

Gangs of New York

2002

Director: Martin Scorsese

Starring: Leonardo DiCaprio, Daniel Day-Lewis, Cameron Diaz

160 minutes - Rated R

By Wanwen Wu

Synopsis:

During the Civil War era in New York City's Five Points, Amsterdam Vallon, an Irish youth, plans to avenge his father's death at the hands of Bill 'the Butcher' Cutting. *Gangs of New York* begins in 1846, with a battle between the Dead Rabbits and the Nativists. After his father is killed, Amsterdam returns sixteen years later to the Five Points and works under Bill. While serving as Bill's right hand man, Amsterdam simultaneously plans his assassination; however, Bill 'the Butcher' was forewarned and scars Amsterdam instead, leaving him to live on disfigured and in shame. After recovering, in the midst of a city-wide riot over the newly passed Conscriptation Act, Amsterdam resurrects the Dead Rabbits and plans one final battle against Bill and his Nativists.

Historically Relevant Scenes

00:01:10>00:12:51	- Gang war: Dead Rabbits vs. Nativists
00:18:12>00:22:14	- Boss Tweed/ introduction to the Five Points
00:24:18> 00:25:57	- Overview of the Five Points' gangs
00:27:42>00:30:42	- Fire in the Five Points
02:09:30>02:12:20	- Election day for sheriff
02:17:53>02:36:20	- Civil war New York Draft Riot/gang war

Ratings:

Entertainment - ★ ★ ☆ ☆

Historical Accuracy - ★ ★ ☆ ☆

Historical Analysis:

Based mainly on Herbert Asbury's 1927 book *The Gangs of New York*, written from gang histories and pre-Civil War New York City journalism, *Gangs of New York* depicts New York City during a time of transition where gangs, bosses, immigrants and Nativists all struggled to survive in a world coming to grips with the chaotic impacts of industrialization. Nominated for ten Academy Awards and winning one Golden Globe, audiences have equally praised and criticized the film. Its extremely long running time of over two and a half hours and underdeveloped characters stand out as its major flaws. Also, historians claim the film inaccurately portrays gang warfare and gender and race relations of the time, especially reducing the actual racism of the era. On the other hand, the historian Tyler Anbinder, who wrote the book *Five Points*, considers the film relatively accurate, especially in its depiction of the persecution and discrimination of Irish immigrants and the immigrants' fight for a better life in America. He recognized that Scorsese made a "dramatic statement not a documentary." And as Scorsese himself admits, "This is based on history. There's no doubt about it. But it is still a film that is more of an opera than history."

Although characteristic of the Gilded Age, the film isn't set during the actual Gilded Age of 1870 through 1900. Coined in 1873 by Mark Twain, the term "Gilded Age" refers to a time when things appeared to be in a good condition in America, but beneath this gilded layer sat deep-rooted problems. While America looked to be prospering, by taking a closer look one could easily spot the internal problems: corrupt government institutions and businesses, sweat shop labor, an abundance of slums due to the influx of immigrants, and massive discrimination of both these immigrants and African-Americans. While the few rich, including the Robber Barons (industrial leaders like John D. Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, and Andrew Carnegie who often employed "questionable" practices to increase their wealth), remained largely unaffected by issues of the time, 90% of the population lay below the poverty line, living in slums.

Of the many slums in America during the time, one of the most well-known was New York City's Five Points, named for being at the intersection of five streets: Mulberry, Orange, Little Water, Cross, and Anthony. Built over the drained, putrid smelling Collect Pond, the area retained its stench so only the poorest lived there. The areas of lower Manhattan's Five Points mentioned in *Gangs of New York* - Paradise Square, Murderer's Alley and Brickbat Mansion - existed in the actual Five Points of the mid 1850s. Although many who visited the Five Points noted the decaying conditions, such as Charles Dickens who called it a

"world of vice and misery," the crime rate, for instance, may not have been as bad as the film suggests, and regardless, the rest of New York City suffered from similar conditions. In reality, the slums gained notoriety not for its soaring crime rates but for its congestion, widespread disease, terrible sanitation, alcoholism, prostitution, horrific tenement conditions and sometimes deadly and dangerous work environment.

