

Agatha Wozniak

## **Examining Desperate and Deliberate Lives**

(Gilded Age)

### **Objectives**

- Explain how technology has impacted the individual's role in society
- Explain how capital and industrialization can turn the individual into a machine and how the individual can regain a sense of self
- Explain how one can be productive and happy at work while avoiding living a desperate life
- Describe how viewing labor as capital deepens social and economic divides. How does it lead to lives of desperation?
- Describe Henry David Thoreau's views on the treatment of the individual in the labor market
- Explain how technology can be both useful and detrimental to the human experience
- Describe what technology infiltrates your life and if you have allowed it to do so.
- Discuss if Henry David Thoreau's thoughts on technology still apply to the modern world

### **Essential Questions**

- How and why do people live desperate lives?
- How can we live deliberate lives?
- What is progress?
- How does technology/modernity impact us?
- What parts of society cause us to be sleepy?
- How can technology progress turn humans into machines?
- How can we choose which technology "infiltrates" our lives?
- Should labor be treated strictly as capital?
- How do we live in a world of social hierarchy and dependency while still striving for equality?

### **Materials Needed**

Henry David Thoreau - "I am the Little Irish Boy"

Charlie Chaplin - *Modern Times* (first 18min or so- [Modern Times 18min clip](#))

### **Lesson 1 - progress, technology, effects of modernity**

Homework due at the beginning of the lesson:

Have students interview an adult (parent, grandparent, etc) 30 years of age or older about technology and progress.

1. How do you define progress?
2. Do you believe all progress to be positive?
3. Do you have a cell phone? Why/Why not? Do you consider the cell phone to be evidence of progress? Why?

4. Has the cell phone changed social life for the better? How is it different? Can a person maintain social connections without a cell phone?
- 1) In the beginning of class, have students individually answer the following questions:
    - a. How do you, personally, define progress?
    - b. How do we, as a society, define progress? Why do you think we define it this way?
    - c. Are science and technology always a step forward? Explain.
  - 2) Have students share their responses with a partner, then with the class a whole. Create a definition of progress as a class, then provide definitions of progress from various academic areas and the dictionary.
  - 3) Place students in larger groups (4 or so) and have them share their interviews. Each group should create a list/chart organizing the responses and comparing them to the provided definitions and the student responses.
  - 4) Considering the cell phone as a starting off point. Is it a tool that improves us? Have a discussion and then share and debate if science and technology are always a step forward.
    - a. As part of the conversation, have students consider how technology can be an extension of their own abilities -- will it help them observe the world better? Will it create more connections to the natural world and society? Or will it distract them? Provide example of Thoreau and his spyglass - upon finally using a spyglass in the forest, he was better able to observe birds and noticed new ones.
  - 5) Finally, have the students write a reflection on how they can monitor which technology infiltrates their lives. What can they do to ensure they do not become “sleepy” or lost in the pace of life? What can ensure they stay awake and live deliberate, observant lives?

## **Lesson 2 - morality of treating labor as strictly capital; humans as machines**

- 1) Have students respond in writing to the following quotation. Discuss the meaning as a class.
  - a) “The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money *merely* is to have been truly idle or worse. If the laborer gets no more than the wages which his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself. If you would get money as a writer or lecturer, you must be popular, which is to go down perpendicularly. Those services which the community will most readily pay for, it is most disagreeable to render. You are paid for being something less than a man. The State does not commonly reward a genius any more wisely.” (“Life without Principle”)
- 2) Introduce another quotation to establish further context for Thoreau and the Gilded Age.
  - a) “‘The inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways.’ Hardly any - not the farmer or the craftsman, not the storekeeper or his clerk, not the manufacturer or the operative - could escape the constant train. A few at the top, ‘seemingly wealthy’, were actually ‘the most terribly impoverished’ of all, with no idea how to ‘use...or get rid of the

accumulated dross' crushing their lives. The laboring man was caught in a different tra. Obligated to earn his daily bread, he 'has not leisure for a true integrity day by day...he has no time to be anything but a machine.'" (*Thoreau and the Laborers of Concord*, Robert A. Gross, pg. 52)

- i) Discuss what Thoreau means by the upper classes having too much wealth and the laborers/lower class being reduced to simply machines
- 3) Pass out Thoreau's poem "I Am a Little Irish Boy". In small groups, have the students read the poem and discuss the meaning behind each of the lines. Then, have them consider the following questions.
  - a) What does the little Irish boy have to look forward too as he grows older? How are his parents and him living desperate, unfulfilled lives? Have technology improved their lives? How are they experiencing progress
- 4) Before turning on the following video, have students think about the following question: "Should labor be regarded strictly as capital?" Then, play Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (first 18min or so- [Modern Times 18min clip](#)) and take notes what the clip is saying about automation, how technology has led humans to be treated as replaceable machines, social divisions in society, etc.
  - a) Have students meet in small groups to discuss their observations and how technology, while helpful, is also a distraction and detriment if not utilized to enhance a person's skills.
    - i) How would labor like this contribute to the social divisions in society?
- 5) Finally, have students analyze the following excerpt and discuss how easy or difficult it is during the Gilded Age (or today) to not spend your entire life being "very industrious, and yet not spending his time well..." and then in pairs create an image that demonstrates how we can live with purpose in a society with such emphasis on work.

"Perhaps I am more than usually jealous with respect to my freedom. I feel that my connection with and obligation to society are still very slight and transient. Those slight labors which afford me a livelihood, and by which it is allowed that I am to some extent serviceable to my contemporaries, are as yet commonly a pleasure to me, and I am not often reminded that they are a necessity. So far I am successful. But I foresee that if my wants should be much increased, the labor required to supply them would become a drudgery. If I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure that for me there would be nothing left worth living for. I trust that I shall never thus sell my birthright for a mess of pottage. I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living. All great enterprises are self-supporting. The poet, for instance, must sustain his body by his poetry, as a steam planing-mill feeds its boilers with the shavings it makes. You must get your living by loving. But as it is said of the merchants that ninety-seven in a hundred fail, so the life of men generally, tried by this standard, is a failure, and bankruptcy may be surely prophesied." (*Life without Principle*)

**“I Am the Little Irish Boy”**

<https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/767>

I am the little Irish boy  
That lives in the shanty  
I am four years old today  
And shall soon be one and twenty  
I shall grow up  
And be a great man  
And shovel all day  
As hard as I can.

Down in the deep cut  
Where the men lived  
Who made the Railroad.

For supper  
I have some potato  
And sometimes some bread  
And then if it's cold  
I go right to bed.

I lie on some straw  
Under my father's coat

My mother does not cry  
And my father does not scold  
For I am a little Irish Boy  
And I'm four years old.