

ISSUES OF THE GILDED AGE

Link to Literature

The period in the 1870s known as the Gilded Age derived its name from a satire written by Mark Twain (born Samuel Clemens, 1835–1910) and Charles Dudley Warner (1829–1900). *The Gilded Age* was considered the first “social protest” novel in American literature and inspired future writers to expose social and political ills that they observed in the nation.

◆ As you read the following excerpt, consider how the authors describe the incident. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

The Gilded Age by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner

[Sellers] began to tell about an enormous speculation he was thinking of embarking some capital in . . . and soon he was building glittering pyramids of coin, and Washington was presently growing opulent under the magic of his eloquence. But



Mark Twain
Library of Congress

at the same time Washington was not able to ignore the cold entirely.

He was nearly as close to the stove as he could get, and yet he could not persuade himself, that he felt the slightest heat, notwithstanding the [glass] door was still gently and serenely glowing. He tried to get a trifle closer to the stove, and the consequence was, he tripped the supporting poker and the stove-door tumbled to the floor. And then there was a revelation—there was nothing in the stove but a lighted tallow-candle! . . . The Colonel was only disconcerted for a moment—he straightway found his voice again:

“I saw that the Academy of France had been testing the properties of heat, and they

came to the conclusion that it was a nonconductor or something like that, and of course its influence must necessarily be deadly in



Charles Dudley Warner
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nervous organizations with excitable temperaments, especially where there is any tendency toward rheumatic affections. What you want is the appearance of heat, not the heat itself—that’s the idea. . . . Stove with a candle in it and a transparent door—that’s it—it has been the salva-

tion of this family. Don’t you fail to write your father about it, Washington. And tell him the idea is mine. . . .”

Washington said with his blue lips that he would, but he said in his secret heart that he would promote no such iniquity. He tried to believe in the healthfulness of the invention, and succeeded tolerably well; but after all he could not feel that good health in a frozen body was any real improvement on the rheumatism.

Source: *The Gilded Age* by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner (March 2006: Modern Library, New York).

Questions to Think About

1. What political or social ills do the authors illustrate in this passage?
2. What did Sellers describe to Washington?
3. **Interpret Literature** What does the authors’ description of Sellers’ plan imply about the nature of speculation?
4. **Draw Conclusions** What does the contradiction between the Colonel’s explanation and the cold that Washington feels imply about the Colonel’s household?