

NEW CRITICISM INTRODUCTION

In a Nutshell

New Criticism is all about the text. No need to read hundreds of pages of history or dig up evidence of [Jane Austen's](#) love life. In fact, forget about when and where the author lived, and whether the author was rich or poor, man or woman.

What's that, you say? You have the author's very private personal journal? The New Critics don't care. It's the text that matters. They're not interested in reading every writer's innermost personal musings—that kind of navel gazing is best reserved for yo' momma—and they're not going to call the psychic hotline to figure out what some poet *meant* to say.

Their motto is: *If the poem is good, if the book is well written, it'll say everything.*

See, many of the New Critics took a hard line against studying anything "outside" the literary work. But these guys and gals weren't totally banishing history, biography, and politics. It's not like they don't think those things are important. It's just that they believe the text—and nothing but the text—should be the main focus of literary study.

Instead of reading *Hamlet* to get clues about [Shakespeare's](#) life (Did he think Queen Elizabeth was the best monarch ever? Was he secretly Catholic?), they wanted to just *read Hamlet*. Period.

But there's really no "just" involved in New Critics' readings. That's not giving them enough credit. They [close read](#) every word in order to gain insight into the work's form, literary devices, technique, and so on. They were all about studying the [poem](#) as a poem, the [play](#) as a play, and the [novel](#) as a novel.

Given that you're reading this page, we bet you're already a bit of a New Critic yourself. New Criticism was developed in the early 20th century, and really got rolling in the 1930s and '40s when more people started attending college. That's when close reading became a skill that everyone could practice and apply—regardless of background or politics.

Suddenly, people didn't need to wear a tweed coat and study history and the classics in order to read poetry and novels closely. Which was really kind of liberating. The New Critics were a great democratizing force that said: *you, too, can know everything there is to know about Shakespeare.*

Unlike many theories that seem to have been developed for the sole purpose of stumping newcomers, New Criticism is actually pretty welcoming. So get your magnifying glasses ready, Shmoopers. The New Critics want you to out how *this* text functions. And... go.

Why Should I Care?

Why Should Readers Care?

New Criticism tried to lay down some laws for reading and interpreting texts. They wanted to make the whole activity more systematic—scientific, even. And in the process, New Criticism made literary analysis more democratic, too; power to the (book-lovin') people, man.

To talk about [Keats's](#) poems, you don't need to get dusty comparing different manuscript versions. You don't even need to spend years reading the history of England. Or researching different styles of 19th-century vases hoping to stumble across *the* model for Keats's [Grecian urn](#).

Nope, you just need to get really up close and personal with the poems. New Criticism demands you ask yourself questions like: What ingredients make his poems good? Is it the paradoxes? The tension between different ideas? The sound of the meter and rhyme? That whole "[unravish'd bride of quietness](#)" bit?

The New Critics made it easier to talk clearly about literature and about how it works its intellectual and emotional magic on us. That's because all it demanded of readers was to, well, *read*. To pay attention to what was on the page (and what was markedly missing from it).

Without New Criticism's notion of *close reading*, book clubs would be more like fan clubs: "I love [Lizzy Bennet](#)." "[Jane Austen](#) is just *to die for*." Not a whole lot of substance there, eh?

But that handy dandy New Criticism toolbox allows us to discuss why *Pride and Prejudice* reads so well, in a pithy and understandable fashion. You know, who doesn't love the irony, the misunderstandings, and the marriage plots? Ladies, grab your knitting gear, let's talk some lit.

Why Should Theorists Care?

Before the New Critics arrived on the scene, English literature studies were all about history. All the great thinkers believed that in order to truly dig into a book's themes, you had to know the history of the language the work was written in, how it got written, what the author's life was like. And so on and so forth.

In fact, folks back then even maintained a strict division between being a critic and being a scholar. Critics were supposedly amateurs who just read literature for fun. Scholars were supposed to be the real *professionals*—the professors who knew every nit-picky detail, like how [Shakespeare](#) signed his name, and what sort of paperweights [Dickens](#) kept on his desk.

These two different camps—the amateur critics and the professional scholars—asked very different questions. If you were a critic, you tried to answer questions about quality: which poems were good or bad? Which novels were just so-so, and which were sparkling and brilliant? On the other hand, if you were a scholar, you kept your nose to the grindstone. You studied facts and spewed literary history.

Imagine we gave an apple to one old-school critic and one old-school scholar. The scholar would tell you all about the history of apple trees and maybe even about how this particular apple traveled from an orchard in Washington to our little neighborhood market. But the critic would bite into it, and tell you whether it was a perfectly tart and crisp apple or kind of sad and mealy.

Yum. So what did New Criticism do? Combined the two, of course. If we gave a New Critic an apple, she would closely examine it, then eat it slowly, and then explain *why* it was good or bad.

New Critics wanted to create a whole system for appreciating and criticizing literature. These critics didn't simply gush praise for a poem; they tried to explain *why* it was an extraordinary example of the poetic form. They asked questions like: What's going on with language in the poem? Where do the line breaks fall? How do all of these formal elements contribute to the poem's major themes?

If it weren't for New Criticism, we might still be studying literature by tracking down every allusion to astronomy in John Donne. Or imagine some future scholar starts reading Harry Potter in order to deduce what we thought about magic and science in the 21st century. Yikes.

As interesting as those studies might be, they're not really about the text: they're about 17th-century astronomy and 21st-century make-believe. They take us further and further away from the text itself—which, when you think about it, is where all of the text's meaning actually lives.

NEW CRITICISM BUZZWORDS

Big Concepts from Big Minds

Close Reading

The close reading is the New Critics' calling card; if the New Critics were a merry band of superheroes, their Bat Signal might be a magnifying glass zeroing in on the lines of a poem. Basically, all you need to do in order to complete a close reading is, um, read a text closely. Duh.

Right, so, when you're reading, you just pay attention to every little element of the text's form (its metaphors, its juxtapositions, ...) and then you hash out the relations between that form and the text's meaning. Close readings can be exhausting, and they can also be as fun as a barrel of monkeys. But of this, we're sure: English classrooms today would just be a bunch of nonsense without the close reading.

Thanks, New Critics—you really did us a solid with this one.

Form

You like following rules, don't you? No? Um. Well, *form*, in poetry, is all about following the rules. Like, sonnets traditionally have 14 lines, and those lines are written in iambic pentameter.

Of course, novels can have "forms" too—anything that uses literary devices to draw out its central themes has a form. But the New Critics were all about the poetry, so that's what we're focusing on here.

Oh, and don't forget: some rules were made to be broken. Strict poetic forms exist partly because things get *really interesting* when poets start going "off form."

Technique

We're pretty sure we just said this, but poetic techniques are all of those fancy shmancy devices that poets (or other writers) use in order to give their texts complexity and nuance. Need an example? Alrighty: a [rhyme scheme](#) is one kind of poetic technique.

You know, AABA BBAA and all that jazz. Good, glad we're on the same page now.

Ontology

This is a big word for the study of what life is really about: human nature, the meaning of existence, etc. The New Critics were fond of this word because they believed poems were a kind of ontology—a particular way of studying of human life. And the poem's form—its way of expressing what us people are all about—is what they believed made the poem different from boring old prose.

Text

C'mon, you know what a text is. Any piece of writing, from a poem to a grocery list, can be a text. But some scholars are fond of using this word to refer bits o' literature because they believe the other prominent option— "work"—puts too much emphasis on a text's author. Since, you know, he or she *worked* to create the text. And the text is his/her life's *work*.

Given that those gnarly New Critics 100% hated autobiographical analyses of literature, it's easy to see why they preferred the word *text*. But you can use whichever word you please. We're just happy that you're reading, whether you're reading texts or works or whatchamacallits.

Irony

There are a lot of different kinds of irony, but the main idea is this: there's a fascinating, and sometimes humorous, contradiction between what someone says and what they mean. Or what someone expects to happen, and what actually happens—like, when a girl gets left at the altar, only to meet the *true* love of her life in her would-be-groom's best man.

In plays and movies and other things you can get your eyeballs on, we can find yet another kind of irony: the irony that arises when the audience knows something that the characters do not. And often, hilarity ensues.

Just take our word for it: whatever you do, do not listen to Alanis Morissette's song "[Irony](#)" in order to get a better idea of what irony is. Man, we love the gal, but she wasn't so up on her definition of the term. Or, the examples she supposedly gives of irony in her lyrics are intended to be ironic in that they're not actually examples of irony...

Whoa, deep. Help us, we're digging ourselves into a deep, dark hole of close reading over here, New Criticism-style.

