

“The Week Before Christmas,” December 20, 1911 by Margaret Chanler Aldrich

This poem was first published in the *New York Times*, and then used by the National Consumers' League for its campaign to improve conditions for retail workers around Christmas.

‘Twas the week before Christmas, and all through the
town

The shopgirls and packers were fast breaking down,
While women of leisure lay soft in their beds,
And visions of purchases danced in their heads.
“I never go into those stores with bad air,
But the time of their closing is not my affair,”
Said a lady who shopped in a limousine car
More roomy and lighter than tenements are.

And then as she dozed, there arose such a clatter,
She rang for a maid to see what was the matter.
She saw to her horror a flying machine.
Come down through her chimney. Within it was seen
An angry old Santa Claus, dressed like his picture,
Whose face was her Bishop's and doctor's in mixture.
He threw from his tonneau a muff which could purr;
“Twas labeled “The voice of the sweated in fur”
Kid mules which went tapping about the parquet—
It's 11 o'clock, we're delivering yet!
Each purchaser wants all his parcels each night—
And to-morrow they drive us before the day's light.
A phonograph sang with an opera voice
(In Italian) “ ‘Tis Christmas, let all men rejoice!”
But always the weary must pay when they break.
And we can't keep a girl if she makes a mistake.

One hand on her Bible, and one on her cheek,
The poor lady listened—a terrified wreck—
While the gifts of her nightmare piled up on the floor,
And that horrid Saint Nicholas handed her more!
When she clutched at her Bible, he pulled off his cap
Saying, “That's what I need for the people you trap
Into working for wages on which they can't live.
It's they who need Scriptures on how to forgive.
But your mean little checks – \$5 here and \$10 there –
For the sweated you doom to a hospital's care
Are the devil's own credit, it alone knows
The lives that are ruined by shops that won't close.
If after long hours, girls reel from a store
More dead than alive, to a friend at the door—
Who offers to treat them, and one more goes under—
‘Tis you are to blame, with your bargains and blunder.
You patronize shops which are open at night,
Then you open a Rescue and think it's all right
I tell you conditions don't change for committees—
It will take every woman in each of your cities;
Good hours! good wages! a small dividend
To the octopus owners – then world without end.
. . . .
Just then came the voices of children at prayers—
“Dear Santa Claus, please send my mother car fares,
She cannot work late and be walking home, too.”
When away to his children the Santa Claus flew.

DOCUMENT 7.4

Historical Era

**The Emergence of
Modern America
(1890-1930)**

Document Title:
“The Week Before Christmas”

Document Type: **Poem**

BRIEF DESCRIPTION:

This poem describes conditions faced by retail workers during the Christmas holiday season in the early 1900s. It is critical of wealthy shoppers who contribute to workers' misery, and was used by the National Consumers' League to encourage consumers to be allies by getting their shopping done early.

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SOURCING THE SOURCE

Nurse, activist, and poet Margaret Chanler Aldrich wrote this poem in December 1911 as part of a turn-of-the-century movement to improve working conditions by changing consumers' behaviors. First published in the *New York Times*, it was reprinted and distributed by members of the Consumers' League of New York, a local chapter of a national organization that advocated for better working conditions for women and children.

Intended Audience: Primarily middle-class and wealthy women who did the shopping for their families.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

Historical Context:

A shift from bespoke (custom-made) to mass production of clothing meant to be purchased off the rack (ready-to-wear) led to the rise of department stores in the late 1800s. The vast majority of both garment workers and department store workers were women. By 1910, over twenty percent of American women over the age of 16 labored outside of the home, making up about twenty percent of the workforce. Working conditions in the garment factories that manufactured ready-to-wear clothing were dangerous and degrading: employers required 6-day, 65-75 hour work weeks; wages rarely covered the most minimal cost of living even for those renting dilapidated tenement apartments; already inadequate wages were further reduced by arbitrary charges and fines for such things as sewing needles and talking; ventilation and lighting were inadequate; some workers were locked inside factories during work hours; and many were subjected to sexual harassment.

