The Triangle Fire

A hundred years ago, American industry was growing fast and needed workers badly. It found them in the millions of immigrants who poured into the United States from Europe. Most passed through Ellis Island in New York Harbor with little money and few possessions. Many went no farther than New York City in their search for jobs. Young women found employment in the overcrowded, unsanitary, and unsafe factories of the city’s garment district. In these sweatshops they worked long hours for low wages. Fire inspections were lax, and fire equipment was inadequate. It was inevitable that tragedy would strike sooner or later.

On Saturday, March 25, 1911, the top three floors of a ten-story building on New York’s Lower East Side were crowded with women working for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. Late in the afternoon, a bin containing waste fabric on the eighth floor began to smolder. No one noticed until it suddenly burst into flames. Women in the crowded workroom tried frantically to put out the rapidly spreading fire. Their efforts were in vain. Acrid smoke filled the room. Many of the women, coughing, choking, and unable to see where they were going, were trampled in the headlong rush for the only unlocked door in the workroom. The owners of the company always kept the other doors locked; that was to prevent women from slipping outside into the hallway for a break when they were supposed to be working.

Those who fled into the heavily congested hallway found that just one elevator was working; only twelve women were able to use it. The fire escape collapsed under the weight of people crowding onto it. The narrow stairway, less than three feet wide, impeded the movement of the women, leaving many trapped. More than forty women jumped from windows and hurtled to their deaths eighty-five feet below; others flung themselves down the elevator shaft in desperate attempts to escape. Firefighters at the scene were unable to cope with the situation. Water from their hoses failed to reach the flames because the pressure was too low; their ladders reached only to the sixth floor.
A throng estimated at over a hundred thousand people attended the mass funeral of the victims of the fire. Incredible as it sounds, an official inquiry later found that the Triangle Shirtwaist Company had not been guilty of negligence. Irate citizens demanded that such a tragedy never be allowed to happen again; and, as a result of the fire, new safety measures were initiated. Laws dealing with building safety were made more stringent, and firefighting equipment and methods were improved. But the changes came too late for the unfortunate 145 women who were casualties of New York’s Triangle fire.

Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. Why did the fleeing women have trouble breathing?

2. What happened to the women who jumped from the windows?

3. What was the number of victims of the Triangle fire?

4. What is the meaning of lax as it is used in the passage?

5. Did anything good result from the Triangle fire?

6. What did the official inquiry fail to do?
7. Why were the citizens of New York irate?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

8. What is the meaning of **smolder** as it is used in the passage?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

9. How did the narrowness of the stairway contribute to the disaster?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

10. Did the women leave the work area in an orderly manner?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

11. How did their inadequate equipment hamper the firefighters?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

12. What is the meaning of **congested** as it is used in the passage?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

13. What is the meaning of **initiated** as it is used in the passage?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

14. How did the people of New York pay their respects to the dead women?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

15. What was so terrible about the lack of concern by the authorities?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
• **Initiate** and *begin* are synonyms, but their meanings carry a difference that should be noted. *Begin* is the general, all-purpose word for the start of something; one can *begin* anything from a sentence to a world war! *Initiate* has a narrower meaning; it suggests taking the first in a series of major steps. (A president may *initiate* a new trade policy; a company may *initiate* new hiring practices.)

*Initiative* is the first step in bringing something about. (I took the *initiative* by demanding a change.)

*Initiative* is also the ability to get things done without waiting to be told. (You must show *initiative* if you wish to be promoted.)

• **Negligent** means “failing to give proper attention to” and is formed from the verb *neglect*. Another adjective, *negligible*, is formed from this verb; it means “so small or unimportant that it can be neglected or ignored.” (The cost of floor mats was *negligible* compared to the price of the car.)