It was no wonder that the conditions of the Five Points harbored disease and death. For example, meat and milk from diseased cows killed 70% of the children under two each year. While those living in the Southern part of New York City lived in decent houses, inhabitants of the Five Points lived in frame houses which were sometimes originally barns or stables, with both people and animals running around. The cave-like underground quarters shown in the film would have been impossible because the drained area consisted of swamp land, which caused buildings to actually sink into the ground, adding more to the slovenliness.

Tenements, with names such as the Old Brewery, Jacob's Ladder and Mulberry Bend, crammed many families together into dark rooms without a bathroom. That resulted in people using the streets as bathrooms to do their business while pigs ran around in the streets - not helping the already disgusting living conditions in a stinky swamp land. Some "old" immigrants even opened boarding houses to accommodate the newly arrived immigrants, providing them with an alternative to the regular tenements.

Also, widespread prostitution caused Five Points missionary Lewis Pease to write, "Every house was a brothel, and every brothel a hell." As depicted in the film, those from higher classes traveled to the Five Points, "some holding camphor-soaked kerchiefs to their noses to ward off the stench," to "go 'slumming' in Five Points—escorted by police—to see if the lurid tales given by reporters and missionaries were true." The way people in the Five Points lived appalled many of those who visited, including Davy Crockett, Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and even Abraham Lincoln.

By the time of the Civil War, citywide conditions had gradually improved, although the lowest on the economic ladder, the Irish immigrants and freed slaves, continued to be the main inhabitants of the area. Unlike the film's portrayal though, not that many of them wore rags. And by that time, they began "moving up the economic ladder" as well.

The film depicts a variety of forms of entertainment, many of which accurately represented the interests of the era. Those living in the Five Points enjoyed boxing matches, cockfights, and matches between

dogs and rats. People also commonly attended plays, especially those by Shakespeare or those with violent themes, and PT Barnum's Museum of Wonder did provide a source of entertainment during its time in the area.

Immigrants arriving daily contributed largely to the culture of the Five Points. In general, immigrants moved to America in search of a better life, fleeing from overpopulation, disease, famine, or religious or political persecution. The immigrants in the Five Points made the best of what they had and their work as shoemakers, tailors, masons, grocers, cigar makers, liquor dealers, and laborers (not merely gang members loitering the streets) afforded them three decent meals a day. While the film focuses on the 1.8 million Irish immigrants who arrived in America due to the Great Potato Famine of the 1840s, the film fails to explore the role of other immigrant groups such as the Germans, Welsh, Scots, Italians and Polish.

After being accustomed to a rural lifestyle, the Irish who moved to America lacked the city skills to survive and so formed many little communities, but they still couldn't afford to not live in the slums of the Five Points. The Protestant Americans of the era saw Irish Catholics as religiously and racially inferior. Many employers of the era preferred the newly freed Blacks to the Irish, and even paid Blacks more than they paid an Irishman for the same job.

What about other immigrants? Well, although the film shows quite a lot of Chinese, the only Chinese who would be in New York City at the time would be the very few sailors (no women at all). The majority of Chinese immigrants arrived later, in the 1880s, so Sparrow's Chinese Pagoda, which the characters in the film visit often, could not have existed. Quite a lot of German Jews did immigrate at around the same time as the Irish, but because they were more prosperous, they settled in the better living conditions of the South of New York City. As for other groups such as Italians, Welsh and Polish, fewer immigrated than the Irish, yet they suffered discrimination similar to what the Irish faced.

While the film primarily depicts immigrant men in gangs, it unfairly portrays immigrant women as thieves, pickpockets and prostitutes. Although many women and even children resorted to crime in order to survive, most women actually made their living as seamstresses or servants, two occupations not depicted in the film at all. Sometimes women took small roles in gang fights, throwing things out windows at opponents, but the majority of Irish immigrant women served as seamstresses. As for children, some sold matches or newspapers, some swept the streets, some joined gangs, and some became pickpockets or succumbed to child labor, but seldom did they become prostitutes.

