Status in 19th century novels english literature essay

Literature, British Literature

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Depiction of Class and Status in 19th Century Novels

Introduction

Literary works can be analyzed from several different perspectives and given various interpretations that will vary in accordance with numerous factors, such as the social and historical background, the author's particular style, which elements are given more relevance and the depth of the analysis. Novels can be quite rich in motifs and symbolisms, and the authors may use several strategies to present their settings, build up the personality of each of their characters, and elaborate the plot in a way that captivates the reader. Nineteenth century British novels are no exception. The aim of this paper is to identify and compare some elements that depict class structure and social status in three novels pertaining to that period. In order to do this, I should first offer a brief historical and biographical background of the selected novels and authors, followed by a presentation of the critical framework, which will mainly consist on some Marxist criticism pointers to discuss elements depicting economic level and power, and some other form Feminist criticism to talk about women and their status. The selected novels contain more of such elements than the scope of this paper could possibly cover; therefore I had to select only a sample and elaborate on it. The main element in my discussion about Jane Eyre is her eligibility for marriage according to her status, and her own attitude towards this matter as a possible dual reflection, on the one hand, of the ideology of the time, and on the other, of the author's personal stance. There are so many things that

could be said about depiction of class and status in Dickens' novels, but from Bleak House I will mostly focus on some instances regarding children. Finally, to consider the thin line that separates working-class from middle-class women in Gissing's novel is almost unavoidable.

Historical Biographical Background

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre

Born in Yorkshire, England on April 21, 1816, Charlotte Brontë was the daughter of Maria Branwell and the clergyman Patrick Brontë. Her mother died when she was only five years old; therefore, her aunt Elizabeth Branwell, a devout Methodist, helped his father raise her. When Charlotte was eight, she and three of her four sisters –Maria, Elizabeth and Emily- were enrolled in Cowan Bridge, a school for clergymen's daughters, where Maria and Elizabeth died of tuberculosis some time later. After living at home for a few years, she ––returned to school in Roe Head, where she became a teacher in 1835, before becoming a private governess. Her experience as a governess was not a pleasant one, so she attempted –along with her sisters Emily and Ann- to open their own school, but this attempt proved unsuccessful as well. The three sisters shared an interest in literary creation, and from a young age began to exercise their talent. Having received several marriage proposals earlier in her life, she finally married Reverend Arthur Nicholls in 1854, although it has been mentioned that it was a loveless marriage, which Charlotte's father strongly opposed at first. She caught pneumonia and died pregnant a short time before turning thirty-nine. [1]Jane Eyre was first published in 1847 –under a pseudonym- and declared "

the best novel of the season."[2]Nonetheless, it also received criticism, perhaps because the way it challenged several social institutions of the time, like education, family, social class and religion.

Charles Dickens' Bleak House

Charles Dickens was born in 1812, in a family large in number but short in income, which, added to his father's careless expenditure, forced Charles to begin working at a shoe-blacking warehouse at the early age of twelve. However, he did know how to read and thus acquired some self-education. At age fifteen he began working as an office boy for a London solicitor and soon after that was hired as a clerk at a law office. At times he would serve as a reporter for the Police Courts. His interest in a banker's daughter inspired him to pursue journalism more seriously, but after four years of unsuccessful courting he had to renounce his aspirations for the girl, though not for a higher economic and social status. He then began publishing his novels in installments and gaining popularity. At age 24 he married Catherine Hogarth and together they bore ten children. It is said that Charles' true love was Catherine's sister Mary, who had died suddenly when she was only seventeen. Despite the social and financial burden divorce meant at the time, his marriage to Catherine ended in separation. About that time, he became involved with a young actress called Ellen Ternan and took her as his mistress. The two of them survived a train wreck in 1865 and he died five years later. Despite his strong social awareness –a message quite frequent in his works-, he could not be described as a political activist; he was rather loyal to traditional institutions and customs and certainly opposed the idea of

a revolution or the workers' right to go on strike. He published his work during times characterized by the vast and fast social change brought by industrialization and urbanization, which resulted in urban crowding, child labor, inadequate wages, lack of safety and hygiene in the working places, large scale unemployment, and alcoholism, among other things. Bleak House was initially published in 20 monthly installments between March 1852 and September 1853.

