2007

Considering the Consequence of Class: Cross-Class Relationships in Nineteenth Century British Novels

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CONSIDERING THE CONSEQUENCE OF CLASS:

CROSS-CLASS RELATIONSHIPS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITISH NOVELS

A Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors with Distinction

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May 2007

This Study by: Julie Crow

Entitled: Considering the Consequence of Class: Cross-Class Relationships in Nineteenth Century British Novels

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University Honors with Distinction.

5/2/07
Date

Karen Tracey, Honors Thesis/ Project Advisor

5/2/07
Date

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Modern society delights in the mismatched marriage. The most popular and wildly romantic tales trace the courtship of a pair that unites, repudiating any notions of fiscal or social inequality. In contemporary fiction, a prince can marry a commoner, and a man of wealth and prestige may attach himself to a maid, a waitress, or even a hooker. While this ability for romance to transcend class is commonplace in the popular culture of today, it is quite scarce in the literature of nineteenth century England. This adherence to standing is a reflection of the strictly stratified structure of the English social system, which remained in place from 1590 to 1880 (Stone 400).

Although the aristocracy and the gentry had been in power for hundreds of years, the nineteenth century saw the rise of the middle class, and the elite classes could not ignore the jostling for power that was taking place below them. But how receptive would the elite be to the mixing of "new money" and "old money" and how often did they fold newcomers into their ranks? There are many methods by which to investigate the potential for social mobility and the willingness of the elite to allow those of a lower class to infiltrate their society, but, as scholar, David Spring, says: "Marriage makes society and tends to confirm its arrangements" (Spring, "Interpreters" 61). In this way, literature of the nineteenth century, specifically those cross-class relationships and couplings explored in this literature, can serve as a reflection of class-conscious attitudes of the time. Also, by virtue that Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Emma* (1816), Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) are positioned throughout the nineteenth century, they serve as a continuum by which to observe the shifting of attitudes in accordance with the shifting of power in the social system.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the delineations of England's social system were precise and respected. The highest echelon, immediately below royalty, contained the landed aristocracy, with annual incomes from 10,000 to 100,000 pounds (Spring, "Interpreters" 58). With these spectacular incomes, members of the aristocracy boasted grand houses, large estates (perhaps several), a house in London, and all other signifiers of superiority their wealth could buy. The landed gentry inhabited the sphere directly below the aristocracy, and with incomes of at least 1,000 pounds annually, associated regularly with the aristocracy. While an income of 1,000 pounds signified gentry status, the gentry at this level often lived uncomfortably because, "status demands often outran income" (Spring, "Interpreters" 59). The non-landed gentry comprised the final elite sphere. These individuals were neither lords of manors nor collectors of rent from tenant farmers, but they lived in large houses and owned adequate amounts of land (Spring, "Interpreters" 60). The elite classes regularly mixed with each other, but rarely sought or accepted the company of those of the lower classes.

However, as the nineteenth century progressed, the middle class grew in wealth and power and presented a legitimate challenge to the hegemony of the elite classes. According to Lawrence and Jeanne Stone, this challenge grew out of "the transforming power of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie, both industrial and professional" (402). The Stones attribute the rise of the middle class to an expansion of the professions and an increase in the prosperity of merchants and tradesmen, due to overseas commerce and the international exchange of goods, and stimulated by improvements in the road system (408). In addition, F.M.L. Thompson points to the use of secret ballots, the limitation of election expenses, the decline in land values, and the

increase in large fortunes made from gold, diamonds, banking, mining, or brewing, all contributing to the middle class surge (24).

Most scholars agree that by 1880, the system was irreconcilably changed, and by 1914, unrecognizable. The dramatic changes in the social composition of the House of Commons are indicative of a social system altered irretrievably. In the 1840's, upper class landed families controlled three quarters of the seats in the House of Commons. In 1868, the elite controlled only two thirds of the seats, and 1880 marked the first time in which businessmen and industrialists constituted a majority. By 1906, the elite occupied only one tenth of the seats (Thompson 24). With 1880 as the turning point, the elite continued to suffer deductions in power: "somewhere between 1880 and the First World War the landed elite went into a decline, suffered a collapse, or at the very least went through a sea of change transforming it by absorption into something different" (Thompson 24).

