

Depictions of social climbing in 19th century french and english literature

[Literature](#), [French Literature](#)



Throughout most of human history, it has been difficult or even impossible to change social classes. Those born into poverty tended to remain there as slaves or peasants, and wealth tended to remain concentrated in the hands of the hereditary social elite. Although there have always been exceptional individuals who rose from obscurity to prominence, most people lived and died in the same classes to which they, their parents, and their grandparents were born. Large-scale social mobility did not become possible until the Industrial Revolution, when the technological innovations developed in the last half of the 18th Century led to the creation of vast wealth from mercantile and manufacturing enterprises. Suddenly, land that had been the primary means of production since antiquity—no longer played as vital a role in the economy, and hereditary landowners—the aristocratic and noble class—lost a great deal of their legal and economic power. By the early 1800s, the old social order was in tatters throughout Europe as “new money” threatened to dominate or even eclipse traditional forms of authority. Yet the way in which contemporary authors discussed and described social climbing behavior was heavily influenced by the political climate in which those authors wrote. Whereas England was consistently governed by a constitutional monarchy during the Industrial Revolution, such that there was no significant disruption to the existence of the land-based independently wealthy “gentlemen”, France’s economy and society was ripped apart by a violent revolution in 1789 followed by a decade known as the Reign of Terror in which the French monarchy was destroyed and the hereditary aristocracy was deliberately eradicated. Even years afterwards, following the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte at the Battle of Waterloo, a

sense of ongoing social upheaval prevailed in France. Yet that upheaval was not regarded as a negative thing by French authors, who presented individual ambition and social climbing in a positive light, reserving much of their criticism and condemnation for the rigid social mores and hierarchies that suppressed the development of the individual. By contrast, English authors of the same period generally took the opposite approach, by ensuring their fictional social climbers in an almost uniformly negative light.

This essay will compare and contrast the treatment of upwardly mobile characters by English and French authors of the mid-19th century. On the English side, the social climbers shall be represented by Jane Wilson from Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Becky Sharp from William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and Rosamund Vincy from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. On the French side, the characters striving for upward mobility will be represented by Eugène de Rastignac from Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot*, Porthos from Alexandre Dumas's *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, and Jean Valjean and his nemesis Javert from *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo.

Women, who generally assumed the rank and social class of their husbands upon marriage, had an opportunity to move up in class by marrying a wealthier man from a more prestigious family. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, one of the minor characters named Jane Wilson attempts to do just that. She is ashamed of her brother Robert, who is a simple farmer, and she tries to entrap the wealthy Frederick Lawrence. Overall, her character is predominately negative. Like her mother and her best friend Eliza Millward,

Jane is a vicious gossip who likes to start and pass rumors. She despises the novel's protagonist—a married woman fleeing an abusive alcoholic husband—and spreads negative rumors about her. This defect of character is what drives Frederick away from her: the newcomer Jane despises happens to be Frederick's beloved sister. Jane has so little control over her destructive, rumor-mongering behavior that she cannot contain it long enough to ensnare the wealthy, attractive bachelor of her dreams. It is Jane's unreasoning, immature campaign of social warfare against his sister that alerts Frederic to the fact that Jane is not marriage material.

Jane never succeeds in breaking out of her social class. Having spurned the company of people she considers to be beneath her, such as most of her own family, she ends up with no husband whatsoever. This, in a society where men control most of the money and assets, guarantees a very unhappy and uncomfortable life. Her legal status now matches her character in terms of immaturity. Indeed, the author presents Jane's misery as the predictable result of her actions. Although this is not the tidy cause-and-effect denouement preferred by Romantic writers, Bronte nonetheless makes sure the reader sees that Jane Wilson's attempts at social climbing are not rewarded.

Thackeray's antihero Becky Sharp is the most vibrant, interesting character in *Vanity Fair*. Raised in poverty, pushed—the text strongly suggests—into a form of child prostitution, and subsequently orphaned after being dumped into a boarding school for girls where she has to work to earn her education and board, Becky is almost completely without social connections or

resources. She spends most of the book trying to secure financial security, although she goes about it in an almost completely amoral way. Along the way she makes mistakes. Although she succeeds in marrying up in terms of social class, the husband she chooses is the handsome but stupid Rawdon Crawley, who embodies every possible stereotype of the early 19th century cavalry officer. He is also not just penniless but in significant debt, and by marrying Becky he earns the wrath of his wealthy aunt who previously supported him. The young couple has to rely on Rawdon's paltry pay as a cavalry officer, supplemented by his gambling winnings. However, by borrowing heavily and moving out without repaying, Becky and Rawdon are constantly on the move ahead of their creditors. Becky subsequently advances Rawdon's career with manipulative flirtations that may or may not have included romantic services. She is eventually caught by her husband, but not until after they have bankrupted one of their creditors, the loyal Mr. Raggles, whose house they rented.