George Gissing's The Odd Women

Born in 1857, in Yorkshire, England, George Robert Gissing was one of five children whose father died suddenly in 1870. His father's strong interest in culture and social justice contrasted to his mother's lack of intellectual curiosity. He fell in love with Marianne Helen Harrison, a prostitute, and in his early attempts to redeem her, he stole money from fellow students at Owens College and got caught. Consequently, he served one month of hard labor and upon his release left to the United States, where for a short period of time became a language professor and began writing short stories. He returned to England the next year, and married " Nell" a few months later; but she continued to live as an alcoholic and eventually went back to soliciting in the streets. He married a second time to Edith Underwood, who bore him two sons, Walter and Alfred. However, domestic conflict prevailed and his second marriage ended in separation too. He got a third wife (although in name only, their marriage was not legal) and lost her to a street accident in Paris. Although he counted with several wealthy friends, his own income was never as much as for him to be considered high class. In a time

when the effects of industrialization and urbanization became increasingly evident, Gissing's work seems to reflect a transition from the Romantic style of the Victorian novel into the more Realistic one that characterized the end of the century. He defined Realism as the " artistic sincerity in the reproduction of everyday events."[3]Additionally, those were times when women did not yet enjoy voting rights and the lower classes were subject to heavy oppression. During the second half of the nineteenth century, single women in Britain outnumbered considerably the available bachelor men. This had serious effects on the socioeconomic structure, because traditionally women were not expected to compete with men in their search for jobs. For the most part, they had been raised to become wives and mothers. Those were times when women were not allowed the opportunity of a higher education or professional opportunities; let alone the right to vote. The first attempts were to let them do some office or clerical work. Only a few manual jobs like printing or hairdressing would be considered " respectable" for middle-class women. The Odd Women was first published in 1893 and received many positive reviews.

Critical Framework

Marxist Criticism

The basic premise of this approach is that everything that happens in a society is somehow related and determined by the mode of production, called the economic base. This economic base is conformed by people, their tools and their work, and hence other social formations, called the superstructure, arise. This superstructure includes social activities or

systems, like religion, politics, art, science, education and morality. Two important terms to remember when following this approach are: material circumstances and historical situation, because no social activity takes place without them. Marxism pays particular attention to the struggle power underlying most social and political activities, and points to the fact that differences in socioeconomic class sometimes are even stronger than those of religion, race or gender (cf. Tyson, ch. 3). Also relevant in the Marxist approach is the role of ideology, which in simple words refers to the shared beliefs and values that govern how people think about themselves and society, and thus determine their actions. It is important to consider that more often than not people are not aware that their actions are being determined by those underlying ideologies. Now, although Marx himself did not mention anything about women being different from men in the class struggle, Engels did declare " the supremacy of the man in marriage is the simple consequence of his economic supremacy, and with the abolition of the latter will disappear of itself."[4]Both authors did comment on what was to count as relevantly necessary, and that included not only the bare physical needs for survival, but also the socially established needs generated by the cultural environment. Finally, literature is part of the cultural superstructure, which means that its form and content are also determined by the economic base. Furthermore, literature also plays and active role in the creation and dispersion of ideologies.

Feminist Criticism

Feminism refers to the different social theories and moral philosophies concerned with the unequal position of women in society. " Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women (Tyson, 2006: 83). The movement has gone through different periods or waves, but its main tenets can be summarized as follows (cf. Tyson, chapter 4): Women are subject to patriarchal oppression in every area: economic, political, social, and psychological, Women are objectified and marginalized; woman is the other, " defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have." Patriarchal ideology permeates most of Western civilization (most vocabulary, rules of logic and criteria are male oriented), Male or female sex is biologically determined, but masculine or feminine gender is dependent on culture; in other words, we " learn" to be men or women, The primal goal of feminism is to promote women’s equality, Gender issues have strong repercussions on human life, including literary production, regardless of any social awareness about them. Following these, the patriarchal thought is that women should be passive, whilst men are the ones in control. It has a light reminiscence of " the Victorian ideal of the ‘ true woman’ as submissive, fragile and sexually pure" (Tyson, 2006: 106).

