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**THE REPRESENTATION OF THE AMERICA OF THE
GILDED AGE IN HENRY ADAMS'S *THE EDUCATION OF
HENRY ADAMS***

MA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The Gilded Age was a period in American history that lasted roughly from the end of the Civil War until the beginning of World War I and was characterized by industrialization, mechanization, and urbanization. In the American intellectual climate, the changes brought on a longing for the golden past—for the old pastoral landscape rather than the new urban environment of commerce and industry. In some, the crumbling of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century principles led to despair and disillusionment with America's progress. This disillusionment is exactly what characterizes the written work of the American novelist, journalist, historian, and academic Henry Brooks Adams (1838–1918). He belonged to the old American elite that were now steadily losing power and influence and whose conservative perspective is commonly disregarded by the mainstream historical narrative. The main purpose of the present thesis is to see what elements are highlighted in Adams's narrative of the Gilded Age and what his story tells us about his vision of America. The introductory part looks at the concept of history as a narrative as proposed by Hayden White. The first part offers a general picture of the social transformation undergone by the USA of the Gilded Age, whereas the analysis concentrates on how Adams in particular represents the same historical period in his work *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907/1918).

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Introduction

Historical writing has traditionally been regarded as providing objective and true accounts of past events. The assumed truthfulness of these accounts has its roots in the historical records that they are based on. In other words, historical study has conventionally been seen as a scientific endeavour that aims to discover factual truth about the past. History is treated as an unmythical area that is free from ambiguities or murkiness and can be understood in a single, universally valid way.

Contemporary study of history, however, has started to question the actual possibility of reaching any objective truth about past events. Our criteria of truth are determined by our personal beliefs about what is right and wrong and what is important in life. Our individual value judgements are thus bound to influence our perception of history. For this reason, since the second half of the twentieth century, there is a tendency among historians to be sceptical about the objectivity of historical study and to emphasize the subjective perspective that unavoidably filters all research findings in the field of history. Because historians have generally accepted that historical writing cannot be objective, they have also begun to recognize that it is inevitably narrative in character. They maintain that writing about history culminates in subjective stories about certain eras rather than objective histories.

One of such historians is Hayden White who insists on the narrative form of historical writing. White (1985: 92) lays particular emphasis on the fact that history is written in the form of certain types of narrative and that the task of the historian is to “charge [past] events with the symbolic significance of a comprehensible plot structure” so as to make a coherent story out of these events. He thus argues that historians explain past events by making stories

out of the facts contained in historical records and this is done by giving a specific plot structure to these events. As a result of this operation of “emplotment,” what emerges is a “‘story of a particular kind’—epic, romance, comedy, tragedy, or satire, as the case may be” (White 1985: 62). A set of historical events can therefore be explained and made sense of in very many different ways, depending on how the historian prefers the reader to understand them. In addition, White also suggests that when transforming a sequence of reported events into a “story of a particular kind,” historians employ the same literary devices as writers of fiction because “the techniques or strategies that they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level of their texts” (ibid.: 121). In brief, in White’s opinion, historians and “imaginative writers” (i.e. poets, novelists, playwrights) use similar forms and tools in their writing.

This suggests that historians have to interpret the materials that they are studying—on the one hand, they have to decide what facts are irrelevant for the purposes of their research and what they can consequently exclude from their narrative; on the other hand, they have to fill in the gaps that permeate their materials by drawing conclusions and inferring causal relationships between events. As White (1985: 51) puts it, “a historical narrative is /.../ necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts.” In a similar vein, Warren I. Susman (1984: xii) has stressed that “[t]he historian searches not only for truth but for meaning.” Thus the historical text is no longer predominantly seen as offering an objective truth but, instead, a culturally situated subjective viewpoint concerning an episode from the past.

Since historians are nowadays increasingly working on the assumption that all historical writing is narrative in nature, they are also increasingly willing to accept as

historical studies retrospective texts written from the individual perspective of different authors. As Susman (1984: 10) has underlined, “[h]istory is seldom the monopoly of the few, as the interpretation of the mystery of the myth may indeed be in some cultures.” Differently from the myth, history lends itself to a variety of interpretations. History is constantly rewritten as historical writing consists of stories that see history from a particular perspective and these necessarily change with time. These personalized histories are also able to help the reader comprehend a bygone age like any other examination of the past. Moreover, by making a conscious effort not to limit ourselves to a single approach and to utilize multiple perspectives on an episode from history, we will get a more rounded picture of that episode. This method of reading the past would grant validity to different approaches as well as enable critical examination of those same approaches. This critical awareness of multiple perspectives is exactly what can lead us to a more nuanced picture of historical events, with the central and marginal viewpoints represented. In the process, our understanding of the past undeniably also increases considerably which, in turn, enriches and broadens our horizons and outlook on life.

In the present thesis, the pluralistic view of history will be used in order to look at America during the so-called Gilded Age. The Gilded Age was a period in American history that lasted roughly from the end of the Civil War till the beginning of World War I and was characterized by major changes in society that were related to nationalization, industrialization, mechanization, and urbanization. All of these developments, which also led to transformations in American values and consciousness, were hailed by most Americans as indications and proofs of the country’s progress. In some groups of the population, however, they caused disillusionment and distress and evoked harsh social criticism. Among the pessimistic minority was the American novelist, journalist, historian, and academic Henry Brooks Adams (1838–1918). He was not a central figure among the social critics and authors

of that time. However, he offers a rare perspective from which to view the United States of his time because he belonged to the old New England elite that were now steadily losing power and influence. Adams thus provides a valuable conservative addition to the vantage point of the usually progressive mainstream critics of post-Civil War America.

The thesis therefore offers two perspectives on that transition period in US history. The following part presents a traditional picture of the Gilded Age that is projected to the reader by most of the large number of historians who have written on the episode in American history. The next section will continue by looking at how Adams in particular represents the same historical period in his work *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907/1918). Thus the empirical analysis will focus on the Gilded Age as seen through Henry Adams's perspective. The main purpose is to see what elements are highlighted in Adams's narrative of the Gilded Age and what his narrative tells us about his vision of America.

The America of the Gilded Age and the Role of Henry Adams in Its Intellectual Climate

The American Industrial Revolution took place in a period between two great wars, the American Civil War (1861–1865) and the First World War (1914–1918). In less than fifty years, the United States of America developed from a country of small agricultural communities into a great industrial power with numerous big cities. Industrial technology had been dominating many areas of American society already from well before the Civil War, and the war further increased industrialization and commerce. Nevertheless, at the time “the presence of the open frontier still helped sustain an image of a rural, agrarian, unmechanical America” (Lee and Reinders 1989: 212). However, with the end of the economic depression of the 1870s, the United States embarked on a period which saw a growth in industrialization and urbanization unprecedented in the country’s history. As historical statistics indicate, increases in gross national production were much more rapid than population growth and the former actually tripled between 1882–86 (\$11.3 billion) and 1912–16 (\$38.9 billion). Capital in manufacturing industries (in 1929 dollars) increased from \$2.7 billion in 1879 to \$20.8 billion in 1914. In short, America was now competing with such great industrial nations as Great Britain and Germany and its industrial growth was faster than in both countries combined (Lee and Reinders 1989: 212). As a result, the American landscape and consciousness inevitably changed.

Urbanization was a direct result of the Industrial Revolution because factories were situated in cities and this led to the growth in urban population. The American cities grew at an astonishing rate as they were flooded by immigrants and displaced rural workers who were

hoping to find employment. Most immigrants to urban areas came from farms and villages because thanks to mechanization, agriculture required less human labour. In addition, large urban centres were increasingly being settled by foreign-born residents, mainly from southern and eastern Europe. Whereas in 1860 only one American in six lived in a community of at least 8,000 people, by 1900, one in three did so. Between 1860 and 1900, the urban population rose four times, while the rural population only doubled (Cashman 1988: 118). As a result of the vast numbers of people coming to live in urban areas, cities already established grew at a pace the world had never witnessed before.

The railroad revolution in transportation and the telegraph and telephone revolutions in communication both reduced distances between cities and brought the products of industries scattered over widely dispersed urban centres to various parts of the country. Many areas were thus able to benefit from industrial technology and from the revolutions in transportation and communication. Owing to the significant increase in the influence of business in America and the changes that took place in business organization after the Civil War, the American city was transformed from simply a big city to a commercial metropolis by the turn of the century. The metropolis was characterized by tall buildings—offices, factories, and apartment houses—which also helped to distinguish it from the countryside. The city therefore offered new surroundings that the migrants to urban centres were not used to. The soaring skyscraper became to symbolize urbanism and its triumph. As Sean Dennis Cashman (1988: 118) has observed, “[i]n the late nineteenth century, American cities were unsurpassed for the scope of their activities, the scale of their skyscrapers, and their general spectacle and sound.” The American city was thus considered to be the centre of civilized life during the Gilded Age.

