

TEACHER'S NOTES

This study guide of the film 'Titanic' was the first of our CINEMA & HISTORY series. Aimed at students of GCSE History, it looks at aspects of the use of different sources and the ways in which they can affect our understanding of history.

SYNOPSIS

Written and directed by James Cameron, the film 'Titanic' is an epic action-packed romance set against the ill-fated maiden voyage of the passenger liner Titanic.

The film introduces some fictional characters, who together with the actual historical figures, board the Titanic for its tragic journey in April, 1912. Kate Winslet stars as a young upper class American called Rose who falls for a free-spirited steerage passenger, Jack, played by Leonardo DiCaprio. The central story of the film is their forbidden love. Around this cross-class romance is a contemporary story in which there is a salvage operation. An ambitious fortune hunter, played by Bill Paxton, plumbs the depths for the treasures of the stately ship Titanic and uncovers the secrets of their profound love.

Director: James Cameron

Certificate: 12

Running time: 194 min

INTRODUCTION

The film 'Titanic' is based on the one and only voyage of RMS Titanic in 1912 and highlights the continuing fascination with this tragic episode in history. This new film joins a list of other films and television dramatisations and documentaries, as well as a large number of books, on the fateful maiden voyage of the Titanic.

In 1986, Dr Robert D Ballard of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, Massachusetts found the site of the wreck of the Titanic (a reconstruction of the survey and exploration of the wreck forms the opening sequence of the film). This find added fuel to the interest in the fate of the Titanic but also added one more controversy to its short life.

From an historian's point of view, one could be cruel and say that the sinking of the Titanic could only really be looked on as a footnote in the history of the pre First World War period. Yet its entry into popular culture and history has meant that we should look closely at **why** this should be. We need also to look at **how** the history of that fateful night of April 14th, 1912 has been handed down to us and the ways in which James Cameron, the director of the film has used this historical event to create a film narrative.

THE EVENTS

The Titanic passenger liner was launched from Queen's Island in Belfast on May 31st, 1911. At the time she was the biggest existing ship and the largest movable object ever built.

Owned by the White Star Line, one of a number of shipping companies who transported people across the Atlantic, she was designed not only to be the flagship of their fleet but also, due to the ultimate luxury and comfort of her fittings was to sweep away all the competition and earn the company dominance in what was a busy and profitable sea route.

Captained by Edward J Smith, the Titanic, through her size and construction was believed to be unsinkable.

On April 10th, 1912, the Titanic set sail from Southampton on her maiden voyage across the Atlantic destined for New York. Aboard were over 2,200 passengers and crew (an absence of a definitive list of all passengers and crew varies this number). After stopping at Cherbourg in France and then at Queenstown in Ireland to pick up other passengers, she set sail for her destination. Life aboard the ship was luxurious for those travelling first class and many well-travelled passengers felt that the second class cabins and staterooms on the liner were of the quality of first class cabins on other ships. Even the third or steerage class was felt to be the best that had ever been designed.

During the day of Sunday April 14th, 1912, Captain Smith received a number of warnings of icebergs on his route, which were largely ignored. At 11:40pm the Titanic struck an iceberg on her starboard side. A gash nearly 300 feet long opened up along five of her watertight compartments and water began to rush in.

It was not until 12:05am that Captain Smith ordered the lifeboats to be prepared for launching. The saddest shortfall was that there were only enough lifeboats to carry about a third of the number of people aboard the ship.

At 12:15am the first wireless call for help was made and half an hour after this the first distress rocket was launched. At the same time the first of the lifeboats went into the water, over an hour after the Titanic had the iceberg. This first lifeboat was only half full, an oversight compounding the problem of so few boats in the first place. All lifeboats were under orders to take women and children only.

At 2:05am the last lifeboat was lowered. At 2:20am the Titanic disappeared from view under the icy waters of the Atlantic.

It was not until 4:10am that the first lifeboat was picked up by the ship Carpathia which had answered the distress call and had sailed as fast as she could to the rescue. Of the 2,206 people aboard the ship, only 703 were saved (the published figures vary).

These, therefore are the basic facts on which the director James Cameron could make his film.