Ambiguity

As our man William Empson would argue, ambiguity is what makes poems *poems*. Unlike other kinds of writing, which can be straightforward, poems (and maybe novels?) are specifically designed to be left open to interpretation. How much fun would it be to read [Shakespeare](#) if you and your classmates couldn't argue over the "true meanings" of some of [Hamlet's](#) best lines?

We thought so.

[Paradox](#)

A paradox is a kind of contradiction—the kind that still manages to ring true to you when you hear it. See, often, the elements of a paradox are only superficially contradictory; poets often use paradoxes in order to point to the fact that two seemingly opposite things are actually quite interrelated.

Like, remember how in ["Composed upon Westminster Bridge," William Wordsworth](#) talks about the city of London as "naturally beautiful"? And the city's buildings bleed into the sky and the sky bleeds into the buildings, and all of that? Delicious. And deliciously paradox-y.

Now, the New Critics loved them some close readings. And paradoxes were one of their favorite poetic techniques. Give a New Critic a [metaphor](#), and he will be busy (analyzing it) for an hour; give him a paradox, and he will be busy for *days*.

[Intentional Fallacy](#)

This is the idea that William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, that dynamic duo of the New Criticism movement, are most famous for. What's the "intentional fallacy" all about?

It's exactly what it sounds like. The notion is this: studying a text through the lens of what an author *intended to say* is a *fallacy*. In other words, trying to apply every little autobiographical tidbit you've ever learned about an author to your understanding of a text will get you nowhere, say the New Critics.

Why? Because the world of the poem is, inevitably, different from what was going on in the author's head when she wrote it. So why not just study the text, the whole text, and nothing but the text?

The Big Names in New Criticism

New Criticism's heavy hitters primarily batted for two teams: Team U.S.A. and Team U.K. On the U.S. side, we have [John Crowe Ransom](#), who was a professor at Vanderbilt University, and who gave New Criticism its name with [the title of one of his books](#). His students ended up being some of the most important new voices on the block (and since this was back in the 1930s, we're afraid these guys' names really do read like [a boy band](#)): Randall Jarrell, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks.

Warren and Brooks wrote the book that actually became *the* textbook for college students studying poetry. Their [Understanding Poetry](#) (1938) taught the techniques that students would need if they were going to study the poem, the whole poem, and nothing but the poem.

As it turns out, if you want to get a theory off the ground, it's a good idea to get your book in the backpacks of English majors everywhere. (Take note, Shmoopers.)

Other key players in the U.S. are Yvor Winters—who used New Criticism to give moral readings of literature—Kenneth Burke, R.P. Blackmur, William K. Wimsatt, and Monroe Beardsley. Wimsatt and Beardsley became famous for their intense hatred of critics who talked about authors' personal lives; for a dose of this medicine, check out their essay, "[The Intentional Fallacy](#)."

Over on the other side of the pond, I.A. Richards was leading the charge in his own classroom. He was interested in how people interpret literature. So he got scientific about the problem: he handed out thirteen poems, without so much as telling his students the names of the authors. And then he asked students to analyze them—What do the poems mean? How do you *know*?

Not surprisingly, this little experiment showed how very difficult it was to analyze a poem without any context, even if you were at the top of your class at [Cambridge](#). One of Richards's students, William Empson, went on to offer an answer to this difficulty: his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is a tour de force of ways to read closely, without any history books on your desk.

All of these critics actually had a lot in common—and not just how quickly they'd roll their eyes if you argued that Shakespeare left clues in *The Tempest* to explain why [he left his second best bed to his wife](#). The New Critics all wanted to spend days picking apart a text word by word. And they all had poetry in common: they analyzed it, and wrote quite a bit of it too.

It's probably not a coincidence that so many of the New Critics were hard-writin' poets themselves, not just poetry scholars. Part of why they could so closely analyze the devices in a poem was because they were thinking like writers. [John Crowe Ransom](#), [Randall Jarrell](#), [Allen Tate](#), [I. A. Richards](#), [William Empson](#), and [Yvor Winters](#) all published poetry. [How do you like them apples?](#)

Gilded Age

The **Gilded Age** in [United States history](#) is the late 19th century, from the 1870s to about 1900. The term for this period came into use in the 1920s and 1930s and was derived from writer [Mark Twain](#)'s 1873 novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, which satirized an era of serious social problems masked by a thin gold gilding. The early half of the Gilded Age roughly coincided with the middle portion of the [Victorian era](#) in Britain and the [Belle Époque](#) in France. Its beginning in the years after the [American Civil War](#) overlaps the [Reconstruction Era](#) (which ended in 1877),^[1] It was followed in the 1890s by the [Progressive Era](#).

The Gilded Age was an era of rapid economic growth, especially in the North and West. As American wages were much higher than those in Europe, especially for skilled workers, the period saw an influx of millions of European immigrants. The rapid expansion of [industrialization](#) led to real wage growth of 60% between 1860 and 1890, spread across the ever-increasing labor force. The average annual wage per industrial worker (including men, women, and children) rose from \$380 in 1880 to \$564 in 1890, a gain of 48%. However, the Gilded Age was also an era of abject poverty and inequality as millions of immigrants—many from impoverished regions—poured into the United States, and the high [concentration of wealth](#) became more visible and contentious.^[2]

[Railroads](#) were the major growth industry, with the factory system, mining, and finance increasing in importance. Immigration from Europe and the eastern states led to the rapid growth of the West, based on farming, ranching, and mining. Labor unions became important in the very rapidly growing industrial cities. Two major nationwide depressions—the [Panic of 1873](#) and the [Panic of 1893](#)—interrupted growth and caused social and political upheavals. The South after the Civil War remained economically devastated; its economy became increasingly tied to cotton and tobacco production, which suffered from low prices. With the end of the [Reconstruction era](#) in 1877, [African-American](#) people in the South were stripped of political power and voting rights and were left economically disadvantaged.

The political landscape was notable in that despite some corruption, turnout was very high and national elections saw two evenly matched parties. The dominant issues were cultural (especially regarding [prohibition](#), education, and ethnic or racial groups), and economic (tariffs and money supply). With the rapid growth of cities, political machines increasingly took control of urban politics. In business, powerful nationwide [trusts](#) formed in some industries. Unions crusaded for the [8-hour working day](#) and the abolition of [child labor](#); middle class reformers demanded civil service reform, prohibition of liquor and beer, and [women's suffrage](#). Local governments across the North and West built public schools chiefly at the elementary level; public high schools started to emerge. The numerous religious denominations were growing in membership and wealth, with Catholicism becoming the largest denomination. They all expanded their missionary activity to the world arena. Catholics, Lutherans and Episcopalians set up religious schools and the larger denominations set up numerous colleges, hospitals, and charities. Many of the problems faced by society, especially the poor, during the Gilded Age gave rise to attempted reforms in the subsequent [Progressive Era](#).^[3]

The name and the era^[edit]

The term "Gilded Age" for the period of economic boom after the [American Civil War](#) up to the turn of the century was applied to the era by historians in the 1920s, who took the term from one of [Mark Twain](#)'s lesser known novels, *[The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today](#)* (1873). The book (co-written with [Charles Dudley Warner](#)) satirized the promised 'golden age' after the Civil War, portrayed as an era of serious social problems masked by a thin [gold gilding](#) of economic expansion.^[4] In the 1920s and 30s "Gilded Age" became a designated [period](#) in American history. The term was adopted by literary and cultural critics as well as historians, including [Van Wyck Brooks](#), [Lewis Mumford](#), [Charles Austin Beard](#), [Mary Ritter Beard](#), [Vernon Louis Parrington](#) and [Matthew Josephson](#). For them, "Gilded Age" was a pejorative term used to describe a time of materialistic excesses combined with extreme poverty.^{[5][6]}

The early half of the Gilded Age roughly coincided with the middle portion of the [Victorian era](#) in Britain and the [Belle Époque](#) in France. With respect to eras of American history, historical views vary as to when the Gilded Age began, ranging from starting right after the [American Civil War](#) (ended, 1865), or 1873, or as the [Reconstruction Era](#) ended in 1877.^[4] The point noted as the end of the Gilded Age also varies. It is generally given as the beginning of the [Progressive Era](#) in the 1890s (sometimes the [United States presidential election of 1896](#))^{[7][8][9][10][11][12]} but also falls in a range that includes the [Spanish–American War](#) in 1898, [Theodore Roosevelt](#)'s accession to the presidency in 1901, and even the U.S. entry into [World War I](#) (1917).^[1]

Industrial and technological advances^[edit]

Technical advances^[edit]