Similarly, exploitive conditions characterized retail work, a growing occupation for native-born white women in urban areas. Department store clerks enjoyed a higher social standing than domestic, laundry, and factory workers, but they often received lower wages and worked longer hours. For example, union organizer Rose Schneiderman worked for three years as a “salesgirl,” before defying her mother's preference for that higher status job in favor of the higher wages of factory work (which, as noted, were still terribly low).

In the early 1900s, labor reformers and journalists launched investigations into working conditions in this new type of retail establishment. They documented dangerous and unhygienic practices within department stores, many of which continue to plague 21st century retail work. In addition to dirty bathrooms, seasonal layoffs, poor and uneven pay (ranging from three to eight dollars a week when wage investigators estimated that eight dollars a week was necessary for the barest existence), and a tiered system of full-time steady work and part-time irregular hours, women also complained of bullying from management. The discipline imposed on saleswomen was meant to be degrading and paternalistic, with minor infractions resulting in fines, harsh criticism, and public humiliation. Additionally, store policies forced many poorly paid clerks to wear clothing sold where they worked, or to purchase stylish clothes to wear on the sales floor. Like the mass retailers of today, department stores relied on selling sweatshop-produced products, while spending many thousands of dollars a year to prevent union organizing by their workers. Despite these poor conditions, department and five-and-dime stores served as major employers for wage-earning women, who had few other options available based on their gender. Department stores typically hired extra employees to help with the end-of-the-year holiday rush, with even the youngest employees (including children as young as ten) working upwards of ninety-hour weeks in order to accommodate shoppers.

Despite the formal and informal racial and class segregation common in the early 20th century, department stores brought women of different classes into close contact with one another. Middle-class and elite shoppers made their purchases from working-class “salesgirls.” The gendered nature of shopping allowed the more elite women to develop a reform movement that addressed some of the ill effects of mass consumption, while appearing to stay out of politics. By the early 1900s, this class of women increasingly organized to influence business practices and public policies regarding child labor, education, temperance, suffrage, sweatshops, birth control, and more. They established reform organizations that largely attracted middle-class and elite white women like themselves.

Formed in 1899, the National Consumers’ League [NCL] was one of the largest groups undertaking these types of investigations and exposing the horrible conditions of department store work. With noteworthy activists like Jane Addams and Florence Kelley taking leadership roles, the NCL chose “Investigate, Agitate, and Legislate” as its motto, reflecting the broader goals of Progressive Era movements. The NCL investigated factories, department stores, and other workplaces to expose unsafe and unsanitary conditions, and offered its “white label” for those goods produced in decent conditions so that consumers could conveniently support those employers. Encouraging women to embrace their emerging role as consumers within an economy dependent on mass production and distribution, the NCL was dedicated to bettering the lives of working women and children.

Several chapters of the organization launched a campaign encouraging women to purchase holiday gifts at the beginning of December rather than waiting until the last minute. The group publicized the hardships that department store clerks (aka “shop girls”), mail carriers, delivery drivers (“errand boys”) and child employees endured during the holiday season that could easily be avoided by conscientious consumers. In 1908, students from the NCL branch at Vassar College encouraged their classmates to conduct their Christmas shopping in an ethical and responsible manner by writing editorials for the school newspaper. The same year, the NCL extended its reach when *Good Housekeeping* published a detailed history of the group’s campaigns, along with suggestions to purchase goods with the NCL’s white label and to shop early for Christmas gifts. During this campaign, which lasted several years, the NCL worked closely with local merchants and store owners in order to offer incentives for shopping early. For example, several New York stores rewarded consumers who completed their shopping in November by waiting to bill them until the following January. NCL activists made ethical Christmas shopping a mainstream concern for women through direct outreach, compelling propaganda (like Aldrich’s poem), and practical solutions.

The author of this poem, Margaret Chanler Aldrich embodied the spirit of the era's women reformers, by working as a nurse – one of the professions open to middle- and upper-class white women – and joining the suffrage and anti-sweatshop movements. Aldrich came from a prominent family, and was politically and culturally well-connected. As a nurse in the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars, she traveled to Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico and was later awarded a Congressional Medal by President Franklin Roosevelt for her nursing service. She was among this larger group of middle-class and elite women uncomfortable with the excesses of the Gilded Age and sympathetic to the plight of the working poor, especially women and children.

