

THE CONSPIRACY OF DISPARAGEMENT:
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE LOWER MIDDLE CLASS
IN BRITISH FICTION, 1850-1920

by

Arlene Young

A thesis
presented to the University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the
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ARLENE YOUNG

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the emerging lower middle class in Britain became the focus of a measure of class hostility. Both his social superiors and inferiors viewed lower-middle-class man with contempt and produced unflattering representations of him in their literature. In periodicals and other forms of non-fiction, middle-class writers generally portrayed members of the lower middle class as pretentious and absurd. References to the lower middle class in working-class literature are less numerous, but are equally disparaging. Representations of the class in fiction tend to be somewhat more balanced, but they still emphasise the limitations of its members and the stifling aspects of their circumscribed lives.

Lower-middle-class authors, however, portray their class very differently. They tend to focus on the intelligence, industry and loyalty of underpaid and undervalued white-collar workers in their non-fiction, and on the warmth and harmony of the lower-middle-class home in their fiction.

In this thesis, I examine these divergent views of the lower middle class in an attempt to come to a better understanding of the various attitudes towards the class in Britain during the period of 1850-1920. This refined under-

standing of the attitudes toward and perceptions of the lower middle class produces insights into the literature of the period by clarifying the thematic and symbolic roles of lower-middle-class characters and the significance of their roles within various works.

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Introduction

The lower middle class is notoriously difficult to define. As Arno Mayer points out, it is a "complex and unstable social, political, and cultural compound," and even the phrase lower middle class "can be assigned no fixed meaning for all times and places."¹ Nevertheless, both the term and the concept conjured up certain images in the minds of writers of the late Victorian period. These images shifted somewhat over the years between the 1850's, when the term first appeared, and the end of the century, when perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the lower middle class had for the most part become consolidated. There still may have been no precise definition of whom the class comprised, but "lower-middle-class" had nonetheless become synonymous with everything that was dreary and dull and narrow, everything that was worthy of contempt.

Indeed, the very force of the responses to it may work against a precise definition of the lower middle class; the perceptions and attitudes of the observers seemed to have played as large a role as any objective criteria in

1. Arno Mayer, "The Lower Middle Class as Historical Problem," The Journal of Modern History 3 (September 1975), 409-436; 409, 411.

determining whom they placed in the class. Just as an individual could consider himself to be middle-class, as someone once postulated, if his neighbours allowed him to do so, so too an individual must admit to being lower-middle-class, apparently, if his neighbours did not allow him to think otherwise. The quality of being lower-middle-class was, it seems, as elusive as that of being a gentleman; a gentleman being, in the words of the narrator of He Knew He Was Right, "that thing, so impossible of definition, and so capable of recognition."² Accordingly, an appreciation of contemporary attitudes is essential to any attempt to understand the lower middle class and its place in the culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These attitudes can be gleaned only from a comprehensive examination of various forms of literature from the period, including periodicals, social surveys, memoirs, autobiographies, novels and stories.

The limits of time and space imposed by a master's thesis also impose restrictions on the fullness of the examination possible here, but I have attempted to be as comprehensive in my treatment of the topic as these restrictions allow. I have included in Chapter 1 most of the material I have found to date in non-fiction sources. The material in Chapter 2, which focuses on fictional represen-

2. Anthony Trollope, He Knew He Was Right, intro. by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 908.

tations of the lower middle class by authors from the classes above and below it on the social ladder, also represents the major portion of the relevant literature I have examined thus far. The number of sources emanating from the lower classes is limited; sources from the solid middle and upper middle classes are more numerous, but still not extensive. It is likely that lower-middle-class figures drift around the peripheries of many novels that I do not discuss here, but fuller treatments of such figures, treatments which tell the reader something about how the author imagined these individuals thought and acted in all circumstances of everyday life, both public and private, are relatively rare. With a few notable exceptions, the lower middle class does not appear to have inspired the great creative geniuses of the period, and figures from that class, as we shall see, often serve thematic purposes rather than featuring as characters whose personalities and problems are of interest in and of themselves.

It is in Chapter 3, in which I explore the literature written by members of the lower middle class itself, that the limits of space become a real problem. Like most other writers, lower-middle-class authors tended to write about what they knew--the lower middle class. Accordingly, works by Charles Dickens, George Gissing, H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, Frank Swinnerton, Shan Bullock, William Hale White, and John Keble Bell--all of whom came from the lower middle class, although their successes as novelists soon

raised most of them up out of it--provide a vast array of characters and situations from which to choose.³ To this list of sources must be added the memoirs and autobiographies of some of these same men as well as others, such as Alfred Grosch, Richard Church, V. S. Pritchett, and W. J. Brown. In selecting the novels and characters on which to focus, I have tried to use material which seems most representative in that it concentrates on the themes and concerns that recur in most of the other novels, or which serves as an interesting corrective to what seem to be the prevailing but not necessarily exclusive attitudes within the class.

3. Dickens's father was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. Dickens himself worked as an office boy, a clerk, and a journalist before becoming a successful novelist. Gissing was the son of a chemist. H. G. Wells's father was the proprietor of a shop which carried an unlikely combination of sports equipment and china. Wells and his brothers were apprenticed to drapers in their teens. Arnold Bennett's father was a draper and pawnbroker who, at age twenty-nine, articulated as a solicitor's clerk and eventually qualified as a solicitor. Bennett worked as a lawyer's clerk in Hanley (now part of Stoke-on-Trent) when he left school and later as a shorthand clerk for a solicitor's firm in London. Swinnerton was born into a family of artisans, his grandfathers both having been glass cutters and his father a copper plate engraver. Swinnerton began work at fourteen as an office boy in a newspaper office. He later worked as a clerk for J. M. Dent and then as a proof-reader and general assistant for Chatto and Windus. See Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, revised and abridged (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979; rpt. of Allen Lane, 1977 edition), pp. 11-55; John Halperin, Gissing: A Life in Books (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 12; David C. Smith, H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 4-7; Margaret Drabble, Arnold Bennett (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985; rpt. of Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1974 edition), pp. 25, 42-45; Frank Swinnerton, Swinnerton: An Autobiography (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1936), pp. 3, 39, 53, 84.

The importance of attitudes and perceptions notwithstanding, there are some objective criteria which can define the lower middle class, or at least major portions of it. In their attempts to assess the lower middle class historically, both Arno Mayer and Geoffrey Crossick acknowledge that a loose definition of the class would include both artisans and the labour aristocracy along with the growing armies of white-collar workers.⁴ Mayer refers to the artisans and labour aristocrats as "the old lower middle class" and the urban white-collar workers as "the new lower middle class," which combined to form "a syncretic lower middle class, a heterogeneous and often incompatible occupational, economic, social, and ideational mixture" (Mayer, 423). The major differences between the two groups, however, demand that the "old" and the "new" be seen as distinct from one another, that the "heterogeneous" and "incompatible" elements be separated. Accordingly, in his analysis of the emergence of the lower middle class in Britain, Crossick questions the existence of a "single lower middle class," noting that "the distinction between marginal non-manual groups and labour aristocrats became increasingly important" (Crossick, 12-13). Certainly contemporary observers of the narrow and dull life seemed to concentrate on white-collar workers.