Rapid developments in the US industry were then what eventually led to the America of the Gilded Age. The period that lasted roughly from the end of the Civil War till the

beginning of World War I was characterized by seemingly boundless economic expansion and the emergence of a new American nation, which had completed the conquest of its vast Western territories and was taking the lead among other nations in industry and trade. In addition to the continental expansion, America also extended its sphere of influence over areas in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and in the Caribbean Sea. Like for major European powers such the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy, the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century were a time of imperialist policies also for the United States. In 1867, America bought Alaska from Russia and this marked the first step in the country's expansion beyond its continental borders. In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States also began to control or influence many islands in the Caribbean Sea (e.g., Cuba, Puerto Rico), in the mid-Pacific (e.g., Guam), and those close to the Asian mainland (e.g., the Philippines). The war thus marked a turning point in US history because a former colony was becoming a colonist. The aim of American expansionism was to protect the country's economic and military interests. On a theoretical level, the doctrine of "manifest destiny" was relied upon according to which the United States had a right and duty to serve as an example for the rest of the world and thus, as it was assumed, also to expand abroad (Cincotta 1994: 194–198). In short, America came of age during the Gilded Age. The country moved away from self-containment and isolation to become a true world power whose influence grew overseas.

Yet, the Gilded Age period was framed by two disasters in American political life—the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in 1865 and of President William McKinley in 1901, with a third tragedy—the murder of President James Garfield in 1881—dividing the period. Moreover, the rise in economy was not untainted either. This is reflected already in the label "the Gilded Age" itself, which comes from the title of a 1873 utopian satire by Mark

Twain and Charles Dudley Warner who in turn were inspired by William Shakespeare's words. Later generations have generally agreed with Mark Twain that "what should have been an age golden with industrial opportunity turned out, instead, to be gilded, guilded, and guilt-ridden" (Cashman 1988: 3). Only the surface glittered.

The importance of appearances for the Gilded Age becomes evident in the characteristic ostentatious displays of wealth by the new, arguably autocratic American plutocracy made up of industrialists, financiers, and politicians who were interested in showing off their affluence and opulent lifestyles. Society was also interested in invention and commercial speculation. On the other hand, in addition to industrialization, incorporation, and immigration, the period also witnessed a lack of concern for the special needs of immigrants and Native Americans, and an intolerance towards African Americans, labour unions, and political dissidents. Thus, there were many social problems which threatened the very fabric of American society during the Gilded Age. As Cashman (1988: 2) describes the reality:

The West was settled at a fatal cost to the American Indian. The South was tied back to the Union at a humiliating cost to the American black. There were two depressions, in 1873 and 1893, each with devastating effects on the economy. The amazing industrial expansion of the United States was accomplished with considerable exploitation of factory artisans. The splendors of the new cities rose amid the squalor of industrial slums.

In short, the postwar American society was considered decadent and avoided confrontation with unresolved social issues. In addition to those mentioned above they also concerned women. They had begun to fight for equality with men before the law, the right to vote, and equal opportunities in education and employment. By the end of the nineteenth century, the feminist movement, which was led by individuals like Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, had made headway as compared to the time of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, the first women's rights convention in the world. Most states now allowed

women to sue, to enter into contracts, and to keep their property in their own name. In several western states, they were already also able to vote. Women enjoyed access to an increasing number of colleges and universities, and they had in a large part joined the paid labour force to work in factories as well as in clerical, secretarial, and sales positions (Contosta 1980: 113). Women's place in American society was therefore clearly changing and they had won several important victories against political and social inequality.

At the same time, as David Herbert Donald has paraphrased Robert H. Wiebe (1967: vii), “beneath all these surface ripples of rapid change, there lay a deep-flowing current, which gave unity and meaning to the period as a whole.” Wiebe essentially argues that this “distended society” was searching for organizing principles which could lay the basis for a viable social order in an emerging new world of conformity and urban anonymity. American values thus changed fundamentally in the years after the Civil War—from those characteristic of the small town in the 1880s to those associated with an urban-industrial society by 1920. At the end of the Reconstruction period, most Americans still held on to the values of the village and believed in individualism, *laissez-faire*, progress, and a divinely-ordained social system. However, these conventional nineteenth-century beliefs were tested and transformed during the last decades of the century by the growth of science and technology, industrialism, urbanization, immigration, and economic depressions. As Lee and Reinders (1989: 218) have put it, “[r]ural traditions and localism, linchpins of identity, broke down in urban anonymity.” People in cities were less self-sufficient and shared weaker bonds than members of small town and rural communities. As a result, the old world-view crumbled.

The cultural gap between the city and the countryside grew wider as it became more and more obvious that the old ways and the old values would no longer suit the modern world. Wiebe maintains that it was “a new middle class” who showed the way into the modern world

and developed a new set of values which would be more appropriate in the changed circumstances and more helpful in addressing twentieth-century issues. This new middle class consisted mainly of urban professional men as well as women. They emphasized the importance of “continuity and regularity, functionality and rationality, administration and management” (Wiebe 1967: viii), which gradually became the new dominant values. The new value system clashed with the nineteenth-century values of ethnic background and wealth. It also led the new middle class to see “the need for a government of continuous involvement” (ibid.: viii). Instead of the personal and informal ways of the community, urban-industrial life called for bureaucratic order and centralized administration. Thus the new middle class wanted a system of official rules and ways of doing things in order to ensure political stability, to prevent the corruption of public life, and to protect themselves against industrial titans and the government itself. In short, social reforms seemed urgent.

The sense of urgency led to the Progressive movement which could be seen as the triumph of the new middle class. The phenomenon involved a variety of reform movements that flourished in the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under the presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William H. Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Link and McCormick 1983: 34–47). Progressivism historically advocates workers' rights, social justice, anti-trust laws, and the regulation of large corporations and monopolies. The general aim was to improve living and working conditions for the common people and to achieve as much social stability as possible. The Progressive movement therefore offered a counterforce in the time of businessmen who have frequently been identified as robber barons: steel tycoons like Andrew Carnegie, oil magnates like John D. Rockefeller, financial tycoons like John Pierpont Morgan, railroad magnates like James J. Hill and Collis Potter Huntington. As a natural reaction against the power and avarice of wealthy entrepreneurs, there was a call

to protect the workers, to help disadvantaged people, and to contribute to the progress of less developed areas. For example, Andrew Carnegie himself also embarked upon a philanthropic career. His early gifts to Allegheny City and Pittsburgh helped to create his public image as a generous benefactor and this would later be strengthened by his numerous charities (Cashman 1988: 92–93). Carnegie’s generosity, whether inspired by selfish motives or not, set a good example to other successful businessmen and proved his own statement that “[n]ot evil, but good has come to the race from the accumulation of wealth by those who have the ability and energy to produce it” (cited in Lee and Reinders 1989: 226–227). In addition, in 1889, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr co-founded in Chicago a social settlement house called Hull House which offered social and educational opportunities for working class people and was one of the first settlement houses in the United States. These multiplied in the upcoming century and by the outbreak of World War I, many settlements had developed into “centers of efficient procedure and expert management” (Wiebe 1967: 150).

As can be seen from the above, the Gilded Age contained multiple contradictory developments. On the one hand, there was the desire to amass huge personal fortunes and to display one’s wealth. On the other hand, there was the wish to engage in philanthropic activities, to protect the workers, and to reduce social injustice. Alan Trachtenberg (1982:5) has concluded that “[o]n the threshold of a process that would transform America and a good part of the world, the Gilded Age marked a watershed of clashing perspectives and practices.” This underlines the contradictory nature of the period.

In brief, “[f]actories and cities, and an acceptance of their life-styles and discipline, had created a new reality” (Lee and Reinders 1989: 231). Railroads and, later, highways served to diminish the old distinctions between rural and urban areas. The Gilded Age thus signifies a period in American history where so much changed very fast. Trachtenberg (1982:5) has

remarked that virtually every aspect of American life was affected and altered: “politics, education, family life, literature, the arts.” However, he also points out that in many ways it was “a period of trauma, of change so swift and thorough that many Americans seemed unable to fathom the extent of the upheaval” (ibid.).

In the American intellectual climate, the changes brought on a longing for the golden past—for the old pastoral landscape rather than the new urban environment of commerce and industry. The old pastoral landscape was associated with idyllic surroundings and a strong sense of traditional moral, ethical, and religious values, whereas the new urban and industrial America suggested widespread corruption, highly dubious links between politicians and businessmen, slums and the poverty of the masses, as well as materialism, vulgarity, and confusion. In many, the loss of America’s past value system precluded feelings of excitement about the society’s major transformation within a generation. This was especially notable among the Boston-centred literary establishment of the time. As Lee and Reinders (1989: 218) have observed, “American culture at that time was backward looking, more aware of lost innocence than future power.” In the face of the chaotic and complicated modern world, the crumbling of the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century principles and ideals was watched with despair by the pessimistic minority and caused disillusionment with America’s progress.

