

The Gilded Age

Historian Allen Nevins, in *The Emergence of Modern America*, described the Gilded Age—the era between the end of the Civil War and the Beginning of World War I—as a “period of currency inflation, widespread speculation, overexpansion of industry, loud booming of dubious enterprises, base business and political morals, and flashy manners...” He was correct, but only partially. Greed, fraud, and selfishness were surely widespread, but there occurred also in this age the organization of labor, some regulation of the economy, and an expansion of education. If there were those guilty of gilding society’s face, there were also those who sought to break through the gilt façade to a harder, if darker, reality. Among this group were the writers of this series—Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Jack London.

When Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner published *The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-day in 1873*, they began with a mock apology for their treatment of:

“an entirely ideal state of society... where there is no fever of speculation, no inflamed desire for sudden wealth, where the poor are all simple-minded and contented, and the rich are all honest and generous, where society is in a condition of primitive purity, and politics is the occupation of only the capable and the patriotic.”

The sardonic social criticism that follows the preface aims to prick many falsehoods of the age. And with realism as a tool, many American writers took up just that aim. With William Dean Howells as its popular and influential spokesman, literary realism ranged from genteel to ruthless, and its targets of reform included a spectrum of social ills.

The writers and texts included in this series can only hint at the larger body of work and thought concentrating on a social and moral critique of America’s gilded age in its many manifestations. Industrialism, immigration, urbanization, monetary policy, labor, racial discrimination, frontier settlement—these were only some of the targets of the pens of journalists and literary artists (who were often the same persons). Howells, Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, Henry Adams, Walt Whitman, Henry James, Sarah Orne Jewett and others might be counted among the varieties of critical realists delineating parts of the late 19th century scenery.

The Gilded Age was a time of change, of excitement, of energy. New technology gave way to industrial and urban development. Transportation, especially the railroads, and improved communications systems continued to join together disparate sections of

the nation. Reconstruction of social and political alliances sought to accomplish the nation's dream of democracy. But increased mobility of persons and information and wealth invited widespread corruption, and it came, with the writers fast on its heels, hoping to reform or at least expose it.

This *Let's Talk About It* series is designed to help readers see a part of the literary response to social changes of the Gilded Age and to recognize the critical function of several writers whose works question the era's golden surface. Some of these works (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and *The Call of the Wild*) are very familiar to American readers; others (Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* and Chopin's *The Awakening*) are somewhat less familiar. But the reading of these books in the context of the series should reveal more of their original purposes and encourage in the reader a habitual alertness to the tension between society's institutions and her literary voices.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn **by Mark Twain**

Perhaps it began as a boy's book, a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, as the author claimed, but it bogged down, got reconfigured, and when *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* emerged eight years after its beginning, it had become a myth of America, a growing-up story of a boy lost on the Mississippi, searching for a father, measuring the values—true and false—of American society, and arriving finally at an uneasy bargain with that society. The raft journey of Huck and Jim is an excellent tale of human longing and achievement. Its episodic structure of the novel pulls the reader along as surely as the river propels the raft. The social and intellectual value of the novel, in 1884 and today, lies in its portraits of American society—individual and collective. Most of them are unflattering.

It is a commonplace of the novel's critics that Huck and Jim find life on the river good and life on the shore, amid human society, troubled. With Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas, Huck is morally restrained; with Pap he lives in constant danger of abuse, though without responsibility. When Huck leaves Jim to go ashore for information about his own "murder," he must go in disguise, and he pretends poorly. When he lives among the Shepherdsons, he watches the pointless death of his friend Buck feuding himself. He sees the violence of the bully and impotence of the mob in the killing of the genial, harmless Boggs by Colonel Sherburn. With the King and Duke, he sees one town's fitness to be duped and its inability to get revenge. He becomes an unwilling accomplice to the deception of Peter Wilks' family and learns pity for them, but he recognizes that ordinary folks are rarely able to avoid being taken by deliberate and scheming crooks. Only alone with Jim, on the raft, does Huckleberry find peace.

As Gilded Age bandits, the King and Duke are classic frauds, ready to turn any trick for money. They feign religious fervor, artistic taste, sympathy, sorrow, and respectability. They stay one step ahead of the law or the lynch mob, changing masks and alliances as necessary to save their necks.

To the frauds Twain foils young Huck, whose developing conscience is matched by a ready wit, but who has much to learn and is without status in the society (indeed, he is officially dead through most of the novel). Huck learns respect and compassion, mostly from Jim, in the absence of other models, and he is eventually able to unveil a bit of the frauds' deception and still escape unharmed. But the "safe" society to which he escapes at Aunt Sally's lacks energy, and though Huck is glad to learn that he is still financially secure and Jim is free of slavery, he longs for further adventure and threatens to "light out for the Territory" if others try to "sivilize" him.