The Gilded Age was a period of economic growth as the United States jumped to the lead in [industrialization](#) ahead of Britain. The nation was rapidly expanding its economy into new areas, especially [heavy industry](#) like factories, [railroads](#), and [coal mining](#). In 1869, the [First Transcontinental Railroad](#) opened up the far-west mining and ranching regions. Travel from New York to San Francisco now took six days instead of six months.^[13] Railroad track mileage tripled

between 1860 and 1880, and then doubled again by 1920. The new track linked formerly isolated areas with larger markets and allowed for the rise of commercial farming, ranching, and mining, creating a truly national marketplace. American steel production rose to surpass the combined totals of Britain, Germany, and France.^[14]

Investors in London and Paris poured money into the railroads through the American financial market centered in [Wall Street](#). By 1900, the process of economic concentration had extended into most branches of industry—a few large corporations, called "[trusts](#)", dominated in steel, oil, sugar, meat, and farm machinery. Through [vertical integration](#) these trusts were able to control each aspect of the production of a specific good, ensuring that the profits made on the finished product were maximized and prices minimized, and by controlling access to the raw materials, prevented other companies from being able to compete in the marketplace.^[15] Several monopolies --most famously [Standard Oil](#)--came to dominate their markets by keeping prices low when competitors appeared; they grew at a rate four times faster than that of the competitive sectors.^[16]

Increased mechanization of industry is a major mark of the Gilded Age's search for cheaper ways to create more product. [Frederick Winslow Taylor](#) observed that worker efficiency in steel could be improved through the use of very close observations with a stop watch to eliminate wasted effort. Mechanization made some factories an assemblage of unskilled laborers performing simple and repetitive tasks under the direction of skilled foremen and engineers. [Machine shops](#) grew rapidly, and they comprised highly skilled workers and engineers. Both the number of unskilled and skilled workers increased, as their wage rates grew.^[17]

[Engineering colleges](#) were established to feed the enormous demand for expertise. Railroads invented modern management, with clear chains of command, statistical reporting, and complex bureaucratic systems.^[18] They systematized the roles of [middle managers](#) and set up explicit career tracks. They hired young men ages 18–21 and promoted them internally until a man reached the status of locomotive engineer, conductor, or station agent at age 40 or so. Career tracks were invented for skilled blue-collar jobs and for white-collar managers, starting in railroads and expanding into finance, manufacturing, and trade. Together with rapid growth of small business, a new middle class was rapidly growing, especially in northern cities.^[19]

The United States became a world leader in applied technology. From 1860 to 1890, 500,000 patents were issued for new inventions—over ten times the number issued in the previous seventy years. [George Westinghouse](#) invented [air brakes](#) for trains (making them both safer and faster). [Theodore Vail](#) established the [American Telephone & Telegraph Company](#) and built a great communications network.^[20] [Thomas Edison](#), in addition to inventing hundreds of devices, established the first electrical lighting utility, basing it on [direct current](#) and an efficient [incandescent lamp](#). Electric power delivery spread rapidly across Gilded Age cities. The streets were lighted at night, and electric streetcars allowed for faster commuting to work and easier shopping.^[21]

Petroleum launched a new industry beginning with the Pennsylvania oil fields in the 1860s. The United States dominated the global industry into the 1950s. [Kerosene](#) replaced [whale oil](#) and candles for lighting homes. [John D. Rockefeller](#) founded Standard Oil Company and monopolized the oil industry, which mostly produced kerosene before the automobile created a demand for gasoline in the 20th century.^[22]

Railroads[\[edit\]](#)

According to historian [Henry Adams](#) the system of railroads needed:

the energies of a generation, for it required all the new machinery to be created--capital, banks, mines, furnaces, shops, power-houses, technical knowledge, mechanical population, together with a steady remodelling of social and political habits, ideas, and institutions to fit the new scale and suit the new conditions. The generation between 1865 and 1895 was already mortgaged to the railways, and no one knew it better than the generation itself.^[23]

The impact can be examined through five aspects: shipping, finance, management, careers, and popular reaction.

Shipping freight and passengers[\[edit\]](#)

First they provided a highly efficient network for shipping freight and passengers across a large national market. The result was a transforming impact on most sectors of the economy including manufacturing, retail and wholesale, agriculture, and finance. The United States now had an integrated national market practically the size of Europe, with no internal barriers or tariffs, all supported by a common language, and financial system and a common legal system.^[24]

Basis of the private financial system[\[edit\]](#)

Railroads financing provided the basis for a dramatic expansion of the private (non-governmental) financial system. Construction of railroads was far more expensive than factories. In 1860, the combined total of railroad stocks and bonds was \$1.8 billion; 1897 it reached \$10.6 billion (compared to a total national debt of \$1.2 billion).^[25] Funding came from financiers throughout the Northeast, and from Europe, especially Britain.^[26] About 10 percent of the funding came from the government, especially in the form of land grants that could be realized when a certain amount of trackage was opened.^[27] The emerging American financial system was based on railroad bonds. New York by 1860 was the dominant financial market. The British invested heavily in railroads around the world, but nowhere more so than the United States; The total came to about \$3 billion by 1914. In 1914–1917, they liquidated their American assets to pay for war supplies.^{[28][29]}

Inventing modern management[\[edit\]](#)

Railroad management designed complex systems that could handle far more complicated simultaneous relationships than could be dreamed of by the local factory owner who could patrol every part of his own factory in a matter of hours. Civil engineers became the senior management of railroads. The leading innovators were the Western Railroad of Massachusetts and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in the 1840s, the Erie in the 1850s and the Pennsylvania in the 1860s.^[30]

Career paths[\[edit\]](#)

The railroads invented the career path in the private sector for both blue-collar workers and white-collar workers. Railroading became a lifetime career for young men; women were almost never hired. A typical career path would see a young man hired at age 18 as a shop laborer, be promoted to skilled mechanic at age 24, brakemen at 25, freight conductor at 27, and passenger conductor at age 57. White-collar careers paths likewise were delineated. Educated young men started in clerical or statistical work and moved up to station agents or bureaucrats at the divisional or central headquarters.^[31]

At each level they had more and more knowledge experience and [human capital](#). They were very hard to replace, and were virtually guaranteed permanent jobs and provided with insurance and medical care. Hiring, firing, and wage rates were set not by foreman, but by central administrators, in order to minimize favoritism and personality conflicts. Everything was done by the book, whereby an increasingly complex set of rules dictated to everyone exactly what should be done in every circumstance, and exactly what their rank and pay would be. By the 1880s the career railroaders were retiring, and pension systems were invented for them.^[31]

Love-hate relationship with the railroads[\[edit\]](#)

America developed a love-hate relationship with railroads. [Boosters](#) in every city worked feverishly to make sure the railroad came through, knowing their urban dreams depended upon it. The mechanical size, scope, and efficiency of the railroads made a profound impression; people dressed in their Sunday best to go down to the terminal to watch the train come in. Travel became much easier, cheaper, and more common. Shoppers from small towns could make day trips to big city stores. Hotels, resorts, and tourist attractions were built to accommodate the demand. The

realization that anyone could buy a ticket for a thousand-mile trip was empowering. Historians Gary Cross and Rick Szostak argue:

with the freedom to travel came a greater sense of national identity and a reduction in regional cultural diversity. Farm children could more easily acquaint themselves with the big city, and easterners could readily visit the West. It is hard to imagine a United States of continental proportions without the railroad.^[32]

The engineers became model citizens, bringing their can-do spirit and their systematic work effort to all phases of the economy as well as local and national government.^[33] By 1910, major cities were building magnificent palatial railroad stations, such as the [Pennsylvania Station in New York City](#), and the [Union Station in Washington DC](#).^[34]

But there was also a dark side.^[35] By the 1870s, railroads were vilified by Western farmers who absorbed the Granger movement theme that monopolistic carriers controlled too much pricing power, and that the state legislatures had to impose maximum prices. Local merchants and shippers supported the demand and got some "[Granger Laws](#)" passed.^[36] Anti-railroad complaints were loudly repeated in late 19th century political rhetoric.^[37]

The most hated railroad man in the country was [Collis P. Huntington](#) (1821–1900), the president of the [Southern Pacific Railroad](#) who dominated California's economy and politics. One textbook argues: "Huntington came to symbolize the greed and corruption of late-nineteenth-century business. Business rivals and political reformers accused him of every conceivable evil. Journalists and cartoonists made their reputations by pillorying him.... Historians have cast Huntington as the state's most despicable villain."^[38] However Huntington defended himself: "The motives back of my actions have been honest ones and the results have redounded far more to the benefit of California than they have to my own."^[39]

Impact on farming[\[edit\]](#)

Further information: [Meat packing industry](#)

