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REPRESENTATIONS OF MODERNITY AND THE URBAN EXPERIENCE
IN *THE GILDED AGE*

MITIA NATH

Assistant Professor, SGTB Khalsa College, University of Delhi
mitia.nath@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

This paper is an analysis of Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's novel *The Gilded Age*. It seeks to examine how the emergence of urban spaces and the simultaneous economic changes occurring in the post-civil war American society triggers off a new set of cultural practices and ethical systems. The paper goes on to explore how the emerging trends and practices conflict sharply with those of the pre-war American society. The paper traces the beginnings of the modern urban space in America as depicted in the novel and attempts to highlight the correlation that exists between a changing economic order and spaces surrounding the economic processes.

Keywords: The Gilded Age, Mark Twain, Charles Dudley, Railways, 19th century American cities, urban spaces.

In the first section of this paper I will briefly examine some of the characteristics of what is described as the Gilded Age in America, the period immediately following the Civil War, the phrase being derived from Twain and Dudley's novel *The Gilded Age*. One of the landmark achievements of this period, around which much of the novel also revolves, is the completion of the first transcontinental railway network in the year 1869. Predicated upon this, to a large extent, is the process of industrialisation in the US, which gathered great momentum following the development of the transcontinental railway network. As a result, investments in heavy industries like coal, iron ore etc., also become more commonplace. In an essay titled, "Understanding Economic Change in the Gilded Age", Ballard C. Campbell writes, "Carrying goods not people was the railroads' principal contribution to economic growth. Lowering the costs of shipping permitted a reduction in the prices customers paid for food and durable items. In forging connections between production and distribution, railroads accelerated the trend towards localised manufacturing of products for sale over wide areas."

What is to be noted about these heavy industries especially railroads is that their rise is thoroughly informed by political and financial corruptions at all levels. This point will be examined later in the context of the novel. In his essay, "Information, Markets and Corruption in the Gilded Age", Richard White, explains how the railways operated through lobbyists, and elected officials, trying to influence and control through bribes etc., chokepoints and bottlenecks of legislation and administration. Subsisting primarily on subsidies from the federal governments, railroads and other heavy industries worked in close alliance with financiers and politicians, creating a parallel underground economy.

In her essay, "The Gilded Age and the Economy of Satire", Lucy Wuster writes about the panic of 1873, the year in which the novel came out, during which the stock market shut down for ten days, due to largely unregulated speculation on railroads. "The panic represented the first crisis of industrial and financial capitalism in the US, following the consolidation and incorporation of industry in the civil war era." Land speculation as can be seen in the novel, is clearly one of the central "businesses" of this period; something that everybody from Hawkins, his son, Laura, Sellers, Dilworthy, Philip, to Ruth's father, is engaged in.

Nineteenth century America also saw a massive rise in circulation of newspapers, magazines, and journals and perhaps that's why the press figures so prominently in the novel as well. Critics have pointed out how in the gilded age, the financiers and industrialists to their advantage used the popularity of the print media. Richard White in the same essay talks about how, trying to control information, the railroad men corrupted the news. They planted stories and bought journalists throughout the seventies and eighties. They also bought newspapermen as agents and lobbyists and loaned them money. The financial market too could be just as easily manipulated by publishing false information.

Along with these economic developments, there is the wave of migration from the East coast settlements towards the West in search of money and opportunities, upon which the project of land speculation appears to be founded.

As can be observed in the novel, with the rise of industrial capitalism, there is a subsequent rise of a new set of ethics that are markedly different from those of the earlier era. There is an erosion of the value systems that were associated with a pre-urban, pre-industrial past. This is an era, as a critic points out, when presidents were businessmen, and generals were businessmen, preachers were businessmen and the whole psychic energy of the American people was absorbed in the exploitation and organisation of the material resources of the continent. This is primarily what I've sought to emphasise in this section – how an entire people are affected, impacted by the larger economy. In the world of the gilded age, the political and the economic are inseparable. The corruption at the macro level is also directly, indirectly impacting people at the micro level. The gilded age is also called so owing to a newfound exuberance and aspiration for wealth, that is distinctly different from the Puritan ethics of the earlier generations founded on austerity and simplicity. The writers here are trying to capture a moment of transition, in which industrial capitalism is expanding rapidly, and in the process appropriating large portions of agricultural as well as cultural spaces.

This point leads directly to the text, and in this second section I will attempt to draw out the representations of urbanity, modernity in *The Gilded Age* and how the novel presents the rise of the modern, urban experience through its characters, and the role played by the political and economic situation towards shaping individual subjectivities as well as community life.

I will begin with the tragedy of the Hawkins' family over the Tennessee land. The 'tragedy' here is clearly an irresolvable conflict between an industrial economy on the one hand and agricultural mode of assessing the question of "value" on the other. In his essay, "The Gilded Age; Performance, Power and Authority", John E Basset points out that Twain here is exploring a larger discontinuity that has crept into society – a gap between dreams and moral values attached to land on the one hand and a social system in which land has only exchange value, on the other. That is to say, that land is now a commodity, which needs to be exchanged for money in order to make more money. This intrinsic contradiction within the social system is highlighted through the attitude of the Hawkins family toward their Tennessee land where they hope to make millions in the future without selling the land. Land for the Hawkins family clearly still harbours feudal metaphors. What the tragedy of the Hawkins' family is an indication of, is a more general incongruity in the experience of the American society between the myth of the American Dream and the actual lived reality of this society.