One of such contemporaries for whom the deep changes seemed baffling and difficult to come to terms with was the American novelist, journalist, historian, and academic Henry Brooks Adams (1838–1918). He was born in Boston, Massachusetts into what was one of the most prominent families in the United States during the late eighteenth century through early twentieth century. Denis William Brogan writes that the Adams family combines “a great role in history with an astonishingly high level, generation after generation, of intellectual competence and achievement” (in Adams 1961: vii). The family could trace their roots back to

the New England of the 1630s. Both Henry Adams's paternal grandfather, John Quincy Adams, and his paternal great-grandfather, John Adams, had been US Presidents, and his father, Charles Francis Adams, Sr., was a United States Congressman and the US Ambassador to the United Kingdom. In addition, his maternal grandfather, Peter Chardon Brooks, was a millionaire and Boston's wealthiest citizen (Contosta 1980: 3), and his maternal great-grandfather, Nathaniel Gorham, was one of the people who signed the US Constitution. Thus Henry Adams had a very distinctive and distinguished social background and represented the old New England and the old American elite. In the words of John Carlos Rowe (1988: 647): "In 1838, no child in the Western world could be said to have had *better* chances of worldly success than the child born Henry Adams." On the other hand, Denis William Brogan has argued that "[i]t is no light thing to be born a Bostonian, but to be both a Bostonian and an Adams was indeed a heritage that was goodly but might also be damaging" (in Adams 1961: ix). The negative side of such an inheritance can be explained by two main reasons.

To begin with, being a Bostonian and an Adams also meant that Henry Adams belonged in mind, education, and prejudices to an earlier time than the age of capitalism and industrialism. Boston had been founded by Puritans and the Puritan legacy was also preserved in the Adamses. Charles Francis Adams, Sr. and his family had moved away from orthodox Calvinism long ago, but still stood by the old Puritan conviction that Boston represented a "latter-day City on a Hill." They believed in the superiority of the New England's way of life and considered themselves responsible for setting moral and intellectual standards for the nation as a whole (Contosta 1980: 4). As the enlightened elite destined to lead their brethren, privileged Bostonians prioritized conduct, learning, and service of the state. Charles Francis Adams, Sr. similarly expected his six children—Louisa, John Quincy II, Charles Francis, Jr., Henry, Mary, and Brooks—to live up to the high family standards and expectations. Henry

himself set out to obediently meet them. He was an 1858 graduate of Harvard University, went to Germany to study civil law, and became very early a private secretary to his father, serving both when Charles Francis Adams, Sr. was a member of the US House of Representatives and when he was the United States Minister to the United Kingdom. Thus Henry Adams had started his life in the way appropriate to his social position as an Adams.

However, as the profound changes took place in American life and values, he was finding it increasingly difficult to adjust his Puritan and Enlightenment legacy to the demands of his own era and modern conditions. In the new world transformed by science, technology, sociology, and figures like Charles Darwin, Auguste Comte, and Karl Marx, the old religious and political truths and the assumptions of Boston no longer seemed to hold. As a result, Henry Adams began to question and rebel against the certainties of his Puritan and Enlightenment heritage. His rationalism and intellectualism led him to abandon the religious faith of his childhood and to become an agnostic. He devoted himself to a search for the law of historical evolution and for a civilization that had given people a happy, free, and humane life. In the evening of his days, the Middle Ages with their mysticism and adoration of the Virgin Mary began to represent to him the “glory of all human existence” (Parrington 1987: 220). That is to say, in the later years of his life he came again to value faith and, moreover, described himself half-whimsically with the curious and perhaps conflicting compound of “Conservative Christian Anarchist.”

Henry Adams could therefore never completely detach himself from his Puritan ancestors or break away from his past. His paradoxical and complex personality is in fact something that is often remarked upon by historians. David R Contosta (1980: 8) explains that there were always two contradictory sides to his character. The part that wanted to meet family standards and expectations was represented by Boston. The other, rebellious part that resented

being an Adams was represented by the rural Quincy where his grandfather John Quincy Adams resided. Henry is usually depicted as the “child of [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau, of the romantic movement” (D. W. Brogan, in Adams 1961: v) who idealized a simple village life with simple virtues. However, Rowe (1988: 646) points out that “Adams’s romantic gestures more often than not end up affirming the Enlightenment values of his family.” Even the symbols he uses in his most eccentric works, including the *Dynamo*, the *Virgin*, and the *Church of the Ara Coeli* in Rome, depend on the human mind to recognize what is beyond its rational limits. They therefore reveal his faith in human rationality and universality of reason, even if romantics helped him to discover the psychological and linguistic aspects of such reason and therefore also to increase his understanding of its scope and complexity. To put it shortly, “[o]ur continuing interest in Henry Adams may well be a consequence of the ways his writings incorporate the shared concerns of the Enlightenment, romanticism, and modernism” (Rowe 1988: 647). He expresses his disillusionment with modernity and emphasizes the ills of the modern world.

Secondly, being a Bostonian and an Adams made Henry Adams part of the tiny minority of American population that could previously be regarded as the nation’s aristocracy, but who was now steadily losing its power and influence and could no longer be so certain of its position or role in society. The old elite were gradually being displaced by robber barons and industrial tycoons like, for example, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and John Pierpont Morgan. These captains of business now moved to the fore and their word assumed more and more authority and sway. As a result, Henry and his siblings were forced to witness gloomily how their social status was sliding and how their country was slipping from their grasp. This contributed to Henry Adams’s growing scepticism and pessimism. As a conservative, he was doubtful of the ideals and accomplishments of the middle class and

questioned the social order created by the Industrial Revolution. He could not accept the old pastoral America being destroyed in the name of this kind of progress. As Vernon Louis Parrington (1987: 216) argues: “He had no wish to dwell in a bankers’ paradise. Dislike of a capitalistic society was in his blood. From father to son all the Adamses had distrusted capitalism and hated State Street¹.” Henry’s New England background and his famous family were thus major causes of his disillusionment with the United States.

In brief, Henry Adams did not feel at home and comfortable in the new world of the Gilded Age. Because of his eighteenth-century mind, education, and prejudices, he could not accept its acquisitive society and ubiquitous government. In other words, he was “too completely the intellectual, too aloof from his generation in spirit and will, to ally himself with the economic masters of the Gilded Age” (Parrington 1987: 215). During his stay in Britain as his father’s private secretary, Adams became familiar with and under the influence of the works by John Stuart Mill. Mill’s *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) demonstrated to him that the masses should be led by an enlightened, moral, and intelligent elite because the common people are subject to demagoguery, ignorance, and corruption. It also became clear to Adams that under modern conditions, he could not anymore best fulfil his family duties of serving the American public and providing necessary leadership to the US government while working in politics. He was an old-fashioned Jeffersonian whose favourite statement was that “[p]ower is poison” (Parrington 1987: 226).

Adams’s feelings of alienation from modern America thus concerned not only capitalism, but also politics. His abilities and family connections enabled him to embark on a number of careers pursued by his ancestors and suggested to him by worried relatives,

¹ State Street—a major north-south thoroughfare in Chicago, Illinois that became a shopping destination during the 1900s.

including legal, political, and teaching careers. Being very self-conscious, however, he was searching for an occupation that could guarantee him a more private and independent existence. In the end, he decided to move to Washington, D. C. in order to become a general man of letters and practice journalism. His purpose was to stay true to the democratic ideal of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by revealing political corruption and ignorance in his journalistic pieces. This proves that he still shared his forebears' belief that an Adams must always be an exemplary or representative citizen and promote public welfare. It has also been argued that his choice of the career of a general man of letters proved to be a "perfect compromise between his inescapable heritage and his need for individual authority, as well as a means of balancing Enlightenment values with romantic inclinations" (Rowe 1988: 648–649).

Following the tragic suicide of his wife in 1885, Henry Adams started to travel extensively and established himself as a globetrotter. Because of his self-conscious and restless character, he did not find it easy to settle down in a place and would always feel a stranger among his generation and in his surroundings. As Oscar Handlin (in Contosta 1980: viii) has explained it:

Unwilling to share the values that society adopted, he drifted apart, all the while seeking explanations for developments of which he disapproved. In the process he acquired the strategic perspective for incisive analysis of his country at a time of transition.

As a result, Henry Adams became one of the maturing nation's most prolific political observers and perceptive critics. In the words of J. C. Levenson (1968: 1): "Henry Adams offers to his fellow Americans the richest and most challenging image of what they are, what they have been, and what they may become." He wrote poems; innumerable articles and essays; several biographies, including *The Life of Albert Gallatin* (1879), *John Randolph* (1882), and *The Life of George Cabot Lodge* (1911); two novels—*Democracy: An American*

Novel (1880) and *Esther: A Novel* (1884); a work of architecture, history, religion, and poetry called *Mont Saint Michel and Charters: A Study of Thirteenth-Century Unity* (1904); and a monumental history of his country in the years 1801–1817 (nine volumes, 1889–1891): *History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (four volumes) and *History of the United States of America During the Administrations of James Madison* (five volumes). Thus Adams was clearly a very productive writer who engaged in many different forms of writing.

However, he is probably best known for *The Education of Henry Adams*, which was privately distributed among his friends in 1907 and posthumously published in 1918. Taking a world-weary and pessimistic attitude, Adams describes what he saw as the decline of the American nation and its politics. His faith in America and in its ability to fulfil the manifest destiny was actually never restored. The following part of the present thesis moves away from the general picture of the Gilded Age that the reader can obtain from most of what make up the massive collection of works that scholars have produced on that period in American history. Instead, the analysis will look at the *Education* and focus on the Gilded Age as seen through specifically Henry Adams's perspective.