The growth of railroads from 1850s to 1880s made commercial farming much more feasible and profitable. Millions of acres were opened to settlement once the railroad was nearby, and provided a long-distance outlet for wheat, cattle and hogs that reached all the way to Europe.^[40] Rural America became one giant market, as wholesalers bought the consumer products produced by the factories in the East, and shipped them to local merchants in small stores nationwide. Shipping live animals was slow and expensive. It was more efficient to slaughter them in major packing centers such as Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Cincinnati, and then ship dressed meat out in refrigerated freight cars. The cars were cooled by slabs of ice that had been harvested from the northern lakes in wintertime, and stored for summer and fall usage. Chicago, the main railroad center, benefited enormously, with Kansas City a distant second. Historian [William Cronon](#) concludes:

Because of the Chicago packers, ranchers in Wyoming and feedlot farmers in Iowa regularly found a reliable market for their animals, and on average received better prices for the animals they sold there. At the same time and for the same reason, Americans of all classes found a greater variety of more and better meats on their tables, purchased on average at lower prices than ever before. Seen in this light, the packers' "rigid system of economy" seemed a very good thing indeed.^[41]

Economic growth[\[edit\]](#)

During the 1870s and 1880s, the U.S. economy rose at the fastest rate in its history, with real wages, wealth, GDP, and [capital formation](#) all increasing rapidly.^[42] For example, between 1865 and 1898, the output of wheat increased by 256%, corn by 222%, coal by 800% and miles of railway track by 567%.^[43] Thick national networks for transportation and communication were created. The [corporation](#) became the dominant form of business organization, and a [scientific management](#) revolution transformed business operations.^{[44][45]}

By the beginning of the 20th century, gross domestic product and industrial production in the United States led the world. Kennedy reports that "U.S. national income, in absolute figures in per capita, was so far above everybody else's by 1914." Per capita income in the United States was \$377 in 1914 compared to Britain in second place at \$244, Germany at \$184, France at \$153, and Italy at \$108, while Russia and Japan trailed far behind at \$41 and \$36.^{[44][45]}

Europe, especially Britain, remained the financial center of the world until 1914, yet the United States' growth caused foreigners to ask, as British author [W. T. Stead](#) wrote in 1901, "What is the secret of American success?"^[46] The businessmen of the [Second Industrial Revolution](#) created industrial towns and cities in the [Northeast](#) with new factories, and hired an ethnically diverse industrial working class, many of them new immigrants from Europe.

Wealthy industrialists and financiers such as [John D. Rockefeller](#), [Jay Gould](#), [Henry Clay Frick](#), [Andrew W. Mellon](#), [Andrew Carnegie](#), [Henry Flagler](#), [Henry H. Rogers](#), [J. P. Morgan](#), [Leland Stanford](#), [Meyer Guggenheim](#), [Jacob Schiff](#), [Charles Crocker](#), [Cornelius Vanderbilt](#) would sometimes be labeled "[robber barons](#)" by their critics, who argue their fortunes were made at the expense of the [working class](#), by chicanery and a betrayal of democracy.^{[47][48]} Their admirers argued that they were "Captains of industry" who built the core America industrial economy and also the non-profit sector through acts of [philanthropy](#).^[49] For instance, Andrew Carnegie donated over 90% of his wealth and said that philanthropy was their duty—the "[Gospel of Wealth](#)". Private money endowed thousands of colleges, hospitals, museums, academies, schools, opera houses, public libraries, and charities.^[50] [John D. Rockefeller](#) donated over \$500 million to various charities, slightly over half his entire net worth. Nevertheless, many business leaders were influenced by [Herbert Spencer's](#) theory of [Social Darwinism](#), which justified [laissez-faire](#) capitalism, ruthless competition and [social stratification](#).^{[51][52]}

This emerging industrial economy quickly expanded to meet the new market demands. From 1869 to 1879, the U.S. economy grew at a rate of 6.8% for NNP (GDP minus capital depreciation) and 4.5% for NNP per capita. The economy repeated this period of growth in the 1880s, in which the wealth of the nation grew at an annual rate of 3.8%, while the GDP was also doubled.^[53] Economist Milton Friedman states that for the 1880s, "The highest decadal rate [of growth of real reproducible, tangible wealth per head from 1805 to 1950] for periods of about ten years was apparently reached in the eighties with approximately 3.8 percent."^[54]

Wages^[edit]

The rapid expansion of [industrialization](#) led to real wage growth of 60% between 1860 and 1890, spread across the ever-increasing labor force.^[55] Real wages (adjusting for inflation) rose steadily, with the exact percentage increase depending on the dates and the specific work force. The Census Bureau reported in 1892 that the average annual wage per industrial worker (including men, women, and children) rose from \$380 in 1880 to \$564 in 1890, a gain of 48%.^[56] Economic historian Clarence D. Long estimates that (in terms of constant 1914 dollars), the average annual incomes of all American non-farm employees rose from \$375 in 1870 to \$395 in 1880, \$519 in 1890 and \$573 in 1900, a gain of 53% in 30 years.^[57]

Australian historian [Peter Shergold](#) found that the standard of living for industrial workers was higher than in Europe. He compared wages and the standard of living in Pittsburgh with Birmingham, England, one of the richest industrial cities of Europe. After taking account of the cost of living (which was 65% higher in the U.S.), he found the standard of living of unskilled workers was about the same in the two cities, while skilled workers in Pittsburgh had about 50% to 100% higher standard of living as those in Birmingham, England. According to Shergold the American advantage grew over time from 1890 to 1914, and the perceived higher American wage led to a heavy steady flow of skilled workers from Britain to industrial America.^[58] According to historian Steve Fraser, workers generally earned less than \$800 a year, which kept them mired in [poverty](#). Workers had to put in roughly 60 hours a week to earn this much.^[59]

[Wage labor](#) was widely condemned as '[wage slavery](#)' in the [working class](#) press, and labor leaders almost always used the phrase in their speeches.^[60] As the shift towards wage labor gained momentum, working class organizations became more militant in their efforts to "strike down the whole system of wages for labor."^[60] In 1886, economist and New York Mayoral candidate [Henry George](#), author of [Progress and Poverty](#), stated "Chattel slavery is dead, but industrial slavery remains."^[60]

Inequality of income[\[edit\]](#)

The unequal distribution of wealth remained high during this period. From 1860 to 1900, the wealthiest 2% of American households owned more than a third of the nation's wealth, while the top 10% owned roughly three fourths of it.^[61] The bottom 40% had no wealth at all.^[61] In terms of property, the wealthiest 1% owned 51%, while the bottom 44% claimed 1.1%.^[61] Historian [Howard Zinn](#) argues that this disparity along with precarious working and living conditions for the working classes prompted the rise of [populist](#), [anarchist](#), and [socialist](#) movements.^{[62][63]} French economist [Thomas Piketty](#) notes that economists during this time, such as [Willford I. King](#), were concerned that the United States was becoming increasingly in-egalitarian to the point of becoming like old Europe, and "further and further away from its original pioneering ideal."^[64]

There was a significant human cost attached to this period of economic growth,^[65] as American industry had the highest rate of accidents in the world.^[66] In 1889, railroads employed 704,000 men, of whom 20,000 were injured and 1,972 were killed on the job.^[67] The U.S. was also the only industrial power to have no workman's compensation program in place to support injured workers.^[66]

Rise of labor unions[\[edit\]](#)

[Craft-oriented](#) labor unions, such as carpenters, printers, shoemakers and cigar makers, grew steadily in the industrial cities after 1870. These unions used frequent short strikes as a method to attain control over the labor market, and fight off competing unions.^[68] They generally blocked women, blacks and Chinese from union membership, but welcomed most European immigrants.^[69]

The railroads had their own separate unions.^[70] An especially large episode of unrest (estimated at eighty thousand railroad workers and several hundred thousand other Americans, both employed and unemployed) broke out during the [economic depression of the 1870s](#) and became known as the [Great Railroad Strike of 1877](#), which was, according to historian [Jack Beatty](#), "the largest strike anywhere in the world in the 19th century."^[71] This strike did not involve labor unions, but rather uncoordinated outbursts in numerous cities. The strike and associated riots lasted 45 days and resulted in the deaths of several hundred participants (no police or soldiers were killed), several hundred more injuries, and millions in damages to railroad property.^{[72][73]} The unrest was deemed severe enough by the government that President [Rutherford B. Hayes](#) intervened with federal troops.