4. Geoffrey Crossick, "The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain," in The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914, ed. Geoffrey Crossick (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp.11-60; Mayer, op. cit.

In this thesis, I shall largely be following Crossick's model, which is based specifically on the British experience, while Mayer's is based on the wider Continental experience. Accordingly, I shall focus only on the urban white-collar workers and others, such as schoolteachers and the minor and dissenting clergy, who were able to maintain a marginally genteel style of life. This urban, white-collar group forms that distinct lower middle class that Gissing refers to as being "a social status so peculiarly English."⁵

Mayer and Crossick outline several common features of the lower-middle-class ethos and style of life. Members of the lower middle class tended to define themselves against the working class and its culture. They rejected both formal and informal collective association, the pub and street life as well as professional organisations, in favour of the ideals of individualism and self-help. Like the middle class, the lower middle class retreated into the cocoon of the highly privatised family, separating life into the "two spheres" of public and private, work and the sanctuary of home. Unlike manual labourers, members of the lower middle class did not dirty their hands or clothing at work, and so could wear, and indeed were expected to wear, the same uniform of a dark coat and white linen as did their employers. His genteel garb became, in fact, the symbol of his respectability for the lower-middle-class man, and the

5. George Gissing, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (London: Gresham, 1903), p. 42.

focus for much derision from outside the class.

Mayer and Crossick differ slightly in their judgments of where recruits into the growing lower middle class came from. Crossick acknowledges the possibility of movement down from middle class origins, but favours the interpretation of the lower middle class as comprising former members of the working and artisan classes moving up the social ladder (Crossick, 35). Mayer sees the class as composed of individuals from a mixture of social origins. "On balance," he contends, "the lower middle class is the up-and-down escalator par excellence of societies that are in motion," providing opportunities for low status aspirants to rise while simultaneously cushioning "the fall of skidders" from the classes above (Mayer, 433, 432). It is certainly at the points of entry into the class that its definition becomes most problematic. Can the son of a military officer or of an impoverished vicar, for example, be considered lower-middle-class because he is poor and forced to work as a low level clerk, or will he always remain a true gentleman in the eyes of society? Is a shop assistant in a haberdasher's a member of the lower middle class while a butcher is not? Is it the counter he stands behind that determines the butcher's status, or the apron he wears? The apron certainly appears to have carried a social stigma. In Gissing's Will Warburton, for example, Rosamund, a romantic young woman from the middle class, is captivated by Warburton's quiet and refined manner. She is prepared to

find his poverty romantic while she believes him to be a clerk, but she is utterly horrified when she learns his true identity. "'A grocer--in an apron!'" she gasps, and she forthwith rejects him completely.⁶ The apron, it appears, established a division that could not be bridged.

The other barriers, symbolic or otherwise, that formed the divisions between classes are less clear. I can offer little to clarify the boundaries of the lower middle class, and can only resolve to tread cautiously when I must approach its margins.

6. George Gissing, Will Warburton (London: Hogarth, 1985), p. 237. First published in 1905.

Chapter 1

"Mingled Pity and Contempt"

One of the by-products of the rapid industrial and commercial development of England during the nineteenth century was the emergence of a new social stratum: the lower middle class. Essentially an urban phenomenon, the lower middle class comprised low-level clerks and civil servants, shopkeepers and shop assistants, telegraph and telephone operators, schoolteachers, and commercial travellers--in other words, most of the expanding service industry for commerce. Although the term sometimes encompassed the labour aristocracy and artisans as well, lower-middle-class most often designated white-collar office workers, the most representative and reviled type being the clerk. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the clerk and others of his kind became the focus of a measure of class hostility, scorned and ridiculed by their social superiors and inferiors alike. Literature from the period abounds in unflattering references to, or representations of, the lower middle class by members of both the solid middle class and the working class. And the predominant attitude of these other classes toward the clerk was, as B. G. Orchard records in 1871, one of "mingled pity and contempt."¹

The emergence of the lower middle class came at a time when class itself was a relatively new concept; the product, as Asa Briggs points out, "of large-scale economic and social changes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries."² It is not surprising, then, that initially there was not a precise conception of who or what constituted the lower middle class. The Oxford English Dictionary places the first use of the term "lower middle class" in 1852, in a letter from Harriet Martineau discussing the public response to her book Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development, library copies of which, she contends, were eagerly read by "thinking men & women of the lower middle, & working classes."³ The division between lower middle and working class is apparently not distinct at the time, certainly not to Martineau. And the use of italics denotes a self-conscious usage of a term that has not as yet become common in everyday speech. Nine years later, a similar uneasiness with the term marks an early review of George Eliot's Silas Marner, in which the reviewer

1. B. G. Orchard, The Clerks of Liverpool (Liverpool: Collinson, 1871), p. 49.

2. Asa Briggs, "The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-Century England," Essays in Social History, eds. M. W. Flinn and T. C. Smout for the Economic History Society (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), pp.154-177; p. 154.

3. Harriet Martineau, letter to G. J. Holyoake, 7 April, [1852]. Quoted by R. K. Webb in Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian (New York & London: Columbia University Press & Heinemann, 1960), p. 301.

comments on "the portraiture of the poor, and of what is now fashionable to call 'the lower middle class.'"⁴ Here again, there is no clear differentiation between working and lower middle class, the characters of Eliot's book being impoverished rural labourers and artisans.

John Stuart Mill, however, also writing in 1861, equates the lower middle class with white-collar work, and with an inherent deficiency in moral and intellectual development. "Englishmen of the lower middle class," he asserts in Considerations on Representative Government, can benefit from their "liability to be placed on juries and to serve parish offices." Mill feels that this type of community service would elevate participating white-collar workers over their fellows. Such service, he contends, "must make them ... very different beings, in range of ideas and development of faculties, from those who have done nothing in their lives but drive a quill, or sell goods over a counter. Still more salutary is the moral part of the instruction afforded by the participation of the private citizen, even if rarely, in public functions."⁵ Not only does Mill place lower-middle-class figures behind desks and counters, but in his tone he also suggests mild disdain for "those who have

4. Anonymous, "Review," Saturday Review 11 (13 April 1861) 369. Rpt. in George Eliot: The Critical Heritage, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 170-171.