RECONSTRUCTING THE STORY

You have just read the basic details of the events which lead up to the sinking of the Titanic. However, they only give part of the story and the filmmaker, as much as the historian, has to look at other areas to focus upon which will give clues as to what happened in the Atlantic on April 14, 1912.

It is possible to reconstruct the physical details of these events as the interior/exterior of the Titanic and dress of the period are well documented. But, can you picture what went on during the voyage itself? Can you imagine the ship beginning to sink right up to the moment of rescue for the few survivors? There were no video cameras on board and any still cameras which may have been in passengers' luggage did not survive.

The only way in which we can find out about those events is from the testimony of those who survived. We discover the events through the oral history of the disaster.

ORAL HISTORY

One would expect there to be a number of different perspectives on what actually happened surrounding the whole range of events leading up to the sinking of the Titanic.

We can look at two obvious examples – what happened to Captain Smith and the famous story of the band who continued playing as the ship sank, all of whom lost their lives.

CAPTAIN EDWARD J SMITH AND HIS FATE

The lore of the sea has it that the captain should go down with his ship.

Survivors of the Titanic give different versions of what they think happened to the Captain. Certainly, one version of the Captain's fate is that he was last seen on the bridge of the ship as it started its plunge beneath the waves. The second version has it that he did not go down with the ship but saved a small child, swam to one of the lifeboats, handed the child to the people on board the life boat and then swam off, never to be seen again.

Another version says that the Captain shot himself. There is no similarity between any aspect of these versions.

- *Why do you think that these versions are so different?*
- *Why do you think that in the film 'Titanic' the captain is shown going down with his ship?*
- *What is the overall impression given of Captain Edward J Smith in the film?*

There is a further question that also needs to be asked.

- *Why, at the time, was it so important to know what had happened to the captain and how he met his fate?*

We shall return to this later.

AND THE BAND PLAYED ON

There is no doubt that the thirty-three year old Wallace Hartley and his band of seven musicians (Brailey, Bricoux, Clarke, Hume, Krins, Taylor and Woodward), all of whom lost their lives, continued to play music on the deck of the Titanic almost until its very last moments. The key contradiction in the accounts of some of the survivors is **what the band played** at the very end which has continually caused controversy to this very day. Did they play a popular sentimental waltz called 'Songe d'Automne' or did they play the hymn 'Nearer, My God, to Thee', or indeed, another hymn called 'Autumn'? One could argue that it does not really matter. However, fierce arguments have been about the final number played by the musicians.

- *Why do you think that remembering a piece of music has become so important?*
- *What does it tell us about the mythology that has grown up around the Titanic?*
- *What does it tell us about attitudes at the time? (Especially when accounts of the sinking of the Titanic first started to be written down.)*

Many of the authors who have written about the Titanic have stated that most of their reliable sources suggest the waltz was last heard. So where did the idea of the hymns come from? It was reported in many newspapers at the time that the waltz was the final piece of music played on board the Titanic.

- *What does it tell us about the ways the newspapers wanted their readers to understand the tragedy?*

TESTIMONIES

The majority of the survivors' accounts used by authors when they write about what happened on that tragic night come from either first or second class passengers or members of the crew. Many of these testimonies were given at the boards of enquiries which were held in America and in Britain at the time. Others are taken from eye witnesses' written accounts published some time after the sinking. There is little written or no testimony from third class passengers. No third class passengers were asked to appear at the board of enquiries. Yet, one of the key parts of the story of the sinking of the Titanic is that the third class or steerage passengers were kept locked below decks until most of the first class passengers were safely off the boat.

- *How does the fact that we have no formal testimony from third class passengers affect the way in which we understand what happened on the ship?*
- *Why, at the time, do you think that the boards of enquiries were not interested in the views of third class passengers?*

One could say that there is a whole **perspective** missing from the story and that perspective is from the least wealthy members of the passengers on the list.

ACTIVITY

Look at the statistics below of the numbers **saved** from each of the three classes on board the Titanic.