While the NCL and others created avenues for middle-class and elite women to use their privileges, time, skills, and resources to advocate for better working conditions, they did not solve all of the problems of retail workers. An investigation conducted in 1938 revealed that Woolworth stores in New York regularly broke at least four labor laws regulating sanitary conditions, including one forbidding the common use of a drinking glass (particularly dangerous with tuberculosis so widespread). Owners frequently cut corners, neglecting plumbing and maintenance of facilities. Workers reported filthy toilets overflowing and flooding restroom floors.

With no one else to turn to, workers often cut their lunch hours short to clean and repair toilets and washstands. Without enforcement, labor laws provided little protection for working women. In the 1930s, retail workers went on strike all over the country. From San Francisco to Detroit to New York, women occupied Woolworth stores, picketed in front of department stores, and successfully engaged in direct action to pressure storeowners to agree to better conditions and union recognition. Low-wage retail and fast-food workers have continued this struggle well into the 21st century with the “Fight for \$15” campaign to raise the minimum wage and secure the right to form a union.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Source**

The New York Times published Aldrich's “The Week Before Christmas” poem in December 1911. Aldrich altered the words to a familiar Christmas poem in order to educate middle and upper-class white women about the working conditions within department stores, and then shame them into action. The popular poem known as “The Night Before Christmas” (originally published in 1823 as “A Visit from St. Nicholas”) shaped Americans' understanding of a holiday filled with happiness, a comfortable home, and a generous Santa Claus. Aldrich contrasted the holiday experiences of “*shopgirls and packers*” in cramped, dark tenements with the holiday experiences of “*women of leisure*” traveling in large limousines. While Christmas songs called on all to rejoice, the workers were unable to join in the celebration of the holiday season due to the early mornings and late nights required by their employers (“*And to-morrow they drive us before the day's light*”). Aldrich likely presumed that many members of the NCL, as well as the women they appealed to through *Good Housekeeping* and the Vassar student newspaper, were Christians who would celebrate Christmas and see Santa Claus as an ideal enforcer of morality.

Aldrich used her poem to criticize the “women of leisure” who were so accustomed to having round-the-clock service within their homes that they were careless about their shopping habits. Middle-class and wealthy women of the early 20th century typically employed domestic workers who worked long hours to clean, cook, launder, and provide childcare, often living in the homes of their employers. Rather than purchasing Christmas gifts early in the holiday season, these elite women waited until the last minute. Yet, they expected the stores to cater to their needs for immediate delivery and extended hours from the early morning until late night (“*It's 11 o'clock, we're delivering yet! Each purchaser wants all his parcels each night*”). These expectations meant the workers suffered from exhaustion (“*shopgirls and packers were fast breaking down,*”) and were regularly fired for minor mistakes (“*But always the weary must pay when they break, And we can't keep a girl if she makes a mistake.*”) In the poem, the angry Santa Claus tells the wealthy woman that she is the one responsible for the low wages and long hours, (“*the people you trap into*

working for wages on which they can't live") and that her small donations to charity ("*your mean little checks -\$5 here and \$10 there*") are insufficient to care for the department store workers whose lives "*are ruined by shops that won't close.*"

Aldrich appealed to an audience of middle-class and elite women by stoking their fears of the moral degradation necessary to supplement the low pay ("*If after long hours, girls reel from a store More dead than alive, to a friend at the door—Who offers to treat them*"), and holds them responsible for the underpaid and overworked "shopgirls" who were forced to trade sex for food, clothing, or a warm bed ("*Tis you are to blame, with your bargains and blunder*"). Aldrich sought to educate and shame elite women who thought that donations to charities or rescue homes for the downtrodden would improve the lives of workers. Rather, she argued that all women should come together to push for better conditions, good hours, and good wages. While this improvement of working conditions would lower profit margins for ruthless businessmen ("*octopus owners*"), it would forever improve the quality of life for millions of American workers ("*world without end*"). The poem ends with Santa Claus scolding the "women of leisure" for their selfishness and flying away to help the working-class children concerned for the safety of their hard-working mothers.

The NCL distributed thousands of copies of the poem for several years as part of its annual Christmas campaign, linking solidarity with workers and holiday traditions.