Starting in the mid-1880s a new group, the [Knights of Labor](#), grew rapidly. Too rapidly, for it spun out of control and failed to handle the [Great Southwest Railroad Strike of 1886](#). The Knights avoided violence, but their reputation collapsed in the wake of the [Haymarket Square Riot in Chicago in 1886](#), when anarchists allegedly bombed the policemen dispersing a meeting.^[74] Police then randomly fired into the crowd, killing and wounding a number of people, including other police, and arbitrarily rounded up anarchists, including leaders of the movement. Seven anarchists went on trial; four were hanged even though no evidence directly linked them to the bombing.^[75] One had in his possession a Knights of Labor membership card.^[75] At its peak, the Knights claimed 700,000 members. By 1890, membership had plummeted to fewer than 100,000, then faded away.^[76]

Strikes organized by labor unions became routine events by the 1880s as the gap between the rich and the poor widened.^[77] There were 37,000 strikes between 1881 and 1905. By far the largest number were in the building trades, followed far behind by coal miners. The main goal was control of working conditions and settling which rival union was in control. Most were of very short duration. In times of depression strikes were more violent but less successful, because the company was losing

money anyway. They were successful in times of prosperity when the company was losing profits and wanted to settle quickly.^[78]

The largest and most dramatic strike was the 1894 [Pullman Strike](#), a coordinated effort to shut down the national railroad system. The strike was led by the upstart [American Railway Union](#) led by [Eugene V. Debs](#) and was not supported by the established brotherhoods. The union defied federal court orders to stop blocking the mail trains, so President Cleveland used the U.S. Army to get the trains moving again. The ARU vanished and the traditional railroad brotherhoods survived, but avoided strikes.^[79]

The new [American Federation of Labor](#), headed by [Samuel Gompers](#), found the solution. The AFL was a coalition of unions, each based on strong local chapters; the AFL coordinated their work in cities and prevented jurisdictional battles. Gompers repudiated socialism and abandoned the violent nature of the earlier unions. The AFL worked to control the local labor market, thereby empowering its locals to obtain higher wages and more control over hiring. As a result, the AFL unions spread to most cities, reaching a peak membership in 1919.^[80]

Severe economic recessions—called "panics"—struck the nation in the [Panic of 1873](#) and the [Panic of 1893](#). They lasted several years, with high urban unemployment, low incomes for farmers, low profits for business, slow overall growth, and reduced immigration. They generated political unrest.^[81]

Politics^[edit]

Main article: [Third Party System](#)

Gilded Age politics, called the [Third Party System](#), featured intense competition between two major parties, with minor parties coming and going, especially on issues of concern to prohibitionists, to labor unions and to farmers. The [Democrats](#) and [Republicans](#) (nicknamed the "Grand Old Party," GOP) fought over control of offices, which were the rewards for party activists, as well as over major economic issues. Very high voter turnout often exceeded 80% or even 90% in some states as the parties drilled their loyal members much as an army drills its soldiers.

Competition was intense and elections were very close. In the southern states, lingering resentment over the Civil War remained and meant that much of the South would vote Democrat. After the end of Reconstruction in 1877, competition in the South took place mainly inside the Democratic Party. Nationwide, turnout fell sharply after 1900.^[82]

Metropolitan area politics^[edit]

The major metropolitan centers underwent rapid population growth and as a result had many lucrative contracts and jobs to award. To take advantage of the new economic opportunity, both parties built so-called "political machines" to manage elections, to reward supporters and to pay off potential opponents. Financed by the "[spoils system](#)", the winning party distributed most local, state and national government jobs, and many government contracts, to its loyal supporters.^[83]

Large cities became dominated by [political machines](#) in which constituents supported a candidate in exchange for anticipated [patronage](#). These votes would be repaid with favors back from the government once the appropriate candidate was elected; and very often candidates were selected based on their willingness to play along with the spoils system. Perhaps the largest example of a political machine from this time period is [Tammany Hall](#) in New York City, led by [Boss Tweed](#).^[83]

Political corruption was rampant, as business leaders spent significant amounts of money ensuring that government did not regulate the activities of [big business](#) - and they more often than not got what they wanted. Such corruption was so commonplace that in 1868 the New York state legislature legalized such bribery.^[84] Historian Howard Zinn argues that the U.S. government was acting exactly as [Karl Marx](#) described capitalist states: "pretending neutrality to maintain order, but serving the interests of the rich".^[85]

National politics^[edit]

Further information: [History of conservatism in the United States § The Gilded Age](#)

Major scandal reached into Congress with the [Crédit Mobilier of America scandal](#) of 1872, and [disgraced the White House](#) during the [Grant](#) Administration (1869–1877). This corruption divided the Republican party into two different factions: the [Stalwarts](#) led by [Roscoe Conkling](#) and the [Half-Breeds](#) led by [James G. Blaine](#). There was a sense that government-enabled political machines intervened in the economy and that the resulting favoritism, bribery, inefficiency, waste, and corruption were having negative consequences. Accordingly, there were widespread calls for reform, such as [Civil Service Reform](#) led by the [Bourbon Democrats](#) and Republican [Mugwumps](#).^[86] In 1884, their support elected Democrat [Grover Cleveland](#) to the White House, and in doing so gave the Democrats their first national victory since 1856.^[87]

The Bourbon Democrats supported a [free-market](#) policy, with low tariffs, low taxes, less spending and, in general, a [laissez-faire](#) (hands-off) government. They argued that tariffs made most goods more expensive for the consumer and subsidized "the trusts" (monopolies). They also denounced [imperialism](#) and overseas expansion.^[88] By contrast, Republicans insisted that national prosperity depended on industry that paid high wages, and warned that lowering the tariff would bring disaster because goods from low-wage European factories would flood American markets.^[89]

Presidential elections between the two major parties were so closely contested that a slight nudge could tip the election in the advantage of either party, and Congress was marked by political stalemate. With support from [Union veterans](#), [businessmen](#), professionals, craftsmen, and larger farmers, the Republicans consistently carried the North in presidential elections.^[90] The Democrats, often led by [Irish Catholics](#), had a base among Catholics, poorer farmers, and traditional party-members.

Some sources consider that America in the Gilded Age was led by a string of relatively weak presidents collectively referred to as the "forgettable presidents" ([Johnson](#), [Grant](#), [Hayes](#), [Garfield](#), [Arthur](#) and [Harrison](#), with the possible exception of [Cleveland](#))^[91] who served in the White House during this period.^[92] "What little political vitality existed in Gilded Age America was to be found in local settings or in Congress, which overshadowed the White House for most of this period."^{[92][93]}

Overall, Republican and Democratic political platforms remained remarkably constant during the years before 1900. Republicans generally favored inflationary, protectionist policies, while Democrats favored [hard-money](#), [free trade](#), and other *laissez-faire* policies.

Ethnocultural politics: pietistic Republicans versus liturgical Democrats^[edit]

From 1860 to the early 20th century, the Republicans took advantage of the association of the Democrats with "[Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion](#)". "Rum" stood for the liquor interests and the tavernkeepers, in contrast to the GOP, which had a strong [dry element](#). "Romanism" meant Roman Catholics, especially [Irish Americans](#), who ran the Democratic Party in most cities, and whom the reformers denounced for political corruption and their separate [parochial-school](#) system. "Rebellion" harked back to the Democrats of the Confederacy, who had tried to break the Union in 1861, as well as to their northern allies, called "[Copperheads](#)."^[95]

Demographic trends boosted the Democratic totals, as the German and Irish Catholic immigrants became Democrats and outnumbered the English and Scandinavian Republicans. The new immigrants who arrived after 1890 seldom voted at this time. During the 1880s and 1890s, the Republicans struggled against the Democrats' efforts, winning several close elections and losing two to Grover Cleveland (in [1884](#) and [1892](#)).

