

# The appearances of class, and how they impact other's perceptions



The issue of class and its representations is consistently present in society, and pervades everyday life to a significant degree, especially when considering the social dynamics of the past century; as such, it is also very prominent in literature, where it can be portrayed in a variety of different manners. Primarily, however, the class divides can be seen in the juxtaposition of individuals with both lower and higher means, and in some of these individuals' imitations of a higher quality of life. In Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat*, the main character unintentionally broadcasts a more lavish lifestyle than what his true means are, and finds that people instantly take notice of things of that nature; in Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a man who had tried to imitate those of higher social standing throughout his life found that, in the end, the pursuit of luxuries can have unforeseen consequences; finally, in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*, interactions between bourgeoisie individuals are examined, and the lines between social classes are illustrated through the author's observations. Through the examination of the "typical" means of these characters and the socioeconomic status that they broadcast, the connections between classes and the ways in which characters are viewed will be analyzed, and the ways in which class distinctions are determined and the reactions they elicit will also be explored. Each of the three works will contribute to this overview of socioeconomic class and perceptions; despite the fact that their characters come from different backgrounds, they provide a solid view of the different issues that can occur with perceptions and mistakes made by characters in these cases. Each of the pieces mentioned describe the ways in which the characters typically lived, or the people with whom they typically interacted; this was largely drawn from their means and socioeconomic class, with <https://assignbuster.com/the-appearances-of-class-and-how-they-impact-others-perceptions/>

societal and monetary influences heavily present within their existences or interactions. For example, in Gogol's *The Overcoat*, the main character is a clerk at a Russian government department; as such, his pay is relatively low, and both he and many of his acquaintances are unable to afford fancy living quarters with particularly modern amenities for the times. The typical clerk described in the story lived in "[an] apartment on the third or fourth story, two little rooms with a hall or a kitchen, with some pretensions to style, with a lamp or some such article that has cost many sacrifices of dinners and excursions" (Gogol 764). Thus, their everyday existences were mediocre; as was mentioned, even something as simple as a lamp or other such fixture would cause these men to have to make severe cutbacks

Each of the pieces mentioned describe the ways in which the characters typically lived, or the people with whom they typically interacted; this was largely drawn from their means and socioeconomic class, with societal and monetary influences heavily present within their existences or interactions. For example, in Gogol's *The Overcoat*, the main character is a clerk at a Russian government department; as such, his pay is relatively low, and both he and many of his acquaintances are unable to afford fancy living quarters with particularly modern amenities for the times. The typical clerk described in the story lived in "[an] apartment on the third or fourth story, two little rooms with a hall or a kitchen, with some pretensions to style, with a lamp or some such article that has cost many sacrifices of dinners and excursions" (Gogol 764). Thus, their everyday existences were mediocre; as was mentioned, even something as simple as a lamp or other such fixture would cause these men to have to make severe cutbacks on their spending either

for food or for pleasure. This contrasts greatly with the other two pieces discussed, because the main characters in each of those stories would be considered to be in the upper-middle class based upon their incomes and the quality of life that they were able to experience. For these two pieces, interactions will primarily be explored, showing how they reacted to those around them, whether they perceived these individuals to be on their socioeconomic level or whether they believed these people to be above them in that regard. In Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the main character is a lawyer in the service of the Russian government, and consistently interacts with his superiors in an attempt to impress and imitate them. In his life, it was said that, " Everything took place with clean hands, in clean shirts, with French words and, most importantly, in the highest society, consequently with the approval of people in high position" (Tolstoy 1448). He performed tasks with the approval of those above him, and thus was able to interact in higher society and eventually carve himself a place on the fringes of it. He wanted greatly to fit into this society, and through his actions and willingness to impress, Ivan Ilyich was able to progress his career (and consequently his salary) throughout the beginning of the piece. He found the people surrounding him to be those who he wanted to interact with; most were higher class individuals such as himself, and the only lower class people who are mentioned are in his service. This shows the stratification of the classes; between the main characters in Gogol's and Tolstoy's pieces, each of which takes place in Russia, there is a significant difference between the qualities of life and interactions that are described. Finally, Proust described the interactions between bourgeoisie French families, and showed how class-conscious Europeans generally were in their daily lives. He <https://assignbuster.com/the-appearances-of-class-and-how-they-impact-others-perceptions/>