The Representation of the America of the Gilded Age in Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams*

The Education of Henry Adams could be regarded as Adams's most widely read work. It was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1919 and has been reprinted several times, showing that it is an enduring piece of writing which still has something to say about the crucial period of transition from Old to New World dominance.

In the work, the author refers to himself in the third person as a character called Henry Adams and treats himself as the object of an educational process. It has been argued that Adams distances the author from the actor so as to bring rational order to his world and to reduce the possibility of intimate self-revelation (Stone 1982: 43). Publishers have called the work an autobiography although Henry Adams himself has insisted that it should not be taken as one (Rowe 1988: 645). Adams claimed that his main purpose was to write a history of his time as seen through the eyes of this character who is an Everyman.

The book can be divided into three parts (Hochfield 1962: 116). The first part deals mostly with Adams's childhood and formative years, concentrating on the author's personality and the events of his private life. Secondly, the author looks at the world around him and offers a critique of his own time. Finally, in the third part of the work, the author becomes even more general and explains his theory of history. Although the three parts of the book are dependent upon one another and form a unitary whole, they can still be distinguished from each other and analyzed separately. The present section of the thesis will look more closely at the author's critique of his time and his representation of the USA of the Gilded Age. In analyzing Adams's view of his country during this transition period, the method of close

reading of the text will be employed. Furthermore, it is assumed that the book reflects certain elements of the historical context in which it was born and the author's social background. The *Education* is therefore treated as a subjective document of its own time that views the historical period from a particular perspective. Thus the analysis will rely on the ideas proposed by Hayden White who, as was discussed in the introductory part of the thesis, has also compared history to a narrative that is told from a certain viewpoint and with the help of story-telling devices. White's theory suits the purposes of the analysis because the theory emphasizes the subjective nature of making sense of a historical era. In this connection, it should be stressed that Henry Adams similarly cannot be an objective observer of American culture because he was born into that same culture and, furthermore, into a particular social status inside that culture. These factors will be taken into consideration while analyzing the work. However, his very position as a specifically situated individual gives special relevance to his narrative as it complements the picture of the era with a perspective that gets excluded from mainstream narrative.

To begin with, what becomes evident is that Adams is greatly concerned over the state of American politics of the era. His comments show that Adams had very little faith in postbellum American politics and politicians, judging the latter to be irresponsible, selfish, and morally lax. As was observed in the previous part of the thesis, he was an old-fashioned Jeffersonian who believed that "[p]ower is poison." He saw America as moving away from the democratic ideal and Puritan principles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Being a conservative and a Puritan, he felt such developments to be undesirable and disgraceful. According to the claims of social Darwinism which was prevalent in society at the time, societies progressed through stages of increasing development. However, when he looked at

American politics and politicians in the immediate postwar period, Adams was discouraged from believing in the evolutionary progress of America.

His disappointment started from the highest level of the White House. He draws the reader's attention to the fact that, in his opinion, the leading Union general, Ulysses Grant, who was elected president after the war failed to bring order back to administration and to implement the reforms that were needed to restore the health and stability of the country. As he phrases it: "A great soldier might be a baby politician" (Adams 1961: 262). Above all, he was struck by a stark contrast between Grant as president and, on the other hand, celebrated political leaders from the past:

That, two thousand years after Alexander the Great and Julius Cæsar, a man like Grant should be called—and should actually and truly be—the highest product of the most advanced evolution, made evolution ludicrous. One must be as commonplace as Grant's own commonplaces to maintain such an absurdity. The progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant, was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin. (Adams 1961: 266)

For Adams, the incompetence, weakness, and simplicity of President Grant thus made the war hero compare unfavourably with past leaders from the earliest political histories of both America and the rest of the world. This seemed to contradict the hypothesis of Darwinian evolutionists that societies underwent evolutionary progress. On the contrary, it appeared to suggest that America was regressing and this regression was towards a worse condition than in the past. This was clearly confusing to the author in the light of social Darwinism but also social progress in general. The argument becomes clearer if we recognize that Adams's definition of progress did not coincide with what his contemporaries predominantly saw as progress. He esteemed moral progress the highest, whereas most Americans evidently valued industrial and territorial expansion, defining progress in scientific and technological terms. Therefore, when Adams asked himself what progress had taken place in the evolution of

America, he concluded that there was little reason for excitement. Most importantly, this and other similar remarks reveal that Adams was convinced of the declining condition of America. It was obvious to him that the country needed more and stronger intellectual leadership if the American experiment were ever to succeed and the country were to become a beacon to other nations of the world, as the Founding Fathers had hoped and dreamed.

Adams's disillusionment about his country's progress also becomes evident through his comments about President Grant's administration. He found that the American political system was suffering from widespread government corruption. Adams was convinced of the shamelessness of politicians as well as of the willingness of the majority of people to accept this. The following statement can be brought out by way of illustration:

Grant's administration outraged every rule of ordinary decency, but scores of promising men, whom the country could not well spare, were ruined in saying so. The world cared little for decency. What it wanted it, did not know; probably a system that would work, and men who could work it; but it found neither. (Adams 1961: 280)

Adams thus argues in a straightforward way that the people in government service seemed to lack a sense of decency, but members of American society who did possess that quality were being pushed to the margins of the community. He also suggests that he himself was forced to the periphery of society instead of the centre and thus clearly to a different position from his ancestors. He describes his movement into opposition to the government: "The Administration drove him, and thousands of other young men, into active enmity, not only to Grant, but to the system or want of system, which took possession of the President" (Adams 1961: 281–282). In short, Adams abhorred the quality of postwar American government. To him, it showed that "[t]he moral law had expired—like the Constitution" (Adams 1961: 280). As a result, being a conservative who could not cast aside the Boston state of mind of his upbringing, Adams suffered agonies over the lost *status quo* and principles. The remarks also underline the mental

confusion of the increasingly urban and industrial America which was looking for a social order or “system” that would be more viable under the changed circumstances. What anguished Adams was that in the face of the complicated and chaotic modern world, America was also distancing itself from the rules of conduct that formed the basis of the old social order. This is reflected in the following lines:

The system of 1789 had broken down, and with it the eighteenth-century fabric of *a priori*, or moral, principles. Politicians had tacitly given it up. Grant’s administration marked the avowal. (Adams 1961: 280–281)

This understanding coloured his whole perception of politics and politicians. He came to view political methods and tactics in a very negative light, claiming that “[t]he selfishness of politics was the earliest of all political education” (Adams 1961: 279). Clearly there were no doubts left in his mind about the corruptive power of politics. All of these developments to which Adams gives prominence here were also what caused him to feel alienated from modern America and to yearn for the golden past and the old pastoral landscape that he connected in his mind to traditional American values and morality.

His feelings of alienation from modern America grew deeper as it became more and more evident that the country was moving towards adopting an industrial capitalist system as the alternative for the old social order. Adams clearly acknowledges the fact that America was changing into a capitalistic and acquisitive society:

For a hundred years, between 1793 and 1893, the American people has hesitated, vacillated, swayed forward and back, between two forces, one simply industrial, the other capitalistic, centralizing and mechanical. In 1893, the issue came on the single gold standard [as the basis of the US currency], and the majority at last declared itself, once for all, in favor of the capitalistic system with all its necessary machinery. All one’s friends, all one’s best citizens, reformers, churches, colleges, educated classes, had joined the banks to force submission to capitalism; a submission long foreseen by the mere law of mass. Of all forms of society or government, this was the one he liked least, but his likes or dislikes were as antiquated as the rebel doctrine of State rights. A capitalistic system had been adopted, and if it were to be run at all, it must be run by capital and by capitalistic methods /.../. (Adams 1961: 344)

The author thus witnessed a triumph of capitalism in the postwar era. What is also revealed here is that Adams makes no secret of his dislike and distrust of the capitalist worldview. As the theoretical part of the present paper claimed, this distrust and dislike were “in his blood” and inherited from his ancestors. The comment below similarly serves to indicate his profound doubts about the social order created by the Industrial Revolution:

He had, in a half-hearted way, struggled all his life against State Street, banks, capitalism altogether, as he knew it in old England or new England /.../. (Adams 1961: 335)

He asserts his romantic anti-capitalist position in an even stronger statement where he candidly refers to feelings of disgust rather than simply to an unenthusiastic protest:

[T]owards bankers Adams felt the narrow prejudice which the serf feels to his overseer; for he knew he must obey, and he knew that the helpless showed only their helplessness when they tempered obedience by mockery. The world, after 1865, became a bankers’ world, and no banker would ever trust one who had deserted State Street /.../. To him, the banking mind was obnoxious /.../. (Adams 1961: 247–248)

Much of Adams’s dislike of capitalism can be traced back to the fact that it often leads to materialism and a hunger for money and possessions. Thus people become selfish and greedy which distracts them from aspiring towards higher ideals and morality. As Adams saw it, the rise of capitalism and materialism in modern America showed that money-making had become more important for the nation than the ideals and principles of the Puritan founders. Strict adherence to these ideals and principles, however, was absolutely essential for the success of the American experiment because it relied heavily on the wisdom and virtue of its people. Without these qualities, Americans would clearly not be able to set moral and intellectual standards for the rest of the world. Yet, in the context of modern materialism, Adams felt very much alone with his Puritan convictions and therefore arguably also hopeless about the American experiment:

He stood up for his eighteenth century, his Constitution of 1789, his George Washington, his Harvard College, his Quincy, and his Plymouth Pilgrims, as long as any one would stand up

with him. He had said it was hopeless twenty years before, but he had kept on, in the same old attitude, by habit and taste, until he found himself altogether alone. He had hugged his antiquated dislike of bankers and capitalistic society until he had become a little better than a crank. (Adams 1961: 343–344)

Adams therefore alludes to his dedication to the eighteenth-century principles and his refusal to desert them, even though this seemed to make him hopelessly out of touch with his age. A similar sentiment is also expressed in the following passage where the author apparently accuses the new social order of neglecting the individual and past truths:

While the country braced itself up to an effort such as no one had thought within its powers, the individual crawled as he best could, through the wreck, and found many values of life upset. (Adams 1961: 346)

The quotation below also serves to show how the new system had ushered in a completely new era and acted like a force that violently and blindly destroyed anything that could be considered conventional:

The new American, whether consciously or not, had turned his back on the nineteenth century before he was done with it; the gold standard, the protective system, and the laws of mass could have no other outcome, and, as so often before, the movement, once accelerated by attempting to impede it, had the additional, brutal consequence of crushing equally the good and the bad that stood in its way. (Adams 1961: 349)

Comments such as this clearly show that Henry Adams did not feel much respect for the methods or manners of his time. His education and upbringing had stressed the reality of ideals and he continued to believe in fixed moral principles. Judging by those standards, he could see signs of widespread deterioration in American culture. Everything that was stable or conventional now seemed to be attacked. As Adams (1961: 346) himself puts it somewhat more dramatically: “[m]uch that had made life pleasant between 1870 and 1890 perished in the ruin.” This also supports the point raised in the theoretical part of the present paper that he felt sceptical about the ideals and accomplishments of the middle class who had created a society characterized by a “protective system” and a ubiquitous government. After all, he was

a follower of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who idealized a simple village life where people lived in a free society and according to a divinely-ordained hierarchical social system. The new society which was dominated by the values of the new middle class and relied on government interference had led to the “laws of the mass.” Adams’s disapproving reference to the “laws of the mass” indicates that he had little faith in the common people. As David R. Contosta (1980: 31–33) has shown, he was influenced by Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill who emphasized that the democratic masses needed the direction and guidance of enlightened and moral elite. The fact that the American people had fallen under the spell of capitalism and were diverging from what Adams viewed as the right path envisioned by the Founding Fathers proved to him that a society could really be in need of what Contosta (1980: 32) has called “enlightened public servants.” They serve the purpose of providing the society with honest, moral, and educated leadership when the common people are letting their moral standards fall. The cultured elite should therefore be privileged and promoted over the misguided masses whom they should lead. In the American context, the aristocratic elite could help the nation to find its way back to the values that the forefathers had in mind when they settled in the country.

In addition to being a threat to idealism, Adams also suggests that modern American capitalism challenged the very sovereignty of the US government. He highlights in his work the corruption of the government by business interests during the Gilded Age by referring to the governing body as “a banker’s Olympus which had become, for five-and-twenty years, more and more despotic” (Adams 1961: 321). Thus he perceives the country to have fallen into the hands of autocratic plutocrats. The greedy entrepreneurs who had recently amassed huge personal fortunes seemed to have corrupted the political system. The questionable links between politicians and businessmen showed to him the potential danger of a capitalist

system. More importantly, it demonstrated that the American people were not electing wise and virtuous men to lead them but such who succumbed to the forces of ignorance, corruption, and demagoguery. Doubtless, the American experiment was at great peril.

The ubiquitous government was another alarming signal for Adams. He was firmly convinced that government should not interfere in the economy and that people involved in politics should cast aside their economic interests. Otherwise the public interest would be jeopardized:

[H]e had never in his life taken politics for a pursuit of economy. One might have a political or an economical policy; one could not have both at the same time. This was heresy in the English school, but it had always been law in the American. (Adams 1961: 335)

With his eighteenth-century mind, Adams therefore still held on to the principle of *laissez-faire* and considered the state regulation of private businesses to be both futile and dangerous. Due to his position as an old-fashioned Jeffersonian, he was also strongly anti-federalist and objected on principle to the concept of a dominant centralized federal government. A powerful central government was repugnant to him because he saw it as a threat to the freedom and primacy of the individual—personal liberties previously seen as the cornerstones of American society were supposedly at stake. However, the Jeffersonian model of society could not be applicable under the changed circumstances of the Gilded Age. The new urban and industrial context rendered bureaucratic order and centralized administration inevitable in order to ensure political stability, to prevent the corruption of public life, and to protect the individual against moneyed interests and the potentially tyrannical government itself. For Adams, this kind of a social order seemed erroneous and unfeasible because he was attracted to the idea of a free society and had a very pessimistic view of the people working in government service. The fact that the author witnessed the emergence of a powerful federal government in America

after the Civil War was thus another sign to him that the nation was in decline and losing sight of the values cherished by the founders.

However, Adams's dislike of the capitalist system can partly also be related to a sense that the prestige of his own class was declining. As was already discussed in the first part of the thesis, the triumph of capitalism also brought along a steady increase in the power and influence of the newly rich businessmen. As a result, Henry Adams and other members of the old New England aristocracy could no longer be certain of their role or position in society. In the words of David R. Contosta (1980: 97): "The fact that many Americans idolized the 'captains of industry,' while ignoring the steady and sober competence of the old elite, galled Adams and his class." The patricians resented the fact that the word of the *nouveaux riches* businessmen assumed more and more authority, even though the latter did not always believe in the idea of *noblesse oblige*. That is, differently from the displaced old elite, the modern capitalist did not necessarily recognize that out of their privileged position in society arose an obligation to set a moral example to the American nation. What Adams appears to overlook here is that the magnates actually donated huge sums of their money to charities and practised philanthropy to an extent that was unheard of in human history. Thus they clearly also contributed to the improvement of public welfare. Nevertheless, it troubled the author that Americans looked up to these industrial titans and made him only more apprehensive about the future.

Moreover, it seemed to Adams and his class that their country was not interested anymore in the moral guidance of the old aristocracy and that it considered their services in government to have lost their usefulness and value. This becomes evident in the following extract:

America had no use for Adams because he was eighteenth-century, and yet it worshipped Grant because he was archaic and should have lived in a cave and worn skins. (Adams 1961: 266)

Thus, with the help of irony, the author conveys his indignation at the devaluation of his eighteenth-century education and principles. Adams resented the fact that because of his eighteenth-century values and his admiration of the Middle Ages, the nation seemed to regard him as an old-fashioned remnant from the past. At the same time, society showed great respect to President Grant without realizing what the author saw as obvious, that the former actually belonged to an even more archaic period when people lived in an uncivilized state and with an undeveloped moral sense. Warren I. Susman (1984: xxii) has commented that “[t]he older culture—Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist—demanded something it called ‘character,’ which stressed moral qualities, whereas the newer culture insisted on ‘personality,’ which emphasized being liked and admired.” As a result of such developments, Adams could not enjoy the power and influence of his forefathers. This was now done by individuals who, as far as Adams was concerned, had little to offer to society and whose standards were not up to par. To its own detriment, society was lowering its criteria for national leaders. Members of the community who did measure up to the old yardstick set by the founders were not welcome in the Government any longer:

All Boston, all New England, and all respectable New England, including Charles Francis Adams the father and Charles Francis Adams the son, agreed that Washington was no place for a respectable young. All Washington, including Presidents, Cabinet officers, Judiciary, Senators, Congressmen, and clerks, expressed the same opinion, and conspired to drive away every young man who happened to be there, or tried to approach. Not one young man of promise remained in the Government service. All drifted into opposition. The Government did not want them in Washington. (Adams 1961: 296)

In short, social circumstances had changed and values different from Puritan standards had become dominant in society. Staying true to the old principles no longer appeared to guarantee

an Adams “authority and strength” but resulted in “exclusion and impotence” (Hochfield 1962: 128). Thus the fact that his social status was sliding and that he was withheld from a place in government might also be viewed as among the reasons for why Adams found his life “so thin and fruitless.” This can be observed in the following passage:

No one seemed very much concerned about this world or the future, unless it might be the anarchists, and they only because they disliked the present. Adams disliked the present as much as they did, and his interest in future society was becoming slight, yet he was kept alive by irritation at finding his life so thin and fruitless. (Adams 1961: 352)

Thus Adams did clearly not approve of the present state of affairs and considered his life rather poor in purpose and in results. He could not get rid of his Boston state of mind and a sense of duty to serve the American public. Modern times, however, did not seem to support his hope and wish to work for the state and to reach the high level of public achievement of the Adams family. He himself also indicates that America was slipping from the grasp of the old elite because of

the whole mechanical consolidation of force, which ruthlessly stamped out the life of the class into which Adams was born, but created monopolies capable of controlling the new energies that America adored. (Adams 1961: 345)

Hence Adams felt that he was now living in a world where completely new energies dominated that made people hurry towards materialism and riches and away from the positive influence of the enlightened patricians. As a result, the American experiment and the Puritan values suffered.