Religious lines were sharply drawn.^[94] In the North, about 50% of the voters were pietistic Protestants (especially Methodists, Scandinavian Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Disciples of Christ) who believed in using the government to reduce social sins, such as drinking. They strongly

supported the GOP, as the table shows. In sharp contrast, liturgical groups, especially the Catholics, Episcopalians, and German Lutherans, voted for the Democrats. They saw the Democratic party as their best protection from the moralism of the pietists, and especially from the threat of prohibition. Both parties cut across the class structure, with the Democrats more bottom-heavy and the GOP better represented among businessmen and professionals in the North.^[96]

Many cultural issues, especially prohibition and foreign-language schools, became hard-fought political issues because of the deep religious divisions in the electorate. For example, in Wisconsin the Republicans tried to close down German-language Catholic and Lutheran parochial schools, and were defeated in 1890 when the [Bennett Law](#) was put to the test.^[97]

Prohibition debates and referendums heated up politics in most states over a period of decades, as national prohibition was finally passed in 1919 (and repealed in 1933), serving as a major issue between the wet Democrats and the dry GOP.^[98]

Immigration^[edit]

Main article: [History of immigration to the United States](#)

Prior to the Gilded Age, the time commonly referred to as the [old immigration](#) saw the first real boom of new arrivals to the United States. During the Gilded Age, approximately 20 million immigrants came to the United States in what is known as the [new immigration](#). Some of them were prosperous farmers who had the cash to buy land and tools in the Plains states especially. Many were poor peasants looking for the [American Dream](#) in unskilled manual labor in mills, mines, and factories. Few immigrants went to the poverty-stricken South, though. To accommodate the heavy influx, the federal government in 1892 opened a reception center at [Ellis Island](#) near the [Statue of Liberty](#).^[99]

Waves of old and new immigrants^[edit]

These immigrants consisted of two groups: The last big waves of the "Old Immigration" from Germany, Britain, Ireland, and Scandinavia, and the rising waves of the "New Immigration", which peaked about 1910. Some men moved back and forth across the Atlantic, but most were permanent settlers. They moved into well-established communities, both urban and rural. The [German American](#) communities spoke German, but their younger generation was bilingual.^[100] The Scandinavian groups generally assimilated quickly; they were noted for their support of reform programs, such as prohibition.^[101]

In terms of immigration, after 1880 the old immigration of Germans, British, Irish, and Scandinavians slackened off. The United States was producing large numbers of new unskilled jobs every year, and to fill them came number from Italy, Poland, Austria, Hungary, Russia, Greece, and other points in southern and central Europe, as well as French Canada. The older immigrants by the 1870s had formed highly stable communities, especially the [German Americans](#).^[102] The British immigrants tended to blend into the general population.^[103]

[Irish Catholics](#) had arrived in large numbers in the 1840s and 1850s in the wake of the [great famine in Ireland](#) when starvation killed millions. Their first few decades were characterized by extreme poverty, social dislocation, crime and violence in their slums. By the late 19th century, the Irish communities had largely stabilized, with a strong new "lace curtain" middle-class of local businessmen, professionals, and political leaders typified by [P. J. Kennedy](#) (1858–1929) in Boston. In economic terms, Irish Catholics were nearly at the bottom in the 1850s. They reached the national average by 1900, and by the late 20th century they far surpassed the national average.^[104]

In political terms, the Irish Catholics comprised a major element in the leadership of the urban Democratic machines across the country.^[105] Although they were only a third of the total Catholic population, the Irish also dominated the Catholic Church, producing most of the bishops, college presidents, and leaders of charitable organizations.^[106] The network of Catholic institutions provided high status, but low-paying lifetime careers to [sisters and nuns](#) in parochial schools, hospitals,

orphanages and convents. They were part of an international Catholic network, with considerable movement back and forth from Ireland, England, France, Germany and Canada.^[107]

New immigrants^[edit]

The "New Immigration" were much poorer peasants and rural folk from southern and eastern Europe, including mostly Italians, Poles and Jews. Some men, especially the Italians and Greeks, saw themselves as temporary migrants who planned to return to their home villages with a nest egg of cash earned in long hours of unskilled labor. Others, especially the Jews, had been driven out of Eastern Europe and had no intention of returning.^[108]

Historians analyze the causes of immigration in terms of push factors (pushing people out of the homeland) and pull factors (pulling them to America). The push factors included economic dislocation, shortages of land, and antisemitism. Pull factors were the economic opportunity of good inexpensive farmland or jobs in factories, mills and mines.^[109]

The first generation typically lived in ethnic enclaves with a common language, food, religion, and connections through the old village. The sheer numbers caused overcrowding in tenements in the larger cities. In the small mill towns, however, management usually built company housing with cheap rents.^[110]

Chinese immigrants^[edit]

Asian immigrants—Chinese at this time—were hired by California construction companies for temporary railroad work. The European Americans strongly disliked the Chinese for their alien life-styles and threat of low wages. The construction of the [Central Pacific Railroad](#) from California to Utah was handled largely by Chinese laborers. In the 1870 census, there were 63,000 Chinese men (with a few women) in the entire U.S.; this number grew to 106,000 in 1880.^[111] Labor unions, led by [Samuel Gompers](#) strongly opposed the presence of Chinese labor. Immigrants from China were not allowed to become citizens until 1950; however, as a result of the Supreme Court decision in [United States v. Wong Kim Ark](#), their children born in the U.S. were full citizens.^[112]

Congress banned further Chinese immigration through the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#) in 1882; the act prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the United States, but some students and businessmen were allowed in on a temporary basis. The Chinese population declined to only 37,000 in 1940. Although many returned to China (a greater proportion than most other immigrant groups), most of them stayed in the United States. Chinese people were unwelcome in urban neighborhoods, so they resettled in the "[Chinatown](#)" districts of large cities. The exclusion policy lasted until the 1940s.^[113]

Rural life^[edit]

Main article: [History of agriculture in the United States § Railroad Age: 1860-1910](#)

A dramatic expansion in farming took place during the Gilded Age,^{[114][115]} with the number of farms tripling from 2.0 million in 1860 to 6.0 million in 1905. The number of people living on farms grew from about 10 million in 1860 to 22 million in 1880 to 31 million in 1905. The value of farms soared from \$8.0 billion in 1860 to \$30 billion in 1906.^[116]

The federal government issued 160-acre (65 [ha](#)) tracts virtually free to settlers under the [Homestead Act](#) of 1862. Even larger numbers purchased lands at very low interest from the new railroads, which were trying to create markets. The railroads advertised heavily in Europe and brought over, at low fares, hundreds of thousands of farmers from Germany, Scandinavia and Britain.^[117]

Despite their remarkable progress and general prosperity, 19th-century U.S. farmers experienced recurring cycles of hardship, caused primarily by falling world prices for cotton and wheat.^[118]

Along with the mechanical improvements which greatly increased yield per unit area, the amount of land under cultivation grew rapidly throughout the second half of the century, as the railroads opened up new areas of the West for settlement. The wheat farmers enjoyed abundant output and

good years from 1876 to 1881 when bad European harvests kept the world price high. They then suffered from a slump in the 1880s when conditions in Europe improved. The farther west the settlers went, the more dependent they became on the monopolistic railroads to move their goods to market, and the more inclined they were to protest, as in the [Populist](#) movement of the 1890s. Wheat farmers blamed local [grain elevator](#) owners (who purchased their crop), railroads and eastern bankers for the low prices.^{[119][120]} This protest has now been attributed to the far increased uncertainty in farming due to its commercialisation, with monopolies, the gold standard and loans being simply visualisations of this risk.^[121]

The first organized effort to address general agricultural problems was the [Grange movement](#). Launched in 1867, by employees of the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), the Granges focused initially on social activities to counter the isolation most farm families experienced. Women's participation was actively encouraged. Spurred by the Panic of 1873, the Grange soon grew to 20,000 chapters and 1.5 million members. The Granges set up their own marketing systems, stores, processing plants, factories and [cooperatives](#). Most went bankrupt. The movement also enjoyed some political success during the 1870s. A few Midwestern states passed "[Granger Laws](#)", limiting railroad and warehouse fees^[122]. The agricultural problems gained mass political attention in the Populist movement, which won 44 votes in the [Electoral College](#) in 1892^[123] Its high point came under with the candidacy of William Jennings Bryan for the Democrats in 1896, who was sympathetic to populist concerns, such as the silver standard.^{[124][125]}

Urban life^[edit]

American society experienced significant changes in the period following the Civil War, most notably the rapid urbanization of the North.^[126] Due to the increasing demand for unskilled workers, most European immigrants went to mill towns, mining camps, and industrial cities. New York, Philadelphia, and especially Chicago saw rapid growth. [Louis Sullivan](#) became a noted architect using steel frames to construct skyscrapers for the first time while pioneering the idea of "[form follows function](#)". Chicago became the center of the [skyscraper](#) craze, starting with the ten-story [Home Insurance Building](#) in 1884–1885 by [William Le Baron Jenney](#).^[127]

As immigration increased in cities, poverty rose as well. The poorest crowded into low-cost housing such as the [Five Points](#) and [Hell's Kitchen](#) neighborhoods in Manhattan. These areas were quickly overridden with notorious criminal gangs such as the [Five Points Gang](#) and the [Bowery Boys](#).^[128] Overcrowding spread germs; the death rates in big city [tenements](#) vastly exceeded those in the countryside.^[66]