For all its satire on social and moral corruption, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* does not treat reformers kindly. Abolitionists, preachers, and judges seem generally foolish, ill-guided, and ineffective. And neither the book nor its hero are effectively reformed. Huck's final claim places him on only the fringe of society, and the book itself contains racial and gender epithets that a contemporary reader might wish to have purged. Perhaps what the age demanded was ambivalence, complexity, and tentative commitment to balance the blatant greed and consciencelessness of many in Gilded Age America.

The Red Badge of Courage **by Stephen Crane**

Though Stephen Crane knew nothing of the civil war first-hand, his novel *The Red Badge of Courage* tells the experiences of a youth engaged in the war with remarkable authority and acuity. The story was widely circulated, a shortened version syndicated in newspapers in late 1894, the 1895 book version gone through nine editions in its first year. It made the twenty-four year old Crane famous in the U.S. and in England.

The truth of *Red Badge* is not the historical accuracy of its battle field but the psychological accuracy of its protagonist's responses to war. It is not documentary but impressionistic. The center of the narrative is the consciousness of protagonist Henry Fleming and what he can make of himself amid the chaos of battle, his anticipation of crisis and his personal acceptance of both failure and redemption.

For Henry, the war is not a battle of political or sectional issues but a confrontation of the individual with larger more abstract realities—fear, death, Nature. Crane's war is not without physical reality, but its central issues are more personal, more universal than any particular circumstances. It is finally far more important that the war brings

Henry Fleming to a vision of himself than that it resolves issues of slavery or sectional autonomy; indeed, these issues are irrelevant to the novel. Much more memorable are the images of “tattered soldier,” “blue column,” “red eyes across the river,” moon “hung in the trees,” and a wafer of sun pasted in the sky.

That the novel is personal does not, however, preclude it from commenting on general issues of the age. In Henry’s descriptions and in those of the more detached narrative voice, for example, there is often a conflict between the personal and the objective, even mechanistic, perception of events. This typical gilded age disparity begs the question of whether man may or may not know truth in any impartial form, an issue of general interest to all of the realists. There seems a great distance between the presentation of images and their meaning, and the author seems to exaggerate the artificiality of Henry’s perceptions, making of the story a highly conscious literary performance, a creation of figures and impressions, not a mirroring of actual events. Yet there is a truth of impression that rises above the story and its impressionistic telling, and this draws readers back again and again to *The Red Badge*. This truth is the initiation and self-awareness of Henry Fleming, tried by fear and battle, redeemed perhaps by chance, and daring to claim his experience and vision as common fact, though the reader may think it remarkable.

The Awakening
by Kate Chopin

When *The Awakening* appeared in 1899, its independent heroine’s actions earned its author a scandalous reputation as a wanton encourager of marital infidelity. The book was banned by many libraries; Chopin was herself banned from respectable groups and gatherings; the criticism led her to abandon writing altogether.

The Awakening is one of those books in which not much seems to happen, but what does happen silently shakes the foundations of society. Edna Pontellier, wife and mother, watches her dull and proper husband stroll off toward dinner and gaming among male companions. To Leonce Pontellier, it must seem impossible that Edna could find his custodial husbanding of her less than satisfying, but during his frequent and extended absences, she discovers her own quite contrary desires—for sensation, for conversation, for companionship, even for romance. Robert Lebrun, the almost incidental object of her romantic longing, emerges as sensitive foil to her inattentive husband. Robert loves Edna but, embarrassed at his own emotional impropriety, he goes away from her to avoid confessing his love. She pines for him but meantime finds companionship with the even less socially acceptable Alcee Arobin. As the story moves toward its climax, Mr. Pontellier writes to Edna of a planned journey on which he will take her; Robert returns, confesses his helpless-but-timid love for her, but leaves again;

and the bolder Arobin waits in the wings for a possible response to his own advances. Edna, in crisis, must act.

But perhaps this romantic storyline is too simple for Chopin's short novel. A more subtle, more "feminine" summary might trace the relations of Edna with her female companions at Grand Isle. Among the spectrum of proper ladies with whom Edna exchanges polite visits and calling cards are Madame Ratinolle, Madame Lebrun, and Mademoiselle Reisz. Though each may offer an identity that Edna may assume, each is also something of a threat to her. The attractive and charming Adele Ratinolle seems the good and proper wife that Edna might become if she suppresses her own desires and sensations. Madame Lebrun, Robert's mother, makes no pretense of a romantic marriage; her husband has been long away and she has assumed a rather stoic, almost stern attitude toward life. Mademoiselle Reisz, who knows Edna's love for Robert and who eventually tells her of his love for her, is not married; nothing herself, she offers her piano playing is a vehicle through which others expose their emotions, and she is a vehicle for bringing Edna and Robert together. These women and several others suggest possible identities for the awakening Edna. But Edna's choice is finally her own.

Today, Edna Pontellier stands as a prototype of the emerging female consciousness—strong enough to throw off the fetters of an indifferent, insensitive husband and of social conformity, yet not necessarily able to establish a satisfactory alternative identity. Today, Edna is judged appropriately guilty of daring to be herself, to feel freely and express openly her passions. Indeed, many who read her story—far from being horrified at her willfulness—are amazed at the hesitation of her break from the will of others and toward her own desire. They wonder at the "tragedy" of her end, not at the unpunished crime of deserting husband and family.