With the elites' power already severely diminished, the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 cemented their fall. Thompson argues that the needs of total war, combined with an altered economy were more than sufficient to collapse the long-standing social system. The crises of the present could not be handled by keeping the existing system intact: "When the business of government, and hence of high politics, became concerned with the sheer survival of the nation, with the life and death of individuals and the life and death of business, everyone wishing to take part had to become professionals" (Thompson 42). The life of leisure was over and by default, the rule of the leisure classes.

With the rise of the middle class occurring early in the century, what is most surprising to scholars is how long the elite were able to retain control. As the Stones ruminate, "what is so remarkable is how long the dikes and levees withstood the rising flood before they finally began to crumble. By and large, the power, wealth, and even status of the landed elite survived more or less intact until 1880" (402). Scholars agree on the strength of the elite until 1880, but they disagree about how the hegemony was maintained.

Lawrence and Jeanne Stone theorize that the elite maintained power by striking a balance between the "too ready acceptance of the new rich which would dilute numbers and values and too rigid rejection, which would stimulate class antagonism" (422). The Stones maintain that this careful inletting of a few members of the upper middle class was effective because of the nearly universal awe of the elite and respect for their way of life (407).

Those who were allowed into the elite painstakingly imitated them, copying their manners, education, and behavior. In the quest to become genteel, the newcomers, "sent their children to boarding schools to learn social graces, they withdrew their wives from work to put them in the parlour to drink tea" (Stone 409). The yearning for the lifestyle of the elite kept their traditions alive.

However, the middle class who were ushered into associations with the elite, were relegated to the bottom of the upper class. Within as well as outside the elite, there was a hierarchy of power, and "the great strength of the English landed elite was its success in psychologically co-opting those below them into the status hierarchy of gentility" (Stone 410). While new elite memberships were granted, the members of the old elite were

careful to retain control. The old elite granted limited membership to a new class, but didn't allow an abundance of intermingling with the established elite: "This genteel society was sliced and sliced again into extremely thin status layers, subtly separated from each other by the delicate but infinitely resistant lines of snobbery" (Stone 423).

The Stones argue that the chosen few who were allowed admittance didn't make a significant impact on elite society. Most bought large houses but not large estates and sold their elite property in their lifetime or at death (Stone 403). As a result, "many were thus transients who left no permanent imprint on county society" (Stone 403). Rather than purchasing the homes of elites, many wealthy merchants and industrialists were building villas within commuting distance from their place of work. These villas were used as weekend and summer retreats, but were quite different from an elite estate (Stone 405).

In addition, the elite were possessed by the arrogance of paternalism, which guided their actions in dealing with the lower classes. As defined by the Stones, "paternalism presupposes an inegalitarian, unchanging, hierarchical social order where everyone has his place and stays in it, under the protection and direction of his superiors" (412). Considering that, "surrender is difficult for those who are convinced that they are the natural rulers of society" (Stone 416), it is unsurprising that the elite unflinchingly defended their right to power. The ideology of paternalism, "wholly antithetical to principles of open mobility, individualism" (Stone 415) convinced the elite that it was not only their right, but their duty to exert power over the lower classes. Espoused by the elite, many members of the lower classes bought into this system as well, and "the

ideology of paternalism survived well into the nineteenth century, and continued to act as a major prop to maintain the social order" (Stone 415).

In comparison to the Stones, Thompson describes a less abrasive elite, more open to the admittance of new members: "the landed elite became noticeably more open in its reception of new blood than it had been formerly" (33). However, Thompson agrees that the numbers of new elite were fairly low, describing the "comparative smallness of the new flow, both in relation to the size of the older established landed class and in relation to the likely number of large fortunes made in industry, trade, and banking" (30).

Thompson finds that the "novel feature" of the nineteenth century was "an acceleration in the speed of social absorption and acquisition of gentry status" (32). He believes that the elite of the nineteenth century more readily accepted those outside their class than in prior generations. Previously a first generation industrialist would have been considered "too closely identified with business and profit-making to be capable of making the transition late in life to the different values of a country gentleman" (Thompson 32). Members of the new elite no longer had to wait two or three generations to be accepted by the established elite community.

This acceleration of the social acclimatization process was a component of what Thompson describes as the "aristocratic embrace" (23). As explained by Thompson, this strategy involved, "gobbling up the new men of no family and little fortune as they came knocking at the doors of the great world of high society and high politics, and attracting, luring, or enslaving them with the seductive charms, favors, and graces that aristocratic people and aristocratic living could provide" (23). In comparison with the Stones' description of a fairly hostile elite, begrudgingly allowing a few into their ranks to

appease the many, Thompson tells of an active elite, eager to assimilate the newcomers to their way of life in order to preserve it.

