

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

TEACHER NAME

GRADE LEVEL: 6th Grade

TEXT TYPE: Non-fiction/informational

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

We will increase understanding of the Great Fire of Chicago and develop college- and career-ready reading skills, by engaging in a close reading with text-dependent tasks and questions.

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The Text: Excerpt from *The Great Fire* by Jim Murphy

It was Sunday and an unusually warm evening for October eighth, so Daniel “Peg Leg” Sullivan left his stifling little house in the west side of Chicago and went to visit neighbors. One of his stops was at the shingled cottage of Patrick and Catherine O’Leary. The one-legged Sullivan remembered getting to the O’Learys’ house at around eight o’clock, but left after only a few minutes because the O’Leary family was already in bed. Both Patrick and Catherine had to be up very early in the morning: he to set off for his job as a laborer; she to milk their five cows and then deliver the milk to the neighbors.

-materials added to the top of a house to make it waterproof

Sullivan ambled down the stretch of land between the O’Learys’ and their neighbor, crossed the street, and sat down on the wooden sidewalk in front of Thomas White’s house. After adjusting his wooden leg to make himself comfortable, he leaned back against White’s fence to enjoy the night.

The wind coming off the prairie had been strong all day, sometimes gusting wildly, and leaves scuttled along the streets; the sound of laughter and fiddle music drifted through the night. A party was going on at the McLaughlins’ to celebrate the arrival of a relative from Ireland. Another neighbor, Dennis Rogan, dropped by the O’Learys’ at eight-thirty, but he, too, left when he heard the family was in bed.

-large area of grassland that is generally flat

Fifteen minutes later, Sullivan decided to go home. As the driver of a wagon, he would need every ounce of strength come morning. It was while pushing himself up that Sullivan first saw the fire—a single tongue of flame shooting out the side of the O’Leary’s barn

Sullivan didn’t hesitate a second. “FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!” he shouted as loud as he could. Running clumsily across the dirt street, Sullivan made his way directly to the barn. There was no time to stop for help. The building was already burning fiercely and he knew that in addition to five cows, the O’Learys had a calf and a horse in there.

The barn’s loft held over three tons of timothy hay, delivered earlier that day. Flames from the burning hay pushed against the roof and beams, almost as if they were struggling to break free. A shower of burning embers greeted Sullivan as he entered the building.

-Area above the main barn

He untied the ropes of the cows, but the frightened animals did not move. On the other side of the barn, another cow and the horse were tied to the wall, straining get loose. Sullivan took a step toward them, then realized that the fire had gotten around behind him and might cut off any chance of escape in a matter of seconds. The heat was fiercely intense and blinding, and in his rush to flee, Sullivan slipped on the uneven floorboards and fell with a thud.

He struggled to get up and, as he did, Sullivan discovered that his wooden leg had gotten stuck between two boards and came off. Instead of panicking, he began hopping toward where he thought the

door was. Luck was with him. He had gone a few feet when the O'Learys' calf bumped into him, and Sullivan was able to throw his arms around its neck. Together, man and calf managed to find the door and safety, both frightened, both badly singed.

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.

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 jerrybuilt 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.

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.

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.

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

-small pieces of easy to burn wood used to start a fire

-being happy (typically during a celebration or party)