Analysis of elements

Jane Eyre

The novel presents the rigid social hierarchy prevailing in the England of the time, where mobility across class strata was mainly inexistent. In fact, the author seems to critique the behavior of the upper class characters the protagonist encounters. For instance, Blanche Ingram is depicted as haughty and superficial; John Reed is mean and Eliza Reed is indifferent and cold. Even Mr. Rochester, the otherwise Byronic hero, is a prime example of debauchery, with his history of mistresses and his attempt to make Jane become one more of them. These and other similar situations are presented to contrast the higher social class, who though materially rich, has a poor morality, against those who are poor and belong to a low social class, but have a higher sense of morality. At the same time, the novel points to several deficiencies of such social structure. For example, it questions the role of the governesses, who based on their level of education could have been counted among the upper class, but whose status as a servant within the family placed them among the lower class instead. This social ambiguity is clearly exemplified in the case of Diana and Mary Rivers, well-educated daughters of a well to do family who fall into financial hardship and thus need to find teaching positions, where they are given no more respect than the cook or the rest of the maids. Another example of what the author seems to criticize is Mr. Rochester's prearranged marriage to Bertha Mason, which is a consequence of the patriarchal practice of primogeniture[5], where as the younger brother he was encouraged by his father to marry for money and status and thus make provision for his future. Later on, this will contrast

with Jane’s own attitude after her engagement to him –and prior to the discovery of Bertha Mason’s existence- where she agrees to marry him but insists that she shall continue to be Adele’s governess and thus earn her own money. She resists the idea of being financially dependent on any other than herself. Jane is presented as constantly striving to overcome oppression and achieve equality and dignity, not only within the class hierarchy, but also against the patriarchal domination around her (impersonated by John Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, Edward Rochester and St. John Rivers). As a child, Jane’s lack of money forces her dependence upon the Reed family, who make no attempt to hide their contempt towards her. From the first chapter, we find her cousin’s harsh words, " You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen’s children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama’s expense." These words seem to embody the way someone like Jane would be regarded at the time; her status and all future possibilities defined by her being a poor orphan. Later on, after gaining some education at Lowood and taking courage to seek a different fate outside its walls, she arrives at Thornfield, where her position as a governess makes her not a servant as such, but certainly not a family member either. Regarding the female identity, Brontë uses a wide number of devices to weave this thread into her narrative. In my opinion, the most outstanding is the need for Jane to prove her eligibility for –and acceptance of- marriage. On the one hand, she faces Edward Rochester who, early on, lets her know he does not regard her particularly beautiful; " you are not pretty any more than I am handsome," he says, and moments

later he adds, " I don’t wish to treat you like an inferior… I claim only such superiority as must result from twenty years’ difference in age and a century’s advance in experience." Jane’s defiant response is, " I don’t think, sir, you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience." And a few lines later we read her inner thoughts about him paying her " 30 pounds per annum for receiving his orders" (chapter 14). When a sense of jealousy about Lady Ingram makes Jane realize her feelings towards her " master" –in this way she will address him until the last chapter, where he is then referred as ‘ Mr. Rochester’-, she rebukes herself with these words: " It does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her" (chapter 16, my italics). However, two chapters later we read that the pain Jane felt was not due to jealousy, since Miss Ingram was" too inferior to excite the feeling… She was very showy, but she was not genuine: she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments; but her mind was poor, her hart barren by nature…She was not good, she was not original: she used to repeat sounding phrases from books: she never offered not had an opinion of her own. She advocated a high tone of sentiment; but she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her." (Bronte, p. 199)Brontë claims, in Jane’s voice, that " the nerve was touched and teased" by the possibility of him marrying out of political reasons, for the family’s name’s sake, because she had rank and connections that suited him, when she " had thought him a man unlikely to be influenced by motives so commonplace in his choice of a wife." Jane’s