Both the Stones and Thompson agree that the newcomers sought to imitate the elite, despite their divergence on whether this behavior was actually encouraged by the established elite. According to Thompson, "the new-fledged gentry could be more aristocratic than the aristocrats in their anxiety to conform to the rules of country life or the etiquette of the London season" (30). Because there were numerous investment opportunities for businessmen that would have been far more profitable than the purchase of a landed estate, it's clear that the motives for land purchase were primarily social (Thompson 29). Now that the gentry hopefuls had the wealth, they sought the means of acquiring the status to accompany it. The desire of others to achieve the wealth and the status of the elite sustained their values and way of life. This focused imitation "strengthened the influence of the landed elite at the same time that it watered down its lineage" (Thompson 30).

Going a step further than Thompson, Spring argues that the elite was open to any members of the lower classes who had adequate wealth and wished to join its ranks. Spring reasons that the relative small numbers of members of lower classes entering the landed elite is reflective of the changes taking place in the nineteenth century that would have "tended to lower a businessman's propensity to buy land" ("Social Mobility" 336). As the economy was changing, there were new secure forms of wealth-holding, of which businessmen instead chose to take advantage (Spring, "Social Mobility" 336). Spring stresses that just because a businessman chose not to enter the elite, did not mean that this avenue was closed to him: "A businessman could have reasons why he might not choose

to enter the elite...reasons that have nothing to do with elite exclusiveness...People who do not choose to enter a society that is open to them are not excluded" ("Social Mobility" 348). Spring doesn't believe that non-entrance is proof of exclusion, and that the complete openness of the elite is a feasible possibility.

When discussing the "openness" of the elite, it is important to realize that there are two distinct ways to view "openness" because there are two criteria by which to define "class". As explained by Paul Delany, "class" has two divergent meanings. Class can refer to wealth or fortune: "a stratification by capital, income, and economic productivity" (508). But wealth alone is not enough to ensure acceptance into the elite because, as articulated by Juliet McMaster, "money, like wine, isn't considered quite respectable until it has aged a little" (87). Class also refers to status: "status groups form cultures of stability, exclusion, and distinction, and place great value on sheer length of tenure" (509). Since "status cannot be diminished by economic misfortune", a member of the elite could lose their fortune but still remain a distinguished member of the upper class, by virtue of their status (Delany 510). Among the elite, status was at least as important, if not more important, than wealth: "Persons of consequence can exact deference from others by virtue of their status- a more direct form of power than the ability to purchase goods and services in the market" (Delany 510). As a result, those of lower classes could potentially buy their way into the elite, but their wealth alone would not confer status nor guarantee the respect of the gentility.

This preoccupation with wealth and status is reflected in the literature of the nineteenth century, where class undeniably dictates the boundaries of any given cross-class relationship. Positioned at the beginning of the spectrum of nineteenth century

British literature, Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* reflect an ever-present consciousness of class and an awareness of social limitations. Jane Austen had "no great liking for social fluidity" (Spring, "Interpreters" 55), and her characters rarely venture beyond the boundaries of their class without consequences.

The secret engagement of Edward Ferrars and Lucy Steele of *Sense and Sensibility* is regarded throughout the novel as a foolish attachment. Edward, heir to a large fortune is rich in wealth and status, while his betrothed, Lucy, is deficient in both. The very nature of a secret engagement alludes to its impropriety, and this match is no exception. The couple keeps their engagement secret, for fear of eliciting the rage of Edward's mother and consequently stripping Edward of his fortune. When revealing the secret to Elinor Dashwood, Lucy stresses the importance of discretion: "you must know of what importance it is to us, not to have it reach his mother; for she would never approve of it, I dare say. I shall have no fortune and I fancy she is an exceeding proud woman" (Sense 126). Lucy recognizes that her deficiencies in wealth and status place her in a lower class than Edward, and that these disparities are significant barriers to their future.

While Elinor faithfully keeps the painful secret, the covert plan is eventually revealed to Mrs. Ferrars, Edward's mother. Mrs. Ferrars acts in accordance with Edward and Lucy's fears and promptly disinherits her eldest son, passing the family fortune to Edward's younger brother, Robert. The novel neither condemns nor laments Mrs. Ferrar's actions: "For Edward to have made such an unprofitable match is taken as a personal affront by Mrs. Ferrars...and his mother's decision to disinherit him is regarded as perfectly justifiable" (Monaghan 63). Edward himself acknowledges the imprudence

of his actions. In explaining himself to Elinor, he insists, "It was a foolish, idle inclination on my side...the consequence of ignorance of the world" (Sense 337). Edward appeals to his youth and want of experience in justifying his actions at the time, and reassures his new betrothed that maturity and education have convinced him of the gravity of his mistake.

