

Social class and status in a woman of no importance



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Social class, in its simplest terms, is a way to divide a populace into strata based on their wealth, or access to power, or some combination of the two. It is also a subjective measurement which often needs only to be implied to exist, so while to a certain extent one's social class is inescapable, in another it can be easily falsified. Ultimately, this has resulted in many texts in which upper-class people live as lower classes or similar. Within *A Woman of No Importance* by Oscar Wilde, characters fantasise about the lives of classes other than their own, enabling Wilde to offer an especially pointed commentary on class relations near the end of the 19th century. At the beginning of the play, Lady Caroline establishes herself as representative of the more vocal aspects of wider Victorian society at the time, which is to say that she is a snob. She is quick to assume that America has few country houses because there is no country, rather than that their culture may be different. This reveals her snobbish view even of upper-class society to be very rigid, and that she assumes all upper-class cultures are the same or perhaps merely that Britain's is the best. Indeed, her later comments about Lady Hunstanton "mix[ing] too much" (1: 11) and her pointed use of the rather accusatory phrase "that member of Parliament" (1: 11) establish quite visibly the snobbery of her ideas regarding class and social structure. This is repeatedly underlined by Lady Caroline's constant and deliberate alteration of Mr. Kelvil's name to "Kettle" (1: 11, 1: 82, 1: 156), (not accidentally an altogether mundane object). An interesting side note, as written by Antony H. Harrison in *A New Companion to Victorian Culture and Literature*, is that unmarried upper- and middle-class women themselves in Victorian society "were traditionally dependents (of their fathers or brothers)" (Tucker, 2014, p. 31) if not their husbands, so Lady Caroline

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judges others from a position of hypocrisy, having merely been born into this life. Gerald Arbuthnot, in contrast, having been raised in the poorest circumstances of anyone in the play, perhaps gives the reader the most insight into the lower classes' fantasies of upper-class life. There is no doubt that Gerald is overjoyed at the prospect of working for Lord Illingworth, calling the job offer "such good news" (1: 27) and saying that he hopes to prove himself "worthy of it" (1: 33). He refers here, ostensibly, to the job itself; crucially however, in the preceding line, Lady Caroline refers to it as a "wonderful opening" (1: 32) which is a telling phrase and one which is repeated verbatim by Gerald later (2: 454). This is Gerald's only entrance into an upper-class life, and certainly in Lady Caroline's estimation, that is something for which he should be immeasurably grateful. However, she implies heavily before Gerald's entrance that she does not approve of traversing the classes, with her statement that she is "not sure... that Jane is right in taking [Gerald] out of his position" (1: 17).

Gerald does not seem to have similar beliefs. He views the opportunity as a paradigm shift, saying that "things that were out of the reach of hope before may be within hope's reach now" (1: 37). This is a revealing sentence; previously, not only were the things to which he refers out of his reach, they were even out of his hope's reach. This presents an interesting counterpoint to Lady Caroline's rigidity and snobbishness. It implies that he too views the classes as strata, but in his mind it does not prevent one from moving between them. So from Lady Caroline's perspective – the view from the top, as it were – people are born into the class to which they belong. From Gerald's, the view from the bottom, that instead is where people end up. So