5. John Stuart Mill, Considerations on Representative Government (London: Longmans, 1911), p. 27.

done nothing in their lives but drive a quill," a feature which is notably absent from the earlier references, but which escalates to open and sometimes harsh contempt in the works of later writers. Indeed, the mere term "lower middle class" could at times inspire responses of distaste. Forced to use the expression, the author of an article in the Quarterly Review in 1869 almost perceptibly winces. "We must apologize for using this painful nomenclature," he explains to his readers, "but really there is no choice."⁶

The extent to which the previous author's discomfort is a reaction against simply using a term which, as the reviewer of Silas Marner indicates, is fashionable and the extent to which it is a reaction against the class itself would be impossible to determine. Briggs points out that conservative elements in England tended to resist the new language of "class" which evolved in the nineteenth century, preferring to retain terms such as "rank" and "order" (Briggs, 157). How much more, then, must they have recoiled at the idea of a new class, which not only did not fit in the existing hierarchy of ranks, but which also impinged on the dominant conservative rank in society at the time, the established middle class. Certainly the middle class was quick to respond unfavourably to the growing armies of

6. Quarterly Review, 126 (1869), 450. Quoted by Asa Briggs in "The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-Century England," in Essays in Social History, eds. M. W. Flinn and T. C. Smout for the Economic History Society (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), pp. 154-177; p. 173, n. 24.

office clerks, denouncing them for their pretentiousness and for their aping of gentlemanly appearance and standards.

An article in Punch in 1845, which purports to offer "directions for the guidance of all clerks," lampoons them mercilessly.⁷ The author sneers at their work, their intelligence and their manners. He recommends that clerks busy themselves during office hours by seeking recreation with such improving activities as reading the newspaper or playing cribbage whenever the principal is absent. "Where the clerks are all on friendly terms," he further suggests, "and particularly in a government office, leap-frog is an agreeable exercise; for it not only fills up the time, but obviates the chief objection to the employment of a clerk, on the ground of its being sedentary." The government clerk's situation, however, he declares to be "the most difficult of all; for the filling up of the office-hours from ten till four will require a great amount of ingenuity." The author goes on to instruct clerks in the preferred responses to clients, customers, or members of the public who approach them for information or assistance. Clerks can maintain their dignity, he points out, by receiving inquiries or requests with "a stare and a yawn" or by "declining to speak to any one who addresses them."

The Punch article, of course, predates the first appearance of the term "lower middle class," and is directed

7. Anonymous, "Punch's Guide to Servants: The Clerk," Punch, 9 (1845), 29.

at a particular occupational group, rather than a specific class. Indeed, many clerks, especially at this relatively early date, came from the ranks of the middle class. Nevertheless, the barbs do not seem to be directed at men of taste and breeding, especially given that the article appears under the heading of "Punch's Guide to Servants." The nomenclature for the class may not have been firmly established in 1845, but the image of the self-important nonentity, imagining himself to be doing a serious day's work and to be the social equal or superior of those he serves, was to become a commonplace that would be increasingly associated with the entire lower middle class as it evolved and as clerks became one of its most visible and numerous components. And according to one of its contributors, Albert Smith, in the 1840's Punch assumed a leading role in the denigration of a type that would come to be regarded as the quintessentially lower-middle-class figure. In a mock anthropological study published in 1847, Smith identifies what he sees as a particularly unsavoury social phenomenon "of comparatively late creation": the Gent.⁸ Smith asserts that he and his colleagues have "laboured, for three or four years, to bring the race of Gents into universal contempt . . . [through] direct attacks in Punch and Bentley's Miscellany, and . . . side-wind blows through the medium of our esteemed friend John Parry, certain burlesques

8. Albert Smith, The Natural History of the Gent (London: Bogue, 1847), p. 2.

at the Lyceum, and various other channels" (Gent, vi-vii). In a phrase that anticipates Orchard's summation of attitudes towards the clerk, Smith assesses the general response to the Gent as one of "mingled contempt and amusement"; a phrase which, indeed, accurately defines the tone of his book. Smith ridicules the Gents' conception of style, especially their cheap and tawdry clothes, and the ubiquitous umbrella or stick. Their pathetic efforts to appear fashionable produce not the intended impression of superiority, but rather, Smith implies, the impression of monkeys mimicking men:

Their strenuous attempts to ape gentility--a bad style of word, we admit, but one peculiarly adapted to our purpose--are to us more painful than ludicrous: and the labouring man, dressed in the usual costume of his class is, in our eyes, more respectable than the Gent, in his dreary efforts to assume a style he is so utterly incapable of carrying off.

Gent, 57-59.

Later, Smith admits that the Gent's imitation of the gentleman, though distorted, does resemble the original. "In fact," Smith allows, "his reflection is that of a spoon, in more ways than one: making the most outrageous images of the original, distorting all features, but still preserving a strange sort of identity" (Gent, 76). It was, perhaps, this "strange sort of identity" that was more distressing to his superiors than any other feature of the Gent's character and appearance. Certainly the unsuitability of clerks' and shopkeepers' pretensions to gentlemanly standards became the most prominent of the recurring themes in middle-class

responses to the lower middle class as the nineteenth century progressed.

Occasionally an observer paints a more sympathetic picture of the lower middle class. In a public address on popular education delivered on 19 January 1862, J. A. Roebuck compares clerks favourably to members of the working classes.⁹ Roebuck's purpose is to demonstrate the civilising effects of education. He argues that the labourer returns home at the end of the day to an uncomfortable hovel, a slatternly wife, and noisy and disagreeable children--all of which combines to drive him to seek refuge in drink at the local pub. But the mercantile clerk, because he has been educated, "comes home, finds his wife ready to receive him, has a comfortable dinner with his [presumably quiet and well-mannered] children, and his pleasures are the pleasures of an educated man. He reads his book, he occupies the mind of his family, and when he goes to bed he thanks God for the good God has rendered him." But such a stilted and idealised vision of lower-middle-class life is hardly more attractive than the vituperative one in Punch. Furthermore, Roebuck sees no more value in the clerk's occupation, though he is not as acerbic, than did the author of the Punch article. Roebuck's mercantile clerk exhibits all his laudatory traits of

9. J. A. Roebuck, address to the Salisbury Literary and Scientific Institution, 19 January 1862; as reported in The Times, 20 January 1862.

refinement despite the fact that he is confined to an office, in the "smoky atmosphere" of London, where "his whole day is passed in writing 'John Brown debtor to Thomas Smith so many pounds of candles or raisins.'" According to Roebuck, the brutish agricultural labourer "has the more ennobling occupation." But even this limited endorsement of lower-middle-class life did not go unchallenged.