Rapid outward expansion required longer journeys to work and shopping for the middle class office workers and housewives. The working-class generally did not own automobiles until after 1945; they typically walked to nearby factories and patronized small neighborhood stores. The middle class demanded a better transportation system. Slow horse-drawn streetcars and faster electric trolleys were the rage in the 1880s.^[129] In the horse-drawn era, streets were unpaved and covered with dirt or gravel. However, this produced uneven wear, opened new hazards for pedestrians, and made for dangerous potholes for bicycles and for motor vehicles. Manhattan alone had 130,000 horses in 1900, pulling streetcars, delivery wagons, and private carriages, and leaving their waste behind. They were not fast, and pedestrians could dodge and scramble their way across the crowded streets. In small towns people mostly walked to their destination so they continued to rely on dirt and gravel into the 1920s. Larger cities had much more complex transportation needs. They wanted better streets, so they paved them with wood or granite blocks.^[130] In 1890, a third of Chicago's 2000 miles of streets were paved, chiefly with wooden blocks, which gave better traction than mud. Brick surfacing was a good compromise, but even better was [asphalt](#) paving. With London and Paris as models, Washington laid 400,000 square yards of asphalt paving by 1882, and served as a model for Buffalo, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. By the end of the century, American cities boasted 30 million square yards of asphalt paving, followed by brick construction.^[131] Street-level electric trolleys moved at 12 miles per hour, and became the main transportation service for middle class shoppers

and office workers. Big-city streets became paths for faster and larger and more dangerous vehicles, the pedestrians beware. In the largest cities, street railways were elevated, which increased their speed and lessened their dangers. Boston built the first subway in the 1890s followed by New York a decade later.^[132]

The South and the West^[edit]

The South^[edit]

The South remained heavily rural and was much poorer than the North or West.^[134] In the South, Reconstruction brought major changes in agricultural practices. The most significant of these was [sharecropping](#), where tenant farmers "shared" up to half of their crop with the landowners, in exchange for seed and essential supplies. About 80% of the Black farmers and 40% of White ones lived under this system after the Civil War. Most sharecroppers were locked in a cycle of debt, from which the only hope of escape was increased planting. This led to the over-production of cotton and tobacco (and thus to declining prices and income), soil exhaustion, and poverty among both landowners and tenants.^[135]

Agriculture's Share of the Labor Force, 1890^[136]

There were only a few scattered cities - small courthouse towns serviced the farm population. Local politics revolved around the politicians and lawyers based at the courthouse. Mill towns, narrowly focused on textile production or cigarette manufacture, began opening in the [Piedmont region](#) especially in the Carolinas. Racial segregation and outward signs of inequality were everywhere, and rarely were challenged. Blacks who violated the color line were liable to expulsion or lynching.^[137] Cotton became even more important than before, as poor whites needed the cash that cotton would bring. Cotton prices were much lower than before the war, so everyone was poor. White southerners showed a reluctance to move north, or to move to cities, so the number of small farms proliferated, and they became smaller as the population grew.^[138]

Many of the White farmers, and most of the Blacks, were [tenant farmers](#) who owned their work animals and tools, and rented the land. Others were day laborers or very poor [sharecroppers](#), who worked under the supervision of the landowner. There was little cash in circulation, because most farmers operated on credit accounts from local merchants, and paid off their debts at cotton harvest time in the fall. Although there were small country churches everywhere, there were only a few dilapidated elementary schools. Apart from private academies, there were very few high schools until the 1920s. Conditions were marginally better in newer areas, especially in Texas and central Florida, with the deepest poverty in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Arkansas.^[138]

The vast majority of [African Americans](#) lived in the South, and as the promises of emancipation and reconstruction faded, they entered the [nadir of race relations](#).^[139] Every Southern state and city passed [Jim Crow](#) laws that were in effect between the late 19th century and 1964, when they were abolished by Congress. They mandated *de jure* (legal) segregation in all public facilities, such as stores and street cars, with a supposedly "[separate but equal](#)" status for Blacks. In reality, this led to treatment and accommodations that were dramatically inferior to those provided for White Americans, systematizing a number of economic, educational and social disadvantages. Schools for Blacks were far fewer and poorly supported by taxpayers, although Northern philanthropies and churches kept open dozens of academies and small colleges.^[140]

In the face of years of mounting violence and intimidation directed at blacks during Reconstruction, the federal government was unable to guarantee constitutional protections to freedmen and women. In the [Compromise of 1877](#) President Hayes withdrew Union troops from the South; "[Redeemers](#)" (White Democrats) acted quickly to reverse the groundbreaking advances of Reconstruction. Black political power was eliminated in the 1880s and in the 1890s new laws effectively blocked over 90% of the Blacks from voting (with some exceptions in Tennessee; blacks did vote in the border states).^[141]

The West^[edit]

In 1869, the [First Transcontinental Railroad](#)—a combination of the [Union Pacific](#) from Omaha to Utah and the [Central Pacific](#) from Utah to California—opened up the far west mining and ranching regions. Travel from New York to San Francisco now took six days instead of six months.^[142]

After the Civil War, many from the East Coast and Europe were lured west by reports from relatives and by extensive advertising campaigns promising "the Best Prairie Lands", "Low Prices", "Large Discounts For Cash", and "Better Terms Than Ever!". The new railroads provided the opportunity for migrants to go out and take a look, with special family tickets, the cost of which could be applied to land purchases offered by the railroads. Farming the plains was indeed more difficult than back east.^[143]

Water management was more critical, lightning fires were more prevalent, the weather was more extreme, rainfall was less predictable. The fearful stayed home, while migrants were mainly motivated by a search improve their economic life. Farmers sought larger, cheaper and more fertile land; merchants and tradesman sought new customers and new leadership opportunities. Laborers wanted higher paying work and better conditions. With the Homestead Act providing free land to citizens and the railroads selling cheap lands to European farmers, the settlement of the Great Plains was swiftly accomplished, and the frontier had virtually ended by 1890.^[143]

Native assimilation^[edit]

[Native American](#) policy was set by the national government (the states had very little role), and after 1865 the national policy was that Native Americans either had to assimilate into the larger community or remain on reservations, where the government provided subsidies. Reservation natives were no longer allowed to roam or fight their traditional enemies. The [U.S. Army](#) was to enforce the laws. Natives of the [West](#) came in [conflict](#) with expansion by miners, ranchers and settlers. By 1880, the [buffalo herds](#), a foundation for the hunting economy had disappeared. Violence petered out in the 1880s and practically ceased after 1890.^[144]

Native Americans individually had the choice of living on reservations, with food, supplies, education and medical care provided by the federal government, or living on their own in the larger society and earning wages, typically as a cowboy on a ranch, or manual worker in town. Reformers wanted to give as many Native Americans as possible the opportunity to own and operate their own farms and ranches, so the issue was how to give individual natives land owned by the tribe. To assimilate the natives into American society, reformers set up training programs and schools, such as the [Carlisle Indian Industrial School](#) in [Carlisle, Pennsylvania](#), that produced many prominent Native American leaders. However, anti-assimilation traditionalists on the reservations resisted integration and the resulting loss of their traditional life.

In 1887, the [Dawes Act](#) proposed to divide tribal land and parcel out 160 acres (0.65 km²) of land to each head of family. Such allotments were to be held in trust by the government for 25 years, then given to owners with full title, so they could sell it or mortgage it. As individual natives sold their land, the total held by the native community shrank by almost half. The individualized system undermined the traditional communal tribal organization. Furthermore, a majority of natives responded to intense missionary activity by converting to Christianity. The long-term goal of Dawes Act was to integrate natives into the mainstream; the majority accepted integration and were absorbed into American society, leaving a trace of native ancestry in millions of American families. Those who refused to assimilate remained in poverty on reservations, supported until now by Federal food, medicine and schooling. In 1934, national policy was reversed again by the [Indian Reorganization Act](#) which tried to protect tribal and communal life on reservations.^[145]

Family life^[edit]

Few single men attempted to operate a farm; farmers clearly understood the need for a hard-working wife, and numerous children, to handle the many chores, including child-rearing, feeding and

clothing the family, managing the housework, and feeding the hired hands.^[146] During the early years of settlement, farm women played an integral role in assuring family survival by working outdoors. After a generation or so, women increasingly left the fields, thus redefining their roles within the family. New conveniences such as sewing and washing machines encouraged women to turn to domestic roles. The scientific housekeeping movement was promoted across the land by the media and government extension agents, as well as county fairs which featured achievements in home cookery and canning, advice columns for women in the farm papers, and home economics courses in schools.^[147]

Although the eastern image of farm life on the prairies emphasizes the isolation of the lonely farmer and the bleakness of farm life, in reality rural folk created a rich social life for themselves. For example, many joined a local branch of the Grange; a majority had ties to local churches. It was popular to organize activities that combined practical work, abundant food, and simple entertainment such as [barn raisings](#), corn huskings, and quilting bees.^[148] One could keep busy with scheduled Grange meetings, church services, and school functions. Women organized shared meals and potluck events, as well as extended visits between families.^[149]

