

Review Research

# A Timeline of Journalistic Influence of Writing on the Gilded Age in American Literature

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## Abstract

The themes found in the writings by authors during the Gilded Age are still prevalent in writings of the twenty-first century. The Gilded Age, a term used to describe a period of economic boom after the American Civil War at the turn of the century, influenced communication to readers by using the ethos unearthed by writers who were opposed to a particular politician and their policies. The Gilded Age was a time of rapid economic growth through the invention of the railroad and business. What looked like a golden time was an era of great growing pains in America between the industrial worker and the wealthy business owner. What the Gilded Age symbolized in both life and writing has become a model of writing that extended to current literature. American writers contributed to a great body of literature that flourished during the Gilded Age. The Gilded Age was a time of rapid economic growth through the invention of the railroad and business. Literature was used as a social revolt that violated the growing power of business and growing government corruption that outlined the utopias of the inefficiency of a capitalistic system. Within genres of writing such as Poetry, the later nineteenth century, and early years of the twentieth century were a poor period for American poetry providing themes of distress, doubts, and fears about American life. Within the genres of writing, newspaper writing played a crucial role in exposing scandals, the pathos of the American Dream, and the logos or persuasion by using the trials of society. Writing was a powerful communication tool during the Gilded Age that allowed writers to target events during this era. Newspaper writing was important to communicating prominent issues to the public, as it upheld ideals to question government and keep it accountable. However, the Gilded Age writings helped to permanently etch in the minds of readers the importance of themes that were prevalent post-Civil War that impacted the writing and writers of American Literature.

## Keywords

American Literature, Gilded Age, Writing, Journalism, Civil War, Newspapers

## 1. Introduction

The Gilded Age was a term that used to define a period from late 1870 through 1900, when economic wealth was increasing, just after the American Civil War. It was at the turn of the century that writing in newspapers played a significant role in uncovering corruption. Readers of the

Gilded Age demanded swift and accurate news, which included the distribution of news to massively diverse audiences, included a cleaner, less cluttered writing style that was based on facts [12]. There was immense development in American history that helped the healing of the tumultuous

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economic pain that came from the Civil War after the 1876 Reconstruction. The signs of hurt and hardship were still visible, however, the effects of industrialization new forms of economic organization, and immigration from Eastern Europe helped the economy grow and create a trend of strength toward urbanization and diversification.

In the late nineteenth century, a series of innovations helped to characterize a fundamentally transformed political and economic newspaper business. It was pivotal for journalism in the United States. It was a time for experimentation, innovation, and the commercialization of the mainstream American Press. It was also the start of a tumultuous time of changes, which helped to develop a "first and second revolution" in the Gilded Age press. The first of these two revolutions saw the emergence of inexpensive, afternoon newspapers with expanded circulations and soaring advertising revenues. The second revolution provided new opportunities for wealth and the pressures of competition reinforced the profit orientation of the press.

## 2. Development of Gilded Age Writing

During the Gilded Age, there was immense corruption, which became a theme of mainstay writing. "The news industry was booming. Journalists learned by doing and by imitating knowledge brokers, established reporters, and editors they could observe personally in city rooms" [11]. Metropolitan cities were influenced by the activity of the spoils system. Writing in newspapers during the Gilded Age helped to ensure that dominant candidates got elected, despite illegal activity. In the 1830s, Andrew Jackson was exposed to corruption through Gilded Age newspapers. Without writing, any wrongdoing would not have had the chance to be discovered by Jackson, which paved the way for future investigations of public officials for federal bureaucracy. Therefore, political scandals were unearthed by writers who were opposed to a particular politician and their policies. "The model offers a fresh and interesting way to consider the spread of knowledge about journalistic rules and routines in the late nineteenth century" [7]. During the presidential election, newspapers such as *The Sun* targeted Ulysses S. Grant for scandals that he and his campaign were not involved in, yet damaged Grant and his campaign.

Readers of Gilded Age newspapers were routinely brought into a new way of journalism, since Gilded Age reporters had much to deal with, as they came from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Reporters navigated a complex course of sources, stories, and a form of writing and storytelling that were evolving as rapidly as the American culture, economy, and technology. Experienced journalists, otherwise known as knowledge brokers, helped to teach newcomers about interviewing, using sources, and the inverted pyramid writing style. Knowledge brokers created the ethos, or the persuasion that kept readers interested in human interest stories and popularized journalism during the Gilded Age.