The story, of course, has not changed, but the times have. The change in social roles and expectations is considerable, and it has allowed *The Awakening* to gain, since the 1950s, its now-prominent place in the canon of the American *fin de siècle*. Such prominence would no doubt surprise both Kate Chopin and her critics, but to us it seems an appropriate "modern" acknowledgment of a true story of "awakening" feminine consciousness.

The Souls of Black Folk

by W. E. B. Du Bois

One surprise in store for today's reader of *The Souls of Black Folk* is how disturbingly current are some of the racial problems addressed in the almost-century-old collection of essays. The title of the book is itself a mild rebuttal of what had become in the 1890s a distressingly familiar identification of the Negro as a subhuman species, a claim institutionalized, especially in the South, by a rage of Jim Crow social codes intended as

a backlash against such advances offered to Negroes by the Freedman's Bureau and the Civil Rights laws of 1866 and 1875.

The articulate voice of W. E. B. Du Bois that rings through the essays of this collection should have put to rout the last smug expressions about dehumanized Negroes. Du Bois' intellectual skills as historian and social analyst are considerable, whether he is assessing the reasons for the limited success of the Freedman's Bureau in "On the Dawn of Freedom," debating the arguments of Washington's "Atlanta Compromise," asserting in mythic proportions the benefits of a university education in "On the Wings of Atlanta" and "Of the Training of Black Men," affirming the relation between social and political advancement in "Of the Sons of Master and Man," or exalting the endurance of his forebears—Alexander Crummell, "John," and all who sang the "sorrow songs"—in the struggle against slavery and continuing injustice. The range of the essays, some composed earlier and fitted into the book, some original for *Souls*, is remarkable; their style, exemplary.

Racial discrimination is not, for Du Bois, merely an abstract issue disconnected from a broader historical context. He is aware of the social flux that has occurred and is continuing as he writes. As he assesses the Negro's economic plight, he is quite aware of the radical changes that mark the Gilded Age in America, so much so that his assessments of technological advance and the need for educational and vocational adjustments ring true universally. His attack on the greed of unscrupulous businessmen impales more victims than Southern white racists. His warning to heed the important role of laboring men echoes beyond a call to respect the Negro farmer. His concerns for the problems of American cities without civic virtue and for the destruction of more stable rural communities seem prophetic for all America at the turn of the century.

The Call of the Wild

by Jack London

Buck, a domesticated West Coast canine, is shipped to the Yukon during the gold rush and passed through several handlers, all ambitious, most abusive. Powerful in and out of harness and possessing rare intelligence, he big sled dog learns to dominate other dogs and men as well. Then, drawn by a primitive call from deep in his past, Buck deserts the society of men to join a pack of Arctic wolves.

This too-simple summary of London's short 1903 novel suggests little of the author's social criticism and naturalistic philosophy. It is after all quite possible to read *The Call of the Wild* as a thinly veiled allegory of the social artifice that veiled late 19th century America's deep rooted violence, or that veiled mankind in general from his own inescapably primitive nature. Likewise, it is possible to read the story as an oblique account of the author's personal journey to the Yukon, a quest for self-recognition and

acceptance as much as for riches. On every level, it is a story of struggle—for riches, for power, for dominance, for a primitive brotherhood, for self-satisfaction.

The stages of Buck's progression (or is it retrogression? —such ambivalence is characteristic of London) from domestic pet to leader of the wolf pack strip away social inhibitions. One might read the African slave's experience beneath the account of Buck's crated shipment and brutal welcome in Alaska; his handlers consciously attempt to "break" him with club and whip, then bind him in harness to accomplish their selfish aims by hard labor; he bought and sold for his strength, yet he knows few personal rewards; and finally there is a violent, retributive break to freedom. Free of society, Buck is "wildly glad," and by his violent, vengeful attack on the Yankee, he gains a mythic identity as Ghost Dog, "The Fiend incarnate."

Through the story range at least two different hierarchies of note—the humans who have come to Alaska seeking riches, and the dogs comprising the sled teams that serve them. Among the first, Buck, for all his canine nobility, is exchanged somewhat arbitrarily; some handlers are wiser than others, some kinder, but none is without a selfish desire that reduces Buck and the other dogs mostly to instruments of human will. Among the second hierarchy, Buck observes, challenges, rises, triumphs; yet Buck's final triumph, over man, moves him beyond the world of sled dogs, into the "younger world" of wild happiness and primitive brotherhood of the wolf pack.

As a Gilded Age story, *The Call of the Wild* offers a dark critique of the era's monetary greed. It reflects the hollowness of economic ambitions, the artificiality of urban mannerisms, the disparagement of labor, the tentativeness of material success. It lays bare a harsh law of nature—dependence upon brutal force for maintenance of social control and position. Such "natural laws" London probably borrowed from his reading of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Karl Marx; but the images of the Klondike as site of natural struggle come from London's own experience there.

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