The avaricious modern entrepreneurs with their ostentatious displays of wealth were not the only part of society that Adams looked unkindly upon. As the *Education* also makes clear, he had a similarly low opinion of the swarms of immigrants as well as of African and Native Americans:

Society offered the profile of a long, straggling caravan, stretching loosely towards the prairies, its few scores of leaders far in advance and its millions of immigrants, negroes, and Indians far in the rear, somewhere in archaic time. (Adams 1961: 237)

The passage suggests Adams's negative attitude towards the chaotic territorial expansion of postwar America. It also shows that he could be accused of being racially prejudiced. He emphasizes that, in his view, the "millions of immigrants, negroes, and Indians" who could be found in American society were in a considerably earlier stage in their development than the leaders of the nation. Yet, this less advanced part of the society still aspired to take their place among the leaders. Society had thus changed and new races were elbowing their way to the top echelons of society where they did not actually belong. They were consequently disregarding the conventional ranks of the country and destabilizing the collective national life.

However, Adams's racial prejudices seemed to be the strongest against the Jewish people. The work contains several anti-Semitic comments, including references to the "Jew banker" (Adams 1961: 285) and to the "weird horror" of a "Polish Jew" glimpsed from a train window during a trip to Russia (ibid.: 408). The following passage can also be brought out to illustrate his resentment and antipathy:

His world was dead. Not a Polish Jew fresh from Warsaw or Cracow—not a furtive Yacoob or Ysaac still reeking of the Ghetto, snarling a weird Yiddish to the officers of the customs—but had a keener instinct, an intenser energy, and a freer hand than he—American of Americans, with Heaven knew how many Puritans and Patriots behind him, and an education that had cost a civil war. (Adams 1961: 238)

Adams therefore claims that even a Jewish immigrant from Poland felt more at home in the America of the Gilded Age than he, even though the author was "American of Americans" and a descendant of generations of Puritans and patriots. Arguably, his racial prejudices arose from feelings of insecurity. Adams felt that his social position was threatened not only by the newly

rich, but also by immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, among them the Jewish people. The members of all these sections of society were regarded as unwelcome intruders. Adams's class tended to believe that the many recent arrivals could never assimilate into the American culture but only served to demolish the national character and the common feeling. In short, they supposedly tore apart the fabric of American society. As Adams himself phrases it:

New power was disintegrating society, and setting independent centres of force to work, until money had all it could do to hold the machine together. No one could represent it faithfully as a whole. (Adams 1961: 419)

Adams chose the Jewish people in particular as the object of his racial hatred because for him, they were the incarnations of the evils of capitalism. The eastern European Jew was linked to the Mediaeval Jewish merchant and thought to be responsible for all the ills of modern capitalism, hence also the reference to the "Jew banker." As it has been argued, "[t]he stereotyped Jewish immigrant and trader served as a convenient symbol for all the patrician loathed. Unfortunately, Adams succumbed to this 'genteel anti-Semitism'" (Contosta 1980: 98). In his opinion, Jews had taken control over politics, the financial world as well as the press. Thus he believed that they were influencing every part of public life in America and as a result also causing the old aristocracy to feel increasingly distant from their country. Edward S. Shapiro (2004: 465) has similarly claimed that "[t]he immigrant Jew personified for the [young] Adamses the loathsome finance capitalism that had transformed them into anachronisms." Thus their contempt for the Jewish people was arguably related to the family's contempt for modern capitalism and the dramatic fall in their socio-economic status that it brought along.

Adams's antipathy towards immigrants can also be seen as one of the factors that led him to become an anti-imperialist. In the *Education*, he describes with great literary artistry how the last decades of the nineteenth century were a time of expansionist politics in the United States of America as the country set out to broaden its sphere of influence over areas in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as well as in Central America:

[I]n forty years, America had made so vast a stride to empire that the world of 1860 stood already on a distant horizon somewhere on the same plane with the republic of Brutus and Cato, while schoolboys read of Abraham Lincoln as they did of Julius Cæsar. Vast swarms of Americans knew the Civil War only by school history, as they knew the story of Cromwell or Cicero, and were as familiar with political assassination as though they had lived under Nero. The climax of empire could be seen approaching, year after year /.../. Nothing annoyed Americans more than to be told this simple and obvious—in no way unpleasant—truth /.../. (Adams 1961: 367)

However, the quotation also suggests that America's turn-of-the-century imperialism irritated or "annoyed" him and contributed to his disillusionment. Adams's resentment can be inferred also from the following quotation:

[A]s he sat at [John] Hay's [US ambassador in Great Britain] table, listening to any member of the British Cabinet, for all were alike now, discuss [the annexation of] the Philippines as a question of balance of power in the East, he could see that the family work of a hundred and fifty years fell at once into the grand perspective of true empire-building, which Hay's work set off with artistic skill. (Adams 1961: 363)

Adams appears to be taken aback as he realizes that Americans in foreign politics seemed to think it necessary to preserve the "balance of power in the East" and that the country could therefore not avoid competing with the Spanish colonial power for the annexation of the Philippines. Arguably, his anti-imperialist sentiments were aroused by his distrust and suspicion of alien peoples whom he did not wish to see as part of American culture. The annexation of the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, for example, would only help those

nationalities to “contaminate” the American society. His racial prejudices were thus at the roots of his anti-imperialist position.

On the other hand, he also felt that imperialism compromised the democratic principles that America had been founded upon. The nation justified its significant imperialist expansion by claiming that it had the right and obligation to expand its sphere of influence and social order because of the ordained manifest destiny. However, as Adams saw it, in attempting to conquer other countries, Americans were blatantly ignoring and violating the truths which had been proclaimed “self-evident” in the Declaration of Independence. As it turned out, “[a] century and a quarter after throwing off British rule, the American people became colonial masters themselves” (Contosta 1980: 104). Adams’s anti-imperialism could thus in some degree also have proceeded from his belief in Puritan ideals and in the value of the “family work of a hundred and fifty years.” For him, imperialism was another indication that the country was in decline and ever farther from proving its status as a “City on a Hill.”

In addition to America’s movement towards colonialism, Adams was also made anxious by the fact that women were beginning to raise their voices to object to their inferior position in society. He emphasizes that the role of women in American society had started to change as they were entering the labour market and factories:

The woman had been set free—volatilized like Clerk Maxwell’s perfect gas; almost brought to the point of explosion, like steam. /.../ [B]ut these swarms were ephemeral like clouds of butterflies in season, blown away and lost, while the reproductive sources lay hidden. At Washington, one saw other swarms as grave gatherings of Dames or Daughters, taking themselves seriously, or brides fluttering fresh pinions; but all these shifting visions, unknown before 1840, touched the true problem slightly and superficially. Behind them, in every city, town, and farmhouse, were myriads of new types—or type-writers—telephone and telegraph-girls, shop-clerks, factory-hands, running into millions of millions, unknown to themselves as to historians. /.../ All these new women had been created since 1840; all were to show their meaning before 1940. (Adams 1961: 444–445)

That is, whereas women have traditionally been associated with the private sphere of life related to home and family, they were now beginning to challenge old stereotypes about gender-appropriate pursuits and interests. According to these stereotypes, women were expected to stay at home and take care of their families. The emergence of the “myriads of new types [of women] /.../—telephone and telegraph-girls, shop-clerks, factory-hands,” however, showed that there was a general wish among women in contemporary America to “take themselves seriously” and to have a job outside the protective walls and confines of their homes. They were now entering the workforce and taking on a public role. This also meant that they were stepping into previously male-dominated environments. The fact that women were venturing out of their “proper sphere” and coming closer to the male domain and defining themselves through traditionally male activities is also expressed by Adams:

When closely watched, [the American woman] seemed making a violent effort to follow the man, who had turned his mind and hand to mechanics. /.../ [A]ll the world saw her trying to find her way by imitating him. The result was often tragic /.../. (Adams 1961: 445)

Thus Adams viewed the female desire to acquire a public-sphere identity as precarious and producing unexpected outcomes. He found it deeply regrettable that the woman “saw before her only the future reserved for machine-made, collectivist females” (Adams 1961: 446). He criticizes the forces unleashed by the machine which were now acting on men as well as women. The effect of the machine as a “kingdom of force” was such that it standardized people and made them part of a collective, uniform whole. Thus it produced a mass society where people had lost all traces of their individual identity. The society consisted of a collection of undifferentiated humans. The individual was crushed and sacrificed for the sake of good performance in factories and mills. These required conformity and discipline—workers had to follow a strict, repetitive, and unbroken routine during firmly fixed hours.

Thus, by referring to “machine-made, collectivist females” and the “often tragic” result of women emulating their husbands who had “turned [their] mind and hand to mechanics,” Adams points to the dehumanizing effect of industrial technology. He criticizes the levelling tendencies in the period of the Industrial Revolution that substituted rural individualism with urban anonymity and undermined traditional and aristocratic values.

