

IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

Here She Is: Miss America and The Protest of 1968

Target Age: High School
Time Period: 20th Century
Featured County: Atlantic
NJ 350th Theme: Diversity

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts:

R.CCR.2- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

R.CCR.8- Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

SL.CCR.5- Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.D.13.c, 6.1.12.D.13.f, 6.3.12.C.1

FOCUS QUESTION:

How has the Miss America pageant reflected changing ideas about the role of women in U.S. society and culture?

BACKGROUND:

The Miss America Pageant began as a publicity stunt—the brainchild of Atlantic City businessmen in 1921 who were trying to keep tourists in town after Labor Day. The first event lasted two days, concluding with a beachfront parade called the Bather’s Revue. Margaret Gorman, a slight, freckled sixteen-year-old from Washington, D.C. took home the first crown. “Margaret Gorman represents the type of womanhood America needs,” the *New York Times* declared, “strong, red-blooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood. It is in her type that the hope of the country rests.”

Over the next ninety years, the Miss America Pageant evolved into a national tradition which has played a pivotal role in defining the ideal American woman, seeking to reconcile what at times seems like diametrically opposing goals—focusing on women’s physical beauty while offering real financial and educational prospects; promoting traditional gender roles while encouraging women’s independence; glorifying feminine modesty while trading on female sexuality. As such, it has become a barometer of the nation’s shifting ideas about gender norms and expectations.



Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives;
Department of State

In 1968, the New Jersey institution became a national platform for debates and protests about sexism and racism when feminist organizations picketed the Atlantic City Convention Center where the Miss America Pageant was held. The protest was one of the first media events to bring national attention to the emerging Women's Liberation Movement. One of the protest's leaders was 27-year-old writer and editor Robin Morgan. In the group's manifesto written to explain the protest of the Miss America Pageant, "No More Miss America!" Morgan targeted what she called "the degrading mindless-boob-girlie symbol" so prevalent in the media. She also attacked the pageant's beauty standards as racist. As of 1968, no African American woman had been included among the contest's finalists. Indeed, a second group staged a simultaneous "Miss Black America Pageant" that same year to protest the lack of contestants of color in the mainstream competition.

Close to four hundred protesters gathered on the boardwalk on September 7, 1968, the day of the pageant. Protesters waved signs with slogans: "No More Beauty Standards," "Miss America is Alive and Well—in Harlem," "Welcome to the Cattle Auction," "Girls Crowned -- Boys Killed," this last conflating protest of Miss America with growing anti-sentiment about U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Both local and national media broadcast news of the Women's Liberation Movement, whose members set up "Freedom Trash Can" to collect make-up, cleaning supplies, hair curlers, and copies of *Ladies Home Journal* and *Playboy* magazines, items they believed represented the oppression of women.

Since 1945 hundreds of millions of dollars have been awarded to the young women through the pageant's scholarship program. In the last thirty years more women of color have participated as contestants and the first black Miss America was crowned in 1984; the 2013 Miss America was of Indian descent. In 1988, the social platform was added as formal component of the pageant, and contestants were asked to voice their views on a wide range of concerns including hospice care, AIDS, and educational reform.

ACTIVITY:

Divide students into small groups. Using computers, have your students go to Google images (or similar search engines), and search "1968 Miss America Protest."

Ask the students to explore:

1. What is happening in the image?
2. What is the symbolic nature of the image?
3. Ask the students to try to imagine themselves as a viewer in the 1960s. Would this image be effective? Would it appeal to some groups more than others?
4. Finally, ask students to evaluate the image as a viewer in 2014. Do these ideas still have the same power? If so, why and if not, why not?

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY #1:

If time permits, distribute Robin Morgan's press release "No More Miss America!" (see below). What problems does she identify? What word and phrases does she use to make her points about these problems?

August 22, 1968, New York City

NO MORE MISS AMERICA!

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

On September 7th in Atlantic City, the Annual Miss America Pageant will again crown "your ideal." But this year, reality will liberate the contest auction-block in the guise of "genyooine" de-plasticized, breathing women. Women's Liberation Groups, black women, high-school and college women, women's peace groups, women's welfare and social-work groups, women's job-equality groups, pro-birth control and pro-abortion groups- women of every political persuasion- all are invited to join us in a day-long boardwalk-theater event, starting at 1:00 p.m. on the Boardwalk in front of Atlantic City's Convention Hall. We will protest the image of Miss America, an image that oppresses women in every area in which it purports to represent us. There will be: Picket Lines; Guerrilla Theater; Leafleting; Lobbying Visits to the contestants urging our sisters to reject the Pageant Farce and join us; a huge Freedom Trash Can (into which we will throw bras, girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, wigs, and representative issues of *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Family Circle*, etc.- bring any such woman-garbage you have around the house); we will also announce a Boycott of all those commercial products related to the Pageant, and the day will end with a Women's Liberation rally at midnight when Miss America is crowned on live television. Lots of other surprises are being planned (come and add your own!) but we do not plan heavy disruptive tactics and so do not expect a bad police scene. It should be a groovy day on the Boardwalk in the sun with our sisters. In case of arrests, however, we plan to reject all male authority and demand to be busted by policewomen only. (In Atlantic City, women cops are not permitted to make arrests- dig that!)