NUMBERS SAVED	
	%
First Class	63
Second Class	42
Third Class	25
Crew	23

First class			
	Carried	Saved	%
Men	173	58	34
Woman	144	139	97
Children	5	5	100
	322	202	63

Second class			
	Carried	Saved	%
Men	160	13	8
Woman	93	78	84
Children	24	24	100
	277	115	42

Third class			
	Carried	Saved	%
Men	454	55	12
Woman	179	98	55
Children	76	23	30
	709	176	25

Crew			
	Carried	Saved	%
Men	875	189	22
Woman	23	21	91
	898	210	23

Passengers & Crew			
	Carried	Saved	%
Men	1,662	315	19
Woman	439	336	77
Children	105	52	49
	2,206	703	32

How do these figures (percentages), given in the House of Commons, relate to any possible reasons you might have given as to why third class passengers were not interviewed by the boards of enquires?

CONCLUSION

Looking at the oral history one could start to draw conclusions about the passengers. These testimonies show how the events came to be related in the way that they did and the sort of society that existed at that time. There is the point of whether or not the captain went down with his ship, the piece of music played by the band as the Titanic was sinking and the fact that most testimonies came from first and second class passengers and crew.

➤ *What conclusions could you draw from these three areas alone?*

POPULAR REPRESENTATIONS

Although photographs were taken of the survivors in the boats by people on board the Carpathia, the newspapers were forced to use 'artists impressions' of what happened as the Titanic sank.

This practice of using drawings is still used by the newspapers and television news programmes when they cannot get, or are not allowed, real photographic or video footage of an event; for instance, in courtrooms, during the Gulf War and the Falklands conflict.

SOCIAL HISTORY AND THE FILM 'TITANIC'

One of the conclusions you may have come to from the previous section is of the prime importance during the early twentieth century of the concept of 'class'; the upper and lower class system whereby the lower class should know their place.

In the film 'Titanic' James Cameron has highlighted the concept of class by positioning the story of Jack and Rose against the backdrop of the sinking of the Titanic. The fact is that the two characters are from the two extremes of the class system. Rose appears to be from the wealthiest of families (although we later discover that all the family wealth has disappeared) whilst Jack has won his ticket on the Titanic in a game of cards. The conflict in the story arises from this 'love across the classes'.

Whilst this on board romance is itself a fiction, it is a fiction which highlights the social conditions of the day. Also, Rose's character, her demand for independence and the expectations that Cal Hockley, Rose's fiancé has for when they marry, also raises the issue of the social position of women at the time.

There is a comment made at one point in the film that women only go to university to find a husband (a comment which was still being used in the 1930's - as cited by feminist Simone de Beauvoir in her autobiography 'Le deuxième sexe (1949) translated as The Second Sex (1953)).

Another issue of the time that is raised by the film is that of race. As the ship sinks, many of the third or steerage class passengers, who cannot speak English, have no way of knowing what they should do, consequently they fail to escape. Additionally, we also see the differences in culture between the two classes - the strict and ordered world of first class and the spirited life of steerage.

➤ *Was it really like that? What **were** the social issues of the day? How well are these reflected in the film?*

RESEARCH TASK

The fact that many believed that the Titanic was unsinkable shows a certain attitude of mind - that man could produce something which could overcome nature itself. It is this attitude and also some of the attitudes that you have already looked at which we will now to explore through the events and society of the period.

You will need to research the following areas:

- *Try to find out as much as you can about the social conditions of the upper classes and also the working classes in the period 1900- 1912. How did they live? What sort of work would they have done? What would they have eaten? What would their living conditions be like?*
- *During this period, the British Empire was at its height. Find a map of the world which shows the full extent of the British Empire during this period.*
- *Technology - the Titanic was only **one** of the major technological advances of this period. Find out other scientific and technological developments which were happening at this time, particularly in Britain and America.*
- *Maritime expansion - the transatlantic ships which were being built at this time were only **one** aspect of the expansion of shipping. Find out how both navy and merchant ships developed during this period and try to explain why this expansion was so vital for Britain.*
- *America was becoming an industrial force to be reckoned with during this period. Find out the areas of industrial expansion which were taking place in America in the early part of the twentieth century.*
- *Large numbers of people were emigrating from Europe to America during this period. Try to find out figures for the number of people who emigrated to America at this point in time, together with their countries of origin. Find out why people from these countries, in particular, should wish to emigrate.*

