

“Gospel of Wealth” and Social Darwinism in the Gilded Age

by Fred Raphael

LESSON OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ resources, designed to align to the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on primary sources.

In this lesson students will learn about the rise of big business, the rapid expansion of industrialization, the growth of cities, and the increased immigration that transformed the United States into a modern nation and a global industrial power with a multicultural and pluralistic society. The students will read, analyze, and assess two essays, the “Gospel of Wealth” (1889) by the industrialist Andrew Carnegie and “What Is Man?” (1906) by the American humorist Mark Twain, that address the ideas of destiny, free will, human nature, and philanthropy. The students will then engage in a written and oral debate with their classmates using quotations from these texts and their own words.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Close-read informational text for comprehension and critical analysis
- Identify, explain, and summarize the key words and phrases, main ideas, and important issues that are being presented in the primary source documents through proficient completion of the worksheets
- Cite evidence from the texts of the primary sources to support responses to the comprehension and critical-thinking questions
- Compare and contrast the viewpoints of different authors on a single idea
- Collaborate and debate effectively and fairly with classmates to develop, express, and justify positions and viewpoints
- Develop a position and express a viewpoint, both orally and in a brief written persuasive essay

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Can Social Darwinism and the Gospel of Wealth justify the inequalities in society?
- To what extent does government have a responsibility to address the inequalities in society?

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 2

GRADE LEVELS: 8–12

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary source or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social studies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.6: Compare the point of view of two or more for how they treat the same or similar topics, including the details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.8: Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author’s claims.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on . . . topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1: Write arguments to support claims in the analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The United States was transformed into the world’s leading industrial power in the decades after the Civil War. The transition was evident in new inventions and methods of mass production, increased industrial output, improved communication and transportation, and new sources of energy and power. Americans nurtured a fascination with the accumulation and display of material wealth, and many prominent entrepreneurs flaunted their economic success with lavish lifestyles and conspicuous consumption. This historical period became known as the Gilded Age, a phrase taken from title of a book by the American humorist Mark Twain.

Talented industrial entrepreneurs, including Andrew Carnegie (steel), J. Pierpont Morgan (banking and finance), John D. Rockefeller (oil), and Cornelius Vanderbilt (railroads), emerged during this era to build huge commercial, financial, and industrial empires, and they amassed unprecedented fortunes. From one perspective, these entrepreneurial leaders are viewed as “captains of industry” because of their role in the development of the modern American industrial economy. However, other observers view these entrepreneurs as “robber barons” because of their ruthless, underhanded, and at times illegal business practices.

The traditional American ideals of individualism, self-reliance, and survival of the fittest were celebrated in the marketplace, and economic theories such as laissez-faire, Social Darwinism, and the Gospel of Wealth seemed to justify the means by which industrial leaders gained their fortunes. Moreover, the influx of immigrants into the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries provided a

cheap source of labor for industrial work in the nation’s factories. As employees struggled and became more discontented with long hours, low wages, and unhealthy and unsafe working conditions, they organized labor unions to protest intolerable work situations. Examples of serious labor disputes between management and workers include the Great Railroad Strike (1877), Haymarket Bombing and Riot (1886), Homestead Steel Strike (1892), and the Pullman Strike (1894).

In this atmosphere, intense fear arose within American society concerning the prospect of conflict between capital (business) and labor. Government leaders and the courts usually took the position that successful businesses were chiefly responsible for the nation’s greatness, and labor slowdowns, strikes, boycotts, and picketing were disruptive to corporate production. Striking workers and union leaders were often viewed as anarchists, revolutionaries, and/or socialists who undermined traditional American ideals.

As the gap between the rich and the poor continued to widen (by 1890, 9 percent of the American people held 71 percent of the nation’s money, and the United States had more millionaires than any other nation in the world), income inequality and the uneven distribution of wealth became more evident. Movements for humanitarian reform developed, and some industrial leaders, such as Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Cornelius Vanderbilt, began to use their enormous wealth and resources for the benefit of society. For example, Carnegie distributed more than \$350 million dollars (90 percent) of his wealth to support the construction of libraries, universities, and other public institutions. This practice of civic philanthropy became known as the Gospel of Wealth. These philanthropic activities were consistent with the ideas of Social Darwinism and American ideals of individualism, self-reliance, and limited government.

