

Victorian social class in middlemarch and north and south



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The Victorian period is one of the most popular eras studied and is well known for many things; from fashion to inventions, to the Industrial revolution to their education. Despite how much people like to think that they differ from them drastically, so much of our modern society depends on what they first created and the changes they set in motion. Many perspectives on how the Victorians lived their lives come from misconceptions given to in literature and education.

A lot of stereotypes held are of their social classes; the upper class were snobbish and shallow, and the lower or working class were dirty, illiterate and uneducated. Two historic and popular novels that examine Victorian life are George Elliot's *Middlemarch* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*; in both novels the writers try to portray the essence of the society as a whole, not merely of one class, sometimes more or less successfully than the other. The two texts both reinforce and contradict the cliched representations of Victorian social class.

The class system itself is complex to define without using a superficial definition the system was always altering due to different legislations, and upon the development of the middle class began subcategories such as the 'upper-middle class' and the 'lower-working class'. " Different social classes can be (and were by the classes themselves) distinguished by inequalities in such areas as power, authority, wealth, working and living conditions, life-styles, life-span, education, religion, and culture. The middle class came about as a result of the Industrial revolution, those who had professions such as factory workers were not wealthy enough and did not have the same aristocratic heritage as the upper class, but were more affluent and

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comfortable in their lifestyle than the working class. They were the “ new gentry who owed their success to commerce, industry, and the professions” A fundamental aspect of society life in the Victorian era, predominantly upper class, was marriage and its ability to change or strengthen a person’s status in society.

In films, novels and even teachings at school we are shown how upper class Victorians married for money, status and attraction rather than love and personality. “ it was not love, but the commercial and social aspects of marriage which held first place with both parents and daughters” And to a certain extent this rings true with this particular society but it seems rather naive to group the upper class as merely one entity with the same mind, but we are surrounded, even in critical and historical writings, by this idea. “ Marry your daughters when you can, and your sons when you will...

The burden of disposing of a daughter in the safe harbour of matrimony fell upon the mother. ” Unfortunately in Middlemarch this is not the case with our female protagonist of Dorothea as she, alongside her sister Celia, live with their Uncle instead. Nevertheless, even without that female figure, Celia very much is the essence of this aspect of marriage. Although she wishes to have a husband she loves, the idea of a dashing good looking, rich prospective husband appeals more.

Hence why she, as well as other Middlemarch women, cannot get their head around the idea of Dorothea marrying Casaubon “ How very ugly Mr Casaubon is! Even in North and South Margaret does not simple agree to marry Captain Lennox, who at the time would have been an excellent eligible

'catch'. In fact Margaret is not very interested in marriage at all. "The Victorian heroine was an almost standardized product... if they were born above the level poverty, [they] the dream of marriage, successful marriage, held before their dazzled eyes.

"Neither woman show signs of being a typical accomplished future wife, and are complete contradictions. However in both novels there are examples of characters that are the essence of the accomplished and beautiful sought women. For the life of the Victorian young lady was never completed until she married" This is true in Middlemarch with Rosamond Vincy and in North and South, Aunt Shaw and her daughter Edith "To get ready for the marriage market a girl was trained like a race-horse. Her education consisted of showy accomplishments designed to ensnare young men" Rosamond encapsulates this image more than any other.

"Certainly, small feet and perfectly turned shoulders aid the impression of refined manners, and the right thing said seems quite astonishingly right when it is accompanied with exquisite curves of lip and eyelid. Although she is technically middle class, she is elegant and striking in her looks and has an education which levitates her to an upper class social group of friends and acquaintances. "By marriage alone a girl could rise to higher rank... Rosamond Vincy... had to content herself with a doctor who was cousin to a lord" Rosamond also brings out the stereotype of shallowness and snobbish behaviour. She chooses Lydgate because of his looks and what she naively believes to be a high status, wealth and a chance for her to rise up in the ranks.

The novel shows Victorian life to what it actually would be, if in modern life we merely married on shallow conceptions of beauty a marriage would not last, there is nothing but a physical attraction to hold it together. Ultimately the marriage is a complete failure and she becomes Lydgate's downfall in both his social surroundings and his financial position. " This is a world in which people generally judge by appearances, and are right nine times out of ten so to do, much more consideration fall to the lot of her who looks to be a ' somebody', than to her excellent but dowdy sister.

The industrial revolution is perhaps one of the most important moments in history in that it spurred on a mass chain of events; both bad and good. Those who worked in the newly developing factories worked excruciating hours for little money and in harsh conditions; which led to many strikes. " The working classes... remained shut out from the political process, and became increasingly hostile not only to the aristocracy but to the middle classes as well. As the Industrial Revolution progressed there was further social stratification. " The further categorisation of the classes led to some resentment.