*When you have built up this picture of the period relate your findings to the **moral issues** of the class structure which were discussed earlier.*

It is interesting to note that members of many of America's richest families were aboard the Titanic - Col John Jacob Astor (owner of a large portion of Manhattan) and his wife Madeleine Force Astor, the mining magnate Benjamin Guggenheim, his valet and chauffeur (who travelled second class), Isidor Straus, (co-owner of Macys store in New York) and his wife Ida. In addition there were members of the British aristocracy - The Countess of Rothes (Lucy-Noel Martha travelling with her maid), Sir Cosmo and Lady Lucile Duff Gordon, (a successful dress designer for fashionable New York and London society).

Whilst the male members of the Americans were all lost at sea, Sir Cosine Duff Gordon and his entourage all survived (in one lifeboat with only twelve people aboard). Duff Gordon, and the Managing Director of the White Star Line, Joseph Bruce Ismay (who also survived) were both highly criticised that they too did not let 'the women and children go first', that they had not strictly stuck to the 'gentlemen's code' and gone down with the ship - as their American counterparts had. Whilst wealth brought privileges it also brought responsibilities - particularly in matters of conduct.

THE TITANIC AND THE END OF AN ERA

This sense of duty, of a way of behaving, was, some would say, last seen in evidence on board the Titanic - men sacrificing themselves for the sake of others. More importantly the sinking of the Titanic raised other issues. Not enough lifeboats were

aboard the ship because the owners wanted more room for the first class promenade decks and so had the boats removed. Thus, safety for all was sacrificed for the comfort of a privileged few. The fact that so few third class passengers survived opened up the question of the upper classes and their 'right' to survive. As a percentage of the total of each 'class' of passenger, more first class men survived than did third or steerage class women and children.

Whilst the sinking of the Titanic itself might not be a great historical event it is possible to see in it the ending of a world which was finally to be swept away in the Great War (1914-1918) - which was only two years away. The class system, the privileges of the upper class, the wasting of working class lives contributed to this world. The lack of consideration for safety and survival led to faith in technology being shattered with the sinking of the unsinkable ship. It was the culmination of all these things and their relationship which gave a new meaning to what would happen in the Great War and the upheavals in society which would occur after the death of millions in that messy conflict.

1912 - SHAKING THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

As well as the Titanic disaster, this was also the year in which Captain Robert Falcon Scott (1868-1912) failed in his attempt to be the first to reach the South Pole. Scott was beaten one month ahead in December 1911 by the Norwegian,

Roald Amudsen. Scott, along with his party, perished in the snows of Antarctica. The expedition failed because of poor preparation and the unwillingness to use sledges pulled by dogs. The British pulled the sledges themselves. Overcome by exhaustion, hunger and frostbite, Scott and his companions died.

In The Times newspaper, in writing of this second tragedy, the following was said:

“[The real value of the Antarctic expedition was] spiritual and therefore in the truest sense national, It is proof that in an age of depressing materialism men can still be found to face known hardship, heavy risk and even death in pursuit of an idea... That is the temper of men who build empires, and while it lives among us we shall be capable of maintaining an Empire that our fathers built.”

Whilst the scale of this tragedy might not be the same as the sinking of the Titanic, the general reaction to it bears many similarities.

TASK 1

In what ways was the reaction/report of the death of Scott similar to ways in which the sinking of the Titanic was reported? What image of Britain and the British is given? (See the written accounts on page 14 and issues highlighted in this study guide.)

TASK 2

Whilst pre First World War Britain is often portrayed as the 'Golden Age' there was a high degree of unrest building. Find out what was happening in 1912 regarding the following happenings: • The Suffragettes • Irish Home Rule • The Trade Unions

TITANIC AND HISTORIES

When James Cameron set out to make the film 'Titanic' he did not intend to make a history lesson for his audience. Obviously, he wished to entertain his audience for the duration of the film and to give them an exciting story which they would enjoy watching. Cameron could easily have elected to lay the romance between Jack and Rose against another setting.