-fancy or elaborate

-built poorly or quickly, especially to save money
-able to burn
-outside

-a tall structure on the top of a church

-a shed-like building that covers a deep hole used for going to the bathroom

-where alcohol is made
-where flour is made

-majestic or elegant

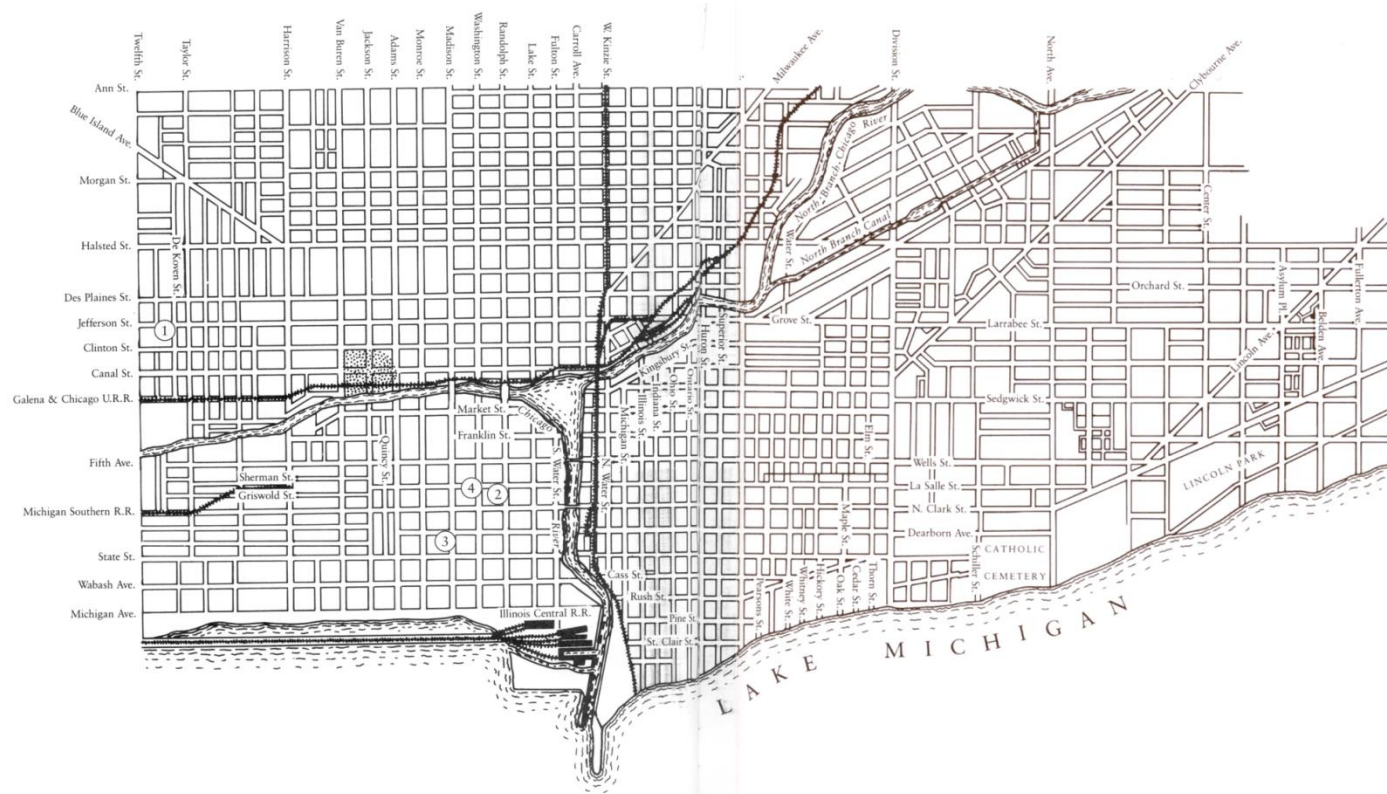
waterline, in some places by several feet. On the day the fire started, over 55 miles of pine-block streets and 600 miles of wooden sidewalks bound the 23,000 acres of the city in a highly combustible knot.

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.

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. Dennis Rogan had heard Sullivan's initial shouts about a fire and returned. He forced open the door to the O'Learys' house and called for them to wake up.

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Street Map of the Sections of Chicago Destroyed by the Fire



 AREA DESTROYED BY SATURDAY NIGHT'S FIRE

1. Home of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary
2. Courthouse
3. *Tribune* Building
4. Chamber of Commerce Building

Street map of sections destroyed by the fire. While the map shows only a small portion of the actual city of Chicago, this area was the chief business and cultural center, and housed nearly one third of its citizens.

