

The Gilded Age

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The late 19th century was a time of immense change in the United States. Western conquest, the rise of big business, and the beginning of modern consumerism all had a major impact on American society. These transformations led to the emergence of authors who viewed society through new lenses. Their work—fiction and nonfiction—helps us to better understand this period, which came to be known as the “Gilded Age.”

This tutorial examines the Gilded Age in four parts:

1. Wealth and Property during the Gilded Age

Industrialization and the rise of consumerism changed the way in which many Americans worked and purchased goods. However, the benefits of these changes were not distributed evenly.

➔ **EXAMPLE** By 1890, 1% of American families owned 51% of the property in the United States. Wealth—whether gained from property ownership or income—was concentrated in a handful of Americans. (Painter, 1987)

Estates by Annual Income	Number of Families	Aggregate Wealth	Average Wealth per Family
Wealthy classes (\$50,000 and over)	125,000	\$33 billion	\$264,000
Well-to-do classes (\$5,000 to \$50,000)	1,375,000	\$23 billion	\$16,000
Middle classes (\$500 to \$5,000)	5,500,000	\$8.2 billion	\$1,500
Poorer classes (under \$500)	5,500,000	\$800 million	\$150

Inequality in wealth and property was evident in the environments in which rich and poor lived.



This mansion, known as “The Breakers,” was built in Newport, Rhode Island, in the mid-1890s as the summer home of Cornelius Vanderbilt II. He was the grandson of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, a railroad baron who was one of the wealthiest men in American history before his death in 1877. For those fortunate enough to be wealthy in Gilded Age America, a summer “cottage” in a place like Newport was an important status symbol.

Insufficient Toilet Accomodations.



Two vaults on right the only Accomodations for 12 families.

Many more Americans, however, lived in conditions such as these. Workers in Pittsburgh inhabited crowded, dilapidated buildings that had few amenities, such as indoor plumbing or outdoor spaces in which children could play. Lewis Hine, who took this photograph sometime between 1907 and 1908, noted that this building housed at least 12 families who shared two pit toilets.

Those who lived in relative comfort during this period developed justifications of their place in society and explanations for the widespread inequality that was prevalent in Gilded Age America.

2. Justifying Wealth

Among the most important ideas to appear in the 19th century was Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. **Charles Darwin** was a British naturalist who, in his 1859 work *On the Origin of Species*, made the case that species develop and evolve through natural selection, not divine intervention. When the book was published, most of the scientific establishment accepted his theory of evolution because they felt it synthesized much of the previous work in the field. However, Darwin's theory quickly drew fire, in England and abroad, from those who felt that natural selection ignored God's role in creation.

British political philosopher **Herbert Spencer** took Darwin's theory and went further. He coined the phrase "survival of the fittest," and popularized the term **Social Darwinism**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Charles Darwin

British naturalist who, in his 1859 work *On the Origin of Species*, made the case that species develop and evolve through natural selection instead of divine intervention.

Herbert Spencer

British political philosopher who took Darwin's theory of natural selection to explain society; he coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" and helped to popularize the concept of social Darwinism.



TERM TO KNOW

Social Darwinism

Theorized that human societies evolved much like a natural organism, wherein some individuals succeeded due to inherent racial and ethnic traits or through their ability to adapt.

Social Darwinism applied Charles Darwin's theories from objective science to social and economic phenomena. Spencer and other advocates of Social Darwinism argued that certain attributes, including intelligence and wealth, combined with the ability to adapt, determined whether an individual succeeded or failed.

William Graham Sumner, a Yale sociologist, was the most vocal proponent of Social Darwinism in the United States. During the 1880s, Sumner summarized his views on nature and society as follows:

William Graham Sumner, Sociologist

"Man is born under the necessity of sustaining the existence he has received by an onerous struggle against nature, both to win what is essential to his life and to ward off what is prejudicial to it. He is born under a burden and a necessity. Nature holds what is essential to him, but she offers nothing gratuitously. He may win for his use what she holds, if he can. Only the most meager and inadequate supply for human needs can be obtained directly from nature. There are trees that may be used for fuel and for dwellings, but labor is required to fit them for this use. There are ores in the ground, but labor is necessary to get out the metals and make tools or weapons. For any real satisfaction, labor is necessary to fit the products of nature for human use. In this struggle, every individual is under the pressure of the necessities for food, clothing, shelter, fuel, and every individual brings with him more or less energy for the conflict necessary to supply his needs. The relations, therefore, between each man's need and each man's energy, or 'individualism,' is the first fact of human life."