In North and South Bessy Higgins and her father speak of the attitude towards their ' masters'. The divide is so apparent Bessy likens it to " th' great battle o' Armageddon the way they keep on, grinning and fighting at each other, till even when they fight, they are picked off into the pit" The attitude towards who is in the wrong is remarkable. Higgins sees the masters as an enemy which need to fought to be taught a lesson; a very alpha male power struggle. " Ay! And I'll fight on too; and I'll get it this time. It'll not take long for to make ' em give in... Aha, my masters!

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I know who'll win. " On the other hand the masters regard them with equal distaste, Mrs. Thornton, while not a master, remarks that the reason for the strikes are because the " packs of ungrateful hounds" , the workers, " want to be masters, and make the masters into slaves on their own ground... every five or six years, there comes a struggle between masters and men" The dehumanisation of the other party, lack of ability to listen and reason and the thirst for power are just a few of the reasons that the workers go on strike and attack the mills in which Margaret is injured.

Margaret and her father become almost like mediators in the situation, Mr. Hale puts aside prejudices and ends up genuinely enjoying the company of a man beneath him both socially and intellectually. " I wish some of the kindest and wisest of masters would meet some of you [work]men and have a good talk on these things; It would, surely, be the best way of getting over your difficulties" He highlights that the real reason for friction is the inability to listen.

While the classes seemed far apart they were in fact narrowing, and the idea of the ' self-made' man was developing. In moving from a society based on rank and privilege to one based on free exchange, the very idea that an individual, through hard work, thrift and self reliance, could achieve social and economic success provided an equalising principle" And so by " Challenging landed privilege and aristocratic corruption, this industrial and urban middle-class can be seen as striving to establish a society based on merit rather than on one's birth. " However the problem with middle class was that there were no certainty and many levels within that.

Conversely this means that " Such diversity makes a satisfactory definition of the middle-class impossible. There is no clear relationship to the means of production. " Although some men accumulated vast amounts of wealth, some merely " scraped a living... [such] as public servants, managers or clerks. In North and South we see this in the character of Hale, his household can just about afford their ongoing servant of Dixon and one other girl, they barely get by with the money they have; although they have a very respectable circle of friends including the Thornton's upon moving to the North.

The title of the novel is of great significance, the south represents the countryside and the old ways of living, and the North represents change and the future. At first Margaret cannot accept her father's decision and her mother certainly fights until her dying day, but she finally accepts Milton as her home when she saves Mr. Thornton from bankruptcy by using the money she inherited from her father's friend. "[I]f you would take some money of mine, eighteen thousand and fifty-seven pounds, lying just at this moment unused in the bank, and bringing me in only two and a half per cent. you could pay me much better interest, and might go on working Marlborough Mills. "

She is not only helping a friend from crisis, but she is accepting Milton and the industrialisation as a symbol for the future and development. The marriage at the end of the novel is not only appealing to the reader on a romantic level but it is significant as " two larger social groups who were trying to prove their place at the top of the social hierarchy... finally make room for each other on the social ladder. " A very similar thing happens in <https://assignbuster.com/victorian-social-class-in-middlemarch-and-north-and-south/>

Middlemarch when she is also a provider for Lydgate and his clinic; she too is accepting the future and change.

She then gives up her fortune for a man much lower in social and class standing, Will Ladislaw. Throughout both texts there is a sense of morals; classes are divisions of wealth, beauty, power and property but these things cannot determine what makes a person better than another. The morals, nature, intellect and overall personality really divide one person from another. In Middlemarch Fred Vincy reinforces the flighty image of the upper class man, although he is not, by constantly gambling. Not only that but he gambles others financial position.

Caleb Garth is lower than Fred but agrees to help with a loan, when he cannot repay the money Caleb and his family are left without their savings and more than anything are disappointed in Fred; Mary refuses to marry him until he is more stable. But what is remarkable about it is that the Garths will still help him out, " For social life entails multiple connections which imply obligation, affection, sympathy, responsibility, mutuality. This is what the social organism is" , they forgive and forget and even give Fred a future career; maybe not one he would have planned for his life, but it is the idea of it being honest, hard earned money.

In the same novel a respectable man of a wealthy background and good moral standing, turns out also to have a dark past one which shows him to be morally corrupt despite his class; Bulstrode. Both novels in different ways through diverse characters, subplots and events reinforce and contradict representations of Victorian social class. Middlemarch could possibly have

done a better job due to “ The elaborate network or “ web” of relationships... a network expanding widely over time, space, and social class alike- [it} is intended to demonstrate to the imagination the inescapable interdependence of human lives.

George Eliot shows a wider range of characters and so does both, many of her characters seem almost like stereotypes but these are brilliantly contradicted with very real sharp contrasts. This could be partly due to her much greater intelligence and, on a more obvious note, the sheer size of the novel; she is able to show more in depth characters studies as well as a wider range of people. On the other hand Elizabeth Gaskell shows a wider range of class and gives a better look into the harsher side of lower class with the Higgins and the Boucher family whereas Middlemarch does not have this angle to it.

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