<p>-Area above the main barn</p>	<p>(5) Sullivan didn't hesitate a second. "FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!" he shouted as loud as he could. Running clumsily across the dirt street, Sullivan made his way directly to the barn. There was no time to stop for help. The building was already burning fiercely and he knew that in addition to five cows, the O'Learys had a calf and a horse in there.</p> <p>(6) The barn's <u>loft</u> held over three tons of timothy hay, delivered earlier that day. Flames from the burning hay pushed against the roof and beams, almost as if they were struggling to break free. A shower of burning embers greeted Sullivan as he entered the building.</p> <p>(7) He untied the ropes of the cows, but the frightened animals did not move. On the other side of the barn, another cow and the horse were tied to the wall, straining get loose. Sullivan took a step toward them, then realized that the fire had gotten around behind him and might cut off any chance of escape in a matter of seconds. The heat was fiercely intense and blinding, and in his rush to flee, Sullivan slipped on the uneven floorboards and fell with a thud.</p> <p>(8) He struggled to get up and, as he did, Sullivan discovered that his wooden leg had gotten stuck between two boards and came off. Instead of panicking, he began hopping toward where he thought the door was. Luck was with him. He had gone a few feet when the O'Learys' calf bumped into him, and Sullivan was able to throw his arms around its neck. Together, man and calf managed to find the door and safety, both frightened, both badly singed.</p>	<p>4. Sullivan has to shout, "FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!" From this detail, what can the reader infer about the technology in Chicago at the time?</p> <p>5. The author states, "The barn's loft held over three tons of timothy hay." What can the reader infer about how this detail could impact the development of The Great Fire?</p> <p>6. Sullivan's behavior in paragraphs 4-6 suggests many things about his personality. What characteristics can be attributed to Sullivan based on evidence from these three paragraphs?</p> <p>7. Sullivan knew the O'Learys had several animals in the barn. Which of them was he able to rescue from the fire? Which were lost?</p>
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<p>-small pieces of easy to burn wood used to start a fire</p> <p>-being happy (typically during a celebration or party)</p> <p>-fancy or elaborate</p> <p>-built poorly or quickly, especially to save money</p> <p>-able to burn</p> <p>-outside</p> <p>-a tall structure on the top of a church</p> <p>-a shed-like building that covers a deep hole used for going to the</p>	<p>(9) 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 <u>kindling</u> 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 <u>merrymaking</u> stopped abruptly, replaced by the shout of “FIRE!”. It would be a warning cry heard thousands of times during the next thirty-one hours.</p> <p>(10) 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 <u>ornately</u> 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 <u>jerrybuilt</u> affairs; the stone or brick exteriors hid wooden frames and floors, all topped with highly <u>flammable</u> tar or shingle roofs. It was also a common practice to disguise wood as another kind of building material. The fancy <u>exterior</u> decorations on just about every building were carved from wood, then painted to look like stone or marble. Most churches had <u>steeple</u>s that appeared to be solid from the street, but a closer inspection would reveal a wooden framework covered with cleverly painted copper or tin.</p> <p>(11) 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 <u>outhouses</u>—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</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Coal and kindling wood are both used to start and stoke fires because they burn so quickly and easily. What detail in paragraph 9 reinforces the tremendous intensity that these two substances add to the fire? What evidence does the author give to back up his argument that Chicago is a city “ready to burn?” The author includes a list of businesses in paragraph 11. How do these businesses contribute to the idea that Chicago is “ready to burn?” How do the locations of these businesses increase the human element of the tragedy?
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<p>bathroom -where alcohol is made -where flour is made</p> <p>majestic or elegant</p>	<p>these residential areas were a variety of businesses—paint factories, lumberyards, <u>distilleries</u>, gasworks, <u>mills</u>, furniture manufacturers, warehouses, and coal distributors.</p> <p>(12) Wealthier districts were by no means free of fire hazards. <u>Stately</u> 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.</p> <p>(13) 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 pine-block streets and 600 miles of wooden sidewalks bound the 23,000 acres of the city in a highly combustible knot.</p>	<p>4. How are the dangers in the wealthier neighborhoods different or similar to the fire risks for those who lived in poorer areas?</p> <p>5. A metaphor is a form of figurative language used to compare two things that are not literally related. Murphy calls Chicago a “highly combustible knot.” Why does he make this comparison? What is he specifically referring to?</p>
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(14) 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.

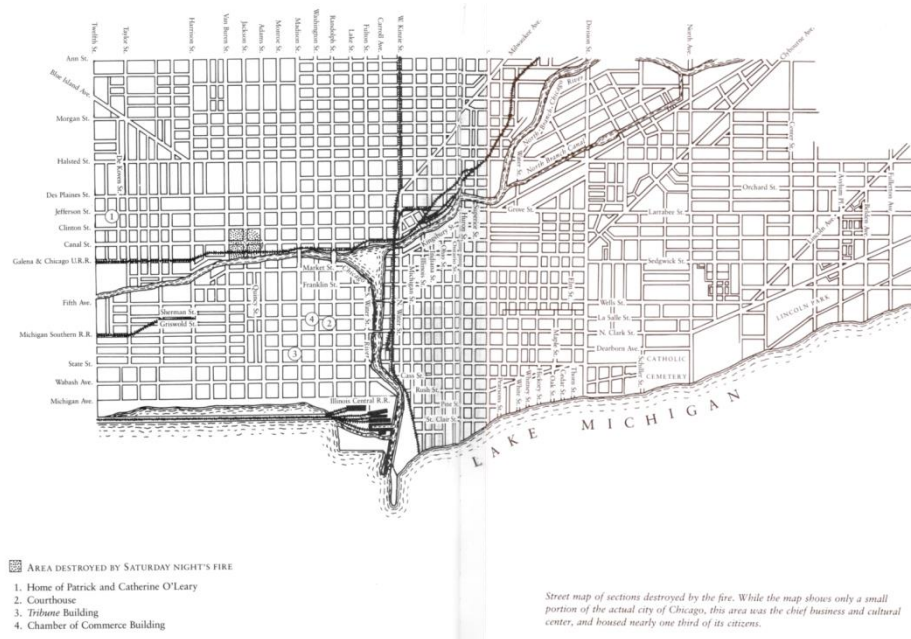
(15) It was this **gusting, swirling** wind that **drove** the flames from the O’Learys’ barn into neighboring yards. To the east, a fence and shed of Jim Dalton’s went up in flames; to the west, a barn **smoldered** for a few minutes, then **flared** up into a thousand yellow-orange fingers. Dennis Rogan had heard Sullivan’s **initial** shouts about a fire and returned. He forced open the door to the O’Learys’ house and called for them to wake up.