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William Graham Sumner

Yale sociologist who became one of the most vocal proponents of social Darwinism in the United States.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What does Sumner mean when he writes that humans are "born under a burden and a necessity."
2. How do you think Sumner defines individualism?

Not surprisingly, this ideology, which Darwin would have rejected as a misreading of his theories, drew praise from those who accumulated wealth during the late 19th century. They saw their success as proof of their biological fitness. Critics of the theory, however, pointed out that those who failed often did not have the same opportunities, or experience the equal playing field that proponents of social Darwinism believed in.

Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie was among the businessmen who explained his rise to wealth in terms of Social Darwinism. He believed that society developed like plant or animal life: through a process of evolution, in which the fittest and most capable enjoyed the greatest material and social success.

Unlike other businessmen of the era, however, Carnegie's Social Darwinist views included a belief that those who succeeded owed a debt to society. Carnegie first expressed this idea, which became known as the **Gospel of Wealth**, in an 1889 essay published in the *North American Review*.



TERM TO KNOW

Gospel of Wealth

The idea that business leaders should be philanthropists and benefactors to those less fortunate, to advance American society.

A selection from Carnegie's essay is provided below. While reading it, you might find it helpful to apply the lens of class.

Andrew Carnegie, Essay on the Gospel of Wealth

"Poor and restricted are our opportunities in this life; narrow our horizon; our best work most imperfect; but rich men should be thankful for one inestimable boon. They have it in their power during their lives to busy themselves in organizing benefactions from which the masses of their fellows will derive lasting advantage, and thus dignify their own lives...."

This, then, is held to be the duty of the man of Wealth: First, to set an example of modest, unostentatious living, shunning display or extravagance; to provide moderately for the legitimate wants of those dependent upon him; and after doing so to consider all surplus revenues which come to him simply as trust funds, which he is called upon to administer, and strictly bound as a matter of duty to administer in the manner which, in his judgment, is best calculated to produce the most beneficial results for the community—the man of wealth thus becoming the mere agent and trustee for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom, experience and ability to administer, doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves....

In bestowing charity, the main consideration should be to help those who will help themselves; to provide part of the means by which those who desire to improve may do so; to give those who desire to use the aids by which they may rise; to assist, but rarely or never to do all. Neither the individual nor the race is improved by alms-giving. Those worthy of assistance, except in rare cases, seldom require assistance. The really valuable men of the race never do, except in cases of accident or sudden change. Everyone has, of course, cases of individuals brought to his own knowledge where temporary assistance can do genuine good, and these he will not overlook. But the amount which can be wisely given by the individual for individuals is necessarily limited by his lack of knowledge of the circumstances connected with each. He is the only true reformer who is as careful and as anxious not to aid the unworthy as he is to aid the worthy, and, perhaps, even more so, for in alms-giving more injury is probably done by rewarding vice than by relieving virtue."



THINK ABOUT IT

1. According to Carnegie, what responsibilities does “the man of Wealth” have to society?
2. What responsibilities do those who receive charity have to society?
3. Based on the evidence provided, in what ways are William Graham Sumner’s and Andrew Carnegie’s arguments similar? In what ways are they different?

Social Darwinism and the Gospel of Wealth added layers of pseudoscience to another prominent idea of late 19th century America: the **self-made man**.



TERM TO KNOW

Self-Made Man

A person born in a disadvantaged situation who, nevertheless, rises through the ranks of society through hard work and ingenuity.

This idea was based on the mid-19th century notion of free labor, which held that all workers should receive fair compensation, and have the opportunity to advance economically, but it added an important caveat. Those who believed in the self-made man theory also believed that those who did not succeed, failed due to their laziness, wastefulness, or other character flaws.

As a result of the self-made man theory, stories of rugged Western cowboys and rags-to-riches tycoons became a popular motif in American literature.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Horatio Alger made a fortune writing novels like *Ragged Dick* (1868) and other stories about young, enterprising, White boys who escaped poverty and succeeded in business through “luck and pluck.” His stories reflected the ideology of the “self-made man.” His books were immensely popular. A board game sold at this time, titled *District Messenger Boy*, gave players a chance to win by applying the strategies that Alger’s characters used.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Horatio Alger

Mid-19th century American fiction writer whose novels, such as *Ragged Dick*, told stories of young enterprising boys who beat



Based on a book by Horatio Alger, *District Messenger Boy* was a board game where players could learn to achieve material success.

poverty and succeeded in business through a combination of “luck and pluck.”