Fitzjames Stephens takes issue with Roebuck in an article entitled "Gentlemen" which appeared anonymously in the March 1862 number of Cornhill Magazine. Stephens argues that the labourer exhibits more admirable traits than does the clerk because, though unpolished, the labourer is honest. Thus the labourer is closer in character to the gentleman, since, Stephens says, "the great characteristic of the manners of a gentleman, as we conceive them in England, is plain, downright, frank simplicity. It is meant to be, and to a great extent it is, the outward and visible sign of the two great cognate virtues--truth and courage."¹⁰ The clerk disqualifies himself for gentlemanly status because his greatest concern is not to express himself honestly but to appear to be refined:

A gentleman and a labouring man would tell the same story in nearly the same words, differently pronounced, of course, and arranged in the one case grammatically, and in the other not. In either case the words themselves would be plain, racy, and smacking of the soil from which they grow. The language of the commercial clerk, and the manner in which he brings it out, are both framed on a quite different model. He thinks about

10. [Fitzjames Stephens], "Gentlemen," Cornhill Magazine 5:27 (March 1862), 327-342; 336.

himself and constantly tries to talk fine. He calls a school an academy, speaks of proceeding when he means going, and talks, in short, much in the style in which the members of his own class write police reports and accounts of appalling catastrophes in the newspapers. The manners of a sailor, a non-commissioned officer in the army, a gamekeeper, or of the better kind of labourers . . . are much better in themselves, and are capable of a far higher polish, than are the manners of a bagman or a small shopkeeper. (Stephens, 337).

Stephens thus condemns the clerk, and with him all his class, as mean and low, as less worthy than his social inferiors, as a parody of a gentleman.

The ludicrousness of lower-middle-class pretensions to gentlemanly standards continues to be a recurrent theme among middle-class observers as the century progresses. In a series of letters in the Liverpool Courier, for example, a curmudgeon who signs himself Benjamin Battleaxe repeatedly attacks clerks for their obsessive concerns with dress and status.¹¹ Battleaxe claims that "the remark is often made by employers, 'Why do our clerks so persistently assert that they are expected to dress and behave like gentlemen, and therefore should be paid more than artisans? We do not desire clerks on £80 a-year to emulate us. Our views are the very opposite. Ambition and vanity, not our wishes, lead to the absurd display in which so many clerks indulge.'" Battleaxe also asserts that, among clerks "a large number are miserably incompetent for the performance of any duties beyond the simplest routine." Battleaxe's

11. Letters to the Editor, Courier, Liverpool: n.d. Reprinted in Orchard, op. cit., pp. 40, 44.

subsequent response to letters from clerks defending their professional and personal worth is even more derisive in tone and offensive in implication: "Must a clerk indulge in more display than an artisan? By what strange impulse is he driven to spend more than he makes? Why does not his honour and manly pride consist in humility and honesty? There is more true grandeur in a saint afoot than in a swindler on horseback." Like Stephens, Battleaxe believes not only that the clerk is no gentleman, but that in his pretensions he fosters characteristics antithetical to gentility--false pride and dishonesty.

Those observers who did see admirable qualities in the lower middle class tended to temper their endorsements with a large measure of condescension. Anstruther White, in an analysis of the declining moral tone of English society published in Fortnightly Review in 1885, sees in "the lower section of the middle class, the small shopkeepers and other employes on the same level, . . . a happy interspace of virtue."¹² Unfortunately, the weaker members of this class are easy prey to the corrupting influence of novels and "society journals" which "deprave the minds of their more untutored readers, and inoculate them with a subtle desire to emulate those whom they idiotically regard as their betters in the ways of iniquity." An even more pernicious

12. H. Anstruther White, "Moral and Merry England," Fortnightly Review, N.S. 38 (July-December 1885), 768-779; 775-776.

influence, according to White, is the easy fraternising characteristic of such apparently vicious venues as "watering-places, hotels, skating-rinks, lawn-tennis grounds, and so forth." The ethical and intellectual marginality implied by this extreme susceptibility presents an image of the lower middle class that is devastating; a class of people so readily corrupted would have to be completely lacking in moral fibre and integrity.

A similar attitude of patronising sympathy and concern colours a plea by Robert White for "cheap and comfortable lodgings" for single men of "the clerk class," which appeared in The Nineteenth Century in 1897.¹³ According to this analysis, the impecunious clerk is in danger of falling victim to the superior resourcefulness of both the class above him and the class below. Exploited by his employer and cheated by his grasping landlord, the clerk, it seems, is virtually forced to lead a life that is "as wretched as it can be. From the miseries of the cheap lodging-house he flies to the doubtful distractions of the public-house, the cheap play-house, or the night club. Thus many a promising career has been ruined" (R. White, 596). And not only are clerks morally weak in the face of adversity, but they are also ineffectual in altering their position, although the author apparently finds their restraint preferable to the restiveness of some sections of the working class: "Too

13. Robert White, "Wanted: A Rowton House for Clerks," The Nineteenth Century (October 1897), 594-601.

peaceful to form unions and commit assaults; too orderly to assemble on Tower Hill and threaten riots; too sensitive and self-respecting to mouth out their grievances in Trafalgar Square or Hyde Park, the clerks of the metropolis have been driven by force of competition and the greed of many callous employers to the extremes of poverty." White's portrait of the meek lower-middle-class figure becomes extravagantly pathetic: "The sort of life they are forced to live is proclaimed in the shiny black coat, the frayed collar, the shabby cuffs, and, above all, in the pale, haggard, 'washed-out' look on their faces. . . . The perpetual struggle to make ends meet and to reconcile gentility with poverty is heart-breaking" (R. White, 596).

Both Anstruther White and Robert White see in the lower middle class an attenuated form of virtue, a desire to be moral and upright that can readily be eroded by unpropitious circumstances or by dubious influences. Such weakness of character would certainly exclude the members of this class from the rank of gentleman in the eyes of these two authors and of the solid middle class for which they wrote. But fear of the erosion of the status both of the gentleman and of the middle class nevertheless appears to have coloured many of the middle-class responses to the lower middle class.

Robin Gilmour points out that during the nineteenth century, the idea of the gentleman "lay at the heart of the social and political accommodation between the aristocracy

and the middle classes."¹⁴ The concept of gentility shifted from a model based on birth and property to one based on morals, wealth, and education, thus allowing members of the increasingly powerful middle class to conceive of themselves as gentlemen. There was an extraordinary "intensity of preoccupation" with "the nature of gentlemanliness" which, Gilmour suggests, "reflected the needs and aspirations of new groups struggling to establish themselves." The subsequent broadening of the definition of the gentleman, however, threatened to undermine its exclusivity, thus defeating the purpose of aspiring to gentlemanly status: "The very openness of the category meant that it could be claimed by more and more people lower and lower on the social scale" (Idea, 14), a process of dilution on which Anthony Trollope comments through his fiction. In The Duke's Children, published in 1880, the Duke of Omnium does not find his daughter's assertion that her suitor is a gentleman reassuring:

"So is my private secretary. There is not a clerk in one of our public offices that does not consider himself to be a gentleman. The curate of the parish is a gentleman, and the medical man who comes from Bradstock. The word is too vague to carry with it any meaning that ought to be serviceable to you in thinking of such a matter."