describes an encounter with his neighbor, known as Swann, whose father was a friend of the narrator's grandparents and great-aunt. Unbeknownst to them, Swann had been fortuitous in his life, and had taken strides up the social ladder and had gained the favor of several individuals in higher society. Thus, the narrator describes how "[his] great-aunt and [his] grandparents did not suspect that he had entirely ceased to live in the kind of society his family had frequented and that, under the sort of incognito which this name Swann gave him among us... [he was] one of the most elegant members of the Jockey Club, a favorite friend of the Comte de Paris and the Prince of Wales, one of the men most sought after by the high society" (Proust 1822). Swann did not reveal his ascension to his neighbors, knowing that they would have felt it to be improper for them to interact with someone having his connections. The author also acknowledges that by saying, " bourgeoisie people of those days formed for themselves a rather Hindu notion of society and considered it to be made up of closed castes" (Proust 1822); in an effort to describe the interactions between his family and others, Proust refers to an almost caste-like system of social hierarchy that existed among the bourgeoisie, detailing who they could and could not interact with because of their particular status. These regulations kept interactions strictly within one's socioeconomic level and class, and explained why the author's family would not have been able to continue to interact with Swann if they would have known about the circles he was travelling through in French society.

This notion brings the issue of class interpretations; in *Swann's Way*, these interpretations are fairly structured, but in *The Overcoat* and *The Death of*

Ivan Ilyich, they are much more flexible. In Gogol's piece, when the main character purchases and receives his new overcoat, the other clerks at his department believe that he is more wealthy than he truly was; "coming up to him, they all began saying that he must 'sprinkle' the new overcoat and that he ought to at least buy them all a supper" (Gogol 771). When the main character heard these requests and assertions, he began to panic because he did not have the means to buy himself a good supper, let alone to supply food for his co-workers as well. However, they all believed that the overcoat showed a higher degree of wealth, and that he should share that wealth with them because they did not have the excess money available for purchasing additional food. The overcoat also caused robbers to feel as though the main character was a good target; as he was walking home from the first party he had been invited to, the overcoat was stolen by several men who believed he would have more objects of value, and who took the overcoat from him believing it to be valuable. Thus, Gogol's piece shows how the impression of additional wealth can actually threaten someone's position in their everyday life. However, Tolstoy's piece gives a different impression; he discusses how the main character, Ivan Ilyich, was attempting to act the part of a member of high society, and how he began to attempt to imitate the rich in his decorating style once his salary was raised to a total of 5,000 rubles. In describing the main character's house, Tolstoy states that "it was the same as in the houses of all people who are not so rich but want to be like the rich" (Tolstoy 1454). Ivan would purchase antiques and design everything to convey the air of wealth, despite the fact that he was not nearly as rich as the individuals he was imitating. However, people treated him much differently than the main character of *The Overcoat*; his wealth was

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celebrated by family and friends, and it was not realized until after his death how his widow would likely struggle financially after getting all of the money she could from the Russian government in pension and death benefits.

Overall, the issues of class and the representation of wealth is vital in the interpretation of the stories presented. Without understanding class and class issues, it would be much more difficult to extract meaning from the three pieces analyzed; Gogol's *The Overcoat*, Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Proust's *Swann's Way* each include various issues involving socioeconomic status and class, and despite these issues being different between the pieces, they each relate in a way that can show how classes interact and how the impression of wealth impacted perceptions of characters as well. Thus, through examining class, each of these stories could be better understood, and the differences between the classes that exist in society can be examined and applied to the periods and cultures in which these stories were created.

## **Works Cited**

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