

Curriculum Guide for

BREAD AND ROSES by Judith Black

This story focuses on the lives of immigrant women in New York City sweat shops during the early 1900's. The story offers a dimension of America's past too frequently neglected in mainstream texts. Amanda, the story's heroine, watches her mother die from a disease that doctors called tuberculosis. This was a tag put on women who collapsed under the physical strains of living in dire poverty, the victims of many circumstances they could not control. Among these circumstances were the living and working conditions that non-citizens had to suffer in order to survive. Add to these the fact that women had no legal or medical control over their reproductive systems, and the result was working class women dying in their thirties and forties from bearing too many children, too frequently, in a filth ridden world. This is Amanda's world. Equipped with her mother's sense of beauty and her father's will she ultimately commits herself to making a better world for her own children.

There are many curriculum areas you might consider using this story to augment.

HISTORY

Working class and immigrant history have long been under exposed. This is an ideal time to draw them out in collaboration with American industrial development.

The story's title, **Bread and Roses**, is derived from the great labor strike of 1912. The immigrants of Lawrence Ma., representing over 30 languages and nationalities, walked out when their already starvation level wages were cut by 24 cents. This money represented three loaves of bread to families for whom it made a difference. The strike that ensued is now considered the most radical in American labor history. Never before had immigrants spoken out with such a single, clear, and definitive voice. You might take this opportunity to look into the Lawrence strike and investigate:

IWW (Wobblers)

Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn

The Industrial Revolution and the textile Industry

American policy toward immigrant workers
Living and work conditions of Immigrants

WOMEN'S HISTORY

Virginia Wolf said that for a woman to pursue creative ends she required 100 lbs. a year and a room of her own. She went on to write about how women were slaves to their biology. Given the overwhelming responsibility of bearing and raising children, they often had little time for other pursuits. The story's title reflects women's dual desire to provide sustenance for their children as well as enjoy a little of life's beauty.

This story sets the precedent for the first major birth control movement in America. From the story students can see that this movement was not spawn out of the desire for sexual activity without the requisite responsibility that must accompany it. Quite conversely, it emerged as a movement by and for women. It's objective was to give women some control over that process of procreation, which was, as the story points out, a life and death matter. This story might logically lead you to a discussion about Margaret Sanger and the birth control movement.

Sexual harassment was well and alive long before Anita Hill gave us a vibrant vocabulary with which to discuss it or the present day White House made it dinner conversation. Though this is a delicate subject, it is also one which has great resonance today. The young women who were the victims of such harassment infrequently had the means by which to protest the treatment they suffered. Amanda's relationship to the shop foreman, Mr. Bonanno, could certainly provide a springboard for a discussion about sexual harassment.

SOCIAL STUDIES

When Sadie explains to Amanda that the immigrant women throw their trash out of windows because they don't know how else to deal with it, she is opening a window from one culture to the next. The Italians were employed by padroni's, and preferred them to the legal rights they might have been given with an American employer. Sadie's parents have promised her in marriage to a young man she has no interest in. Michael's parents, through a settlement house, sent their wild son off as a 'fresh air kid.' Amanda's father claimed that doctors were thieves "like lawyers and politicians." **Bread and Roses** is filled with windows that can help us to understand

various immigrant cultures. Have students, whether they understood their meaning or not, brainstorm all the windows they can remember. Divide them up and have them research the cultural context for each reference.

Bread and Roses (These words were on a banner held aloft by the textile workers in the famous 1912 strike in Lawrence Ma. They were the inspiration for this song.)

As we go marching marching in the beauty of the day
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray
Are struck with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses
For the people hear us singing: bread and roses, bread and roses!

As we go marching marching, we battle too for men
For they are women's children and we mother them again
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes
Hearts starve as well as bodies, give us bread, but give us roses

As we go marching marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through their singing their ancient cry for bread
Small art and love and beauty, their drudging spirits knew
Yes it is bread that we fight for, but we fight for roses too.

As we go marching marching we bring the greater day
The rising of the woman means the rising of the race
No more the drudge and idler, 10 that toil where on reposes
But a sharing of life's glories, bread and roses, bread and roses!