"I do not know any other way of dividing people," said she.¹⁵

14. Robin Gilmour, The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 2.

15. Anthony Trollope, The Duke's Children (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 67.

If there were no other way of dividing people, then it was imperative for the middle class to preserve the mystique of the gentleman. If the middle class wanted to remain in the ascendent, asserting its pre-eminence in the social and political worlds previously dominated by the landed aristocracy, then it had to deny entry to the club to the clerks, shopkeepers, and commercial travellers, those shabby and unimpressive denizens of the suburbs who comprised the lower middle class.

The middle class, then, had to preserve its status in part by defining itself against the marginal groups on its own periphery. Perhaps the middle class learned to tolerate the term "lower middle class" as much in its own defence as in acquiescence to fashionable jargon. For if, as Richard Faber asserts, "the detection of ladies and gentlemen became something of a national pastime,"¹⁶ so too determining the definition of lower middle class could provide a form of doubtful entertainment. In a novel published in 1900, the lower-middle-class wife of a middle-class swell, appropriately nicknamed Dandie, listens uncomfortably as her husband's cousin relates a recent conversation at their ladies' club:

"There was a discussion at the club the other day about classes. Women's clubs should never discuss. Some one asked how we could distinguish between the upper middle class and the lower middle class. One said it was whether you kept one servant or two; another if you lived in the suburbs--a house in a row; somebody else

16. Richard Faber, Proper Stations (London: Faber & Faber, 1971) p. 145.

said you were ostracised if you had ever done the washing at home, and another one that you were lower middle class without doubt if you had been seen to open your own front door or walk down the street with a market basket. You should have seen the faces! Why, you are flushing and wriggling yourself. We were all touched in some sensitive spot. . . . I think myself that only an idle woman can be a lady: she has time to cultivate grace. I flared up when a distinction was drawn between trades and professions. Dandie's father and mine were only tradesmen on a magnificent scale."¹⁷

Apparently the line between middle and lower middle class could be disturbingly uncertain for those who were insecure in their position on the social ladder.

Certainly those who had risen out of the lower middle class would be sensitive to the kind of observations made at this fictional women's club, and so, too, would those who were losing status, members of the middle class who could no longer maintain large households with several servants. But the extensive changes that took place in England during the nineteenth century--in particular the urbanisation that accompanied industrialisation, the extension of the franchise, and the increased access to education--produced a society that was in a state of flux. The development of class-consciousness was in part a response to some of these changes, a means by which sections of society could attempt to define and consolidate their positions in rapidly evolving circumstances. These same conditions had allowed the middle class to establish its advantageous position; but there was no guarantee that it was secure in a society that

17. Alice Dudeney, The Maternity of Harriott Wicken (London & New York: Macmillan, 1900), p. 81.

continued to expand and alter.

T. H. S. Escott comments on the changing relations between the classes in Social Transformations of the Victorian Age, a general analysis of all of English society at the end of the nineteenth century published in 1897: "The fusion of classes not less than the organization of professions or enterprise is the keynote of our epoch. The process has, without an exception, been one of levelling up, not down."¹⁸ Although Escott here refers to the fusion of the middle and upper classes, the "obliteration of the conventional distinction between the aristocracies of birth and money, the oligarchies of manufacture and of land" (Transformations, 202-203), he also foresees the waning of the notion of class itself:

The epithet 'middle class' is employed in deference to traditional wont, but is in great measure misleading because the tendency of the age, the uniformity of the social and educational discipline through which most Englishmen pass tends increasingly to obliterate distinctions of conventional grade, and in tastes, pursuits, prejudices, to assimilate all to a single type. . . . The Universities . . . have been brought to the door of the labourer at his bench, to the shop assistant at his counter, to the clerk at his desk. If this does not always imply an universal access of real education, no one who knows the England of to-day can doubt that it never fails to mean the multiplication of all kinds of knowledge, or to generate the social aspirations, and the thirst for that kind of self-improvement, real or imaginary, which is accompanied by a growing demand for social existence of an animated kind, for a daily life less insular in its organization and less restricted to the domestic hearth.

Transformations, 193-195

18. T. H. S. Escott, Social Transformations of the Victorian Age (Folcroft Library Editions, 1973; rpt. of 1897 edition, London: Seeley), p. 201.

Escott does not appear to have a jaundiced view of the lower middle class. He does not see their social aspirations or desire for self-improvement, which he admits may be "imaginary," as absurd or pretentious; nor is there any indication that his assessment of their style of life as "insular in its organization" and "restricted to the domestic hearth" is coloured by contempt. At the same time, he does not claim that the lower middle class is blessed with any peculiar virtues; it is simply and understandably a group with "a growing demand for social existence of a more animated kind." Escott's observations, indeed, seem to be remarkably objective and his attitude toward the inevitability of continued change is remarkably balanced and composed. A certain amount of friction between the classes as they begin to merge, he apparently feels, is only natural and will soon pass away:

That upon the humbler levels of the community the progress from ignorance to education should be accompanied by real or apparent disturbances of the personal relations between classes was to have been expected. . . . Those above them in the social scale have not yet been able to decide whether to conciliate their educated inferiors as possible friends, or to stand on their guard against them as actual enemies. As the situation becomes more familiar, it will prove less strained.

Transformations, 166

But while Escott optimistically predicts the approaching obliteration of class distinctions and the eventual equanimity with which all classes would respond to social levelling, most of his contemporaries were less sanguine.

In The Blight of Respectability, published in 1900, three years after Escott's monograph, Walter Gallichan

derides lower-middle-class values and habits.¹⁹ As the title of his book suggests, he focuses on that most salient component of the lower-middle-class ethos, respectability, which he analyses through the analogy of disease. To label a man as respectable, Gallichan claims, is "to blast . . . [his] reputation as a tolerable specimen of the human race." The respectable man is "a sort of factory-made cheap line in humanity, with a few prim, precise superstitions, no reasoned morals, and no intellectual or aesthetic needs"; his wife and daughters are "gangrened with respectability and snobbishness." Indeed, Gallichan feels that respectability is a contagion which destroys any inherent worth in the members of the class in which it is endemic. "Were it not for the inherited virus," he asserts, "they [the respectable wife and daughters] might have been decent and wholesome women" (Blight, 4-5). Furthermore, the contagion is spreading, threatening to continue the erosion of the concept of gentility. Gallichan sardonically describes a certain "British Matron" of his acquaintance who questions the propriety of a mutual friend considering herself a lady. "'Is she a Lady or is she a Person?' asked . . . [the] British Matron," apparently with a self-important flourish. The Matron herself, Gallichan points out, "unquestionably . . . was a 'lady' in the popular sense of the title."