We see similar "tragedies" played out in different, often humorous ways in the lives of Colonel Sellers, Laura, Washington Hawkins and others. Colonel Sellers for instance becomes the embodiment of the gilded age with his endless schemes and aspirations for luxuries amid the stark poverty. Indeed he is a more accurate symbol of the age than Hawkins, because, as Basset in the same essay points out: Colonel Sellers himself is not aware of the discrepancy between his lived reality and the magical world he aspires for. "He assimilates his

mask completely. If not integrity, his performance has internal coherence. Sellers, in creating, not reflecting a reality, has authority over it and an indulgent audience of whose own desires he is a projection.” This is also perhaps the reason for his survival, where Hawkins fails. Basset claims that it is the lack of an underlying authentic self that prevents him from being vulnerable to realities of the world. Sellers projected his fantasies of power and wealth onto the outside world so perfectly that the division between the two has ceased to exist for him.

It is interesting to observe that the writers’ tone with respect to these gentlemen, Washington Hawkins included, is not one of censure. Despite drawing their families to desperate times, they are portrayed as kind father figures, eager to fulfil their paternal duties towards not only to their immediate family but also those of friends or even orphans. Behind their stupidity and callous decisions there are kindly intentions, of which the writers appear keen to make the readers conscious. Leland Krauth in his essay, “At Home in The Gilded Age” suggests that it is partly because Twain himself highly valued domesticity, something that the reader is familiar with through Tom Sawyer, where a pre-lapsarian sense of innocence is celebrated by turning all of St. Petersburg into a happy, caring family. This image of domesticity is something that is reinforced at the end of the novel through the Philip-Ruth marriage

However it can also be argued that the writers are deliberately blurring the lines between good and evil, vice and virtue, to make the readers question their own sense of morality, as well as the laws of the land. One doesn’t know what to make of Sellers: he is likeable and kind, but a swindler nonetheless. As Krauth points out, by the end of the novel the reader wants Laura to walk free, the University Bill to pass, and Dilworthy to win, despite being aware of their crimes – petty or serious. The gilded age clearly is not to be seen as a simple condemnation of the “evils” of industrialisation, but a more complex re-evaluation of older values and beliefs against the backdrop of an industrial culture, where individuals are, often willy-nilly, drawn into its processes. The instabilities in the social order warranted by industrialisation, also serve to deconstruct established notions of truth, justice, virtue etc. At the end of the novel, the reader is caught with a warped sense of right and wrong.

The course of Laura’s life – beginning with the loss of her parents in the steamboat accident, her movement from innocence to corruption, her final acquittal by the jury – in many ways is a reflection upon these transformations occurring within society at this moment.

The steamboat accident is a good illustration. The accident, which appears to be a chance occurrence, is arguable a consequence of modernity, and developments occurring in urban spaces. To elaborate, what is defined as the modern urban space is also a particular redistribution, re-organisation of space and time; that is shrinking spaces, shrinking time clubbed with densely populated pockets owing to industrial development. Within this kind of an organisation, “accidents” of various kinds ranging from running into acquaintances, to collapsing buildings, to malfunctioning machines, to car-crashes become possible. By definition, modern urban space makes way for such “accidents”, which occur with increasing frequency as we move into the next century, and also legitimises them as manifestations of ‘destiny’. The steamboat accident is a symptom of the larger experience of modernity, as also of the time to come.

The accident and the voyage both become metaphors for the Westward journey that a large section of Americans were participating in. The culmination of this journey in a disaster, especially one for which no one can be blamed, despite the number of casualties, are also traits that mark the Westward journey for most aspirants.

Returning to the original point, Laura, an unwilling participant in the process of modernisation, as opposed to Sellers and Dilworthy, becomes a victim of the system. The geographical mobility that is made possible by the development in railways also facilitates mobility in terms of class and social positions of individuals. A movement in terms of space, away from family and community, also allows an individual to chart out his or her own trajectory in the social order, marking the rise of the individual against the society. It is interesting to note that at an early moment in the novel, the narrative voice, echoing that of the tradition-bound society, states that there was no question of the women of the Hawkins family going out to work given the position of the family in the social hierarchy. (“Southern family of good blood.”) Once in Washington, away

from her family, Laura is free to carve out her own path of upward mobility. As can be observed even with Ruth Bolton, the development of the individual subject occurs away from the ties of family. This social mobility facilitated by capitalist forces is something that is well examined in the European 19th century novel.

Had she been convicted and hanged, the tragic death would redeem her, as well as the system to which she falls prey. The writers however do not grant her that death. The jury is stupid and inept, and the scene is played out, as several critics have suggested, like a scene from a sentimental novel. In her acquittal there is no joy or glory. Committed to an asylum, she dies a banal, commonplace death. Twain and Dudley do not allow her grace even in death.

As mentioned above, within the political economy of this age, very few are left untouched by the frenzy that is gripping the society. Even people like Mrs Hawkins and Mrs Sellers who are marginal in every which way to the larger project, are dragged into it and made to bear the brunt of flawed economic policies, fraudulent financial schemes, unrealistic aspirations of the age through their husbands and families. The only character that remains untouched till the very end is Alice – who represents a type of pre-lapsarian innocence and simplicity of love. That she loses Philip in the end to the gutsy Ruth is indicative of the fact that these values that she embodies are becoming increasingly inadequate to sustain oneself in the gilded age. She is a failure insofar as Philip doesn't recognise her true affections and Ruth overshadows her with her vivacious assertive self. By depicting Alice as a person who finally fails, and Colonel Sellers the petty swindler who succeeds, the novel makes an important statement. To conclude, the gilded age is also the end of an era; the end of a system of values that Alice exemplifies, end of a pre-urban simple family life that Laura desires in the final pages. In this respect it looks ahead to the age of Crane and Fitzgerald where there is no possibility of escaping the urban experience.

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