With the huge amount of immigrants flooding in, a method of dealing with all the people needed to be devised – enter the Boss System and specifically Boss Tweed. A city “boss” could either be an elected political leader, or the man who pulled the strings of all the involved parties that made the city work. Bosses would assist the newly arrived immigrants who in turn would vote for the boss’s elected leader of choice. Once he controlled the political system, he could appropriate funds to build and control public works projects so that he could both improve the city’s efficiency while padding his own pocketbook. Historian Tyler Anbinder described Boss Tweed as “ambivalent about the immigrants” but aware of the critical importance of immigrant votes (as is accurately depicted in the film). William Tweed began his rise to political power by joining a volunteer fire company, a common profession at the time. From there, he joined Congress, became the face of Tammany Hall by the early 1850s, and created the “Tweed Ring” in 1857.

During its political reign, the Tweed Ring plundered New York City’s coffers of at least \$30 million (about \$500 million today), through fake expenditures and tax favors. Tweed worked alongside gangs to steal elections, and he especially worked with Irish gangs and appointed Irish as “minor ward bosses” in order to gain Irish votes for the Democrats of Tammany Hall. By controlling Irish policemen, Tweed avoided punishment. Besides gaining Irish votes by providing them with aid, Tweed used “repeaters” in elections, getting people to vote multiple times by changing their appearance for each vote, similar to what occurs in the film’s depiction of election day.

Besides elections, Boss Tweed and his Tweed Ring also concerned themselves with civic duties such as the construction and the maintenance of public facilities. Although projects such as the New York County Courthouse, or Tweed Courthouse, plundered New York’s treasury by purposely using the most expensive building materials, the Tweed Ring actually improved the water supply and sewage disposal of the city. Because of those little improvements which manifested and mattered to the everyday immigrant, Tweed remained popular. He provided Irish immigrants with jobs and food in an unfamiliar land and even attempted to help poor New Yorkers buy their way out of the draft from the first Conscription Act.

By the 1860s Tweed controlled New York’s state and city nominations and served as a state senator. In 1870 Tammany Hall itself unsuccessfully attempted to oust the Tweed Ring. But Tweed’s eventual demise came from Thomas Nast’s cartoons which revealed his unscrupulous behavior. Upon arrest, Tweed’s first trial ended with no verdict and the second trial resulted in only one year of jail. After fleeing

to Cuba and then Spain, the American government finally got a hold of him, sending him back to jail in the United States in 1876, where he remained until his death in 1878.

Because of the corruption, vice, and violence of New York City, an official police force called the Municipal Police was created in 1850. Despite the official police force, gangs still thrived and continued working with and for corrupt politicians. Under the mayor Fernando Wood, the Municipal Police grew so corrupt that the state created the Metropolitan Police in 1857 in order to combat the corruption of the Municipal Police. Eventually, with both police forces fighting gangs and each other, more chaos erupted and the two police forces even freed each other's prisoners.

In the same way that the multiple police forces created disorder, the multiple volunteer fire companies, which existed because of no singular public fire department, also caused more problems than they solved. With the streets crammed with buildings, fire spread easily. Because of their prevalence, insurance companies paid the first fire company that arrived, causing even more mayhem since the first person from a fire company at the scene sometimes placed a barrel over the hydrant in order to prevent others from using the hydrant, as shown in the film during a fire. That act resulted in the gang name "plug uglies" because the barrel they used was an "ugly" "plug" over the hydrant. By doing that they left the fire to rage on while waiting for the rest of their fire company to show up.

In total, thirty to forty fire companies existed, comprised mostly of men who wanted to be heroes, but like the two police forces depicted in the film, the many fire companies ended up fighting with each other while the fire destroyed the city. In the process of fighting the fires and each other, some volunteer firefighters looted the houses or shops being burnt, prompting many to join the fire companies so their own homes would not be looted if it ever caught fire. The same way the police forces grew corrupt due to corrupt politicians and government officials, the fire companies revolved around political and gang-related issues and linked themselves with gangs since the insurance money and looting financed the gangs.

Aside from the turmoil caused by the New York fire companies, New York also suffered from the preponderance of gangs. In the political arena, by beating up opponents, gangs brought votes, causing "the lines between gangs and political parties [to become] very blurred." For immigrants though, ethnic-based, territorial gangs formed to ensure their own safety since the police concerned themselves more with protecting the rich from the poor than protecting everyone. By 1855, an estimated

30,000 people had an “allegiance” to gang leaders, such as Bill ‘the Butcher,’ and through them to politicians such as Boss Tweed.

