

A Close Reading of *The Great Fire* by Jim Murphy (excerpt)

Student Mini-Assessment

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Excerpt from *The Great Fire* by Jim Murphy

The Great Fire of Chicago is considered the largest disaster of the 1800s. It is rumored to have started in the barn of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary

- (1) A shed attached to the barn was already engulfed by flames. It contained two tons of coal for the winter and a large supply of kindling wood. Fire ran along the dry grass and leaves, and took hold of a neighbor's fence. The heat from the burning barn, shed, and fence was so hot that the O'Learys' house, forty feet away, began to smolder. Neighbors rushed from their homes, many carrying buckets or pots of water. The sound of music and merrymaking stopped abruptly, replaced by the shout of "FIRE!" It would be a warning cry heard thousands of times during the next thirty-one hours.
- (2) Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn. The city boasted having 59,500 buildings, many of them—such as the Courthouse and the Tribune Building—large and ornately decorated. The trouble was that about two-thirds of all these structures were made entirely of wood. Many of the remaining buildings (even the ones proclaimed to be "fireproof") looked solid, but were actually jerrybuilt¹ affairs; the stone or brick exteriors hid wooden frames and floors, all topped with highly flammable tar or shingle roofs. It was also a common practice to disguise wood as another kind of building material. The fancy exterior decorations on just about every building were carved from wood, then painted to look like stone or marble. Most churches had steeples that appeared to be solid from the street, but a closer inspection would reveal a wooden framework covered with cleverly painted copper or tin.
- (3) The situation was worst in the middle-class and poorer districts. Lot sizes were small, and owners usually filled them up with cottages, barns, sheds, and outhouses—all made of fast-burning wood, naturally. Because both Patrick and Catherine O'Leary worked, they were able to put a large addition on their cottage despite a lot size of just 25 by 100 feet. Interspersed in these residential areas were a variety of businesses—paint factories, lumberyards, distilleries, gasworks, mills, furniture manufacturers, warehouses, and coal distributors.
- (4) Wealthier districts were by no means free of fire hazards. Stately stone and brick homes had wood interiors and stood side by side with smaller wood-frame houses. Wooden stables and other storage buildings were common, and trees lined the streets and filled the yards.
- (5) The links between richer and poorer sections went beyond the materials used for construction or the way buildings were crammed together. Chicago had been built largely on soggy marshland that flooded every time it rained. As the years passed and the town developed, a quick solution to the water and mud problem was needed. The answer was to make the roads and sidewalks out of wood and elevate them above the waterline, in some places by several feet. On the day the fire started, over 55 miles of

¹ Built cheaply or poorly constructed

pine-block streets and 600 miles of wooden sidewalks bound the 23,000 acres of the city in a highly combustible knot.

- (6) Fires were common in all cities back then, and Chicago was no exception. In 1863 there had been 186 reported fires in Chicago; the number had risen to 515 by 1868. Records for 1870 indicate that fire-fighting companies responded to nearly 600 alarms. The next year saw even more fires spring up, mainly because the summer had been unusually dry. Between July and October only a few scattered showers had taken place and these did not produce much water at all. Trees drooped in the unrelenting summer sun; grass and leaves dried out. By October, as many as six fires were breaking out every day. On Saturday the seventh, the night before the Great Fire, a blaze destroyed four blocks and took over sixteen hours to control. What made Sunday the eighth different and particularly dangerous was the steady wind blowing in from the southwest.
- (7) It was this gusting, swirling wind that drove the flames from the O'Learys' barn into neighboring yards. To the east, a fence and shed of Jim Dalton's went up in flames; to the west, a barn smoldered for a few minutes, then flared up into a thousand yellow-orange fingers.

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Questions for Students

1. Reread this sentence from paragraph 5 of the passage:

The answer was to make the roads and sidewalks out of wood and elevate them above the waterline, in some places by several feet.

Which two phrases in the sentence best help the reader determine the meaning of the word “elevate”?

- A. The answer was
- B. to make the roads and sidewalks
- C. out of wood
- D. above the waterline
- E. in some places
- F. by several feet

2. What was the main reason that the middle class and poorer districts in Chicago burned down more easily than other districts in the city did?