The title of Mark Twain’s essay “What Is Man?” refers to the biblical Psalm 8:4–6 (“What is man that you are mindful of him, . . . You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet.”), which features a dialogue between a young man and an old man on human nature. The elderly man seems jaded and asserts that human beings are merely machines who are driven by the pursuit of self-satisfaction. The young man objects and challenges the old man to justify and support his viewpoints. The essay focuses on the ideas of destiny, free will, habitat, heredity, predetermination, the nature of mankind, and “outside” influences and their impact on society.

MATERIALS

- Excerpts from Andrew Carnegie’s “The Gospel of Wealth.” Source: Andrew Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays* (New York: The Century Co., 1901), 1–46. Available from Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=q5ALvRp61wgC>.
- Excerpts from Mark Twain’s “What Is Man.” Source: *What Is Man? and Other Irreverent Essays*, ed. S. T. Joshi (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), 19–94. Available from Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=p1qSdWioRkAC>.
- “Gospel of Wealth” Analysis Worksheet
- “What Is Man?” Analysis Worksheet
- Text Debate: Mark Twain and Andrew Carnegie on Social Darwinism

VOCABULARY

Laissez-faire, Gospel of Wealth, Social Darwinism

PROCEDURE

Warm-up/Do-Now Exercise

Students will answer the following questions based on their prior knowledge and personal experiences and viewpoints. You can have the students work individually or collaborate in pairs (“pair-and-share”) in the development of their responses.

- a) What are the major factors determining why some people are successful and others are not?
- b) What barriers prevent some people from achieving success?
- c) Should the government try to make society more equal through high taxes on the wealthy and social welfare programs for the poor?

Pre-Lesson Preparation—Providing Historical Background for Students

1. Review wealth disparities during the Gilded Age.
2. Discuss the achievements and importance of the industrialist Andrew Carnegie, including his rise and unprecedented success in the steel business and his later philanthropic work.
3. Provide a brief overview of the background and literary achievements of the American humorist Mark Twain.
4. Provide brief explanations and/or elaborations on the ideas of Social Darwinism, laissez-faire economics, and limited government, and how they relate to the Gilded Age and the impact of the traditional ideals of individualism, self-reliance, and survival of the fittest on American society.

Lesson Presentation: Guided Practice/Independent Work

You can choose to have the students work individually or collaborate in pairs (“pair-and-share”) or small groups to read and discuss the document excerpts and complete the worksheet that accompanies each reading selection.

1. Distribute the first reading, the excerpts from “The Gospel of Wealth” by Andrew Carnegie. Ask the students to read the text and complete the “Gospel of Wealth” Analysis Worksheet. The students can read the selection silently or do a “shared reading” within their pairs or small groups. If the text level is too challenging for the students, you can “share read” the document excerpts with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
2. Once they have completed the worksheets, facilitate a discussion among the students on the key words, phrases, and sentences that are highlighted in this reading, and ask the students or student groups to share their responses to the critical-thinking questions.

3. Repeat the process with the second reading, excerpts from “What Is Man” by Mark Twain.
4. Pair the students up (or keep their existing pairs) and assign the role of either Andrew Carnegie or Mark Twain to each student within the pair. Distribute the Text Debate: Mark Twain and Andrew Carnegie on Social Darwinism worksheet to each student for completion. Each student will then find quotations that reflect his/her assigned historical figure’s views on Social Darwinism and the appropriate role of the government in addressing the inequalities in society.
5. The pairs of students will engage in a debate between “Mark Twain” and “Andrew Carnegie.” One student will lead with a quote; the other student will react with a quote that offers a response. After the students have used 5 quotes each, they should continue in their own words. They will record their selection of quotations and remarks on the worksheet.

Wrap up/Summary Activity

1. Facilitate a discussion in which the students share out the ideas and viewpoints of their assigned historical figures, Carnegie or Twain, on Social Darwinism and the appropriate role of the government in resolving the inequalities in society.
2. As a closure or summary activity for the lesson, the students should complete an exit card or write a brief persuasive-essay response to one of the lesson’s essential questions:
 - Can Social Darwinism and the Gospel of Wealth justify the inequalities in society?
 - To what extent does government have a responsibility to address the inequalities in society?
3. In their written responses, the students should use evidence from the documents to support their positions and viewpoints.