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1. **What pattern emerges when you look at how many fires break out each year from 1863 to 1870? What does this suggest about what people should have known in 1871?**

2. **The author previously had personified the fire, describing it as “struggling to break free” and “greet[ing] Sullivan”, and now as having “a thousand yellow-orange fingers.” What is the author’s purpose in using this language?**

Street Map of Sections of Chicago Destroyed by the Fire



3. Looking at the map and reading the text, what conditions and geographic limitations prevented the fire from spreading farther than it did? If the wind had been blowing off of Lake Michigan rather than towards it, what would have been the effect of the fire?

4. Despite the fact that it was in the middle of the fire, Lincoln Park never burned. Using the map and reading the text, what inferences can you draw as to reasons why a park might not have burned?

Group Brainstorm Activity to Support Culminating Writing Assignment

Introduction:

Today, cities have taken a number of steps to prevent fires, including implementing stricter fire codes. Fire codes are local laws that require people building any kind of structure to follow certain procedures intended to keep fire risk low. Some examples of modern fire code requirements include using building materials that are not easily flammable, like bricks, leaving adequate space between buildings, having roofs that will not catch fire if sparks land on them, installing automatic, heat-triggered sprinkler systems, and using special walls made of concrete or cement called “fire walls” to stop the spread of fire from one section of a large building to another. Fire walls became common in the mid-1900’s as concrete became a commonly-available building material.

In Chicago in 1871, there were only two fire codes: stove pipes passing through roofs needed a tin or iron shield six inches above and below the wooden roofline, and 2) each home was required to have “one good painted leather fire bucket for each fireplace or stove in the building.” (Chicago Fire Bucket Ordinance, 1835).

Questions for Discussion:

Take a few minutes with your group to brainstorm answers to the following questions:

- Which modern fire codes would have been physically possible to require in 1871 in Chicago?

- How would laws about buildings and what materials builders were allowed to use affect people with different income levels in 1871 Chicago? Think especially about poor people like the O’Learys.

Writing Assignment – The Great Fire: A Community Responds

Instructions:

It is December 1871. The shock of the Great Fire has worn off and the city of Chicago needs to begin rebuilding. You have been asked to give advice to the mayor of Chicago about new fire codes that might prevent the next “Great Fire.” Which two changes to the Chicago fire code might have helped lessen the impact of the Great Fire of 1871? Construct an argument with a clear beginning, middle, and end describing the two changes you would make, using details from the text to support your choices. Be sure that your ideas are appropriate for the time period and solve problems that contributed to the 1871 fire described by the author.

Use the Evidence Collection Chart for Writing Assignment, below, to help you.

Optional Writing Assignment

Instructions:

Elias Colbert and Everett Chamberlin in their article referred to the people in the crowded neighborhood where the fire started as “human rats”. However, another article in *The Tribune* described the same neighborhood in the following way:

“They were nearly all poor people, the savings of whose lifetime were represented in the little mass of furniture which blocked the streets, and impeded the firemen. They were principally laborers, most of them Germans or Scandinavians. Though the gaunt phantom of starvation and homelessness, for the night, at least, passed over them, it was singular to observe the cheerfulness, not to say merriment, that prevailed. Though mothers hugged their little ones to their breasts and shivered with alarm, yet, strange to say, they talked freely and laughed as if realizing the utter uselessness of expressing more dolefully their consciousness of ruin.”

Why might people describe the same neighborhood in such different ways? With which point of view does Murphy (our author) agree? **Use specific evidence from the texts to explain your response.**

Please note: If your teacher assigns the optional writing assignment, make sure you have copies of the accompanying articles from Appendix B.