Writing was a powerful communication tool during the Gilded Age that allowed writers to target events during this era.

Writing provided the opportunity for government officials to be questioned and held accountable by the public. Journalists communicated on dominant issues that affected the public and caused many political machines to be damaged during the Gilded Age. However, the Gilded Age writings helped to permanently etch in the minds of readers the importance of themes that were prevalent post-Civil War that impacted the writing and writers of American Literature.

## 3. American Literature of Gilded Age

The term Gilded Age was first used in literature by Mark Twain in his book, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, which was co-authored with Charles Dudley Warner, and gave an insight into the vast corruption and the truth of unsavory living conditions only seen by those living on the inside of the era. On the outside, the culture of the Gilded Age seemed powerful, especially to immigrants. A depiction of a perfect society emerged in other countries and helped increase the interest of people to move to the United States.

Most of what was published was used to increase wealth and rivalries between businesses. "Nineteenth-century journalists were as pragmatic about such conduct but ultimately left the reader wishing for a fuller discussion of these proto-ethical matters" [5]. However, beneath the golden veneer, there was a tarnished American society that was plagued by poverty and corruption. Twain wrote the satire as a revealing portrait of post-Civil War America and caustic pummeling of government, politics, and big business. Its title quickly became synonymous with graft, materialism, and corruption in public life. Giving way to the poor rural family that would later become affluent by promptly selling 75,000 acres of unimproved land, the theme of the novel gives way to the idea that the lust for getting rich through land speculation will pervade society [8]. Although the book does not associate with the themes of industrialization, monopolies, and the corruption of the urban political machines, its significance gives way to a title taken from William Shakespeare's *King John* from 1595: "To gild refined gold, to paint the lily...is wasteful and ridiculous excess (Act IV, scene 2). Gilding gold put gold on top of gold as being wasteful and excessive and was characteristic of the age that Twain and Warner wrote about in this novel [6]. It is the contrast between the ideal of the "Golden Age" as being less worthy. The "Golden Age" would be interrupted by gilding as only a thin layer of gold over metal, so that the title of the book would have a pejorative meaning of the time, events, and people of the Gilded Age.

American writers contributed to a great body of literature that flourished during the Gilded Age. Literature was used as a social revolt that violated the growing power of business and growing government corruption that outlined the utopias

of the inefficiency of a capitalistic system. The year 1906, saw many first works that criticized the U.S. economic and political life and urged socialism as a remedy, as found in *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair [9]. The writings of American works became prevalent and timely as not only a means of creativity, but that of communicating the trials and emotions of what the people during this period experienced, and its effects on everyday living.

*Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy in 1888, showed both an indictment of the capitalistic system and an imaginative picture of collectivist society in the year 2000. *Man in the Hoe* by Edwin Markham in 1899 held criticism against the exploitation of labor and vaguely threatened revolution; it immediately stimulated nationwide interest. A year later William Vaughn Moody wrote *An Ode in Time of Hesitation* and denounced growing U.S. imperialism as a desertion of earlier principles; his *On a Soldier Fallen in the Philippines* (1901) developed the same theme even more effectively.

Within genres of writing such as Poetry, the later nineteenth century, and early years of the twentieth century were a poor period for American poetry providing themes of distress, doubts, and fears about American life. The use of imperfect rhymes, avoidance of regular rhythms, and a tendency to include brief stanzas with cryptic meanings could be found in poetry, which helped develop and grow fiction writing during the Gilded Age. Fiction writers printed daring or unconventional short stories and published aggression upon established writers. In 1920, critics noticed a new school of fiction had risen to prominence with the success of books [14]. Novels of the 1920s were often not only lyrical and personal but also, in the despairing mood that followed World War I, apt to express the pervasive disillusionment of the postwar generation. Novels of the 1930s inclined toward radical social criticism in response to the miseries of the Great Depression, though some of the best, by writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Henry Roth, and Nathanael West, continued to explore the Modernist vein of the previous decade. The book initiated a career of great promise that found fruition in *The Great Gatsby* in 1925, a novel about the promise and failure of the American Dream [1].