- A. The buildings in these districts had wooden decorations painted to look like marble or stone.
- B. The roofs of the buildings in these districts were made of materials that burned easily.
- C. These districts contained many wooden buildings that were built closely together.
- D. These districts were crossed by miles of pine-block streets and wooden sidewalks.

3. According to the passage, how did the location of the businesses affect the Great Fire?

- A. The location of the businesses was one reason “the situation was worst in the middle-class and poorer districts.”
- B. The location of the businesses provided some of “the links between richer and poorer sections” of the city.
- C. The location of the businesses meant that the “wealthier districts were by no means free of fire hazards.”
- D. The location of the businesses helped bind “the 23,000 acres of the city in a highly combustible knot.”

4. How do the details in paragraphs 3 and 4 about the poor, middle-class, and wealthier neighborhoods contribute to the development of the central ideas of the passage?

- A. The paragraphs support the idea that the fire spread widely because of the amount of wood in all three areas.
- B. The paragraphs support the idea that wood was the most readily available resource because of the number of trees in the area.
- C. The paragraphs support the idea that long ago people were unaware of the importance of well-constructed buildings.
- D. The paragraphs support the idea that Chicago was different from other large cities during that time.

5. This question has two parts. Answer Part A and then answer Part B.

Part A: Which statement below best summarizes the central idea of this passage?

- A. The Great Fire of Chicago was one of the most damaging fires in American history.
- B. The Great Fire of Chicago quickly got out of control in some neighborhoods but not others.
- C. Chicago firefighters could not put out the fire even though many people tried to help.
- D. Chicago provided almost perfect conditions for a widespread and damaging fire.

Part B: Which sentence from the passage provides the best support for the correct answer in Part A?

- A. "Neighbors rushed from their homes, many carrying buckets or pots of water."
- B. "Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn."
- C. "The situation was worst in the middle-class and poorer districts."
- D. "Fires were common in all cities back then, and Chicago was no exception."

6. In the chart below, the left-hand column contains a list of details from the passage. The right-hand column is headed "Reasons Chicago Burned in October 1871 Instead of Later." Find two details that show why Chicago burned when it did, and copy each detail into one of the empty boxes.

Details from <i>The Great Fire</i>	Reasons Chicago Burned in October 1871 Instead of Later
Neighbors rushed from their homes, many carrying buckets or pots of water.	Detail 1:
The sound of music and merrymaking stopped abruptly, replaced by the shout of "FIRE!" It would be a warning cry heard thousands of times during the next thirty-one hours.	
Lot sizes were small, and owners usually filled them up with cottages, barns, sheds, and outhouses—all made of fast-burning wood, naturally.	Detail 2:
Chicago had been built largely on soggy marshland that flooded every time it rained.	
On the day the fire started, over 55 miles of pine-block streets and 600 miles of wooden sidewalks bound the 23,000 acres of the city in a highly combustible knot.	
Between July and October only a few scattered showers had taken place and these did not produce much water at all.	
On Saturday the seventh, the night before the Great Fire, a blaze destroyed four blocks and took over sixteen hours to control.	
What made Sunday the eighth different and particularly dangerous was the steady wind blowing in from the southwest.	

7. This question has two parts. Answer Part A and then answer Part B.

Part A: Based on The Great Fire, which statement is true about conditions in Chicago in 1870-1871?

- A.** Land for building homes was abundant in Chicago.
- B.** Firefighters in Chicago were inexperienced.
- C.** The growth of Chicago was being carefully planned.
- D.** A fire was likely to occur almost every day in Chicago.

Part B: Which sentence from the passage provides the best support for the correct answer in Part A?

- A.** "Lot sizes were small, and owners usually filled them up with cottages, barns, sheds, and outhouses - all made of fast-burning wood, naturally."
- B.** "As the years passed and the town developed, a quick solution to the water and mud problem was needed."
- C.** "Records for 1870 indicate that fire-fighting companies responded to nearly 600 alarms."
- D.** "On Saturday the seventh, the night before the Great Fire, a blaze destroyed four blocks and took over sixteen hours to control."