Childhood on western farms is contested territory. One group of scholars argues the rural environment was salubrious because it allowed children to break loose from urban hierarchies of age and gender, promoted family interdependence, and produced children who were more self-reliant, mobile, adaptable, responsible, independent and more in touch with nature than their urban or eastern counterparts.^{[150][151]} However other historians offer a grim portrait of loneliness, privation, abuse, and demanding physical labor from an early age.^{[152][153][154]}

Art^[edit]

Some well-known painters of the Gilded Age include: [Winslow Homer](#), [Thomas Eakins](#), [John Singer Sargent](#), [Mary Cassatt](#), [James Abbott McNeill Whistler](#), [Childe Hassam](#), [John Henry Twachtman](#) and [Maurice Prendergast](#).^[155]

The New York Art world took a major turn during the Gilded age, seeing an outgrowth of exhibitions and the establishment of major auction houses with a focus on American Art.^[156] The Gilded Age was pivotal in establishing the New York Art world in the international art market.^[157]

New York Art Galleries, Clubs, and Associations During the Gilded Age

- [American Art Association](#)^[158]
- [American Watercolor Society](#)^[159]
- [Ashcan School](#)
- [Brummer Gallery](#)^[160]
- [Century Association](#)^[161]
- [Colony Club](#)
- [Cottier Gallery](#)^[162]
- [Grand Central Art Galleries](#)^[163]
- [Lotos Club](#)^[164]
- [Montross Gallery](#)^[165]
- [National Association of Portrait Painters](#)^[166]
- [Salmagundi Club](#)^[167]
- [Union League Club of New York](#)^[168]

Women's roles^[edit]

Social activism^[edit]

During the Gilded Age, many [new social movements](#) took hold in the United States. Many women abolitionists who were disappointed that the [Fifteenth Amendment](#) did not extend voting rights to them, remained active in politics, this time focusing on issues important to them. Reviving the temperance movement from the [Second Great Awakening](#), many women joined the [Women's Christian Temperance Union](#) (WCTU) in an attempt to bring morality back to America. Its chief leader was [Frances Willard \(1839-1898\)](#), who had a national and international outreach from her base in Evanston, Illinois. Often the WCTU women took up the issue of women's suffrage which had lain dormant since the [Seneca Falls Convention](#). With leaders like [Susan B. Anthony](#), the [National American Woman Suffrage Association](#) (NAWSA) was formed in order to secure the right of women to vote.^[169]

Employment^[edit]

Many young women worked as servants or in shops and factories until marriage, then typically became full-time housewives. However, black, Irish and Swedish adult women often worked as servants. In most large Northern cities, the Irish Catholic women dominated the market for servants.^[170] Heavy industry was a male domain, but in light industries such as textiles and food processing, large numbers of young women were hired. Thousands of young unmarried Irish and French Canadian women worked in Northeastern textile mills. Coming from poor families these jobs meant upward social mobility, more money, and more social prestige in their community that made them more attractive marriage partners. In [Cohoes, New York](#), mill women went on strike in 1882 to gain union recognition. They fought off Swedish strike breakers in order to protect the status they had achieved.^[171]

After 1860, as the larger cities opened [department stores](#), middle-class women did most of the shopping; increasingly they were served by young middle-class women clerks.^[172] Typically, most young women quit their jobs when they married. In some ethnic groups, however, married women were encouraged to work, especially among African-Americans, and Irish Catholics. When the husband operated a small shop or restaurant, wives and other family members could find employment there. Widows and deserted wives often operated boarding houses.^[173]

Career women were few. The teaching profession had once been heavily male, but as schooling expanded many women took on teaching careers.^[174] If they remained unmarried they could have a prestigious but poorly paid lifetime career in the middle class.^[175] At the end of the period nursing schools opened up new opportunities for women, but medical schools remained nearly all male.^[176]

Business opportunities were rare, unless it was a matter of a widow taking over her late husband's small business. However the rapid acceptance of the [sewing machine](#) made housewives more productive and opened up new careers for women running their own small millinery and dressmaking shops.^[177] When her husband died, [Lydia Moss Bradley](#) (1816–1908) inherited \$500,000; shrewd investments doubled that sum and she later became president of his old bank in Peoria, Illinois. She worked from home to handle banking business. In an age when philanthropists such as Johns Hopkins, Cornell, Purdue, Vanderbilt, Stanford, Rice and Duke were perpetuating their names by founding universities, she lifted her aspirations from the original idea of an orphanage to the loftier goal and in 1897 founded [Bradley University](#) in Peoria.^[178]

Social thought^[edit]

A leading magazine, [The Nation](#) espoused [Classical liberalism](#) every week starting in 1865, under the influential editor [E.L. Godkin](#) (1831–1902).^[179]

Science played an important part in social thought as the work of [Charles Darwin](#) became known among intellectuals. Following Darwin's idea of [natural selection](#), English philosopher [Herbert Spencer](#) proposed the idea of [social Darwinism](#). This new concept justified the stratification of the wealthy and poor, and it was in this proposal that Spencer coined the term "[survival of the fittest](#)."

Joining Spencer was Yale professor [William Graham Sumner](#) whose book *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1884) argued that assistance to the poor actually weakens their ability to survive in society. Sumner argued for a [laissez-faire](#) and [free-market](#) economy. Few people, however, agreed with the social Darwinists, because they ridiculed religion and denounced philanthropy.

[Henry George](#) proposed a "single tax" in his book *Progress and Poverty*. The tax would be leveled on the rich and poor alike, with the excess money collected used to equalize wealth and level out society.

The [Norwegian American](#) economist [Thorstein Veblen](#) argued in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) that the "[conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure](#)" of the wealthy had become the basis of social status in America.

In *Looking Backward* (1887), the reformer [Edward Bellamy](#) envisioned a future America set in the year 2000 in which a socialist paradise has been established. The works of authors such as George and Bellamy became popular, and soon clubs were created across America to discuss their ideas, although these organizations rarely made any real social change.^[180]

Religion^[edit]

Main articles: [History of religion in the United States](#) and [Third Great Awakening](#)

The [Third Great Awakening](#) which began before the Civil War returned and made a significant change in religious attitudes toward social progress. Followers of the new Awakening promoted the idea of the [Social Gospel](#) which gave rise to organizations such as the [YMCA](#), the American branch of the [Salvation Army](#), and [settlement houses](#) such as [Hull House](#), founded by [Jane Addams](#) in Chicago in 1889.^[181]

The Third Great Awakening was a period of religious activism in American history from the late 1850s to the 20th century. It affected pietistic Protestant denominations and had a strong sense of social activism. It gathered strength from the [postmillennial](#) theology that the [Second Coming](#) of Christ would come after mankind had reformed the entire earth. The Social Gospel movement gained its force from the Awakening, as did the worldwide missionary movement. New groupings emerged, such as the [Holiness movement](#) and [Nazarene](#) movements, [Theosophy](#) and [Christian Science](#).^[182]

The Protestant mainline denominations (especially the Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches) grew rapidly in numbers, wealth and educational levels, throwing off their frontier beginnings and becoming centered in towns and cities. Leaders such as [Josiah Strong](#) advocated a [muscular Christianity](#) with systematic outreach to the [unchurched](#) in America and around the globe. Others built colleges and universities to train the next generation. Each denomination supported active missionary societies, and made the role of missionary one of high prestige.^{[3][183]} The great majority of pietistic mainline Protestants (in the North) supported the [Republican Party](#), and urged it to endorse prohibition and social reforms.^{[184][185]} (see [Third Party System](#))

The Awakening in numerous cities in 1858 was interrupted by the [American Civil War](#). In the South; on the other hand, the Civil War stimulated revivals and strengthened the Baptists, especially.^[186] After the war, [Dwight L. Moody](#) made revivalism the centerpiece of his activities in Chicago by founding the [Moody Bible Institute](#). The hymns of [Ira Sankey](#) were especially influential.^[187]

Across the nation, "drys" crusaded, in the name of religion, for the [prohibition](#) of alcohol. The [Woman's Christian Temperance Union](#) mobilized Protestant women for social crusades against not only liquor, but also pornography and prostitution, and sparked the demand for women's suffrage.^[188]

The Gilded Age plutocracy came under harsh attack from the Social Gospel preachers and reformers in the [Progressive Era](#) who became involved with issues of [child labor](#), compulsory elementary education and the protection of women from exploitation in factories.^[189]

All the major denominations sponsored growing [missionary](#) activities inside the United States and around the world.^{[190][191]}

Colleges associated with churches rapidly expanded in number, size and quality of curriculum. The promotion of muscular Christianity became popular among young men on campus and in urban YMCAs, as well as such denominational youth groups such as the [Epworth League](#) for Methodists and the [Walther League](#) for Lutherans.^[192]