self-awareness of her status seems evident on the eve of Mr. Rochester's proposal, when still believing he intends to marry Lady Ingram, she reproaches him, Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you – and as full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; - it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal, -as we are! Having crossed if not the grave at least the social boundaries, the engagement is settled. However, Mrs. Fairfax reaction is a good example of how society would question the marriage between a governess and her employer, " Equality of position and fortune is often advisable…and there are twenty years of difference in your ages… Is it really for love he is going to marry you?" After the wedding is averted by the discovery of Bertha Mason, Jane rejects the possibility of moving abroad with her beloved, since it would turn her into his mistress; and although he reminds her that she does not " have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom [she] need fear to offend by living with [him]," she firmly states " Mr. Rochester, I will not be yours… I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man" (chapter 27). On the other hand, having become homeless and " absolutely destitute" after fleeing Thornfield, Jane meets St. John Rivers, her savior at first, and her suitor sometime later. St. John's marriage proposal and Jane's reaction (chapter 34) present a good portrayal of the interaction between a " religious zealot" and a non-submissive young

woman. He asks " Jane, come with me to India: come as my helpmeet and fellow-laborer… God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife… Your are formed for labor, not for love." Not quite a romantic opening, one could say. Curiously enough, her first denial is in terms of her not being fit for the task, her lack of vocation. For a moment there St. John resorts to a softer tone, " Jane, you are docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant, and courageous, very gentle and very heroic." In pondering her response, Jane tells herself " If I join St. John, I abandon half myself… I shall satisfy him… Can I receive from him the bridal ring, endure all the forms of love and know that the spirit was quite absent? … No: such a martyrdom would be monstrous. I will never undergo it. As his sister, I might accompany him – not as his wife." Jane might be willing to submit herself in terms of service, sacrificing herself to the missionary work, but not in relation to St. John as a man. He insists the union must be consecrated and sealed by marriage and even tries to persuade –as to not say manipulate- her by appealing to the solemnity of the matter, asking her to fix her heart on her Maker, " the advancement of the Maker's spiritual kingdom," " the delight and endeavour" it would bring her. At this point, she admits to be ready to " cross oceans with him in that capacity" and " accommodate quietly to his masterhood," as long as her heart and mind can remain " free." However, he insists he wants a wife, someone he can " influence efficiently in life." Her ultimate response is " I cannot marry you and become a part of you," and finally she adds " I scorn your idea of love, I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer, and I scorn you when you offer it." It seems evident to me that Jane wanted to be loved, not owned. Finally, our heroine does marry the man

she fell in love with, but not until she has acquired her own financial independence and become " superior" to him in the sense that, being crippled and blind, he depends completely on her. I would dare say that this ending is a way for Brontë to make an statement: society has its rules and expectations regarding female behavior, particularly if there is no notorious family name involved or if her qualifications do not allow for anything beyond a governess position; but each woman can find her way and live life in her own terms.

Bleak House

Blended with some elements of romance and mystery, perhaps the most noticeable theme in this novel is its criticism of the unjust and painful results of a flawed legal system, represented in the High Court of Chancery and its corrupt lawyers.[6]The opening chapter introduces the ambiance, On such an afternoon some score of members of the High Court of Chancery bar ought to be mistily engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, running their goat-hair and horsehair warded heads against walls of words and making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might. On such an afternoon the various solicitors in the cause, some two or three of whom have inherited it from their fathers, who made a fortune by it, ought to be — as are they not? — ranged in a line… between the registrar's red table and the silk gowns, with bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders, injunctions, affidavits, issues, references to masters, masters' reports, mountains of costly nonsense, piled before them…In some way, Dickens

seems to point that such flawedness is inherited from the past, not in a sense of despising customs and traditions, but indeed noting the selfishness and coldness that tradition is tainted with. The issue of true legitimacy is relevant throughout the novel, but most importantly in relation to the sociopolitical moment when the novel was written. The author seems to " invite the reader to decide what constitutes true legitimacy –the middle class ideology that bases the right to power and success on personal merit or the aristocratic essentialist ideology that bases the right to power on heredity."[7]This issue becomes relevant in relation to the protagonist, Esther Summerson, because she is Lady Dedlock's daughter born out of wedlock. Although she is already 20 by the time the story begins, her illegitimate birth is a stigma that needs to be overcome. Had she merely been an orphan, it would have meant less shame, but in England of the 1850's, society did not welcome illegitimate children or their parents. Besides Esther, we meet Ada and Richard, a couple of orphans unfortunately trapped in the midst of a lawsuit that cannot expect a resolution any time soon. Their guardianship granted to a cousin they might have met but once, they move to live with him and depend on him thenceforth. Children's suffering is a theme often present in Dickens' narratives, and it is indeed an outstanding topic in Bleak House. First, we meet the Jellyby's children, who portray the vulnerability of children in a society unjustly led by adults. From the very title of chapter four, ' Telescopic Philanthropy', Dickens satirizes Mrs. Jellyby's attitude as she " devotes herself entirely to an extensive variety of public subjects at various times," while neglecting her household responsibilities. She would not be bothered even by one of her children