Despite this seeming bad fortune, Lucy comes out even, abandoning Edward and marrying his brother, to whom the fortune has now passed. By swapping brothers, Lucy has snuck her way into the elite class. Austen's portrayal of Lucy as callous and fortune focused is an unflattering reflection on those of lower class.

Upon the dissolution of Edward's prior engagement, he proposes to his true love, Elinor. While male-favored English inheritance laws have left Elinor almost as poor as Lucy, by virtue of her gentile family, she is rich in status, which brings her closer to Edward's level. In addition, with Edward stripped of the majority of his fortune, their fortunes are not as disparate as they once were, and his wealth is consequently more comparable to that of Elinor. In contrast to Edward's fanciful first engagement, his second is regarded as a mature choice.

Emma Woodhouse, of Jane Austen's Emma, similarly attaches herself to an individual of both lower status and wealth than herself. Rather than an engagement, Emma initiates a friendship with Harriet Smith, a pretty, yet flighty and unrefined girl of illegitimate birth. However, rather than interacting on an equal footing, Harriet essentially becomes Emma's puppet. As described by Beth Tobin, she adopts Harriet, as if she were a pet and plays with her future as if she were a doll (479). Taking Harriet under her wing, Emma attempts to train her in the ways of the elite class and improve her

position through a lucrative marriage. Although Harriet improves under Emma's instruction, the effort is largely futile. Learned manners can only go so far because, "In the dual system that still prevails in Austen's world, it is not enough to look right; one must *be* right...what counts most are breeding, connection, and consequence, which are not sold in shops" (Delany 515). Status cannot be bought or taught, it must be inherited.

However, Emma refuses to believe that she can't ensure a prosperous place for Harriet, despite her class deficiencies. She is adamant that, "till it appears that men are much more philosophic on the subject of beauty than they are generally supposed; till they do fall in love with well-informed minds instead of handsome faces, a girl, with such loveliness as Harriet, has a certainty of being admired and sought after" (Emma 55).

So certain is Emma of Harriet's destined upward mobility that she picks out the clergyman, Mr. Elton, for Harriet's match, simultaneously coaxing her to refuse a proposal from a respectable farmer, Robert Martin. This interference outrages family friend, Mr. Knightley, the wealthiest member of the community. He lectures Emma, revealing that of her friendship with Harriet, "I have always thought it a very foolish intimacy" (Emma 56). He warns Emma of the eminent failure of her mission due to Harriet's illegitimacy: "Men of family would not very fond of connecting themselves with a girl of such obscurity, and most prudent men would be afraid of the inconvenience and disgrace they might be involved in, when the mystery of her parentage came to be revealed" (Emma 56). In addition, he worries about the consequences of Emma's meddling for Harriet: "Nothing so easy as for a young lady to raise her expectations too high" (Emma 56). Confident of the suitableness of the match between Harriet and Martin, Mr. Knightley bemoans, "What are Harriet Smith's claims, either of birth, nature,

or education, to any connection higher than Robert Martin? She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom, with probably no settled provision at all, and certainly no respectable relations" (Emma 53). Emma's interference is viewed as a "perverse manipulation of rank" (Monaghan 125), and Mr. Knightley is quick to point out her ignorance of social realities.

Also in opposition to Mr. Knightley's wishes, Emma ignores Jane Fairfax, "the only other well-educated and accomplished woman of her own age in Highbury society" (Tobin 480). By virtue of their proximity in status, Jane "should be the object of Emma's interest and attention" (Tobin 480). Willfully ignoring the realities of class, Emma chooses to devote her time to the simple and inferior Harriet.