Among these conventional values were also beliefs about gender-appropriate behaviour. Being a conservative and an old-fashioned Jeffersonian, Adams supported the traditional role divisions and suggests that according to his opinion, the role of the woman was to be only the bearer of children and the guardian of time-honoured truths:

Of all movements of inertia, maternity and reproduction are the most typical, and women’s property of moving in a constant line forever is ultimate, uniting history in its only unbroken and unbreakable sequence. Whatever else stops, the woman must go on reproducing /.../. If the laws of inertia are to be sought anywhere with certainty, it is in the feminine mind. (Adams 1961: 441)

He therefore saw the woman’s function as a mother as a fixed condition in the continuously changing world. Women had to “go on reproducing” until the end of time simply by virtue of their being women. Such was the natural law or the “law of inertia.” Thus Adams judged females by nature unfit and unsuitable for the competitive environment of the workforce. Instead, they were destined to be the protectors of traditional values and consequently they already *had* a heavy responsibility on their shoulders. He also indicates that if women started to want more out of life than a domestic existence, society would be made to suffer and face negative consequences:

The woman’s force had counted as inertia of rotation, and her axis of rotation had been the cradle and the family. /.../ [B]ut it was surely true that, if her force were to be diverted from its axis, it must find a new field and the family must pay for it. (Adams 1961: 446)

Any diversion from the axis could thus potentially be dangerous and harmful for the well-being of the family and eventually to society as a whole. A working mother was therefore not expected to be able to function properly in both her public and private roles and thought to be neglecting her duties as a wife and mother. As far as the author was concerned, women simply had to accept the “gender barrier.” What can be concluded is that, in his opinion, the rights to liberty and to the pursuit of happiness as foreseen in the founding document of the nation did not extend to women but concerned only American men. He could not conceive that women would similarly wish to realize their full potential. In addition, as the following passage shows, Adams was also ironical towards the feminist movement. He suggests that it had no real cause or aim and that by revolting, women were actually in end effect working against their own best interests and asserted goals:

[T]he American woman had no illusions or ambitions or new resources, and nothing to rebel against, except her own maternity; yet the rebels increased by millions from year to year till they blocked the path of rebellion. (Adams 1961: 446)

Adams did therefore clearly not support the concept of a working woman. He could not accept that the American woman was “marrying machinery” like the man. It showed to him that women were becoming materialistic and morally corrupt like men. As a result, they actually appeared to be no nobler or more virtuous than men. Without their moral guidance, however, men were left powerless against the great material enticements of the modern world. Women had to stay at home and continue to be morally uncorrupted in order to help men resist those temptations as well. Thus it can be assumed that the provision that women should remain true to the conventional gender roles became particularly important under the conditions of urbanization and industrialization. Their entering into the previously male domain disturbed the balance between the public and the private spheres of life. No longer

could the private sphere be associated with gentleness, integrity, and selfishness which were supposed to level out the roughness, depravity, and egotism of the public sphere. All these moral qualities were now left without any protection. In other words, “[t]he American experiment could not stand the demise of the traditional household and its moral teaching” (Contosta 1980: 114). Similarly to businessmen and immigrants, women were also treating the eighteenth-century ranks and assumptions with disrespect and pressing themselves outside their conventional place in society. The revolt of women thus offered further proof to Adams that the old certainties and uniformities were collapsing. As a result, the fate of the nation and of the American experiment was also becoming unpredictable.

In conclusion, the analysis of Henry Adams’s representation of America during the Gilded Age period in the *Education* demonstrates that the author felt alienated from modern America and that this concerned politics as well as capitalism. As Adams (1961: 317) himself states: “He felt nothing in common with the world as it promised to be.” He was led to think that his studies at Harvard College of the 1850s had prepared him neither for a career nor for the extraordinary intellectual, technological, and social transformations of the last half of the century. Adams’s life encompassed the decades in which America transformed itself at a breathtaking speed from an agrarian, Puritan backwater, into a driving force of the Industrial Revolution and then lived to see the dawn of the age of technology. He foresaw that American life was going to be completely transformed by technology, and not always in a positive way. He saw the technological revolution as having a negative impact on American democracy, producing widespread corruption, imperialism, materialism, and the emergence of robber barons. He therefore recognized the deeply disruptive and dehumanizing potential of technology and his work warns the American nation against these harmful effects.

Adams invented the phrase “the acceleration of history” to describe the breathtaking speed of societal change. As he saw it, civilization had moved from the unity of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to the disorder or multiplicity of the twentieth. He admired the unity of the mediaeval society, especially as it manifested itself in the magnificent cathedrals of France. He believed that the cult of the Virgin Mary had exerted a civilizing and unifying influence on the old world. As Adams himself emphasizes her power:

Symbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn man’s activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done /.../. (Adams 1961: 389)

Modern times, however, were shaped by the electrical dynamo which did not unify but created chaos and confusion. Adams underlines the complexities and multiplicities of the new world in the following extract which reveals that they were faced everywhere and seemed to be inescapable:

The magnet in its new relation staggered his new education by its evidence of growing complexity, and multiplicity, and even contradiction, in life. He could not escape it; politics or science, the lesson was the same, and at every step it blocked his path whichever way he turned. He found it in politics; he ran against it in science; he struck it in everyday life, as though he were still Adam in the Garden of Eden between God who was unity, and Satan who was complexity, with no means of deciding which was truth. (Adams 1961: 397)

The author also draws the reader’s attention to the alarming rate at which these multiplicities appeared to be increasing:

One had in vain bowed one’s neck to railways, banks, corporations, trusts, and even to the popular will as far as one could understand it—or even further; the multiplicity of unity had steadily increased, was increasing, and threatened to increase beyond reason. (Adams 1961: 398)

Consequently, the world was no longer simple or easy to grasp and “the child born in 1900 would /.../ be born into a new world which would not be a unity but a multiple” (Adams 1961: 457). Adams therefore saw the movement from the forces of the Virgin to those of the dynamo as negative and regressive. There was a stark difference between the effects of the two

“kingdoms of force” acting on humans. The dynamo, however, was the new object of man’s worship, the new deity:

The new American showed his parentage proudly; he was the child of steam and the brother of the dynamo, and already within less than thirty years, this mass of mixed humanities, brought together by steam, was squeezed and welded into approach to shape; a product of so much mechanical power, and bearing no distinctive marks but that of its pressure. The new American, like the new European, was the servant of the powerhouse, as the European of the twelfth century was the servant of the Church, and the features would follow the parentage. (Adams 1961: 466)

As Adams also saw it, the movement towards what he calls “the electro-dynamo-social universe” (Adams 1961: 413) was inevitable and irreversible. He concluded that the Western civilization was going through unavoidable devolution.

This also helped him to understand what he viewed as the simultaneous decline of the cultures of Europe and America. He was convinced that everything sinful and selfish had triumphed in American life. The explanation for this was that life in urban and industrial society distracted people from the traditional values that signified a commitment to family, community, and religious faith. As a result, Americans became removed from the values that their forefathers hoped to pass on when they settled in the country. This led to the collapse of the Western civilization as he knew it. As was observed above, Puritans saw a special role for America as a pinnacle and a City on a Hill. Because of that, they assumed that problems in America affected also the rest of the world. Therefore, if America was in decline or “diseased,” so was all the world. This was also a belief which Henry Adams had inherited from his ancestors, being, as he calls himself, “a quintessence of Boston” (Adams 1961: 387). His anxieties about the future and the fate of the American experiment grew as he saw that the world was forgetting the standards, assumptions, and ranks which he had taken with him from

Boston. As D. W. Brogan (in Adams 1961: xi) has put it, Adams was forced to learn that “[n]othing was stable, not even the natural precedence of the Adams family.”

Adams was thus witnessing how society was disregarding the Puritan ethics and history. Untypically to an American, he was more fascinated by and enthusiastic about the past than the future. He lacked the American native optimism. He looked pessimistically at the future and did not believe in progress. The Darwinian theory about evolutionary progress seemed a self-deluding belief in the light of the developments he witnessed in contemporary America. His difficulties with the Gilded Age period were caused partly by his pessimistic frame of mind, but also by the profound changes in society that made his position and role in society uncertain. His declining class prestige and a negative state of mind thus distorted his outlook on the American experiment and the world at large.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the present paper was to look at how the American novelist, journalist, historian, and academic Henry Brooks Adams (1838–1918) represents the America of the Gilded Age in his work *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907/1918) and to explore how Adams's conservative historical narrative compares with the traditionally progressive representation of that period in US history.

Historical writing has traditionally been based on historical records and the study of history has conventionally been seen as a science that strives towards the objective truth about the past. It has thus been assumed that history is an unambiguous area that can only be interpreted in one, universally valid way. Contemporary historical research, however, tends to be sceptical about the possibility of achieving objectivity in historical study and emphasizes the subjective perspective that unavoidably affects all findings in the field of history. Because of their general acceptance that historical writing cannot be objective, historians have also started to insist that it is inevitably narrative in character. It is now believed that writers on history produce subjective stories about certain historical periods rather than objective histories. The historical text is therefore commonly no longer expected to offer an objective truth but, instead, a culturally situated subjective viewpoint.