getting his head stuck between the railings or falling down the stairs, where carpets " were so torn as to be absolute traps." The oldest daughter, Caddy, serves as her mother's secretary and is quite overworked and miserable. When the time comes to make preparations for a very plain wedding breakfast for Caddy, Esther tries to helpestablish some order among all the waste and ruin… such wonderful things came tumbling off the closets when they were opened –bits of mouldy pie, sour bottles, letters, tea, forks, odd boots and shoes of children, firewood, wafers, saucepan-lids, damp sugar in odds and ends of paper bags, footstools, blacklead brushes, bread, Mrs. Jellyby's bonnets, books with butter sticking to the binding, guttered candle ends…etc. (chapter 30). The description of such material chaos seems to reflect the lack of order and interest prevailing in the family. On the other hand, we find Mrs. Pardiggle, one of those " charitable people who did a little and made a great deal of noise." She declared not to be like Mrs. Jellyby in " her treatment of her young family… excluded in participation in the objects to which she is devoted." Oh no! She did take her family everywhere, but also took their allowances from them to donate –against their joy and will- to her charities. " The face of each child, as the amount of his contribution was mentioned, darkened in a peculiarly vindictive manner" (chapter 8). Neckett's children are another example of undeserved suffering. Having lost their mother to childbirth and their father just deceased, they were left alone, In a poor room with a sloping ceiling and containing very little furniture was a mite of a boy, some five or six years old, nursing and hushing a heavy child of eighteen months. There was no fire, though the weather was cold; both children were wrapped in some poor shawls and tippets as a

substitute. Their clothing was not so warm, however, but that their noses looked red and pinched and their small figures shrunken as the boy walked up and down nursing and hushing the child with its head on his shoulder (chapter 15). Just so, locked in a room, while their sister -not much older than them- goes out to do some washing job. Later, she becomes a servant girl at the Smallweed's home, but continues to be ill treated, until Mr. Jarndyce, who offers her to Esther as her maid –and her pupil, as well, rescues her. However, more suffering is still in store when reaching out to help Jo the sweeper boy, she is infected with smallpox. Now, Dickens allows this character a bit of a happy ending, as we hear at the end she is married to a miller in the neighborhood, someone who is " very fond of her." Finally, there is Jo, the street-crossing sweeper. It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language — to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, and to think (for perhaps Jo DOES think at odd times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business here, or there, or anywhere; and yet to be perplexed by the consideration that I AM here somehow, too, and everybody overlooked me until I became the

creature that I am! His appearance seems so insignificant that his testimony after Capitan Howdon's death cannot be counted, even if he was the only witness. Nonetheless he is useful for Lady Dedlock and eventually his testimony helps detective Bucket sort out the identities of the suspects in Tulkinhorn's murder.

Odd Women

The first impression is that the novel refers to unwed women. Those described by Rhoda Nunn as " no making a pair with them." However, it has more to do with the attitude some of these women acquired, in realizing that in lack of a husband they had to learn to support themselves, be independent and stay away from the workhouse, situation that gave Alice and Virginia Madden " a thrill" by simply mentioning it. They were real women who faced two different problems: there were not enough men to marry, and they had restricted access to jobs. Traditionally, some of these unwed women could turn to teaching as a source of income, but this too was becoming a more professional and overcrowded option, as Alice Madden resents in chapter two, " certificates, and even degrees, are asked for on every hand… I know it will end in my taking a place without salary." To make matters worse, even as governesses they would still be labeled as working class. On the other hand, owning their own school might have been a bit more respectable, as Alicia and Monica Madden discuss following a suggestion from Rhoda Nunn, Both were enthusiastic for the undertaking. It afforded them a novel subject of conversation, and inspirited them by seeming to restore their self-respect. After all, they might have a mission, a