- *What do you think were the attractions of the Titanic story for Cameron and indeed the many other filmmakers and authors who have used the Titanic as a basis for feature films and novels?*
- *Given that we know the Titanic sinks, why are we kept interested in the story?*

Whilst the cross-class romance told in the film is fiction, many incidents which Cameron shows us are based on reality. For example, the locking of steerage passengers in their quarters, the band playing, Guggenheim awaiting his death in full evening dress. Molly Brown (the Denver socialite Margaret Tobin Brown) and Thomas Andrews (a director of the builders Harland and Wolff and chief draughtsman of the Titanic) staring blankly at the wall as the ship slowly came to its final end.

The surface 'reality' of the film is highly accurate, the production design team having carefully researched the 'look' of the original ship for their own reconstruction.

The film works in constructing its narrative in many of the same ways that certain history books work. The characters are introduced, we see the events leading up to the

tragedy and follow these events through. At the end we see what has happened to the characters, how they and the world around them have changed. In a history book, the main characters could be a king, a queen, a prime minister, a general, or whatever. True, these are real life characters but nevertheless, filmmakers tend to treat their characters in much the same way that historians treat theirs, although history books can go into more depth in explaining such things as motives etc.

The key question to ask of such films, if we are looking at them from a historical point of view, is how do they choose to represent what has happened and how well have they caught not simply the 'look' of the period but also the values, beliefs and ideas of the period.

Look back at the research work you carried out and see how well the film 'Titanic' reflects the values, beliefs and ideas of this period. Consider the ways in which the film manages to convey these.

TASK

Look at the list of values, beliefs and ideas that you have discovered while doing your research. For each of these elements try to think of moments in the film which reflect them. Study the moments and decide whether these parts of the film form the plot of the romance between Jack and Rose. Do they form part of other sub plots which surround the main romantic plot?

Bearing in mind that the actual sinking of the ship takes up only a third of the film's length, one should consider how the narrative of the rest of the film contributes to what we know will happen, that is, the Titanic will sink.

BEYOND 1912

The story of the voyage and sinking of the Titanic and the love affair between Jack and Rose is framed within the story of the discovery of the wreck of the Titanic. Rose, in old age, sees herself on television in a drawing that has been found in the recovered safe of the wreck. Rose then visits the survey ship.

The events at the end of the film as Rose finishes recounting her story, then doing what she does with the jewel from the lost treasures of the Titanic, brings the story to a close.

- *Why do you think that the filmmakers decided to frame the story of 1912 within the context of the 1980's? Does this add anything to the film?*
- *We know from the outset that Rose has survived. What keeps us interested in her story, knowing that no matter what happens, she will be picked up by the Carpathia?*

READING FILM AND READING HISTORY

Some people argue that when we watch a film, the images simply roll in front of our eyes, that we do not have to make any great effort to understand what is happening on the screen. However, one could argue that when watching a film we, the audience, are all of the time making sense of what we see on screen. In fact - making predictions.

All photographs, advertisements and artwork of films have been thought out by a team of professionals i.e. advertisers, designers, artists etc. Someone has considered what to put in the picture / how to compose the picture / at what distance to film the picture and so on.

Films are then - **constructed**.

As a cinema-going audience we don't usually know about the decisions that are made during the creation of a film or a sequence in it. However, we can usually decipher why a picture looks as it does.

Without being conscious of what we are doing we automatically 'read' films and images, making sense of them and their messages.

We do this by picking up clues, by **de-constructing** the images as we look at them. As a guideline for **de-constructing**, the following list of points will provide you with a framework:

A) LIGHTING

Lighting can have great impact on our understanding of a film. It plays an important part in creating the atmosphere of any one scene.

Lighting can emphasise, accentuate, disguise, reveal, conceal or imply.

B) COLOURS

What are the predominant colours? Grey, blue and white for example, are quite harsh tones, while amber, pink and orange are used to suggest warmth. How is colour used to evoke a reaction from the audience?

C) EDITING

Constructed sequences are made by editing. The montage of shots allows filmmakers to manipulate time and to create a particular mood through the different techniques that are used.