She lived in a large house, received visits from the rector and the curate, gave parties attended by well-to-

19. Walter Gallichan, The Blight of Respectability (London: University of London Press, 1900).

do tradesfolk and one or two professional men, with their wives and families, and refrained from committing the misdemeanor of carrying parcels in the street. Undoubtedly she was considered a lady by most members of her own class. But was she a lady? . . . This dame was the daughter of a tradesman, and she earned her own livelihood. That is quite enough to stamp her as a mere person in the judgment of an immense class.

Blight, 22-23

Gallichan clearly disdains the "popular sense of the title." But what seems to offend him the most is the pretentiousness of the Matron, who makes a show of entertaining tradesmen, who is the daughter of a tradesman, but who, apparently, not only considers herself to be a lady but also is presumptuous enough to consider herself worthy to sit in judgement of others' social credentials.

The section of the lower middle class for which Gallichan had the most contempt was undoubtedly its upper portion. That segment of the class seemed most clearly to have ambitions to rise socially and apparently could displace individuals on the periphery of true gentility-- individuals such as impoverished young ladies who might have to suffer under the domination of a vulgar mistress. Gallichan produces a suitably distressing hypothesis (based, it seems, on the Matron) which illustrates his worst fears: "An ignorant, ill-mannered, middle-class woman dubs herself Lady, and describes her cultured governess as a Person" (Blight, 25).²⁰ For the lower sections of the class which

20. Like many of his contemporaries, Gallichan uses middle-class to characterise people or groups who would more accurately be described as lower-middle-class. The "ladies" of the solid middle class would not likely be ignorant or ill-mannered, and the Matron, who is apparently his model for the "ignorant, ill-mannered, middle-class woman," is one

seemed to have no hope of social advancements, he seemed to have more sympathy.

Very sombre is the spectacle of the life that bruises the million. To one who walks the street observantly on public holidays, the white faces and worn bodies of his toiling brethren tell of dull, grinding lives. See the poor mercantile clerks and shopmen, the genteel drudges, the indispensable factors of the wealth which they will never share. . . . How can we inveigh against these tired workers for the drowsy occupation of their few leisure hours? What is chiefly at fault is the crushing system that leaves so little time for expansion of the mind and the sympathies, the ideal that shapes the many to this level. . . . Are such doomed to take no thought for higher things than bread-getting and eating, and will their minds for ever starve on the Bethel hymn and the newspaper? Blight, 121-123

Gallichan may partially exonerate the overworked clerk and shopman of the blame for their own limitations, but he nevertheless continues to judge them as narrow and spiritless, as having minds and sympathies that have been atrophied by the demands of the "crushing system." He does not express true compassion for these "genteel drudges"; he merely mingles pity with condescension.

Gallichan's catch-phrase for the lower middle class is "the Respectables"; T. W. H. Crosland refers to them as "the suburbans." His book, published in 1905, is a mock anthropological study which purports to analyse and interpret the behaviour of this strange breed, "a people to themselves."²¹ "Persons of culture," Crosland contends, "have

of "the respectables," one of the "factory-made cheap line in humanity." As such, and as a tradesman's daughter who earns her own living, she is certainly not a real middle-class lady, although she may wish to pass herself off as one.

21. T. W. H. Crosland, The Suburbans (London: Long, 1905), p.7.

for a generation or so made a point of speaking of the suburban with hushed voices and a certain contempt." Many of the same mean-spirited traits that Gallichan groups under the rubric of respectable, Crosland characterises as suburban, a term which he feels "is a sort of label which may be properly applied to pretty well everything on the earth that is ill-conditioned, undesirable, and unholy. . . . the whole of the humdrum, platitudinous things of life" (Suburbans, 7-8). But unlike Gallichan, Crosland never softens his assessment of the lower middle class with even the suggestion of a qualification. He feels pity for no segment of the vulgar suburban; he is unrelentingly contemptuous of them. Suburbia he describes as "a country devoid of graciousness to a degree which appals"; even the ways of getting to the suburbs are "mean and squalid ways" (Suburbans, 15,34). He sneers at the "sumptuary laws of Clapham, Balham, Ealing, Herne Hill, and Highgate" and labels the lower-middle-class male's attempts to maintain a respectable appearance despite his frayed collar and worn coat as "ludicrous" (Suburbans, 37-40). He assesses the suburban spirit as "inhuman," shaped by "avarice and rapacity and cupidity," and pictures the suburban wife as a harriidan and the suburban husband as "a hen-pecked, shrew-driven, neglected, heart-sick man" (Suburbans, 46,50).

Indeed, Crosland has a particularly jaundiced view of

the lower-middle-class family life that Escott and Gallichan describe with terms such as "insular," "restricted," and "narrow"; terms which are at best slightly disparaging, but which pale before Crosland's assessment of lower-middle-class domesticity. "The married life of the suburb," he affirms, "may appear to be tranquil and peaceful and undisturbed; really it is nothing of the kind. An armed neutrality, a cold resignation, is the best that can be said for it" (Suburbans, 76-77). And the comforts of the hearth and home, which constituted most of the major attractions of lower-middle-class life, Crosland sees not only as illusory but also as pernicious:

Despite their peevishness and touchiness and want of conduct, despite their backbitings and slanderings and petty squabbings, despite their financial stringencies and the general narrowness of their affairs, domestic and otherwise, it cannot be denied that the suburbans do contrive to extract from life feelings of security, complacency, and completeness. For the individual suburban of our own time this is fortunate. For suburbans as a body and of future generations it is most unfortunate.
Suburbans, 35-36

For all Crosland's harshness, however, he does not appear to feel defensive about the effects of the lower middle class on the stability of his own class and position in society. In his view, it would seem, the lower middle class is a threat only to itself. He frequently mentions the suburbans' respectability, retaining the same disparaging connotations that Gallichan ascribed to the term. And he does occasionally refer to the suburban male sneeringly as a gentleman; but for Crosland, the epithet is so ludicrously misplaced as to be nothing more than a joke.