task in the world. They pictured themselves the heads of a respectable and thriving establishment, with subordinate teachers, with pleasant social relations; they felt young again, and capable of indefinite activity (p. 51). In an excellent article,[8]Wendy Lesser describes the novel as " an eminently fair, consciously antiromantic, intellectually respectful appraisal of the women's movement." Likewise, Elaine Showalter mentions that the novel " deal[s] with the questions of feminist celibacy, " womanliness," and sexual repression, but also with the more submerged male agendas about competition with women for power and speech."[9]Referring again to Rhoda’s characterization, Showalter notes howShe fiercely opposes marriage as an institution and is hostile towards men, whom she regards as untrustworthy and dishonorable. What silences women, she argues, is not sexual frustration, but rather the myth of romantic love; sentimentality; jealousy and anguish over male betrayal. Rhoda believes that her oddness gives her both exemplary power and rhetorical force and that her integrity and powers of leadership depend on her remaining single (p. 31). Although " at first view the countenance seemed masculine, its expression somewhat aggressive," Rhoda is described as having " self-confidence, intellectual keenness, a bright humor, and frank courage." Until the death of her mother, she herself had held a teaching position, which she describes as " a sham – a pretence of knowing what [she] neither knew nor cared to know;" something she had gone into " like most girls, as a dreary matter of fact." The brief summary of her own story as she relates it to Virginia, seems representative of other women like her, When my mother left me that little sum of money I took a bold step. I went to Bristol to learn everything I could that would help

me out of school life. Shorthand, bookkeeping, commercial correspondence - I had lessons in them all, and worked desperately for a year. It did me good; at the end of the year I was vastly improved in health, and felt myself worth something in the world. I got a place as cashier in a large shop. That soon tired me, and by dint of advertising I found a place in an office at Bath. It was a move towards London, and I couldn't rest till I had come the whole way. My first engagement here was as shorthand writer to the secretary of a company. But he soon wanted some one who could use a typewriter. That was a suggestion. I went to learn typewriting, and the lady who taught me asked me in the end to stay with her as an assistant. This is her house, and here I live with her (chapter 3). The lady mentioned in that last line is Mary Barfoot, who used her private means to combine benevolence and business, with the purpose of training young girls to take jobs in offices, particularly the " daughters of educated people" (not so much the lower classes). Her wish is to save such girls from two big evils: marrying for financial support only, or falling into prostitution –like Bella Royston-. Everard Barfoot who, although eventually attracted to her, is originally motivated by a desire of conquest challenges Rhoda’s position. In describing her cousin to Rhoda, Mary Barfoot says that having attended Eton, Everard was once " a furious Radical," but he did not imitate the young aristocrats; he rather hated and scorned them. His father had accumulated his wealth through commerce, but had failed to acquire any outstanding social position. From Eton he was of course to pass to Oxford, but at that stage came practical rebellion. No… he wouldn't go to a university, to fill his head with useless learning; he had made up his mind to be an engineer. This was astonishment to every one;

engineering didn't seem at all the thing for him… his bent had always been to liberal studies. But nothing could shake his idea. He had got it into his head that only some such work as engineering−−something of a practical kind, that called for strength and craftsmanship−−was worthy of a man with his opinions. He would rank with the classes that keep the world going with their sturdy toil: that was how he spoke. And, after a great fight, he had his way. He left Eton to study civil engineering (chapter 8). So, theirs is a story of power struggle rather than romance; he tries to persuade her to join him in a free union (although he is willing to marry her), whereas she insists on a legal commitment (although that would be a betrayal of sorts against the women she has so earnestly tried to help so far). On the other hand, we find Monica Madden’s story. The difference between her and her older sisters being her beauty, Monica's face was of a recognized type of prettiness; a pure oval; from the smooth forehead to the dimpled little chin all its lines were soft and graceful. Her lack of colour, by heightening the effect of black eyebrows and darkly lustrous eyes, gave her at present a more spiritual cast than her character justified; but a thoughtful firmness was native to her lips, and no possibility of smirk or simper lurked in the attractive features. The slim figure was well fitted in a costume of pale blue, cheap but becoming; a modest little hat rested on her black hair; her gloves and her sunshade completed the dainty picture (chapter 4). For a short period of time she joins a draper shop as an apprentice, certainly not her choice " if any more liberal employment had seemed within her reach." She meets a man on the park, agrees to meet him –unescorted- but not without some inner struggle, " other girls were constantly doing this kind of thing--other girls in business;