GLOSSARY

Car fares – Money for electric streetcars or trolleys, new forms of urban mass transit that overtook horse-drawn wagons and omni-buses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Child labor – Survival for working-class families often required children to begin work in mines, fields, and factories at a young age. Young boys often delivered the purchases made by consumers, while girls worked at the counters, stockrooms, and cafeterias of department stores.

Gilded Age (1870s-1900) – a period of rapid industrial and business growth characterized by extreme economic inequality and political corruption.

Kid mules – Kidskin (kid) is a type of soft, thin leather. Mules are a style of shoe without a back.

National Consumers' League – a group of primarily middle-class women formed the organization in the late 1800s to organize female shoppers to improve conditions for workers.

Octopus owners – nickname given to elite industrialists, who devoured and controlled everything in their path. These businessmen were also regularly called "robber barons" as a critique of the unscrupulous measures they took to increase their wealth.

Parquet – a type of wooden flooring typically arranged in a geometric pattern, like a square.

Philanthropy – Donating large sums of money to a cause considered important and worthy by the donor, such as libraries, hospitals, and museums. Rather than paying workers well or paying taxes toward public services, the wealthy often gave money to charity to improve their image.

Progressive Era (1890s-1920) – period of social reform concerned with issues such as poor working and living conditions, political corruption, women's rights, and child labor.

Rescue – a charitable space meant to provide temporary aid to the poor, including temporary housing for unwed pregnant women, women escaping prostitution, and others with perceived moral failings.

Sweated – those who work in sweatshops

Sweatshops – workplaces (often factories, but sometimes home workshops) with poor wages, long hours, dangerous and unsanitary conditions, and no union representation.

Tenement housing – Apartments in urban areas that were overly crowded, unsanitary, and dangerous.

To treat – This term refers to an exchange of sex (by the woman) for food, clothing, a night out or a bed for the night (from a man).

Tonneau – the part of an automobile without a roof or cover. In modern usage, this typically refers to the cargo area of a pickup truck or a convertible. In this poem, it refers to Santa’s sleigh.

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Source Specific

- Why might Margaret Chanler Aldrich have chosen to use a popular Christmas poem as the foundation for her poem? Who is the intended audience for the poem?
- How and why does Aldrich juxtapose the elite “women of leisure” with the saleswomen from department stores?
- Why does she focus on elite women, rather than the department store owners? What is her goal?

Historical Era

- What kinds of working conditions were present in early 1900s department stores, according to the poem? How do they compare with accounts from other industries, such as garment factories?
- How did middle and upper-class reformers attempt to change working conditions?

Labor & Working Class History

- How were professional women, like Margaret Chanler Aldrich, using their status and wealth to act in solidarity with working-class women in the Progressive Era?
- How might we compare the problems and solutions identified in this poem to conditions faced by retail workers in America today?

CITATION & FAIR USE

Aldrich, Margaret Chanler. “The Week Before Christmas.” *New York Times*. Dec. 20, 1911, pg 12.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Benson, Susan Porter. *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Colt, Sarah, dir. *American Experience*. Season 30, episode 3, “The Gilded Age.” Aired February 6, 2018 on PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/gilded-age/>

Kheel Center, Cornell University. *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, accessed February 13, 2014, <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/index.html>

Reagan, Michael B. “1937 Department Store Strike.” FoundSF.org http://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=1937_Department_Store_Strike (accessed December 18, 2019).

Sklar, Kathryn Kish. *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Storrs, Landon R. Y. *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Zinn, Howard, Dana Frank, and Robin D. G. Kelley. *Three Strikes: Miners, Musicians, Salesgirls, and the Fighting Spirit of Labor's Last Century*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

CURRICULAR & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Curricular Connections:

NCHS ERA 6 Standard 3: The rise of the American labor movement and how political issues reflected social and economic changes.

This document reveals how dangerous and exploitative working conditions led immigrant garment workers to organize into a trade union, as well as for women labor leaders to seek alliance and support from middle-class women for workplace and political reform.

NCHS US ERA 7 Standard 1: How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization and political corruption.

This document reveals the ways in which industrial capitalism created the working conditions that motivated Progressives to seek both protective legislation to regulate business and women's enfranchisement.

Common Core Standards: [<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/>]

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

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.