Crosland's depiction of Suburbia as a separate country and of its inhabitants as an alien race is in itself a joke, of course, and a very nasty one. It does reflect a changing attitude to the lower middle class, however. In the early years of the twentieth century, articles in British periodicals tended to present the class more objectively than those written earlier, often placing it in a larger social context. More objective writers than Crosland also perceive the lower middle class as a distinct group whose major characteristics and style of life demand analysis, but, unlike Crosland, they attempt to see the class as an integral part of the British social system, rather than as some unnerving social anomaly. For example, a series of articles which assessed and compared the budgets of families at various social and economic levels appeared in Cornhill Magazine in 1901; in that series, G. S. Layard's examination of a lower-middle-class budget is a model of objective and balanced analysis.²² Layard recognises at the outset the problems inherent in trying to generalise for a group that is extraordinarily diverse, "a class which includes all those sorts and conditions of men which range between the skilled mechanic and the curate in priest's orders. . . . those who have fallen from affluence to the penury of 150 l. per annum, as well as those who have risen from penury to the affluence of the same income" (Layard, 656). Layard judi-

22. G. S. Layard, "A Lower-middle-class Budget," Cornhill Magazine 10 N.S. (1901), 656-666.

ciously examines all the "matters of small moment" that comprise lower-middle-class life and that dictate the expenditure of a limited income, noting that "there is not . . . much room for false pride on 150 l. a year" (Layard, 662, 663). Layard thus sees the lower-middle-class figure as unpretentious, and he also sees him as a vital and significant part of British society and prosperity. "The lower middle class of which we write," he points out, "is the backbone of the commonwealth" (Layard, 656).

C. F. G. Masterman, a noted author, politician and social observer of his day, also attests to the importance of the lower middle class. Writing in 1909, he states that the class forms, "in conjunction with the artisan class below, from which it is so sharply cut off in interest and ideas, the healthiest and most hopeful promise for the future of England."²³ But Masterman is assessing the role of social classes within the larger concern of "the condition of England," and he comes to this conclusion only after a thorough and thoughtful analysis of both the virtues and shortcomings of the lower middle class. Indeed, most of his observations carry with them a sense of deep ambivalence to his subject. "It is no despicable life which has thus silently developed in suburban London," he notes. "Family affection is there, cheerfulness, and almost unlimited patience" (Condition, 74). The limitations of Masterman's

23. C. F. G. Masterman, The Condition of England (London: Methuen, 1909), p.95.

endorsement of lower-middle-class life are evident in the negative terms he uses to describe it: "It is no despicable life." And Masterman also sees, as Crosland did, a falseness in the quiet facade of suburbia. "There are possibilities of havoc in this ordered and comfortable society," he warns; despite the surface "tranquility and repose" there are echoes "full of restlessness and disappointment, and longing, with a note of menace in it" (Condition, 75). But it is difficult to imagine that there would be echoes of anything else, given the characteristics of this "not despicable life" that Masterman describes. The suburban wife "is harassed by the indifference or insolence of the domestic servant," while her husband labours at a "dismal sedentary occupation so many incredible hours a day" (Condition, 71-72,73). But the restive echoes that Masterman warns of are not likely to alarm the other classes, given the general response that he feels the suburbans inspire. "They are easily forgotten:" he admits, "for they do not strive or cry. . . . No one fears the Middle Classes, the suburbans; and perhaps for that reason, no one respects them. They only appear articulate in comedy, to be made the butt of a more nimble-witted company outside" (Condition, 68).

Masterman no doubt hopes to alter the perception of the lower middle class with the analysis he presents in his book, but there are hints that he finds his proteges difficult to promote successfully. "Why does the picture of this

suburban life, presented by however kindly a critic, leave the reader at the end with a sense of dissatisfaction?" he asks (Condition, 75). Although this question embodies his response to fictional works by lower-middle-class authors, it could as readily be applied to Masterman's own portrayal of suburban life. The virtues that he sees in the lower middle class are virtues of potential alone--potential that can be realised only if its members resist the aspects of their culture which Masterman deems damaging or debasing: their "incorrect standards of value," their "absence of vision," and their susceptibility to "the huge ignorance of the world of the music hall and the Yellow newspaper" (Condition, 80,94).

Another assessment of the place of the lower middle class in the social organisation of Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century appears in an early sociological analysis by F. G. D'Aeth. In an article published in The Sociological Review in 1910, entitled "Present Tendencies of Class Differentiation," D'Aeth attempts to interpret and classify the existing social grades.²⁴ After briefly outlining the old class system and tracing its decline, D'Aeth describes the new grades in the social order and the characteristics of the members of each. He letters the grades from A to G, A being the lowest level or "The Loafer" and G being the highest or "The Rich"; the bulk of the lower mid-

24. F. G. D'Aeth, "Present Tendencies of Class Differentiation," The Sociological Review 3 (1910), 269-276.

dle class would fall somewhere in grades B to D. D'Aeth assigns income levels and occupations to each grade and then, without a hint of irony, gives a brief summary of the social customs and ability of its members. The poorest section of the lower middle class would fall into D'Aeth's grade B, or "Low-skilled labour," in which he includes the "lowest type clerk, [and] shop assistant. The only social custom that D'Aeth appears to be aware of in this group is that "some change clothes and put on [a] collar in [the] evening"; under Ability he observes: "general intelligence rather low; need to be told" (D'Aeth, 270). Grade C includes, among others such as skilled labourers, "petty officers, clerks, smaller officials, etc." He describes this group as follows:

Social customs--table set for meals: married children visit parents on Sundays; Ability--technical skill; a very fair general intelligence; shrewd at times; a simple mind, not following a connected argument; laborious procedure at business meetings. D'Aeth, 270

The bulk of the lower middle class would fall into D'Aeth's grade D, "Smaller Shopkeeper and clerk." Unlike grades B and C, this group is exclusively lower-middle-class, comprising, according to D'Aeth's definition, "clerks, shopkeepers and tradesmen, commercial travellers, printers, engineers, etc., elementary school teachers, a few ministers." The elements of this group's social customs and abilities are, like those of the previous ones, listed in the sparest of prose:

Social customs--furnish their homes; entertain visitors; some have a young servant: Ability--varied; either a

high degree of technical skill; or a little capital and managing a business; shrewd in small matters; read magazines; express superficial opinions freely upon all subjects.
D'Aeth, 270

D'Aeth's note-like style suggests, but does not achieve, objectivity. He is not, like Gallichan and Crosland, overtly contemptuous of the lower middle class. His summary of their customs and activities is instead shaped by condescension for a group that is consumed with the "matters of small moment": a group whose members may or may not have "a little capital"; who read, but only magazines; and who reveal their intellectual limitations through their "superficial opinions." But while D'Aeth obviously does not have a high opinion of the lower middle class, neither does he seem to feel the need to condemn it. His attempt to give an objective assessment of the class may fail, but it comes in the context of a larger attempt to understand the new realities of class in the twentieth century, rather than in an attempt to denigrate the clerk or the shopkeeper. The lower-middle-class figure in D'Aeth's assessment of him seems to offer no threat to the integrity of the British class system, nor does he appear to be pretentious or absurd. But then, neither is he the "backbone of the commonwealth"; he is simply a man of limited breeding and abilities who has his small place in the composition of society.

