

Gangs of new york: the irish immigrants



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“Gangs of New York”, directed by Martin Scorsese, depicts how waves of Irish immigrants that came to the United States were treated upon arrival. English and Dutch natives in New York’s city of Five Points clearly showed that they were not in favor of the newcomers. Bill the Butcher took the case into extremes when he leads a gang of locals into a war with the Irish. Bill kills Priest Vallon, the leader of the Irish, and his son Amsterdam runs away. Years later, Amsterdam reappears and seeks revenge for his father. “Gangs of New York” a historical film which follows the adventures of a young Irish American man, is a tool that somewhat illustrates history during the time of immigration; important elements discussed in the text of Foner’s Give Me Liberty were not incorporated into the film.

“Gangs of New York” starts in the year 1846, in which Amsterdam’s father, a Catholic Irish immigrant, sets out to battle the Protestants already in New York. Irish participation in the war occurred because they did not want Protestant teachings, which they were not in favor of, to be approved by government. After the gruesome scene where Amsterdam’s father is slain, the film is told from Amsterdam’s point of view. He describes what happens in the city of Five Points and how the citizens act. In Five Points, Amsterdam says that immigrants are not welcomed nor are they hired by any job. Irish immigrants came to the United States, particularly the in the north, because “job opportunities were most abundant and the new arrivals would not have to compete with slave labor” (Foner 319) Locals of Five Points did not accept any immigrant newcomers because they were following orders from Bill the Butcher, who seems as if he has total control of the city. Bill is working under William “Boss” Tweed, head of Tammany Hall. His way of fighting for control

of the city is through boxing matches and lighting buildings on fire.

Amsterdam's point of view shapes the historical narrative in the film by describing what happened during the time period of the 1860's as well as telling the story of his life with his allies, who were also immigrants, and what he had gone through in order to take survive this period.

One of Amsterdam's allies later on in the film was the pickpocket Jenny Everdeane, a local of Five Points. He quickly falls for her, which had made an impact on the historical part of the film. When Martin Scorsese directed "Gangs of New York", he altered history. She was a colleague of Bill the Butcher. In a scene where the two were alone, Amsterdam eventually finds out that she was working with Bill when he asks her where she got one of the several necklaces that were in her possession. His feelings for her dropped upon hearing the news. Martin Scorsese inserted a scene where there is love because he did not want the film to focus just on the historical account of the time period, but wanted to make the film appeal to the intended audience. During the time when Irish immigrants were fighting for their freedom, there probably were not any love affairs going on. Irish immigrants decided to come to the United States was because most of them were trying to escape the disaster that had struck Ireland, which was the Great Famine during the years 1845-1851. In the actual time period, there were no serious love affections going on after immigration.

Due to the film's language and sensuality with Amsterdam and Everdeane, the intended audience of the film are high school students and above. The intended audience shapes the storyline and the historical account of the film because they are mature enough to handle some of the grotesque scenes

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and may be able to understand the storyline. By the time students take a U. S. History course in high school, they will probably cover the time period that “Gangs of New York” was set in. The high school U. S. History course consists of the beginnings of America up to the present day. In college, however, U. S. History is split into two- early and modern history. The college U. S. History does consist of the time period of the 1860s. After a thorough study of the course, students who watch “Gangs of New York” will be familiar with the topic of immigrants coming to the United States, although the high school course does not describe in detail the true intentions of the Europeans’ migration to the most powerful country in the world.

Although the producers of “Gangs of New York” may have taken a U. S. History course in high school or college, the connection they made with history was somewhat accurate, but skipped two major events that happened in the United States. In chapter 9 of Foner’s “Give Me Liberty”, the rise of immigration is discussed. According to Foner, immigrants from Ireland and Germany headed for northern states. “Gangs of New York” portrayed the Irish immigrants moving to New York accurately. However, the film did not what the Irish were going through after they came to the United States. Scorsese focused more on gang fights in the city rather than concentrating on the issue of the Irish. In the Foner text, the Irish were working low-wage jobs that “native” Americans avoided by all means. Irish were laborers when they moved to the United States. Labor was done not just by the Irish, but by blacks as well.

“Gangs of New York” had scenes where some blacks were included, but they were not shown as slaves. They were shown briefly in the film being

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executed by Bill the Butcher, who hated everyone that was against his vision of having a Protestant America. The film was also correct for the racism that the Irish and the blacks went through. Chapter 11 of Foner describes racism, which was that that the white race, meaning the individuals that were born and raised in America, was superior to any other race. The film shows Bill the Butcher as a candidate for racism; he only wanted Protestantism to rule America as well as the thought that natives of the country were the most inferior compared to other cultures that existed in the United States.

Racism, Irish immigration, and battles between Catholic and Protestants were important parts of history that affects the present day, however, "Gangs of New York" would not be recommended as a teaching tool for learning about the Irish-American historical experience during the mid-19th century United States. Although the film is entertaining, it omits certain events in history that students will eventually learn, such as the Civil War and how it affects the North and South. Slavery in New York was not included in the film, even though it had a few scenes that showed how blacks were mistreated. The film's focus is mainly on an individual who wants revenge for the killing of his father. Amsterdam's father himself was an immigrant to the United States and was eventually killed for his belief in Catholicism.

Amsterdam was an American born Irish citizen who did not want to convert to Protestantism. Scenes which show Amsterdam and Everdeane having affection only serve as a distraction to the person who wants to learn about Irish immigration to the United States. The idea of Irish immigration is far more important than affection, as well as the labor that they had gone

through in order to live among local Americans. “Gangs of New York” would be recommended for its entertainment, but not as a teaching tool.