but it seemed to put her on the level of a servant. And why had she consented? The man could never be anything to her; he was too old, too hard-featured, too grave." The struggle seems to grow bigger when he proposes to her,'I have behaved very imprudently,' continued the girl. But I don't see--I can't see--what else I could have done. Things are so badly arranged. It wasn't possible for us to be introduced by any one who knew us both, so I had either to break off your acquaintance after that first conversation, or conduct myself as I have been doing. I think it's a very hard position. My sisters would call me an immodest girl, but I don't think it is true. I may perhaps come to feel you as a girl ought to when she marries, and how else can I tell unless I meet you and talk with you? And your position is just the same. I don't blame you for a moment; I think it would be ridiculous to blame you. Yet we have gone against the ordinary rule, and people would make us suffer for it--or me, at all events (chapter 7). Eventually, she consents, but when breaking the news to her friend Mildred, she honestly tells her, " You will marry him for a comfortable home--that's what it amounts to. And you'll repent it bitterly some day--you'll repent… He's too old. Your habits and his won't suit." Monica does not listen to the warning, and indeed comes to face the consequences in the shape of an utterly jealous husband and then she is driven to an affair with Mr. Bevis. It begins with casual conversation one evening at Mrs. Cosgrove’s, but turns into an improper relationship when she visits him at his flat, expecting his sisters to be there and choosing to stay even after it is evident they will not attend. As regards social propriety, a flat differs in many respects from a house. In an ordinary drawing-room, it could scarcely have mattered if Bevis

entertained her for a short space until his sisters' arrival; but in this little set of rooms it was doubtfully permissible for her to sit tête-à-tête with a young man, under any excuse. And the fact of his opening the front door himself seemed to suggest that not even a servant was in the flat (chapter 20). Afterwards, despite her willingness to leave het husband and flee with Bevis, he draws back and she is forced to stay in an empty marriage. Even when she is pregnant of her husband and he forgives her infidelity, she cannot possibly be happy and finally dies a few days after giving birth to a daughter. The fact that the novel closes with the unmarried Rhoda Nunn holding the motherless little girl seems an omen of the fate so many women were to face in those days.

Final Comments

The issue of marginalization is a shared interest for both Marxism and Feminism; the first focusing on the lower economic classes, the latter, on the marginalized gender. Now, in the three novels we can observe that many women suffered both kinds of oppression. For example, when little Jane fights back against her cousin and her aunt, the problem was not just that she was being rebellious, but that she was the dependent orphaned girl who was behaving ungratefully. On the other hand, Monica Madden’s story in Gissing’s novel somehow shows that marriage is not the golden solution either. That does not necessarily mean it is impossible for a woman to enjoy financial stability within a harmonious marriage relationship, as we can see in the case of Esther Summerson marrying Allan Woodcourt and becoming mistress of the " new" Bleak House. However, that might not have been the

rule in the England of late nineteenth century, particularly for someone legally unrecognized by her parents. We can see that in a sense Jane Eyre and The Odd Women share a criticism of the exchange of male financial support for female sexual availability. Nonetheless, as time goes by, single women are less odd and even becoming a majority in some cultures and countries. In most cases these days, a woman would be offended if someone insinuates that her only hope for financial support is in a man –with or without marriage involved-. As I have mentioned in the introduction, so many elements can be seen as a depiction of class and status in these novels, and all of them offer plenty of room for either a Marxist or a Feminist reading, but the present document is already too long as it is. However, I will simply mention that some of the features that could be further analyzed include, for example, architecture, clothes, ethnicity and religion and the sociolectical uses of language.