It is not until her own happiness is threatened that Emma recognizes the folly of her infatuation with Harriet. Learning that Harriet has set her sights on Mr. Knightley, Emma is horrified to realize that she in fact loves Mr. Knightley as well. Her heart is further agitated by the fear that Mr. Knightley may return Harriet's affections. She blames herself for bringing about the unthinkable: "Who had been at pains to give Harriet notions of self-consequence but herself? Who but herself had taught her, that she was to elevate herself if possible, and that her claims were great to a high worldly establishment? (Emma 375). Emma regrets her choice of companion and acknowledges Mr. Knightley's foresight: "Had she followed Mr. Knightley's known wishes, in paying that attention to Miss Fairfax, which was every way her due…had she endeavored to find a friend there instead of in Harriet Smith; she must, in all probability, have been spared from every pain which pressed on her now" (Emma 381).

While Emma's meddling in Harriet's affairs "undermines her society's elaborate discriminations of social standing" (Tobin 482) and seems to threaten both her future and Harriet's future, Austen's conclusion rights the potential class wrongs. Mr. Knightly is discovered to have affection for Emma, not Harriet, and Emma is saved from "the worst of all her womanly follies- her willful intimacy with Harriet Smith" (Emma 419). Harriet is essentially quarantined to London for a time and is eventually married to Robert Martin after all. Despite the potential for a cross-class coupling, both couples ultimately marry their match in both wealth and status. Both Emma and Mr. Knightley bring an abundance of wealth and status to the union, so there is not a great concern about the betterment of one's position. According to Delany, "Emma and Mr. Knightley are free at the end to be passionate about each other because their fortunes are both large and roughly equal, thus canceling out any motive of 'interest'" (511). Similarly, the union of Harriet and Martin is appropriate because it "returns them to the near-invisibility of their original functions outside the leisure class's ongoing reproduction of polite society" (Grossman). Harriet has ensured a secure future for herself in the match with Martin, the most social elevation she could realistically obtain. Despite Emma's best efforts, Harriet finds herself right back where she started, with a proposal from a farmer.

It's no accident that Mr. Knightley, the most wealthy and most powerful citizen of Highbury is proved right in the end. As Tobin points out, Austen idealizes the gentry, and significantly "it is Mr. Knightley who chastises Emma, reminds her of her duty as a member of the gentry" (482). The very name "Knightley" conjures remembrances of the days of chivalry (Delany 512), and purposely, Mr. Knightley is the most moralistic and paternalistic figure in the novel. Just as Lawrence and Jeanne Stone described of the

elite, Mr. Knightley acts in accordance with the system of paternalism. He is involved in the affairs of those below him in class, with the intent of securing for them a proper future. Mr. Knightley "attempts to maintain the order of his community, and this forces him to care for its individual members and regulate their activities" (Kramp). In this light, the attention that Mr. Knightely pays to Harriet during the Box Hill excursion is not romantic like Emma fears, but paternalistic. He points out the beauty of the land in the attempt to reconcile her to the life of a farmer's wife (Monaghan 135). The most prosperous and respected of the Highbury residents, Mr. Knightley is endowed with the authority to mold his community.

Emma also holds a position of power in her community. As Tobin points out, "no other Austen heroine is as beautiful, as rich, or as independent as Emma" (478). Despite her femininity, by virtue of this wealth and status, Emma should be a patriarchal figure for her community as well. However, throughout the majority of the novel, Emma refuses to play by the rules of the elite. She ignores her responsibility and becomes engrossed in a world of fantasy and social impossibility. Her ill-advised match making is "an abuse of her social and economic powers" (Tobin 480). However, like Edward of Sense and Sensibility, her disregard for social decorum is blamed on a selfish immaturity, that the novel rectifies in the end.

Mr. Knightley's patriarchal benevolence clashes once again with Emma's self-indulgent immaturity with regard to the Bates. Mrs. and Miss Bates have little wealth but manage to remain among the gentility by virtue of their status. Mr. Knightley treats these ladies with the utmost respect and seeks to accommodate them whenever possible. Emma's careless disregard for these unfortunate members of her class is manifested

during the Box Hill excursion when she mockingly references Miss Bates' dullness (Emma 336). Once again, Mr. Knightley is quick to point out her error: "Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave her every harmless absurdity to take its chance...but Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to...Her situation should secure your compassion" (Emma 340). Mr. Knightley's words are meant to encourage Emma to respect those of nearby status, while sympathizing with their precarious situation. Mr. Knightley also recognizes that her thoughtless insult may have unintended consequences: "despite their wit and truth, her words are a shocking violation of the 'good manners', which, in a traditional society, are designed to lessen the sting of inequality" (Tobin 481). By virtue of his position as policer and protector of Highbury society, this is conduct that Mr. Knightley cannot ignore.