Application Activity (optional)

You can orchestrate a class discussion on the impact and significance of Social Darwinism and the appropriate role of government (federal, state, and/or local) in social welfare programs that address inequalities in society today.

Excerpts from “The Gospel of Wealth” by Andrew Carnegie

. . . The price which society pays for the law of competition, like the price it pays for cheap comforts and luxuries, is also great; but the advantages of this law are also greater still than its cost—for it is to this law that we owe our wonderful material development, which brings improved conditions in its train. But, whether the law be benign or not, we must say of it, as we say of the change in the conditions of men to which we have referred: It is here; we cannot evade it; no substitutes for it have been found; and while the law may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it insures the survival of the fittest in every department. We accept and welcome, therefore, as conditions to which we must accommodate ourselves, great inequality of environment; the concentration of business, industrial and commercial, in the hands of a few; and the law of competition between these, as being not only beneficial, but essential to the future progress of the race. . . .

Objections to the foundations upon which society is based are not in order, because the condition of the race is better with these than it has been with any other which has been tried. . . . The Socialist or Anarchist who seeks to overturn present conditions is to be regarded as attacking the foundation upon which civilization itself rests, for civilization took its start from the day when the capable, industrious workman said to his incompetent and lazy fellow, “If thou dost not sow, thou shalt not reap” . . . One who studies this subject will soon be brought face to face with the conclusion that upon the sacredness of property civilization itself depends—the right of the laborer to his hundred dollars in the savings-bank, and equally the legal right of the millionaire to his millions. . . . To those who propose to substitute Communism for this intense Individualism, the answer therefore is: The race has tried that. All progress from that barbarous day to the present time has resulted from its displacement. Not evil, but good, has come to the race from the accumulation of wealth by those who have had the ability and energy to produce it.

. . . Under its sway we shall have an ideal State, in which the surplus wealth of the few will become, in the best sense, the property of the many, because administered for the common good; and this wealth, passing through the hands of the few, can be made a much more potent force for the elevation of our race than if distributed in small sums to the people themselves. Even the poorest can be made to see this, and to agree that great sums gathered by some of their fellow-citizens and spent for public purposes, from which the masses reap the principal benefit, are more valuable to them than if scattered among themselves in trifling amounts through the course of many years. . . .

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

Excerpts from “What Is Man” by Mark Twain

Prejudices . . . must be removed by *outside influences* or not at all. Put that down. . . .

There are gold men, and tin men, and copper men, and leaden men, and steel men, and so on—and each has the limitations of his nature, his heredities, his training, and his environment. You can build engines out of each of these metals, and they will all perform, but you must not require the weak ones to do equal work with the stronger ones. In each case, to get the best results, you must free the metal from its obstructing prejudicial ores by education—smelting, refining, and so forth.

. . . Man the machine—man the impersonal engine. Whatsoever a man is, is due to his make, and to the *influences* brought to bear upon it by his heredities, his habitat, his associations. He is moved, directed, commanded, by *exterior influences—solely*. He *originates* nothing, not even a thought.

. . . It is a quite natural opinion—indeed an inevitable opinion—but *you* did not create the materials out of which it is formed. They are odds and ends of thoughts, impressions, feelings, gathered unconsciously from a thousand books, a thousand conversations, and from streams of thought and feeling which have flowed down into your heart and brain out of the hearts and brains of centuries of ancestors. *Personally* you did not create even the smallest microscopic fragment of the materials out of which your opinion is made; and personally you cannot claim even the slender merit of *putting the borrowed materials together*. That was done *automatically*—by your mental machinery, in strict accordance with the law of that machinery’s construction. And you not only did not make that machinery yourself, but you have *not even any command over it*.

