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World in the 1900s

Paper #2 (secondary source)

A Pickpocket’s Tale is a novel written by Timothy J. Gilfoyle. The book follows the life of a pickpocket named George Appo a half Irish and Chinese American. The reader explores New York’s criminal society in the 19th century through Appo’s encounters. Gilfoyle starts the book off by telling the story of George’s fathers who was a Chinese immigrant who worked his way up into the American Middle Class and was then imprisoned for the accidental murder of his land lord. Originally sentenced to the death penalty by a very cruel judge. Appo’s father is forced to leave his son and daughter in the watch of their drunkard mother. However, later on his father’s sentence is reviewed and reduced to ten-year.[[1]](#footnote-1)

George’s mother and sister then shortly after “die” in a ship wreck leaving him alone in New York. Gilfoyle does not believe this because of inconsistencies with ship records. He believes that George was actually just abandoned by his mother and told a lie.[[2]](#footnote-2) He is placed in the care of a family in the Five Point community. The Five Point community became famous after Charles Dickens gave it the reputation of a “hideous tenements which take their name from robbery and murder…all that is loathsome, drooping and decayed is here”.[[3]](#footnote-3) George quickly discovers the way to survive in this place. He starts to find jobs through theft and partaking in the criminal activity that already existed.

After being imprisoned and miss treated in the prison system George finally decides that he no longer wants to live the life of a criminal. George; however, always seems to fall into the wrong crowd or is just genially unlucky. Eventually pleading insane George is placed in an insane asylum and set free a year later. Again attempting to redefine his life and leave crime behind.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Gilfoyle had proven to be a very successful writer in this area of study. His first novel having previously won the Nevins award. Gilfoyle was also awarded The Guggenheim fellowships in humanities in U.S. & Canada. He teaches history at Loyola University in Chicago, and graduated from Columbia College. He is well versed in American history in the 19th century and it is clear to see this in the sources he uses in this novel. Gilfoyle mostly uses Appo’s journal to further his argument. Using Appo as his sole foundation for the novels argument, that the judicial system is what created criminals, he then branches out to other secondary and primary sources. He uses a lot of prison and court records to keep track of the rate of imprisonment for different criminals and what they were being imprisoned for. The court trials also provide a view into how judges prosecuted criminals and what would have you jailed. Gilfoyle finds that the police court justices assumed criminals as guilty until proved innocent.[[5]](#footnote-5) Imprisoning pretty much anyone accused of a crime. This is supported by the arrest records where the prisons where over filled, and people where constantly being proven innocent later or being resentenced down the road. Apart from Appo, Gilfoyle also brought in others letters, journals, and newspaper articles to show the criminal life in the 1900s. Some of the journals were of people who were not criminals to provide a view of how people viewed men like Appo. Newspaper reporting on how terrible the neighborhoods where, and who were committing what crimes.

Gilfoyle argument is that in the 1900s it was the judicial and prison system that created the real criminals. Men would be charged with petty crimes and sentenced to sever punishment. Some men were not even guilty of the crimes they were accused of; however, after spending time in the early prison system they often found themselves turned into real criminals or driven into insanity. He starts with the miss trial of Appo’s father who was sentenced to death, but then his sentence was reduced to ten years after his case was reviewed. Gilfoyle gives the first real view of prison life when Appo is sentenced to prison time at the age of sixteen. Appo was sentenced to two years and six months for pickpocketing. In the chapter called Factories for Turning out Criminals, we are told the story of how Appo was beaten into unconsciousness by the warden for accidently burning a sleeve. When he is revived by the doctor Appo on waking says “You punished me for nothing and the next time I am brought here, you will punish me for something”.[[6]](#footnote-6) From this point on Appo picks up on his criminal activities and does more serious crimes then petty theft. Making sure that if anyone was to sentence him to prison and beat him again they would have a real reason too. This was an ideal that many who were wrongfully imprisoned or beat soon picked up on as well. If the judicial system wanted to treat them as dangerous criminals for petty misdemeanors they would live up to the title of true criminals. Using Appo’s personal experience to show how boys who just wanted to survive would become real criminals after being abused in the prison system.

Gilfoyle also uses exports from the media and news. People had started to hear of the terrible acts being done in prison, and with over populated prisons. The people wondered what was going on with the judicial system. Charles Dickens is used to support his argument about how prisons made criminals out of men. Gilfoyle mentions that during Dicken’s publicized tour of the United States prisons in 1841, Dickens wrote officials that the prison system functioned as a “’dreadful punishment of torture and agony’. He compared the black hood worn by Eastern inmates to a ‘dark shroud, an emblem of the curtain dropped between him and the living world’”.[[7]](#footnote-7) These men where separated from the world and treated as if they did not belong in normal society. After years of being treated this way it could not be expected for them to integrate into the normal society again. They were just deprived of what was their humanity for year’s hidden from the world as if they were some evil monsters. This helped push that argument that the prison system created the true criminals. Most young men imprisoned where just trying to survive.

It provides a greater view into the underworld of the country. While Appo was originally from New York he travels far in his adventures and seems to have criminal connections wherever he goes. It is a whole new social group that has been looked over. They are not only able to assist each other across the country, but they all keep close tabs on each other knowing where they can find each other. It provides a view of the 1900s that is not just the white middle class, but a deeper look into those that where impoverished. In a time of great change and progress and hope. We still see people struggling, but also still see them enjoying some of the innovations of the time. It shows how the people were out casted and miss treated by the government. Even in a time when social movements and change where all taking place this part of society was ignored and looked down upon them. Playing off the theme of social change and treatment of people. Old prisoners would rise up and show the terrible things that happened and where happening to them in the American prison system.

A Pickpocket’s Tale is a fun read, you quickly find you’re self-drawn into Appo’s life and into the treatment of people and corruption of the prison system. The novel provides a deeper view into the real struggles of “criminals” sentenced by a corrupt judicial system as they try to reform the prison system and themselves. Gilfoyle provides a reader with a strong argument and a well written novel to explore the underworld of America in the 1900s.

Citations

Gilfoyle, Timothy J.. A Pickpocket's Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century New York (Kindle Location 0-10153). W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition.

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4. Gilfoyle, Timothy J.. A Pickpocket's Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century New York. W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition.5324 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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