Emma is similarly discourteous to the Coles, a family that has recently bought their way into the Highbury community by virtue of their fortune from trade. As noted by McMaster, "Austen located few major characters in trade, and for many of her characters the word has a ring that seems to require apology" (87). This rings true for the Coles, as they attempt to make up for their lack of status by throwing a dinner party in calculated accordance with the customs of the genteel. Emma's condescension and reluctance to admit the Coles into the ranks of the genteel can be seen in her initial reaction to the party: "The Coles were very respectable in their way, but they ought to be taught that it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them" (Emma 188).

As evidenced by Emma's attitude, the Coles have a difficult path in order to enter the gentility, rich in wealth but lacking in status. In contrast, the Bates possess status without wealth, and "still have connections: they are on visiting terms with the best families of Highbury; and that's more than can be said for the Coles, with all their money and servants" (McMaster 88). The desire to exactly imitate the gentility, as discussed by the Stones and Thompson, is expressed in Austen's novel through the Coles' careful planning of their party, from the diligence accorded to the guest list to the proper placement of each dish (Emma 194). Reminiscent of Thompson's description of the acceleration of the social acclimization process, characteristic of the century, Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley argue for their inclusion in elite society: "The Coles have lived respectfully in Highbury for a number of years, and both Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley acknowledge the justice of their claims to stand on equal footing with the best families" (Monaghan 128). Under the influence of these two patriarchal figures, despite her initial reservations, Emma eventually allows that the Coles have a right to a place in Highbury elite society.

The Coles are able to earn a place for themselves among the elite due to their careful study and practice of genteel manners. In the community of Highbury, "much has to do with manners and tact...Emma accepts the Coles into the genteel society...because they expressed themselves so properly" (McMaster 87). Where the Coles succeed, the crass Mrs. Elton fails. Descended from a manufacturing family, Mrs. Elton's boastful attitude and course manners impede her ability to earn the respect of the established elite. Mrs. Elton's "loud-mouthed self-approval" is alarming to Emma and the rest of the

gentility (McMaster 87). As portrayed in Emma, the established elite was only willing to accept a select few who showed the proper deference to their status.

In a departure from Austen's elite heroines, Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre is an unattached orphan of ambiguous parentage. By virtue of her parents' mismatched marriage, Jane's background is a mix between the propertied class and the working poor. As articulated by Fraiman, "If these two met and married in the space between classes, they were also, each of them, socially ambiguous, and this ambiguity is part of their legacy to Jane" (616). The socially mismatched marriage described at the beginning of the novel lays the foundation for Jane's hardships due to her social ambiguity throughout the novel.

As a result of her inability to align herself with one particular class, Jane is an outsider in nearly every situation. While living with her aunt, Mrs. Reed, she is simultaneously excluded from the family and rejected by the servants. She spends the majority of her time with only a book for company. She can find no solace in a human soul because "she is neither family nor servant, but floats uncomfortably between" (Fraiman 617). When she goes away to school at Lowood, thanks to her Aunt's cruel relation of her character, the headmaster singles Jane out, warning the other students to "be on your guard against her...avoid her company, exclude her from your sports, and shut her out from your converse" (Bronte 68). Finally, her status as a governess at Thornfield marks her as the other as well. She is a dependent, yet better born and educated than the other servants (Peters).

Jane recognizes her class ambiguity, and as she begins to develop feelings for her employer, Mr. Rochester, she admonishes herself for venturing to imagine that he'd

consider her for a wife. She tries to convince herself that such a future is impossible and chastises herself for treasuring small favors from Mr. Rochester: "your folly sickens me...you have derived pleasure from occasional tokens of preference – equivocal tokens, shown by a gentleman of family, and man of the world, to a dependent and a novice" (Bronte 173).

Despite Jane's self-assurances to the contrary, Mr. Rochester is in fact nursing a passion for Jane. However, he is conflicted about how to proceed. In a moment of jumbled reflection he rhetorically asks, "Is the wandering and sinful, but now rest-seeking and repentant man justified in daring the world's opinion in order to attach to him forever this gentle, gracious, genial stranger?" (Bronte 238). Mr. Rochester is aware of the class disparities between the two and the turmoil it could cause.