Numerous gangs existed during this era, some of which escaped recorded history. Many of the gangs mentioned in the film might have actually represented real gangs such as the Daybreak Boys, Frog Hollows, Nightwalkers or Broadway Twisters. With the boatfuls of Irish arriving day by day, it should be of no surprise that many, many Irish gangs formed. Before moving to America due to the Great Potato Famine, the Irish already had a history of violence and gangs, which they brought with them to America. With many immigrants receiving police or fire company jobs, they invariably became linked back to gangs and politics. Of the Irish gangs portrayed in *Gangs of New York*, all have some written evidence, either in journalism or gang history, to prove their existence, including the Shirt Tails, Plug Uglies, O’Connell Guard, Chichesters, Forty Thieves, and most important to the film, the Dead Rabbits.

Several different theories exist to explain the origin of the Dead Rabbits. One of which is that it split from the Roach Guards after someone threw a dead rabbit in the middle of the room during a meeting. While the Roach Guards used a blue stripe to identify themselves (unlike in the movie where a Nativist gang uses a blue stripe), the Dead Rabbits used a red stripe to identify themselves (correctly shown in the movie). The two became enemies, although they still united against common foes, such as Nativist gangs like the Bowery Boys. Another theory to the creation of the name comes from the Gaelic “dead ráibéad” which translates to “very big lug” or “tough guys.” The Dead Rabbits, consisting of thugs and thieves, were also called the Black Birds.

Although the film shows the members of the Dead Rabbits carrying an actual dead rabbit into battle with them, that fact is questionable. Some sources claim it to be true, while others regard it as a myth. As accurately depicted in the film, the Dead Rabbits worked for Tweed’s Democratic Party of Tammany Hall; however, the Irish opposed Blacks so the film inaccurately portrayed the Dead Rabbits as having a Black member. However, in the same way the film has members of the Dead Rabbits switching sides to support the Nativist gang after defeat, gang members did in fact switch sides, sometimes even multiple times.

Several of the characters portrayed to be in gangs actually existed. For example, the character of Walter ‘Monk’ McGinn was based loosely on Monk Eastman, a Jewish gangster of the late 1800s who ran the Eastman gang and was eventually killed by a corrupt Prohibition enforcement agent. Jack Mulraney, who in the film worked as a corrupt policeman for Bill ‘the Butcher,’ ran with the Gophers, and his nickname “Happy Jack” resulted from the permanent grin across his face caused b a

form of facial muscle paralysis. As mentioned earlier, women sometimes took part in gang fights by throwing things at opponents, but probably none became as involved as Hellcat Maggie. The depiction of Hellcat Maggie in the film accurately shows a woman who filed her teeth to fangs and attached brass nails to her fingers in order to scratch people's eyes out or cut their ears off in fights. And similar to the film, she collected the ears of opponents in a jar.

For the large array of Irish gangs who often fought each other, their common enemy remained the "Nativists" or "Native American" gangs like the Bowery Boys, American Guard or Slaughter Housers. The most famous of which, the anti-Catholic and anti-Irish Bowery Boys, often fought the Dead Rabbits and O'Connell Guard. While the Bowery Boys actively took part in the New York Draft Riots, looting buildings and fighting opposing gangs, by the end of the 1860s the gang split up into many other groups and soon enough, the Bowery Boys ceased to exist.

Although the Bowery Boys originally worked with Tammany Hall, they ended up associating themselves with the Know Nothing Political Party, named because its members acted dumb and pretended they "knew nothing" when questioned. The Bowery Boys decided to align themselves with the Know Nothings because they too saw the Irish immigrants as scum and held the same anti-Irish and anti-Catholic spirit. A Detroit Know Nothing recommended true Americans to "carry your revolver and shoot down the first Irish rebel that dare insult your person as an American!" Another called Catholics "mindless 'emissaries of bloody and bigoted Rome,' bishops' pawns incapable of voting their individual consciences." In the film, Bill Cutting reflects this belief when he comments, "[the Irish] vote how the archbishop tells 'em. And who tells the archbishop? Their king in the pointy hat that sits on his throne in Rome."

