

Interview of Jane Addams by the *New York Post*, March 13, 1915

Student Name _____ Date _____

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Jane Addams Condemns Race Prejudice Film

Calls It "Pernicious Caricature of Negro Race."

Producer seems to have gathered most vicious and grotesque individuals to show them as representatives of entire race, says head of Hull House after seeing "The Birth of a Nation" moving picture drama.

"Pernicious caricature of the negro [sic] race," is the way in which Miss Jane Addams of Hull House, Chicago, expressed her opinion to-day of the motion-picture dramas. "The Birth of a Nation," now being shown in New York, in which is told a story of Reconstruction days and Ku Klux Klan violence in the South following the Civil War. After having seen the film, Miss Adams softened no terms in her condemnation of it.

"The producer seems to have followed the principle of gathering the most vicious and grotesque individuals he could find among colored people, and showing them as representatives of the truth about the entire race," she said in describing her impressions of the play. "It is both unjust and untrue. The same method could be followed to smirch the reputation of any race. For instance, it would be easy enough to go about the slums of a city and bring together some of the criminals and degenerates and take pictures of them purporting to show the character of the white race. It would no more be the truth about the white race than this is about the black.

An Anachronism.

"One of the most unfortunate things about this film is that it appeals to race prejudice upon the basis of conditions of half a century ago, which have nothing to do with the facts we have to consider to-day. Even then it does not tell the whole truth. It is claimed that the play is historical: but history is easy to misuse. It is undoubtedly true that some of the elements of the plot are based on actual events, but they are only a part of the picture. You can use history to demonstrate anything, when you take certain of its facts and emphasize them to the exclusion of the rest.

"Nobody denies that in the haste and confusion of the period after the Civil War the men in control of politics did very tyrannical and shortsighted things; and made a great many mistakes. The carpet-baggers from the North, who went in and influenced the negroes against the interests of the whites unquestionably did a great deal of harm; but to present the tendency they represented as the only one is as unfair to the North as to claim that all Southerners wanted to oppress the negroes would be to the South. Then the film shows a ridiculous scene in a Southern Legislature, to which the election of a majority of negroes has been obtained by defrauding whites of their votes. Negro legislators are shown taking off their shoes at their desks, drinking whiskey from flasks while making speeches, acting in all sorts of uncouth ways. It is laughably false to the whole truth.

"Then there is the impression that is created of the Ku Klux-Klan—perfectly ridiculous. The Klan takes the place of the melodrama hero, always doing the noble thing and rescuing the

heroine in distress. There are the revolting scenes of the pursuit of one white girl, which rouse feeling against the negro; and then there follows a second similar scene of attempted forced marriage between a powerful mulatto politician—there may have been such vicious individuals as this man is shown to be, but they were certainly exceptions—and a white girl. Of course, the Klan breaks in just in time to prevent the success of the design. At every turn the Klan is made to appeal to the enthusiasm of the spectator as the heroic defender of a victimized people. None of the outrageous, vicious, misguided outrages, which it certainly committed, are shown. I am not interested in loading blame for those outrages on the men who made up the Klan. It was natural that in the heat of the times they made mistakes, just as did the men of the North. I am simply contending that what this play tells of it is not the whole truth.

The Part of the Klan.

"Of course the spectators applaud the Klan. It is not shown to them except to stir their sympathy. Of course they applaud slights and contempt for the negroes; they are shown only as despicable brutes.

"It is certainly to be hoped that such a film can be suppressed. As an appeal to race prejudice, it is full of danger."

"Do you recall any portions of the play that you found particularly objectionable?" Miss Addams was asked.

"No, it was rather the whole tone of the second part," was the reply. "Of course, there are the unpleasant episodes in which white girls figure; but the evil is rather in the dominant attitude of mind toward the negro. As I have said, it seems to me an attempt to make him appear worse than childish, and brutal and vicious—actually grotesque and primitive and contemptible."

"How far did you observe that this attitude of mind influenced the spectators?"

"It is hard to tell, of course. Certainly I felt that they were made to feel a prejudice against negroes; some showed approval in applause when the hero refuses to shake hands with the mulatto politician, and they were roused to the point of clapping enthusiastically, before the end of the pictures, whenever the Ku Klux Klan appeared. That was the noticeable thing about the play—the success of the glorification of the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, contrasted with the base and elemental character of the negroes misrepresented in the ludicrously perverted scenes of plantation life. The production is the most subtle form of untruth—a half-truth."

Source: *New York Evening Post*, March 13, 1915.

Additional relevant resources. Please read the material at the following links:

An [article from the New York Times](#) reporting on a hearing in 1922 when D.W. Griffith decided to release *Birth of a Nation* "for commercial purposes:"

http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9503EED7153AEF33A25750C0A9649D946395D6CF

A [photograph of the KKK's 1925 march](#) in Washington, D.C.:

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6689>

***Birth of a Nation*, the NAACP, and the Balancing of Rights**

After reviewing the Addams interview and the material at the links provided, answer the following questions:

- What were the main points in Addams' critique of the film?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of her analysis of the film's treatment of post-Civil War history?
- How would you describe the tone of her comments?
- Was Addams' critique effective? Why or why not?
- Why did Addams, a white woman, serve as the spokesperson for the NAACP?
- With whom did the NAACP meet to protest the showing of *Birth of a Nation*?
- Why were these officials targeted?

***Birth of a Nation*, the NAACP, and the Balancing of Rights**

- To what extent were the efforts of the NAACP successful?
- What reasons did Walter White give for petitioning the Motion Picture Commission to revoke Griffith's permit to show *Birth of a Nation*?
- On what grounds was the Commission authorized to revoke a permit?
- Based on the information provided in this article, should the permit have been revoked? On what grounds?
- What does the photograph of the Klan's 1925 march in Washington, DC, tell us about the size and influence of the Klan?

After reviewing the details in these three documents, discuss the larger issues as a class:

- Why did the NAACP, which had a record of defending First Amendment rights of free expression, urge officials to prohibit the showing of the film and/or delete certain scenes?
- Why were local and state governments reluctant to censor *Birth of a Nation*?
- What do these documents reveal about the NAACP as an organization?
- What do these documents reveal about the nature, extent, and acceptance of racism at this point in American history?
- Was the NAACP justified in trying to censor *Birth of a Nation*?