When Mr. Rochester makes the determination to challenge the world's opinion and unite himself with his socially adrift governess, his engagement is immediately met with skepticism. The first person to learn of their betrothal, the head of the household, Mrs. Fairfax, is concerned about Mr. Rochester's motives, warning Jane to "Try and keep Mr. Rochester at a distance: distrust yourself as well as him. Gentlemen in his station are not accustomed to marry their governesses" (Bronte 290). To Mrs. Fairfax the disparity in class, as well as the large discrepancy in age between the two seems to be the "flaunting of a doubly violated social taboo" (Godfrey). The undeniable difference in age, wealth, and status create significant power inequalities between Jane and Mr. Rochester.

Rochester recognizes these inequalities and attempts to initiate his bride-to-be into the ranks of the elite. Rochester "attempts to transform Jane into a wife acceptable within

his existing social alliances by adorning her with jewels and silk dresses" (Bossche). However, Jane cannot forget their class disparities, and these presents injure her pride. As the gifts pile up, she can barely contain her growing consternation: "The more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation" (Bronte 294). With all of his wealth, Mr. Rochester "both offers her freedom and threatens to enslave her" (Bossche). Jane despises the thought of being a charity case and laments that, "If I had but a prospect of one day bringing Mr. Rochester an accession of fortune, I could better endure to be kept by him now" (Bronte 294).

While Jane and Mr. Rochester make it through a rocky engagement and to the altar, their union is halted by an alter-side accusation. To the horror of both Jane and Mr. Rochester, the existence of Bertha, Rochester's unarguably insane, yet undeniably alive wife is revealed. Consequently, it's clear that in reality, Rochester's proposal was not of marriage but of adultery. Despite any illusions he may have had, he was asking Jane to be his mistress, not his wife. Bertha's existence is significant because Mrs. Fairfax's concerns are justified. The presence of Bertha in the novel, "aligns Rochester with what men of his station *are* accustomed to doing; not having two wives but having a wife and a lower class mistress whose defamed status leaves her wholly at his mercy" (Fraiman 625).

While these shocking events precipitate Jane's flight from Thornflield, she would not depart forever. When she returns, she finds Rochester's situation stunningly altered. In a suicidal tirade, his insane wife has burned Thornfield, the incident leaving Rochester without a home and without his sight. The altered Rochester is physically and financially weaker, as well as newly single. Conveniently, Jane has recently learned of influential

family connections and been awarded a considerable fortune. Just as Rochester has descended in power, Jane has ascended. The two are now able to inhabit the same class, and their marriage this time is met with no obstacles. As a result of this social leveling, "the rather out-of-the-ordinary relationship between Jane and Rochester becomes both possible and non-threatening to society" (Peters). The relationship is also now non-threatening to Jane, as she expresses to Rochester, "I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence" (Bronte 493).

Disparities in wealth and status also separate Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw of George Eliot's Middlemarch. Dorothea initially marries a fellow member of the gentry, Mr. Casaubon, but the clergyman's death leaves her widowed within two years. She is shocked to learn that her late husband had included a codicil to his will, providing for her immediate disinheritance if she were to marry his cousin, Will. Dorothea is appalled that the innocent friendship between herself and Will would be suggested to be something inappropriate. This codicil serves as a physical representation of the gulf that already stands between herself and Will. While Dorothea is a descendent of a wealthy and connected elite family, Will is known throughout Middlemarch as, "the grandson of a thieving Jew pawnbroker" (Eliot 734). Even without the codicil, a union between the two would be unrealistic, considering their respective social standings.

While Dorothea may not have entertained any romantic notions of Will, prior to her husband's death, Will had been passionately devoted to Dorothea almost from the time they met. However, Will never intends to seek a union with Dorothea until he can improve his wealth and status to match hers. Before he learns of the codicil, Will dreams of "wonders he might do in five years, for example political writing, political

speaking...and they might give him such distinction that he would not seem to be asking Dorothea to step down to him" (Eliot 483). Upon learning of the codicil, Will is outraged that others may think he would court Dorothea, believing the prize to be her fortune, rather than her person. As he vehemently expresses to Dorothea, "There has been a mean implication against my character. I wish you to know that under no circumstances would I have lowered myself by- under no circumstances would I have given men the chance of saying that I sought money under the pretext of seeking- something else. There was no need of other safeguard against me- the safeguard of wealth was enough" (Eliot 600). Will explains to Dorothea that as long as he could not match her caliber of wealth and status, he would have refrained from pursuing her. Following their bitter departure, Dorothea overtakes Will on the road, riding comfortably in her carriage, while he plods along the wheel tracks (Eliot 604). This meeting is symbolic of the wide and seemingly increasing gulf between them.

