A Rhetorical Analysis of The Immigrant
by Natalie Wagner

In the early decades of the 20th century, the U.S. Congress passed a series of laws that would determine the demographic future of our country. At this time the United States was experiencing the Second Great Wave of immigration, with more than 26 million immigrants arriving in the United States between 1870 and 1920. This period not only witnessed a growth in the numbers of immigrants, but also a change in the origins of the immigrants, spreading from northern Europe to southern and eastern Europe as well as other parts of the world (DeSipio 32-33).

With the increase in numbers and nationalities of incoming immigrants came an increase in anti-immigration sentiment among Americans. Congress passed several laws in response to this sentiment, such as the Immigration Act of 1917, which excluded Asians and the illiterate (among others), and the 1921 and 1924 Quota Acts, which restricted immigration based on national origin. Although they seem discriminatory and racist to us today, these laws were a reflection of anti-immigration sentiment throughout the United States at the time.

Not everyone shared these feelings, however. The silent black and white film The Immigrant (1917) responds to popular nativist sentiment by presenting immigrants in a positive manner. This pro-immigration film uses the Tramp, played by Charlie Chaplin, as an example of a successful immigrant. The Tramp makes a strong argument against nativists' low expectations of immigrants. Instead of being a physically inferior, immoral beggar that refuses to assimilate, the Tramp portrays the clever, hard-working immigrant who is willing to come and prosper in the United States, even when met with hostility from natives. By portraying immigrants as resourceful newcomers and nativists as bullies, The Immigrant acts as a cultural critique of the anti-immigration laws of its day.

One popular anxiety about immigration among Americans was that incoming persons would enter our country only to become beggars and live off of our resources. The Immigration Act of 1917 even states that the United States will exclude "persons likely to become a public charge." In response to this anxiety, The Immigrant uses the Tramp to show that immigrants can take care of themselves and will not become a public charge. The Tramp shows that he is capable of survival in numerous situations. On the boat to America, he is one of the few travelers not to become seasick; instead, he spends his free time fishing, a productive activity that by no means implies a need of others. Further evidence of his aptitude is seen when the Tramp angers another traveler by beating him at a game of dice. The furious loser advances on the Tramp, who is able to prevent a fight and keep the situation under control. By these actions, he shows that he is level-headed and responsible enough to look out for himself.

Once in the United States, the Tramp is without money to eat. In contrast to what nativists would expect of the average immigrant, the Tramp does not resort to begging, but waits until he can provide his own money, which he eventually finds on the sidewalk. Unfortunately, he loses his money again in the restaurant. Trying to be polite, he repeatedly refuses the artist's offer to pay for his meal and ends up having to take the artist's tip to cover the bill. He is deeply embarrassed, signifying that as he learns the rules of generosity, he will not make the same mistake again. At
the end of the film, the artist gives him a job and an advance, solving his monetary problems. By refusing to accept charity from anyone and eventually finding a job, the Tramp shows the viewing public that as an entering immigrant he will not become a public charge, but will take care of himself.

Another misconception of the early 1900s was that immigrants would come in hoards to the United States and then refuse to assimilate to our culture. Arguing in favor of the 1924 Quota Act, Senator James Michener claimed that immigrants “do not understand our ways, [and] they do not want to understand our ways” (CR 5908). In response to Michener’s argument, Senator Alex Mooney cited his hometown, Cleveland, as evidence that immigrants can and will assimilate. He admired his immigrant neighbors for “their deep-seated love for our country and its institutions, [and] their ambitions and struggles and hopes for their children” (CR 5910). In The Immigrant, the Tramp supports Mooney’s case by providing a clear example of an immigrant who is in fact willing to assimilate. At the same time, the film shows how Michener’s nativist attitude might hinder the process of assimilation. The Tramp learns early on that if he does not assimilate, he will not be able to survive in this new country. We see him begin to learn and practice American customs when he sits down to eat at the restaurant. The waiter gestures to him to take off his hat, but the Tramp does not understand how wearing a hat inside a restaurant could be a problem, so he puts his hat back on. The waiter is obviously annoyed that the Tramp cannot understand and gruffly removes his hat again. After a few minutes of confusion, the Tramp understands that the waiter is requesting that, like everyone else in the restaurant, he remove his hat while eating. Upon understanding, the Tramp leaves his hat to
the side, proving that he is willing to assimilate to American culture. However, his encounter with the waiter has left him bitter, making assimilation a means of survival instead of an act of loyalty. Had the waiter been more patient and understanding, the Tramp would have learned this custom and assimilated on his own, but the waiter’s rude nativist attitude hindered him from doing so.

The second lesson for the Tramp is the “correct” way to eat, and here the pattern is the same. He eats his beans off of the side of his knife, causing the man seated next to him, a native, to gawk at him and finally to leave in disgust at the Tramp’s barbaric eating habits. By this point in the film, the viewer has connected with the Tramp, causing the actions of the native to seem rude and inconsiderate. In this scene, then, The Immigrant portrays the nativist attitude as disruptive to the assimilation process and responds to the argument that immigrants will not assimilate by showing through the Tramp that they can and will.

The Immigrant also addresses the fear that immigrants would come into the United States with low morals and have a negative influence on American society. This paranoia is reflected in the legislation of 1917, which bans prostitution and polygamy, two practices considered immoral by Americans. The Immigrant uses the Tramp to demonstrate that immigrants can be of high character. The Tramp is so generous, in fact, that he puts his own well-being aside in order to take care of others. For example, when the Tramp learns that the girl he loves and her mother have lost their money, he secretly gives them his winnings from the dice game on the boat. He again demonstrates his generosity in the restaurant when he buys dinner for the girl, even though he knows that he will be thrown out if he cannot pay. In the end, the Tramp marries the girl he loves. Although it is hard to tell how she really feels about the marriage, clearly the Tramp is happy to fulfill one of the most patriotic expectations of the time—starting a family to continue the tradition of American ideals. The Immigrant uses the Tramp to prove to viewers that immigrants can be generous and virtuous.

At a time in American history when the majority of the population preferred shutting the door on immigration, The Immigrant presented the other side of the argument. While Congress passed law after law characterizing immigrants as lazy, immoral persons and restricting their entrance into the United States, The Immigrant showed how immigrants can bring life and laughter as well as hard work and strong morals into our society. The actions of the Tramp in the film are a direct response to the nativist attitudes that surfaced in the 1917, 1921, and 1924 laws. Even though the Tramp makes mistakes, they do no damage and he learns his lesson every time. By letting viewers experience the immigration process of the Tramp, the filmmakers evidently hoped that viewers would make a connection with him and begin to see immigrants as people like themselves—or even as people like their ancestors, who made the same voyage years before. The United States is a country founded on immigration, and The Immigrant contended that we should value that tradition.

Works Cited