D) FRAMING

When we watch a film, everything that we see is enclosed in a frame. What we see may appear perfectly natural, but it will have been carefully selected and arranged within the frame by the director. The director chooses where to place people and objects and where to place the camera so that we understand or 'read' each shot in a particular way.

What is being framed provides an important clue as to what is being emphasised. Look at what has been included or excluded from the film 'Titanic'. Is our attention being directed or diverted for a particular reason? Does the framing suggest that we are seeing something from one person's viewpoint,

or from a neutral standpoint?

E) FOCUS

Is the focus hard or soft, and to what effect?

TASK

Choose a sequence from the film 'Titanic' and try to **de-construct** it using the headings A-E

The terms used in the headings A-E are a guide to reading a film. Are they also useful for reading history? How can these filmic terms relate to a real life narrative? Look back at the research you did on the social history of the period and the film 'Titanic' (page 8). Consider the values, beliefs and ideas of that period and the aftermath on the people affected by the tragedy. Study each term used and instead of relating it to an image or a film, try to relate it to the two narratives below.

Using the terms as a guide, **de-construct** the report on Joseph Bruce Ismay and the memories (1995) of a young girl, Eva Hart, who survived the disaster which killed her father. This can be done in a filmic or historical way.

Of Joseph Bruce Ismay, Lord Mersey stated:

"The attack on Mr Ismay resolved itself into the suggestion that, occupying the position of Managing Director of the steamship company, some moral duty was imposed upon him to wait on board until the vessel foundered. I do not agree. Mr Ismay, after rendering assistance to many passengers, found "C" collapsible, the last boat on the starboard side, actually being lowered. No other people were there at the time. There was room for him and he lumped in. Had he not lumped in he would merely have added one more life, namely his own, to the number of those lost."

From 'Shadow of the Titanic - A Survivor's Story' (p. 50) a biography of Miss Eva Hart MBE, JP
"The rescue had really come only just in time. Shortly after the 'Carpathia' picked us up the weather deteriorated and by the afternoon of that day was quite bad. It took Captain Rostron four hours to navigate his ship out of the ice-field again, and then we ran into a most dreadful fog. Every few minutes we had the monotonous blaring of the fog horn in our ears while the wet, clammy fog swirled around us. The ship could make only very slow progress. Then, as if we had not suffered enough - as if the sea was loath to lose its prey - the fog was followed by a frightful thunder storm. it was almost as if the Atlantic was doing its worst to claim the few survivors who remained from what had been the 'Titanic'. Our new ship was unable to go very fast under these appalling conditions. She was relatively slow in any case and now she was heavily overladen. So she slowly limped back to New York with 706 survivors, while the remains of that wonderful ship and many of her 1,502 dead lay in the depths of the Atlantic."

FURTHER READING

Titanic - Destination Disaster - The Legends and the Reality'

by John P Eaton and Charles A Haas

(Patrick Stephens Ltd. an imprint of Haynes Publishing Group 1996)

Shadow of the Titanic - A Survivor's Story'

biography of Miss Eva Hart MBE, JP as told to Ronald C Denney

(Greenwich University Press 1995)

'A Lifetime on the Titanic'

biography of Edith Haisman by James Pellow with Dorothy Kendle

(Island Books 1995)

The Riddle of the Titanic'

by Robin Gardiner and Dan Van Der Vat

(Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1995)

Titanic:An Illustrated History'

by Don Lynch and Ken Marshall

(Hodder and Stoughton 1992)

A Night to Remember'

by Walter Lord

(Penguin 1978)

The Titanic - The Extraordinary Story of the 'Unsinkable' Ship'

by Geoff Tibballs

(Carlton 1997)

'Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy'

by John P Eaton and Charles A Haas

(Patrick Stephens Ltd. an imprint of Haynes Publishing Group 1990)

Titanic: 14th-15th April 1912 The Official Story'

by Aidan Lawes

(Public Record Office 1997)

For further information about the *Titanic*, including special assistance to students and teachers, contact Titanic International, Post Office Box 7007, Freehold, New Jersey 07728-7007 USA.