In a subsequent meeting, Will bewails that, "There is no hope for me...I shall most likely always be very poor...It is impossible for us ever to belong to each other" (Eliot 769). However, their union does occur when Dorothea gives up her late husband's fortune in order to marry Will. Upon learning of her decision, Dorothea's family is incredulous. Her sister, Celia worries that her actions have cut her off from elite society forever: "How will you live? And you will go away among queer people. And I shall never see you..." (Eliot 779). Her brother in law, Sir James reveals his attitudes toward cross-class relationships in responding to her actions, "It hurts me too much that a woman like Dorothea should have done what is wrong" (Eliot 775).

However, the novel reveals that eventually, "social snobberies and family tensions worked their way out somewhat" (Coles 180), and that Dorothea moved between the gentility and the poor, visiting the former and living among the latter. While over time, her family warmed to her decision, the novel relates that Middlemarch tradition was not as kind. It is observed that Dorothea could not have been a "nice lady" because she, "married a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father, and a little more than a year after his death gave up her estate to marry his cousin- young enough to have been his son, with no property, and not well-born" (Eliot 793).

Concerns over class also cause tensions among other members of Middlemarch society, including the Garths and the Vinceys. The two families at one time had been on equal footing, but the Garths have since descended in class, while the Vinceys have ascended. As a result, despite the fact that Mrs. Garth is better educated, Mrs. Vincey, an innkeeper's daughter, feels that she is superior.

The Vinceys attempt to imitate the elite, sending their son, Fred to a university to acquire the manners, speech, and habits of a gentleman. The family intends Fred to become a clergyman because it is a respected occupation that both, "conferred gentility and offered opportunity for material advance" (McSweeney 48). However, the level-headed Mary Garth recognizes the folly of such a plan: "His (Fred's) being a clergyman would only be for gentility's sake, and I think there is nothing more contemptible than such imbecile gentility" (Eliot 492).

The Vinceys' daughter, Rosamond, also has a genteel education at her disposal. Due to this education and exposure to the upper echelons of genteel society, Rosamond has become ashamed of her family's background: "Rosamond felt that she might have

been happier if she had not been the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer. She disliked anything which reminded her that her mother's father had been an innkeeper" (Eliot 94). It is precisely this shrinking from one's background that made the elite skeptical of the ambitious industrialists and manufacturers. Mrs. Cadwallader makes it clear that she prefers "the farmers at the tithe-dinner who drank her health unpretentiously, and were not ashamed of their grandfathers' furniture" (Eliot 82).

This clash between the established elite and the upstarts of lower classes was not uncommon in the nineteenth century. In a period where wealth found its way into new hands, the elite had to struggle to retain the power to which it had been accustomed. British novels of the nineteenth century, including Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, seem to most closely correlate with the elite strategy as espoused by Lawrence and Jeanne Stone. The novels portray a reluctant, yet necessarily flexible elite, begrudgingly allowing a select few of lower classes to enter into their society. The newcomers are relegated to the bottom of elite society, and despite their comparable wealth, denied the status benefits of elite society, such as marriage with established elite families.

Within the novels, wildly disparate matches are not allowed to occur. The pair is either separated, or not allowed to unite until their standing in wealth or status has become more equal. In addition, this issue of class disparity is recognized by many of the characters, leading some to proactively seek to rectify it in order to have a future with their beloved.

As the century progressed and the elite became more accustomed to associating with those of lower classes, the relaxing (although not extinction) of class delineations

can be seen in the novels. From Lucy and Edward's foiled secret engagement in *Sense and Sensibility* to the scandalous attachment of Dorothea and Will, which is allowed to come to fruition in *Middlemarch*, cross-class relationships are not quite as outlandish as portrayed at the beginning of the century. While Austen's novels obsess over the elite, adhering to strict divisions of class and painfully describing each class boundary, Bronte and Eliot's novels devote time to characters of non-elite classes, as well as the elite, and illustrate scenes in which unequal classes interact. In this way, the novels can be seen as a continuum, changing alongside the changing social system in England. However, the mismatched couples that are allowed to unite don't emerge unscathed, and despite the reforms that were occurring, it would be many years before the classes were fluid enough to allow the disparate romances found in the entertainment mediums of popular culture today. Even in literature at the end of the nineteenth century, a prince can only marry a commoner only if it is revealed that she is actually descended from royalty, and a wealthy member of the elite can unite with a lower class woman...once she has conveniently acquired an independent fortune.

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