. . . Then it came from *outside*. Adam is quite big enough; let us not try to make a god of him. *None but gods have ever had a thought which did not come from the outside*. Adam probably had a good head, but it was of no sort of use to him until it was filled up *from the outside*. He was not able to invent the triflingest little thing with it. He had not a shadow of a notion of the difference between good and evil—he had to get the idea *from the outside*. Neither he nor Eve was able to originate the idea that it was immodest to go naked; the knowledge came in with the apple *from the outside*. A man’s brain is so constructed that *it can originate nothing whatever*. It can only use material obtained *outside*. It is merely a machine; and it works automatically, not by will-power. *It has no command over itself, its owner has no command over it*.

. . . No. A brave man does not *create* his bravery. He is entitled to no personal credit for possessing it. It is born to him. A baby born with a billion dollars—where is the personal merit in that? A baby born with nothing—where is the personal demerit in that? The one is fawned upon, admired, worshiped, by sycophants, the other is neglected and despised—where is the sense in it?

. . . Sometimes a timid man sets himself the task of conquering his cowardice and becoming brave—and succeeds. What do you say to that?

That it shows the value of *training in right directions over training in wrong ones*. Inestimably valuable is training, influence, education, in right directions—*training one’s self-approration to elevate its ideals*.

But as to merit—the personal merit of the victorious coward’s project and achievement?

There isn’t any. In the world’s view he is a worthier man than he was before, but *he* didn’t achieve the change—the merit of it is not his.

. . . His *make*, and the influences which wrought upon it from the outside.

“Gospel of Wealth” Analysis Worksheet

Directions: Read the excerpts from Andrew Carnegie’s “Gospel of Wealth” and complete the following:

Select **two (2)** important phrases from this essay and briefly explain their importance or significance.

1st phrase

Why is this phrase important or significant?

2nd phrase

Why is this phrase important or significant?

Create a sentence using these two phrases (1st and 2nd) that summarizes their importance or significance.

Repeat this process: Select **two (2)** additional important phrases from this essay and briefly explain their importance or significance.

3rd phrase

Why is this phrase important or significant?

4th phrase

Why is this phrase important or significant?

Create a sentence using these two phrases (3rd and 4th) that summarizes their importance or significance.

Critical-Thinking Questions

1. How does Carnegie believe unregulated competition will benefit society?

2. Why does Carnegie oppose “almsgiving” (charity) to the poor?

3. What does Carnegie believe is the reason some people gain huge amounts of wealth while others are poor?

“What Is Man?” Analysis Worksheet

Directions: Read the excerpts from Mark Twain’s “What Is Man?” and complete the following tasks:

Select **two (2)** important phrases from this essay and briefly explain their importance or significance.

1st phrase

Why is this phrase important or significant?

2nd phrase

Why is this phrase important or significant?

Create a sentence using these two phrases (1st and 2nd) that summarizes their importance or significance.

Repeat this process: Select **two (2)** additional important phrases from this essay and briefly explain their importance or significance.

3rd phrase

Why is this phrase important or significant?

4th phrase

Why is this phrase important or significant?

Create a sentence using these two phrases (3rd and 4th) that summarizes their importance or significance.

Critical-Thinking Questions

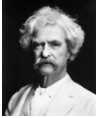




1. Explain Twain’s belief about what separates “gold men” from “tin men.”

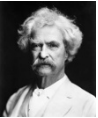
2. What does Twain believe is the biggest influence on the personality and abilities of a person?


3. What does Twain believe is the reason some people gain huge amounts of wealth while others are poor?


Text Debate—Mark Twain and Andrew Carnegie on Social Darwinism


Directions: You will be debating the merits of Social Darwinism and how much the government should try to make society more equal. Andrew Carnegie will begin with a quote, Mark Twain will respond with a quote. After you have used 5 quotes from the essay excerpts, switch to your own words and continue the debate.

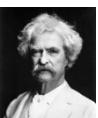
1.		Twain
2.		Carnegie
3.		Twain
4.		Carnegie
5.		Twain
6.		Carnegie
7.		Twain
8.		Carnegie


9.  Twain


10.  Carnegie


11.  Twain

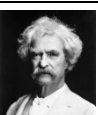
12.  Carnegie


13.  Twain

14.  Carnegie

15.  Twain

16.  Carnegie

17.  Twain

18.  Carnegie