2. Criticizing Wealth

At the core of Social Darwinism, the Gospel of Wealth, and the self-made man was the notion that the late 19th century was a time of improvement, progress, and opportunity. However, while many were unwilling to give up the notion of progress, others argued that industrialization and the concentration of wealth into the hands of a few were not true progress.

The economist **Henry George**, best known for his 1879 book *Progress and Poverty*, criticized inequality in the industrial economy. In doing so, he refuted the ideas espoused by Spencer and Carnegie:

Henry George, Excerpt from *Progress and Poverty*

“...[T]he evils arising from the unjust and unequal distribution of wealth, which are becoming more and more apparent as modern civilization goes on, are not incidents of progress, but tendencies which must bring progress to a halt; that they will not cure themselves, but, on the contrary, must, unless their cause is removed, grow greater and greater, until they sweep us back into barbarism by the road every precious civilization has trod. But it also shows that these evils are not imposed by natural laws; that they spring solely from social maladjustments which ignore natural laws, and that in removing their cause we shall be giving an enormous impetus to progress.”



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Henry George

Economist whose 1879 book *Progress and Poverty* criticized the inequality found in the industrial economy.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Based on the evidence provided, how would Henry George respond to Social Darwinists' claims that the accumulation of wealth and inequality were natural phenomena?
2. What “social maladjustments” is he referencing?

In *Progress and Poverty*, George argued that people should own what they create, but land and other natural resources should belong to everyone. These resources should be taxed through a “single land tax,” which he believed would reduce land speculation.

Novelist **Edward Bellamy** envisioned a utopian future without inequality for the United States. His 1888 novel *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*, portrays America in the year 2000. After abandoning industrial capitalism, citizens live in peace and harmony with each other.



DID YOU KNOW

In his book, Bellamy predicted the advent of credit cards, cable entertainment, and “superstore” cooperatives that resemble Walmart.

Looking Backward was a bestseller and, like George's book, appealed to readers who felt that big business and consumerism were moving the country in the wrong direction.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Edward Bellamy

American novelist skeptical of the industrial progress of the Gilded Age; his 1888 novel *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*, portrayed a futuristic America where citizens lived in peace and harmony with each other after abandoning industrial capitalism.



THINK ABOUT IT

Today's critics of social and wealth inequity often refer to the "one percent" who own much of the nation's wealth. Are there any parallels between contemporary debates over wealth inequality and those that occurred during the Gilded Age?

3. The Gilded Age

Perhaps it's fitting that the noted American writer **Mark Twain** contributed to the label that best describes this period in American history. In a book coauthored with Charles Dudley Warner in 1873, the term **Gilded Age** is used to describe American society during the late 19th century.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Mark Twain

Celebrated American author who coined the term "Gilded Age" to refer to America in the late 19th century.



TERM TO KNOW

Gilded Age

A period in American history in which materialism, a quest for personal gain, and corruption dominated politics and society.

In their novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, Twain and Warner satirized corruption in the United States and suggested that excitement over national growth and industrialization distracted people from considering economic inequality and political corruption. The authors believed that this could have negative consequences for the country.



DID YOU KNOW

"Gilded" refers to a thin layer of gold applied to items made from inferior materials to deceive people about their true value.

The book includes characters who pursued wealth by any means necessary, including graft and bribery. The slogan they lived by was, "Get rich, dishonestly if we can, honestly if we must." Considering what many Americans saw in the nation's cities and halls of power in the late 19th century, this slogan seemed to be accurate.



SUMMARY

Americans could not help but notice the significant changes taking place around them during the late 19th century. Some developed ideas, ideologies, and stories to explain the changes, and to defend their position in society. Proponents of economic changes that produced enormous wealth for a few cited Social Darwinism, Carnegie's Gospel of Wealth, and the concept of the self-made man to explain why some succeeded and others failed economically. Others criticized the changes, citing the inequities that the new economy created. Two of these critics—Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner—applied the “Gilded Age” label to this period in American history.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Gilded Age

A period in American history during which materialism, a quest for personal gain, and corruption dominated politics and society.

Gospel of Wealth

The idea that business leaders should be philanthropists and serve as benefactors to those less fortunate in order to advance American society.

Self-Made Man

A person born in a disadvantaged situation who, nevertheless, rises through the ranks of society through hard work and ingenuity.

Social Darwinism

Theorized that human societies evolved much like a natural organism, wherein some individuals succeeded due to inherent racial and ethnic traits or through their ability to adapt.



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