Becky Sharp is not entirely without principles or positive traits. She helps her old friend Amelia Sedley near the end of the book, and she does so not entirely with the hope of ensnaring Amelia's well-off older brother. But she is also shown as degenerating into drunkenness, dishonesty, and friendship with con artists and cardsharps. Whether she murders Jos Sedley at the end of the book is left up to the reader's interpretation, however although she gets the money from the insurance policy she never does attain the title of "Lady" Crawley she covets so intensely: her husband dies before the title

passes to him, so that her son becomes the new Lord Crawley. So the little social climber does not actually succeed in accomplishing her goal.

Thackeray presents reasons that explain Becky's commitment to intrigue and to conduct that resembles what one might expect of an acquisitive cockroach: she seeks the social and financial security she was denied in her youth. Indeed, to a modern audience Becky is a sympathetic character, yet the narrator's assertion that people frequently deserve their own bad treatment may have struck a nerve with a contemporary audience. Although interesting and readable, Becky is not and can never be considered "good".

Middlemarch was written later in the 19th century, after the mercantile class had become well established as possessing enough wealth to occasionally compete financially with independently wealthy families. Overall, George Sand is more charitable to her social-climbing characters than earlier English Realist authors were. She depicts the Vincy family, warts and all, in a far more positive way however she does not allow them to succeed in their aims.

The Vincy family has two young adults, Fred and Rosamund, who both aspire to a higher social station due to years of overindulgence by their financially overextended parents. Mr. Vincy spends more than he can afford on Fred's education and Rosamund's fripperies, attempting to compete with the wealthier families such as the Casaubons and the Brookes and launch the Vincy children higher onto the social ladder. In this effort, he is not successful. He and his wife end up experiencing the predictable results of

their financial folly. Their children are depicted in a more positive way, however their ethical weaknesses are clear and George Sand clearly and explicitly describes the effects their self-absorbed social climbing behavior has on other people.

Fred is depicted in a mostly positive way, with acknowledgement of his moral and ethical weaknesses which do not ameliorate until he accepts the class he was born into. He has been educated alongside young gentlemen at university and has adopted their habits in terms of spending and dress. He has no other ambition than to ride good horses, follow the hounds in a fashionable riding habit, and be generally respected for doing so. To that end he hopes to inherit significant property from an uncle who favors him, and in expectation of this inheritance he spends heavily. Unpleasantly surprised when his uncle leaves most of his property to somebody else, Fred must either become a minister (a career for which he is unsuited) or go to work for Caleb Garth in order to repay a debt that financially cripples the Garth family. He ends up discovering an aptitude for property management, and earns the respect of Mary Garth, Caleb's daughter. So instead of marrying "up" in class, Fred ends up sinking socially and becoming a tradesman who works with his hands, likes it, and earns an honest living. By the end of the book, he is happy overall. He is financially better off than he was at the beginning of the story, however he has slipped in social class. His sister, who is miserable, has done the opposite.

Like her brother Fred, Rosamund Vincy has been raised at a very affluent standard of living. Her idea of running a household simply consists of

ordering the very best of everything, and expecting someone else to pay the bill. She believes that Tertius Lydgate, whose titled relatives disapprove of his choice of a medical profession, will help him financially. But she's wrong, and her free spending and systematic undermining of her husband's attempts at economy drive the young couple into debt. Throwing pretty little tantrums fails to solve the Lydgates' financial problems, which improve only after a loan from the upper-class Dorothea Casaubon. Lydgate, having married a spendthrift, sacrifices his dream of service to the medical community, leaves Middlemarch, and becomes an obscure doctor whose income never matches Rosamund's expectations. It is not until Lydgate dies that the petulant, immature Rosamond finds a physician wealthy enough to satisfy her material wants. Although she does end up in a good financial situation later in life, Rosamond never becomes an attractive or positive character and is not ethically redeemed the way her brother Fred is.

Among the English Realist authors, attempts to rise in class are regarded as evidence of a moral, spiritual, or character defect. The characters who eventually attain happiness seldom do it by marrying up, and the characters who do achieve improvements in social status generally do not do so without a great deal of amoral conniving or self-absorbed disregard for the effects of their actions on other people. The predominant message is that permanent class divisions are good and appropriate, and that human beings are happiest and most effective when they live, work, socialize, and marry within the class in which they are born. Those who try to rise above their station

generally cause and incur misery even if they succeed, which many do not—in fact, some of them end up worse off than before.