Male chauvinist-reactionaries on this issue had best stay away, nor are male liberals welcome in the demonstrations. But sympathetic men can donate money as well as cars and drivers. We need cars to transport people to New Jersey and back. Male reporters will be refused interviews. We reject patronizing reportage. *Only newswomen will be recognized.*

Anyone interested in further information, and anyone willing to help with ideas, transportation, money, or anything, can write us at: P.O. Box 531, Peter Stuyvesant Station, New York, N.Y. 1009, or telephone (212) 475-8775 between 7:30 and 10:00 p.m. weeknights. Get a group of women together, come to the Miss America Pageant on Saturday, September 7th, and raise your voice for Women's Liberation. We will reclaim ourselves for ourselves. On to Atlantic City!

The Ten Points We Protest:

1. *The Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol.* The Pageant contestants epitomize the roles we are all forced to play as women. The parade down the runway blares the metaphor of the 4-H Club county fair, where nervous animals are judged for teeth, fleece, etc., and where the best "Specimen" gets the blue ribbon. So women in our society forced daily to compete for male approval, enslaved by ludicrous "beauty" standards we are conditioned to take seriously.
2. *Racism with Roses.* Since its inception in 1921, the Pageant has not had one Black finalist, and this has not been for a lack of test-case contestants. There has never been a Puerto Rican, Alaskan, Hawaiian, or Mexican-American winner. Nor has there ever been a *true* Miss America- an American Indian.
3. *Miss America as Military Death Mascot.* The highlight of her reign each year is a cheerleader-tour of American troops abroad- last year she went to Vietnam to pep-talk our husbands, fathers, sons and boyfriends into dying and killing with a better spirit. She personifies the "unstained patriotic American womanhood our boys are fighting for." The Living Bra and the Dead Soldier. We refuse to be used as Mascots for Murder.

4. *The Consumer Con-Game.* Miss America is a walking commercial for the Pageant's sponsors. Wind her up and she plugs your product on promotion tours and TV—all in an "honest, objective" endorsement. What a skill.
5. *Competition Rigged and Unrigged.* We deplore the encouragement of an American myth that oppresses men as well as women: the win-or-you're-worthless competitive disease. The "beauty contest" creates only one winner to be "used" and forty-nine losers who are "useless."
6. *The Woman as Pop Culture Obsolescent Theme.* Spindle, mutilate, and then discard tomorrow. What is so ignored as last year's Miss America? This only reflects the gospel of our Society, according to Saint Male: women must be young, juicy, malleable—hence age discrimination and the cult of youth. And we women are brainwashed into believing this ourselves!
7. *The Unbeatable Madonna-Whore Combination.* Miss America and Playboy's centerfold are sisters over the skin. To win approval, we must be both sexy and wholesome, delicate but able to cope, demure yet titillatingly bitchy. Deviation of any sort brings, we are told, disaster: "You won't get a man!!"
8. *The Irrelevant Crown on the Throne of Mediocrity.* Miss America represents what women are supposed to be: inoffensive, bland, apolitical. If you are tall, short, over or under what weight The Man prescribes you should be, forget it. Personality, articulateness, intelligence, and commitment—unwise. Conformity is the key to the crown and, by extension, success in Society.
9. *Miss America as Dream Equivalent To-?* In this reputedly democratic society, where every little boy supposedly can grow up to be President, what can every little girl hope to grow to be? Miss America. That's where it's at. Real power to control our own lives is restricted to men, while women get patronizing pseudo-power, an ermine cloak and a bunch of flowers; men are judged by their actions, women by appearance.
10. *Miss America as Big Sister Watching You.* The pageant exercises Thought Control, attempts to sear the Image onto our minds, to further make women oppressed and men oppressors; to enslave us all the more in high-heeled, low-status roles; to inculcate false values in young girls; women as beasts of buying; to seduce us to our selves before our own oppression.

NO MORE MISS AMERICA

FOLLOW-UP #2:

In the last three decades, the Miss America pageant has made advocating a social platform a requirement for contestants. What causes have contestants supported? Hint: the "platform" appears at the bottom of each contestant biography from 1990 to 2002 for the American Experience documentary "Miss America": http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/sfeature/sf_list.html

How many causes are there in all? Do some causes appear repeatedly? Have the class develop a timeline that traces the popularity of different social platforms over time.

Finally, as homework, have students work in groups to develop a presentation about a social platform of their own (what causes, organizations, or problems spark their interest—how could they get involved), research this field, and make a presentation to the class on why the cause is important.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Places You Can Visit

The Sheraton Atlantic City Convention Center (known as the “unofficial” museum of Miss America, the Sheraton has a collection of Miss America memorabilia, as well as has organized a walking tour to celebrate the pageant known as the “Road to the Crown”): <http://www.sheratonatlanticcity.com/>

For more information see: http://articles.philly.com/2013-06-23/news/40135557_1_miss-america-pageant-liza-cartmell

More Classroom Activities

“Miss America,” The American Experience: A PBS movie and associated resources about the Miss American Pageant. Includes a teacher’s guide with lessons in history, economics and geography. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/>

For More Information

Angela Osborne, *Miss America: The Dream Lives On: A 75 Year Celebration* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1995).

Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: the Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1998).

A.R. Riverol, *Live From Atlantic City: the History of the Miss America Pageant Before, After, and In Spite of Television* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992).

The Miss America Pageant Official Website: <http://www.missamerica.org/default.aspx>

“No More Miss America” - a link to the website of political activist Jo Freeman for more details and pictures about the protests. <http://www.jofreeman.com/photos/MissAm1969.html>

“Pageant Protest Sparked Bra-Burning Myth”
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94240375>

CREDIT INFORMATION:

Pg. 1, “Miss America, 1953,” Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.

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