Similar to how Boss Tweed influenced Irish gangs to help him steal elections, the Know Nothings and their gangs messed with elections by attacking immigrants, the largest group of voters in the Five Points. Nationwide, Know Nothings received support from many Republicans, running on a "xenophobic platform," asking for the "purification of the ballot box" and aiming to protect Americans from foreign influence, seen in the film with the Nativist flag that states, "Native Americans beware of foreign influence."

Because of their disparaging attitude towards the Irish, many gang fights broke out between the Protestant Nativist and Irish Catholic gangs. But a lot of the time fights broke out between Irish gangs themselves. In general, the depiction of gang fights in the movie

exaggerates the events. Not many brought weapons into fights and not as many died as shown. Fists remained the most common weapons, not axes and knives as depicted in the film, while bats and clubs sometimes appeared, but not handguns until the late 1850s. As for the battle between the Dead Rabbits and Natives at the beginning of the film, historians claim it to be “reasonably true to history” except for the death toll. An actual battle of the Dead Rabbits and Plug Uglies against the Bowery Boys did occur in 1857 (not 1846 as in the film), with 800 to 1000 involved, resulting in twelve deaths, far less than the exaggerated casualties shown in the film.

Although the history of the Bowery Boys remains vague, several members of the gang have become relatively well-known, with the most famous being Bill ‘the Butcher’ Poole. As it can be assumed by the name, the character of Bill ‘the Butcher’ Cutting in the film reflects the life of the actual Bill ‘the Butcher.’ The actual ‘Butcher’ was of English descent, had a wife and a son, and lived from 1821 to 1855 and not in the Five Points. He took part in gambling, bare-knuckle boxing, street fighting, worked in the Red Rover fire company, and participated in many gang activities as a member of the Bowery Boys. Unlike the character in the film, William Poole did not have a glass eye. As can be assumed by his name, he was an actual butcher. He learned the trade from his father, and although no proof exists of whether he actually murdered people with his “knife handling” skills, he did injure people and became known for the “bloodiness of his actions,” similar to Day-Lewis’ character in the film who believes “[fear] preserves the order of things.”

Because of his tactics, those in the Five Points and lower Manhattan area feared him, but Poole did not hold as much power as ‘the Butcher’ depicted in the film. In actuality, he worked for political bosses and used violence in order to ensure votes, and with his hatred of Irish immigrants, he joined the Know Nothing political party, and as some sources say he became its leader. Similar to the issues between the characters of Bill ‘the Butcher’ and Amsterdam Vallon, the real ‘Butcher’ faced many issues with John Morrissey, an Irishman who worked for Tammany Hall, which led to ‘the Butcher’s’ death in 1855, when he was shot by Morrissey’s friend, a fellow Irishman, Lew Baker. Strangely, Poole survived for nearly two weeks after initially being shot, and supposedly, with his last breath he said, “Goodbye Boys, I die a true American” and “what grieves me most is thinking that I’ve been murdered by a set of Irish.” Although he uttered similar last words in the film as in real life, Bill ‘the Butcher’ Poole died eight years before the New York Draft Riots even occurred.

As issues between gangs tore New York City apart, the United States simultaneously tore itself apart with the Civil War, which serves as a backdrop to the issues in New York City's Five Points in the film. New Yorkers largely opposed the Civil War and often blamed and persecuted Blacks, causing Blacks to be placed under federal protection. The Civil War itself added to the mess of New York, but the first Conscription Act intensified the mess. Issued on March 3, 1863, the Conscription Act called for 300,000 soldiers, requiring men from ages 20 through 45 to put their names in for the July 11 drawing that would determine who would go to battle. With the numbers killed in battle published in newspapers, civilians feared being drafted into the Civil War. But by paying a "commutation fee" of \$300 (around \$5000 today), or by finding a substitute, one could avoid being potentially drafted. These realities led to intense backlash from immigrants. From the Irish immigrants' perspective, first off, they disliked the Blacks who earned more than they did for the same jobs and they refused to fight for them. Secondly, they could afford nowhere near the commutation fee. And lastly, Union army members recruited Irish to fight fresh off the arriving boats, which undoubtedly made the Irish dislike the Union even more.