By contrast, the French Realist authors have a more tolerant and benevolent view of social climbing. This may be due to the social instability that devastated the French economy and culture in the late 18th century. By the 19th century, although Napoleon had been defeated and France's imperial ambitions had been temporarily curtailed, decades of social engineering on a national level had produced an environment wherein people could—for the first time in human history—expect to be promoted to positions of temporal authority based solely on their merit. Freed from the oppressive social structures of the Church and the hereditary aristocracy courtesy of Madame Guillotine, French people became used to the notion that it was possible to accumulate not only wealth but social status. For an individual to desire to rise in the world was not heretical but noble. Even after the restoration of the French monarchy and a return to a society and economy that contained a hereditary upper class, the French character was permanently changed to the point where things condemned elsewhere were, in France, deemed reasonable and understandable. The desire to change one's social class was one such addition to the French national psyche. Whereas English authors and readers still looked askance at social climbers, in France the behavior was considered right and legitimate.

It is now important to draw a distinction between social climbing and conspicuous overconsumption. Social climbing is an attempt to permanently change one's social class by being accepted into a more elite clique of

associates. In order to do this, people acquire habits, preferences, and mannerisms appropriate to their desired station in life. Sometimes this involves spending more than they can afford. Eugène de Rastignac, in Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot*, severely gouges his family to equip himself with clothing appropriate to social life among the nobility so as to obtain a wealthy mistress who will be able to arrange profitable job appointments. Becky Sharp throws expensive parties on credit from tradespeople and vendors, who allow her credit only because they think she is the mistress of the Marquis de Steyne. Becky's parties have several goals: to trigger reciprocal hospitality, to finesse military promotions for her husband, and to allow Rawdon to fleece the guests at cards or billiards. Eugène and Becky therefore spend with a purpose. By contrast, Gustave Flaubert's eponymous heroine Madame Bovary spends her family into ruin not with the goal of being accepted among the provincial upper crust, but in order to act out her fantasies of wealth and privilege. Likewise, Mathilde Loisel from the short story *La Parure* by Guy de Maupassant fancies that she has been born beneath her rightful station in life, however her financial distress is only distantly related to her desire to appear wealthy and beautiful at the ball. Mathilde's major error is due to pride. It is not her social ambitions that cause her to bankrupt herself and her husband replacing the diamond necklace she loses: it is the pride that keeps her from telling her friend about the loss, confessing everything, and including the other woman in her plan to replace the necklace. Had she admitted to losing the necklace, with its imitation diamonds, she and her husband would have had only a brief period of financial hardship and would not have been ruined.

Honoré de Balzac, in the body of novels sometimes described as his “human comedy”, writes about Eugène de Rastignac repeatedly but introduces him for the first time in *Père Goriot*. As a Realist writer, de Balzac has no trouble showing Rastignac’s willingness to sacrifice other people to achieve his own goals. The hardship endured by his family from whom he continues to wheedle money so as to outfit himself for a place in high society, his love for a woman who aggressively exploits her elderly father Goriot in a way that would be considered elder abuse today, and his willingness to move into an apartment with Goriot’s daughter at the already impoverished old man’s expense show a willingness to financially abuse others. However Rastignac has standards. He does not participate in the murder plot proposed by Vautrin, even though he stands to gain a fortune. He not only attends Goriot’s funeral but helps to pay for it along with a student even more impoverished than Rastignac.

Although Rastignac is willing to exploit others for financial gain, he does not exploit them except in the service of his upward mobility. He does not manipulate people for fun or spread gossip like Jane Wilson, nor does he needlessly slight or blatantly discard people he believes to be his social inferiors the way Becky Sharp does. He is not stupidly short-sighted, lazy, or selfish like the Vincy siblings, and unlike Rosamund he is capable of changing his strategy. Overall, Rastignac is an intelligent and likeable young man. Character-wise, he is well developed in a way most of the English social climbing characters are not.

Alexandre Dumas (Père) is not considered a Realist author but a Romantic one. His series of novels revolving around the d'Artagnan character are historical fiction that he uses to critique different aspects of the Old Regime prior to the French Revolution. The first novel, *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, is set in the late 1620s during the Huguenot rebellion. The musketeer characters support their ideals of honor and service to a just and competent monarchy, in an increasingly ambiguous and dishonorable world. His character Porthos, who appears in *Les Trois Mousquetaires* and its two sequels, is an amiable man. Large, strong, loyal, but not too bright, Porthos is a musketeer with champagne tastes and a water budget. He is not nobly born like Athos, nor is he well educated and refined like Aramis. However he has a taste for the finer things in life. To that end, he hopes at first to marry a wealthy widow. By the first sequel *Twenty Years After*, Porthos is a very wealthy man whose assets have grown considerably due to one happy coincidence after another. He then desires a noble title: he wishes to be a baron. By the end of the second book he succeeds in his aim. Yet Porthos, unlike Rastignac or any of the English social climbers, never pretends to be anything except who he is. He does not seek to harm others, except through his participation in the escapades with Athos, Aramis, and d'Artagnan.

