduction

Once a desolate stretch of sand dunes, Coney Island became in the second half of the nineteenth century a seaside resort for New York's expanding middle class. The extension of streetcar and railroad lines to Coney Island granted accessibility to growing numbers of pleasure seekers who sought a day's escape from the city. This island, once separated from the mainland, is part of Brooklyn. Originally, the island was covered with sand dunes, and wild rabbits were abundant, thence the name Coney Island. Famous for bathing beaches, amusement parks, and its Boardwalk, in the nineteenth century this was a fashionable resort with large summer hotels served by many steamboats and railroads (Kasson 1978). Coney Island offers a wonderful case study not only because of its long existence as such a place, but also because it was, for a few decades, the primary proving ground for new forms of mechanical amusements designed to attract a large middle-class audience. The principal amusement parks were Luna Park, Dreamland Park, and Steeplechase Park.

2. The Amusements of Coney Island

Coney Island opened in 1895 and its amusement parks flourished in the years before World War I. Like the Midways of the World's Fairs (which had been the inspiration for Coney's designers), Coney Island offered an array of fantasy environments and entertainments. The architecture of its three amusement parks was wildly eclectic: minarets, towers, domes, stucco, gilding, paint, over-decoration, jumble and garishness; and at night, Coney Island was dazzling: a fairyland of electric lights. At the 1893 Columbian <https://assignbuster.com/coney-island-essay/>

Exposition at Chicago, the Midway amusement section offered an invigorating contrast to the monumental, neoclassical, dignified and correct White City at the center of the Exposition (Kasson 1978). Similarly, Coney Island offered an exhilarating antidote to nearby New York City. During the summer months, millions of urban workers went to Coney Island, where a carnival atmosphere prevailed, and the normal structures and rules governing social behavior were temporarily suspended. Like the circus, Coney Island functioned as an antidote and even a protest to the moralism and ideology of the Progressive Era. Coney Island's spectacularly staged program provided its working-class audiences a spectacle and a moral: after the eruption of Vesuvius, it is the Christians of Pompeii who escape and are triumphant, the wealthy and decadent Romans who perish. So this vision of an urban Armageddon offered spectators a double pleasure: a voyeuristic enjoyment of lavish displays of luxury and extravagance set in doomed Pompeii and the moral pleasure of witnessing the ultimate triumph of justice. In *The Last Days of Pompeii*, the unbearable conditions of metropolitan life were transformed into melodramatic and fiery entertainment. Understood to be an outlet for the built-up human steam of the urban world proper, Manhattan, Coney Island functioned as a staging ground for all manner of transcendental aspirations: moon travel and undersea adventures, jet-propelled flight and various Jules-Verne-like combinations thereof. Before the city itself could offer many amenities for its burgeoning working class, Coney Island was the place the city did its dreaming.

2. 1. Luna Park

The fantasy of a Never Land free of obligations, where men could relive their childhoods, ride on elephants, and play with any toy they liked, was Luna's governing narrative, the story that Thompson used to explain his amusement park, his vision of the good life, and how he had come to be the man he was. Thompson was the marvel of the new American economy of urban mass amusements. In 1902-3, when only twenty-eight years old, he had designed and, with his partner Elmer "Skip" Dundy, built Luna Park, a twenty-two-acre amusement park on Coney Island on the edge of New York City. Luna was unlike any place Americans had ever seen: a cityscape of narrow avenues lined with brilliantly white palaces, playfully ornamented with spewing fountains, onion domes, glittering towers, and minarets that served no purpose other than to humor anyone who paid ten cents to cross its threshold. Luna founded a new and lasting paradigm for outdoor amusements—an architecturally unified and exotic garden of enchantment, which mocked the drab circumstances of everyday life and specialized in the experience of imaginative escape and thrilling fantasies. Luna's architecture, amusements, and proprietor played important roles in furthering this marketculture, but their specific contributions were to the particular pattern of meanings that composed the commercial culture of Peter Pan. Luna was one of the most influential—and, in all probability, the most popular—of the broad array of institutions whose designers and supporters enlisted or claimed for themselves the fantasy of unending childhood to define their particular enterprises.

2. 2. Tilyou's Steeplechase Park

George Tilyou's Steeplechase Park, the third of Coney Island's amusement parks, opened in 1897 and incorporated sexuality and romance into its repertoire. For example, its Razzle Dazzle, otherwise known as the Wedding Ring, featured a large circle of laminated wood suspended from a pole, which, when rocked back and forth, caused patrons to stumble into one another, packaging the kind of physical encounters that occurred frequently on city streets as a form of sexual amusement (Kasson 1978). Even before the era of the great parks, West Brighton, or Coney as it was called, was the island's focal point, attracting three hundred thousand to five hundred thousand working women and men and (if they had them) their children to its rollicking entertainments and breezy beaches, especially on hot summer Sundays. By 1909 the number of summer visitors had grown to twenty million. Tilyou's Park was named for its most famous ride, a mechanical horse race that circled the park.

2. 3. Dreamland

The Reynolds enterprise, an amusement park called Dreamland, took to the hilt his showman's sense of style and atmosphere, creating a kind of walk-through theatrical space dense with overripe and unexamined classical conceits. Dreamland opened its gates on May 15, 1904 to the thousands who came, as they did every day from then on, to gawk at the lushly bosomed caryatid holding up the grand entry arch and the three-hundred-seventy-five-foot tower covered with an extravagant display of a hundred thousand electric lights, to experience the sensation of riding the Shoot the Chutes, to feel the pull of the crowd.

3. Conclusion

Coney Island was, for most of the early twentieth century, a kind of laboratory or test bench for fantastic innovation. Coney Island relied on fun houses, mechanical sensations, and circustype sideshow attractions. The entertaining island rarely allowed people to be passive viewers. Instead, people were whirled through space and knocked off balance, their hats blown off, skirts lifted, sense of humor tried. People themselves became the show, providing interest and hilarity to each other. Although those merry days are now long gone, people still can enjoy the rides, comprising the Wonder Wheel and the Cyclone Roller Coaster. Even today women and men seek out Coney's rollicking resorts and cool beaches.

Works Cited

Kasson, John F. *Amusing the Millions: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Hill ; Wang, 1978.