Leonardo DiCaprio's character stated, "they read out the draftees names' like they was already dead." Subsequently, the Conscription Act led to four days and nights of rioting, in what came to be known as the New York Draft Riots. In Scorsese's depiction of the Draft Riots, several inaccuracies arose. First, Scorsese made the riots seem to occur at the same time as the gang wars of the 1830s and 1840s. Second, while the riots occurred during the summer, the film shows it occurring during winter. Third, in the film, the navy fires canons from the harbor (a completely erroneous depiction). The idea of placing candles on windowsills to demonstrate support for riot was not done for this conflict, but instead for an anti-Black riot that occurred thirty years earlier. These errors, Scorsese accurately conveys the essence of the Draft Riots: the belief that the Civil War was a "rich man's war" but a "poor man's fight." Because most of the rioters were Irish, they refused to fight for Blacks after having to compete with them for jobs, and they subsequently lynched or beat many Blacks and burned Colored churches and orphanages. Started by the Black Joke fire company, rioters first attacked draft offices, robbing and looting buildings in their path and targeting any Blacks and abolitionists they passed.

Rioting raged on for four days and nights from July 13 through 16, until Lincoln sent in the Federal Army, who arrived in New York City straight from the Gettysburg battlefield. Although the army eventually restored order, by the end of the riot, with 50,000 to 70,000 involved,

between 100 and 1000 were killed or wounded, including rioters, and \$1.5 to 2 million worth of damage was inflicted (equivalent to \$25 to 35 million today). Despite the rioting, by August the drawing of draftees' names continued.

After suffering through the Civil War and then decades of the Gilded Age, America welcomed the arrival of the Progressive Era, which lasted from 1902 to 1920. During the Progressive Era, muckrakers finally exposed the terrible living conditions of the Five Points in works such as Jacob Riis' book *How the Other Half Lives*, which brought to light the reality of tenement living and child labor in the Five Points. By the 1920s, the Teddy Roosevelt-led Progressive Era had enacted numerous reforms at the federal, state and local levels to reduce the influence of bosses while improving the working and living conditions of urban dwellers.

Although *Gangs of New York* met criticism, historian Anbinder argued that the film showed "that the making of the multi-ethnic America we know today was a lot more difficult than we remember. We tend to think that our ancestors were not like immigrants today, but in almost every way they were." With the overall accurate sense of the plight of immigrants and by showing the World Trade Center at the end of the film even after the September 11th terrorist attack, Scorsese's decision "to make a film about the ones who built New York, not the ones who tried to destroy it" rings true. However, as the film concludes, Amsterdam Vallon predicts, "And no matter what they did to build this city up again for the rest of time, it would be like no one even knew we was ever here." Fortunately for a generation of Americans, Scorsese rebuilt the world of 19th century America, and the lives of those founders of urban America will never be lost again.

Key Quotes

Boss Tweed: (*while talking to Bill 'the Butcher' about an alliance*) The appearance of the law must be upheld, especially while it's being broken.

Bill the Butcher: (*when Johnny claims he's with the Natives not the Irish*) A Native is a man what's willing to give his life for his country.

Jenny Everdeane: (*after bumping into people*) I leave you in the grace and favor of the Lord.

Bill the Butcher: (*walking down the streets with Amsterdam after beating up McGloin*) Now everything you see belongs to me, to one degree or another. The beggars and newsboys and quick thieves here in Paradise, the sailor dives and gin mills and blind tigers on the waterfront, the anglers and amusers, the she-hes and the Chinks- everybody owes, everybody pays because that's how you stand up against the rising of the tide.

Amsterdam Vallon: (*sitting eating with Jenny, Johnny and other Irish after his recovery*) Get all of us together, and we ain't got a gang. We got an army. And all you need's a spark, right? Just one spark, something to wake us all up.

Bill the Butcher: (*sitting with an American flag draped over him while talking to Amsterdam the night he is shot in the theater*) Civilization is crumbling.

Boss Tweed: (*after the draft riots*) We're burying a lot of votes down here tonight.