Several authors drafted novels on social class that attacked capitalist exploitation, as in several novels based on a 1929 strike in the textile mills [2]. Particularly admired as a protest writer was John Dos Passos had first attracted attention with an anti-World War I novel, *Three Soldiers* in 1921, on his most sweeping indictments of modern society and the economic system of the Gilded Age. Passos employed various narratives on the economic system in his works, including *Manhattan Transfer* in 1925, the U.S.A. trilogy of the 42nd Parallel, in 1919, and *The Big Money*, which employed various narratives that broke down society. Nathanael West authored novels, including *A Cool Million* in 1934, and *The Day of the Locust* in 1939, using black

comedy to create a bitter vision of an inhuman and brutal world and its depressing effects on his sensitive, but ineffectual protagonists [15]. West evoked the tawdry but rich materials of mass culture and popular fantasy to mock the pathos of the American Dream, a frequent target during the Depression years [3]. By using experiences of life, writers of the Gilded Age gave way to logos, the persuasion to believe in the argument of what was wrong in society. The poetry literature by Emily Dickinson, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Henry Roth, and Nathanael West, along with many other writers, appeal to the reader's senses.

#### 4. Impact of Gilded Age Writing Today

The Gilded Age was a time of rapid economic growth through the invention of the railroad and business. What looked like a golden time was an era of great growing pains in America between the industrial worker and the wealthy business owner. What the Gilded Age symbolized in both life and writing has become a model of writing that extended to current literature. The dominant issues of industrialization, political corruption, and The American Dream are current themes still written about in novels, newspapers, and poetry, making way for a Second Gilded Age to exist in writing gave way to a New Journalism, which is a writing that brings people to talk about the newspaper [10]. It allowed for yellow journalism or the yellow press within American newspapers, which used eye-catching headlines and sensationalized exaggerations for increased sales to prevail. It also allowed for themes of inequality that dominated the Gilded Age writings to be found in news stories and novels. The main character of Andrew Carnegie, a steel magnate and one of the richest men in the nineteenth Century, is becoming a modernized antagonist within writings today.

#### 5. Conclusions

The world without writing holds itself to an evolution of writing systems into complete writing systems that allow people to write down whatever they can express in words, events, and observations [13]. According to Sachsman, "Communities operated not just through interpersonal networks; they also were mediated through memoirs and even fictional accounts former journalists wrote about the newspaper business." The writings of The Gilded were crucial to cultural progression to spread, branch out, and in some cultures, fade out. Fiction, Poetry, and newspaper writing provided the rise and fall of society as it relates to storytelling [4].

The world cannot exist without writing. Although the days of a feather pen and ink have been replaced by pen and paper typewriters to computers. The influence of the Gilded Age has been expressed through writings that are still present in

society today. Within Poetry, the later nineteenth century, and early years of the twentieth century were a poor period for American poetry writers to include themes of distress, doubts, and fears about American life. This helped to develop the writings of fiction during the Gilded Age to include stories that brought attention to current events and the success of books. The classic stories of the 1920s and 1930s are relevant to events of the Great Depression, corruption, and the American Dream are communicated in writings in the twenty-first century. Poems, dramas, and memoirs thought of during the Gilded Age continue to be challenged and coincide with American writings of great opulence and consumerism written today.

## Abbreviations

Gilded Age	A period of Economic Boom After the American Civil War at the Turn of the Century
Genre	A class or Category of Artistic Endeavor Having a Particular Form, Content, or Technique
Industrialization	The Period of Social and Economic Change That Transforms a Human Group

## Author Contributions

Cristina Guarneri is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Data Availability Statement

The data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## Biography



**Cristina Guarneri** is an adjunct professor at Seton Hall University, English Department. She completed her Ed.D. in Education from Seton Hall University in 2009, and her M.A. in Creative Writing and English in 2018. Dr. Guarneri received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing and English, with a Certification in Professional Writing in 2021 from Southern New Hampshire University in 2018. She has provided writing seminars and workshops throughout the Tri-State area. Recognized for her exceptional contributions to writing eighteenth-century British Literature, Dr. Guarneri has spoken on national radio, speaking in the top 30 radio market. Dr. Guarneri continues to work on various writing projects. She is the author of several books, including children's, fiction, and non-fiction works.

## Research Field

**Cristina Guarneri:** *The Gilded Age, Pandemic Writing, Power of Words, Socioeconomics in British Literature, Victorian Novel Realism, Journalism.*