Interestingly, Porthos's desire for social advancement is not seen as being somehow against the natural social order. His fellow soldiers, even the aristocratic Athos, support not only his pursuit of wealth but his desire for rank. This viewpoint is radically different from that of the English aristocrats and peers portrayed in *Vanity Fair*, who shun the upstart Becky and her

comically dim husband unless it is in their interests to do otherwise. At no point do the English Realist authors introduce democratic motives to their characters. Dorothea Brooke visits with Rosamund on a business related errand to Lydgate's home, but it never occurs to her to mingle socially with her or with Mary Garth. Although she designs new houses for her uncle's tenants, Dorothea does not socialize with them, and when her name is linked romantically with Ladislaw's in a codicil to her husband's will, her friends and relatives are shocked. When she later marries the assetless but somewhat liberal Ladislaw, sacrificing her husband's entire inheritance and living only on her own assets inherited from her mother, her decision is not presented as good or intelligent. Indeed, Ladislaw's attraction to Dorothea is something he himself regards as inappropriate. Yet in Dumas's book, nobody suggests that Porthos's courtship and marriage of a wealthy widow is in any way inappropriate despite their vast age difference and a sizable difference in class between an enlisted musketeer (not even an officer) and the wife of a well educated lawyer.

One point to remember is that Dumas wrote in the Romantic tradition and not the Realist tradition, so the lack of opposition to Porthos's financial and social advancement was not plausible or realistic. However Dumas's treatment of Porthos is not solely a product of the Romantic perspective. In *Les Misérables*, the Romantic writer Victor Hugo spends several chapters chronicling the various rises and falls of Jean Valjean.

Valjean begins as a convicted thief and escapee, and at first reoffends by stealing from a child and from a priest. Yet after having been shown mercy

by one of his victims, Valjean has a change of heart. He changes his ways, becomes an honest man, and in fact becomes the mayor of a town, rising from obscurity to become one of the most powerful, wealthy, and influential men in the area. Yet Valjean is not allowed to remain successful. He is recognized and recaptured after heroically saving a man from being crushed beneath a wagon. When he escapes again to rescue Cosette, he seeks out a life of quiet anonymity as a private citizen, yet by the end of the novel he has been found out again. Valjean does indeed learn to live a moral life—he is among the most noble and self-sacrificing of all literary characters—but aside from his brief stint as a mayor and factory owner the author does not allow him to keep any of his gains no matter how well earned they might be. This exaggeration of fortune can also be attributed to the Romantic perspective. Valjean's desire to live as an honest person instead of with the stigma of having been a convict is a driving force in his life, and yet the entire world is arrayed against him.

Unlike the anti-heroine Becky Sharp, who is similarly trying to rise out of an ignominious beginning, Jean Valjean is in every respect a hero. The reader cannot help but empathize with him, and the human beings who persecute or mistreat him are presented as malicious, ignorant, or irrational. Indeed, the entire system that keeps him and the other characters down is exposed to critical judgement from the reader. This is an inversion of the version of society and class presented by the English novelists, who treat social traditions and constructs as basically positive. Although he has human weaknesses and fears, and although he makes mistakes, he is a man who

does his very best even though circumstances force him to be dishonest about his identity. He saves the lives of several people throughout the book, including the overzealous Javert whom he spares much the way Valjean was spared by the priest he robbed long ago. He dies surrounded by the people who love and respect him for the man he has become, who know about his past but do not hold it against him. In this respect he has indeed moved up in the world.

In conclusion, both the 19th century French and English authors are at times critical of human society, but the French authors include social inequality and systemic poverty among the aspects of human society to criticize. Anne Bronte depicts alcoholism in brutal and disgusting detail, George Sand delves into the financial problems created by the bad decision making of some of the characters in her books, and William Makepeace Thackeray freely mocks the pretensions of English genteel society. Honoré de Balzac does not shrink from depicting people as physically ugly as well as morally corrupt, particularly in the aristocracy. Alexandre Dumas allows his Musketeers to make political enemies and allies, working sometimes for and sometimes against corrupt politicians, statesmen, and would-be rulers. Finally, Victor Hugo's masterwork, while rejected by several contemporary Realist critics, caught the public imagination so thoroughly it actually led to significant social and political improvements in France. However the English authors, unlike the French authors, tend to take class stratification as a fact of life and are seldom critical of the way social hierarchies work. The French authors, influenced perhaps by the Revolution, have a tendency to criticize

social inequality while presenting proactive and upwardly mobile individuals in a positive way.

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