

Title: The Moral Crusade: Policing of "Morality"

Essential Question: Why did the police begin policing "purity" and enforcing religious "morality?"

Essential Knowledge:

Common Core

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8:** Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

New York State

- 12.G2e Rights are not absolute; they vary with legal status, with location (as in schools and workplaces), and with circumstance. The different statuses of United States residency bring with them specific protections, rights, and responsibilities. Minors have specific rights in school, in the workplace, in the community, and in the family. The extension of rights across location, circumstance, age, and legal status is a subject of civic discourse.

National Council for the Social Studies Themes

- Culture
- Power, Authority, and Governance
- Civic Ideals and Practices

C3

- D2.Eco.1.9-12. Analyze how incentives influence choices that may result in policies with a range of costs and benefits for different groups.
- D2.His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
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Learning Objectives:

- Students will explain Comstock's anti-vice purity campaign against sex work as a way of enforcing his own religious vision of morality.
- Students will understand the intersection of gender, sexism, and policing.
- Students will learn the economic motive the NYPD had to enforce "morality" and to avoid policing sex work.
- Students will understand why police have historically criminalized sex work.

Grade Level: 9-12

Time Needed: 60-90 minutes

Relevant Topics:

- Immigration
- Media bias
- Moral philosophy

Key Vocabulary: morality, power, gender, sexism, vice, crusade

Required Sources:

[Lesson Citations](#)

Materials/Additional Sources:

[Lesson 5: Comstock Act](#)
[Lesson 5: Modern Comstock](#)

Teacher Preparation/Background Knowledge:

This lesson introduces students to the Comstock Act as an example of how laws reflect moral values and power structures in the US. It also looks at how those laws can continue to shape debates long after their passage.

The Comstock Act was passed in 1873 after being championed by the “moral reformer” Anthony Comstock, students met in last night’s episode.

Although enforcement of the Comstock Act declined over the 20th century and court decisions limited its scope, the law was never fully repealed, and so the Act often resurfaces in political discourse.

Implementation Notes & Disclaimers:

The topic of abortion could be complicated for students who might have varying beliefs around abortion access.

Modifications

Individual Student Learning Needs:

- Provide **chunked readings** with section headings and guiding questions
- Offer **sentence starters** for written responses and discussions
- Allow use of **annotation guides with symbols** (e.g., star, question mark)
- Pre-teach **key vocabulary** (e.g., stereotype, bias, scapegoat) using visuals

Language Support:

- Permit use of bilingual dictionaries or glossaries

Podcast Reflection: [The Moral Crusade](#)

Suggested Time: 10 minutes

- Lead a discussion debriefing the episode. Use [Harvard Project Zero Thinking Routine: Claim, Support, Question](#) to lead discussion about the episode.
- Call on students to share observations, questions, and things that were surprising or shocking. Any curiosities they have.
- Then say that today they’ll be exploring the complexities of “morality.”

Engage: What are morals? What does it mean to be moral?

Suggested Time: 5-10 minutes

- Do Now: Ask students to do a quick jot of their own definition of “morality”.
- After 3 minutes or so, have students discuss their answers and come to a group definition of morality.
- Then, put up a definition of morality on the board: *a set of personal or social standards for good or bad behavior and character.*
- Follow up by asking students if there are universal morals. What are moral behaviors? What does it mean to behave morally?

Explore: Comstock Act

Suggested Time: 20 minutes

- Students will read this American Experience article independently and annotate the text
 - [Anthony Comstock-Chastity Wars](#)
 - They'll answer questions about the piece in the graphic organizer
 - [Lesson 5: Comstock Act](#)

Explain: Modern Day Uses of the Comstock Act

Suggested Time: 30 minutes

- Students will read about how the Comstock Act is still used today by anti-abortion groups.
- [Lesson 5: Modern Comstock](#)
- Some sample sources:
 - [The 19th Explains: What is the Comstock Act?](#)
 - [The Comstock Act: Implications for Abortion Care Nationwide](#)

Elaborate: Back to Morality

Suggested Time: 10 minutes

- Students will return to their original definition of morality and reflect on whether or not their definition has changed

Optional Homework: Students can read and/or watch this video on moral relativism, in understanding that morals are shaped by culture and institutions. In the US, capitalism, which they'll explore in the next lesson, dominates the culture.

[Moral Relativism](#)

Informed Action & Community

Connection: Survey Community: What are morals?

- Ask family members or community members to define morals. Is there a universal definition?