Gerald is, in a sense, an 'anti-snob'; he views the world through the same lens as Lady Caroline, and sees the same demarcations, but passes them without judgement. Lady Hunstanton clearly identifies with Gerald's position, as she refers to him as "quite a protégé" (1: 47) of hers, and attributes the offer only to "good fortune" (1: 47), implying that she too believes one can move up the ranks given the right circumstances. Wilde has cleverly intertwined this 'born into it' belief with the 'can become it' alternative in the narrative; if Gerald's true parentage were known, then his presence in the upper class would not merely be accepted, but guaranteed. It is the fact that he is known in society as "an underpaid clerk in a small Provincial Bank in a third-rate English town" (2: 502), as Illingworth puts it himself in his conversation with Mrs. Arbuthnot at the end of Act Two, that is so aggravating to him. Illingworth himself is resolutely unwilling to view Gerald's potential contentment as valid, revealing his own snobbish tendencies. Gerald's own view of Illingworth is clearly respectful if not a little awestruck. At the beginning of the third act, Gerald is sitting in a chair – a demeanour implying professionalism and respect – whereas Illingworth himself is "lolling on a sofa" (3: 532). This exposes the differing attitudes of Gerald and Illingworth when it comes to their understanding of being a part of the upper orders. Certainly, Lady Caroline comments, near the beginning of the play, that "in [her] young days... one never met any one in society who worked for their living. It was not considered the thing." (1: 17). Illingworth too subtly devalues his work later in Act One, referring to the job for which he hired Gerald as "something [he is] foolish enough to think of doing" (1: 93) rather than anything with more gravitas. This is then echoed by his later statement that "one should never take sides in anything..."

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taking sides is the beginning of sincerity, and earnestness follows shortly afterwards, and the human being becomes a bore” (1: 114). In short, Illingworth intends for his son to emulate his own effortless, which seems to be a far cry from the hard work Gerald expects. While Mrs. Arbuthnot seems to have no positive illusions or fantasies about upper-class life any longer, she may perhaps have ones which bias her against it. For example, although her scandal has yet had scant mention, the chance appearance of Lord Henry Weston’s name in conversation (2: 387) prompts Hester’s outburst about the women he wronged, and this is the point at which Mrs. Arbuthnot enters. From her perspective, it may seem as if people have been discussing little else but her since she left upper-class society, and especially given that Hester is a stranger to her at this point this may have contributed to how rapidly relationships sour after this point. She is reluctant to participate in the conversation she overhears as she arrives, for obvious reasons. However even as the conversation moves on, and she is directly or indirectly addressed several times (2: 393, 2: 395, 2: 399, 2: 403), she does not respond until Gerald is mentioned by Lady Hunstanton in line 409. There is another way to read this, which is that the ladies consider Mrs. Arbuthnot herself to be off-stage, so to speak, and so they continue their conversation while the Footman deals with the ‘reality’ of Mrs. Arbuthnot. In either case, however, it reveals much about Mrs. Arbuthnot’s disillusionment with high society; no matter the specific cause of her silence, a certain amount of ill feeling can reasonably be inferred on her part. Her eventual cold bow to Illingworth (2: 454) is certainly indicative of such feelings.

Hester, like Mrs. Arbuthnot, is not enamoured with British high society and despite being an heiress is an outsider in this specific group, and thus is <https://assignbuster.com/social-class-and-status-in-a-woman-of-no-importance/>

treated almost like a plaything. In fact, for a considerable time in Act Two, the other ladies completely forget her presence, in a scene which somewhat foreshadows the following one in which the ladies talk while Mrs. Arbuthnot arrives in the background. Instead, she seems deeply enamoured both with Mrs. Arbuthnot and Gerald. In Act Three, she expresses her idea that Mrs. Arbuthnot, upon arriving at the house, “brought with [her] a sense of what is good and pure in life” (3: 675), which is a surprisingly abstract and profound thought to attach to a person one has just met and does not know. She seems to have worked out, almost at first glance, that the Arbuthnots are the kind of people she herself seems to fantasise about, and to a certain extent this is due to Mrs. Arbuthnot’s ascetic nature appealing to Hester’s religious sensibilities, which they discuss in Act Three (3: 677-684) and which form much of the justification for how their story resolves. *A Woman of No Importance* is a text so concerned with class and social status that nearly every line further entrenches people in their social positions. It is emphasised that there are many ways to be a lower class of person; Lady Caroline herself provides many of the social justifications for such things through her dialogue. Mrs. Arbuthnot fell into it, whereas Gerald was born into it, and unlike her wealthy peers, Hester can extract the best parts of being in each class, making her – in terms of social class – the most important character in the play.