Having arrived at the general understanding that all historical writing is narrative in nature, historians are nowadays also increasingly willing to accept personalized histories as sources of understanding the past. These personalized histories see history from a particular perspective and can also give the reader a sense of a past era. It can be claimed that history is

constantly rewritten and lends itself to a variety of interpretations. Moreover, multiple perspectives on an episode from history can also lead to a more complete and nuanced picture of that episode. Our understanding of the past would thereby greatly increase which, in turn, could help to gain a broader and richer outlook on life.

One of the periods that would benefit from new perspectives is the America of the Gilded Age. The United States went through major changes after the Civil War. In less than fifty years, it developed from a country of small agricultural communities into a great industrial power with many big cities. As a result, America was now competing with such great industrial nations as Great Britain and Germany and its industrial growth was faster than in both countries put together.

This period has come to be known as the Gilded Age, an era that lasted roughly from the end of the Civil War (1861–1865) until the beginning of World War I (1914–1918), characterized by what seemed like boundless economic expansion and also urbanization and the growth of cities. In addition, it was also the time when America was expanding westward and gaining control over the large western territories. Its influence overseas also grew as it moved away from isolation, spread out beyond its continental borders, and became a true world power.

All these developments inevitably also brought along a fundamental change in American values and consciousness. In the years after the Civil War, Americans shifted from the values of the small town, which involved a belief in individualism, *laissez-faire*, progress, and a divinely-ordered hierarchical social system, to those characteristic of an urban and industrial society that emphasized regularity and management because bureaucratic order and centralized administration had become necessities. In short, it can be claimed that the Gilded Age was a period in American history where very much changed very fast and when a new

reality was created. Most Americans welcomed these changes and believed that their country was progressing towards realizing its manifest destiny.

On the other hand, there were many social issues that ruffled the surface of American society at the time and that have given grounds for harsh social criticism of the era. Liberal historians have mostly criticized the period for the unfair treatment of immigrants as well as Native and African Americans; for the unwillingness to accept labour unions and political dissidents; for the slums in the great industrial cities; for the concentration of capital into the hands of the few and the poverty of the masses. By contrast, conservative critics have expressed their deep concern mainly about issues such as the rush towards riches, the widespread corruption, the questionable links between politicians and businessmen, the extraordinarily big immigration wave, and the revolt of women. To this group of critics, these kinds of developments showed that the country had stooped to materialism and vulgarity which diverted it from the values and ideals of the Founding Fathers. As a result, the conservatives started to long for what they saw as the golden past with the old pastoral landscape.

Henry Adams is a representative of the conservative critics of the Gilded Age. He was born into the old New England elite. Being an Adams meant that Henry Adams belonged in mind, education, and prejudices to an earlier time than the age of capitalism and industrialism. Under the conditions of the new and modern world, however, it seemed that he could not rely anymore on the old religious and political truths and assumptions. His inability to abandon his eighteenth-century mind, education, and prejudices led to a growing feeling of alienation from modern America and its capitalism and politics. All of this combined to make him one of the maturing nation's most productive political journalists and incisive critics at a time when the country was undergoing its transformation.

A close reading of *The Education of Henry Adams* revealed that the author paints a very disturbing and dismal picture of his country during the transition period of the Gilded Age. Adams was critical about the corruption in postwar American politics, the rise of a capitalist system and of the robber barons, the emergence of a strong central government, the inrush of immigrants, the triumph of an imperialist policy, and the rebellion of women in American society. For him, all of these issues seem to have been interrelated and to point, not towards progress, but towards tendencies that were unnatural and detrimental to the welfare of the nation and the American experiment: unsuited people were taking control of the country's institutions instead of a talented and virtuous aristocracy, and America was departing from the Puritan values and ideals as well as from the principles set out in the Declaration of Independence. Moreover, because of the supposedly degenerate state of things in America, not only the nation itself was destined for downfall but the whole Western civilization. In Adams's view, problems in America affected also the rest of the world because he still believed in the special role of America as a moral and intellectual guide to other nations that the Puritans had foreseen for the country. He explained the profound changes that the society had undergone by the inevitable "acceleration of history." As he saw it, civilization had transformed from a world of unity that characterized the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to a world of complexities and multiplicities. He essentially understood it as a movement from the positive forces of the Virgin Mary to the negative forces of the electrical dynamo. Adams was therefore discouraged by what he saw as a backward journey and concluded that the Western civilization was irreversibly devolving.

Henry Adams was thus far more pessimistic about the America between the Civil War and WW I than can be observed in the traditional representations of the period. Whereas the mainstream historical narrative generally emphasizes the growth in economy, territory, and

influence that the period witnessed and thus sees it as a success story, Henry Adams gives greater prominence to the negative effects that the changes brought along. Even though the mainstream narrative similarly offers criticism of the era, the Gilded Age is still viewed as a period that signified progress and a movement forward. Thus technological innovation is still perceived as leading towards the future and the criticism stands in stark contrast to that of Adams's who is sceptical about both technology and progress. Adams's criticism thus positions him as a Puritan and a conservative in the European sense.

Because of his conservative values, Adams did also not share his society's definition of progress. He prioritized moral progress, whereas his contemporaries tended to value industrial and territorial expansion, defining progress in scientific and technological terms. In the context of the Gilded Age where Puritan principles seemed to be forgotten, Adams found it very hard to remain optimistic about the future and to believe in the evolution of America. His story about the era does not reflect the native American optimism and faith in progress. Consequently, it does not fall under the general framework of the Gilded Age narratives. Because of Adams's conservative treatment of the transition period and his lack of enthusiasm about the future, his perspective on the era has been marginalized and not included in the mainstream narrative, making its study more relevant.

Arguably, the differences between the accounts arise from the fact that Henry Adams experienced a fall in his social standing during these years. After all, traditional history is often said to be written by winners. Adams can be viewed as a representative of those whose world was made obsolete by the social transformation. *The Education of Henry Adams* offers a historical writing that is, moreover, a historical narrative on the model proposed by Hayden White. This narrative can roughly be classified as a tragedy and a satire. Adams supposedly chose this particular kind of a plot structure for his story precisely because of his decreased

power and influence. Thus it can be claimed that his narrative presents the period from the marginalized perspective of a particular class in society whose social position was negatively affected and gives us an even clearer view of the depth of change. His perspective undeniably adds to our understanding of the era and the reader emerges with a more complete and nuanced picture of the America of the Gilded Age.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
INGLISE FILOLOOGIA OSAKOND

Keit Korbits

The Representation of the America of the Gilded Age in Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams*

Kuldse ajastu Ameerika kujutamine Henry Adamsi teoses *The Education of Henry Adams*

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Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva magistritöö eesmärk on vaadelda, kuidas kujutab ameerika kirjanik, ajakirjanik ja ajaloolane Henry Brooks Adams (1838–1918) nn. kuldse ajastu Ameerikat oma teoses *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907/1918). Nn. kuldne ajastu oli periood USA ajaloos, mis kestis laias laastus Ameerika kodusõja (1861–1865) lõpust kuni Esimese maailmasõja (1914–1918) alguseni ning mida iseloomustas ühtse riigi väljakujunemine, industrialiseerumine, linnastumine ja Ameerika mõjuvõimu suurenemine välismaal. Kuigi traditsiooniline ajaloonarratiiv on selle ajastu suhtes küllaltki kriitiline sotsiaalse ebavõrdsuse tõttu, vaadatakse seda siiski kui progressiaega ja tulevikku suunatud perioodi. Henry Adamsi ajastukäsitus erineb aga teravalt liberaalsete ajaloolaste omast, kuna ta on skeptiline nii tehnoloogia kui progressi suhtes ning ebatüüpiliselt ameeriklase kohta on tema pilk suunatud minevikku, mitte tulevikku. Adamsi ühiskonnakriitika kinnistab tema positsiooni konservatiivi ja puritaanina, kes laidab maha industriaal-kapitalistliku ühiskonnakorra ja uusrikaste esilekerkimise, tugeva keskvalitsuse, imperialistliku poliitika, immigrantide suure sissevoolu ja naiste ühiskondliku aktiivsuse. Ameeriklased olid Adamsi silmis hülgamas puritaanlikke väärtusi ja „Kõigekõrgema ettemääratuse” doktriini (*manifest destiny*). Võib oletada, et Adamsi pessimism tuleneb tema langenud ühiskondlikust positsioonist, kuna ta sündis vana Uus-Inglismaa aristokraatia hulka, kelle asemel olid riigis võimust võtnud uued jõud. Ta kujutab kuldset ajastut seega ühe teatud kindla seltskonnakihi marginaliseeritud vaatenurgast. Adamsi narratiiv annab meile aga selgema pildi Ameerika ühiskonnas toimunud muutuste sügavusest, täiendab ja nüansseerib meie arusaamist kõnealusest ajastust, ning rikastab meie maailmapilti.

Märksõnad:

Ameerika Ühendriikide ajalugu, Ameerika ühiskond.