Escott's prediction, then, that "as the situation . . . [became] more familiar, it . . . [would] prove less strained" appears to have been accurate. Both the serious

and the parodic analyses written in the first decade of the twentieth century suggest that, while the lower middle class could not be said to have become consolidated, with a sense of community and shared purpose such as existed in the working class, it had developed an identity and its members shared--or were perceived to share--certain common values and features. As it thus became more clearly differentiated, the lower middle class perhaps presented somewhat less of a threat to the security of the middle class. Also, as Gilmour points out, in the late Victorian and Edwardian period "a significant determinant of gentlemanliness" was a public school education (Idea, 182), something no lower-middle-class boy was ever likely to attain. And while, as Gilmour further attests, the idea of the gentlemen was losing its potency by the end of the nineteenth century, the use of an exclusive education as the prerequisite for admission nevertheless ensured that the enclave of the gentleman would be less open to incursions from the entirely unsuitable. Accordingly, D'Aeth could feel secure that the lower middle class would not easily stray into his two highest social grades of the professionals and the rich, for one of the characteristics of the members of these groups is that they have attended public schools (D'Aeth, 270-271).

The working class regarded the lower middle class no more favourably than did the middle class. The literature coming out of the working class is not as extensive, of course, but references to the lower middle class that do

survive are uniformly disparaging. As early as 1860, working men found the lower-middle-class presence in the mechanics' institutes intimidating. As one artisan observes, the institutes were dominated by

a class of fast young fellows who rejoice in the nomenclature of shopmen and clerks, who keep up a strict line of demarcation, and not only monopolise the daily journals, but likewise the conversation. And if a labouring man ventures a sentiment, he is met with either a universal grin or a personal taunt, and therefore he soon becomes disgusted with that society that fails to reward him for the expense of attending.²⁵

A similar sense of resentment at their supercilious attitude is evident in a protest against the insinuation of lower-middle-class members into working-class social clubs, because "here it is that the working class club man feels himself the patron rather than the patronised, that he really unbends and feels himself free."²⁶

Working men soon began to respond to the lower middle class with a sense of their own superiority over a group who seemed to them to comprise nothing but poseurs. Thomas Wright, under the name of the Journeyman Engineer, asserts that the average labourer is "an infinitely better man, and a more useful and creditable member of society, than the snobby-genteel kind of person who, with the manners and

25. Henry Knell, Chips from the Block (London: n.p., [1860]), p. 84; as quoted by Geoffrey Crossick, "The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain: A Discussion," in The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914, ed. Geoffrey Crossick, (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 11-60; p. 51.

26. Workingman, Working Men and Women (London: Tinsley, 1879), p. 36; as quoted in Crossick, op. cit., p. 52.

education of an underbred counter-skipper, and an income less than that of a good mechanic, sacrifices comfort and honesty to keep up appearances."²⁷ Wright disdainfully labels these "counter-skippers" and their kind as members of the "let-us-be-genteel-or-die classes" (Habits, 206), and he is especially contemptuous of the lower-middle-class version of the swell: "Your cheap imitation swell--the 'gent' of the present generation--is an utterly despicable creature, fit only to be kicked" (Habits, 181). It is only in the contemplation of the excessively long hours that shop assistants work that Wright shows some compassion for their plight. "Workmen of the artisan class are disposed to entertain a rather contemptuous opinion of 'counter-skippers,'" he admits, "but they should bear in mind that even counter-skippers are men and brethren, who feel all the irksomeness of confinement, and are doubtless endowed with bumps that cause them to long for, and would enable them to enjoy, a half-holiday" (Habits, 202). Wright's concern is unquestionably sincere, making the the subtle qualifications in his statement all the more revealing of his attitude toward the lower middle class--"even counter-skippers" are "doubtless" endowed with some human characteristics; they do merit some pity, as well as contempt.

The traditional bond that supposedly linked the working

27. Thomas Wright [A Journeyman Engineer], Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes (New York: Kelley, 1967; rpt. of London: Tinsley, 1867 edition), p. vii.

man and the real gentleman was perhaps reinforced by the shared attitude of pity and contempt for the lower middle class that emerges in their writings. But given the unassertiveness of the lower middle class, the strength of the reactions against it often seems excessive. Nevertheless, the lower middle class made those outside it, and indeed even some of those inside it, feel uneasy. Perhaps to many Victorians it appeared to be an aberration intruding on the traditional social order, a visible and identifiable element which symbolised the disturbing changes which were disrupting life as they knew and understood it. Accordingly, the lower middle class was threatening, not in a grand or heroic sense, but in the sense of an insidious disease. Like a cancer, like pollution, like the burgeoning urbanisation and commercialisation that spawned it, the lower middle class was menacing by virtue of its unrestrained growth. But what defense could there be against a force which was unaggressive, which could not be challenged, but which also could not be contained? The only satisfying response, apparently, was to revile it.

Chapter 2

"The World of Whiffs and Glimpses"

The mingled pity and contempt that characterises the attitude toward the lower middle class in the periodical literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is also evident in the fiction of the period. The mingling is often somewhat uneven, however, the pity being largely concentrated in the works of the middle-class authors and the contempt figuring more prominently in the fiction of working-class authors such as Thomas Hardy and Robert Tressell.¹ The most reprehensible and despised character in Tressell's The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, for example, is the self-serving foreman, Hunter,

1. Hardy's origins were solidly working-class: his ancestors had been stone-masons for generations. See Michael Millgate, Thomas Hardy: A Biography (New York: Random, 1982), pp. 4-5. Tressell is a more problematic figure. Although his origins were middle-class and he was well-educated, he did not pursue a career in the professions or the civil service. He chose instead to join the working class. See Alan Swingewood, The Myth of Mass Culture (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 50 n. Swingewood attests to Tressell's complete assimilation into the working class: Tressell "shared the experiences of working-class life because he identified with them [the people of the working class] and their struggle completely." Nevertheless, in his self-exile, Tressell may have been even less tolerant of the shortcomings of members of the middle and lower middle classes than were those who were born into the working class.

who stalks the house-decorators he supervises, trying to catch them in such minor derelictions of duty as whistling on the job so that he can dock their wages. Tressell also mocks the social pretensions of the local lower-middle-class community, which has claimed for its residential area the formerly aristocratic neighbourhood around Lord Street. The narrator sardonically comments that "Lord Street was still a most respectable neighbourhood, the inhabitants generally being of a very superior type: shop-walkers, shop assistants, barber's clerks, boarding house keepers, a coal merchant, and even two retired jerry-builders."² He then goes on to outline the petty social subdivisions within this community, whose top-ranking members are defined by their occasional sporting of "top hats, lavender trousers, and frock coats" (Philanthropists, 79-80). Like Thomas Wright, Tressell views the members of the lower middle class, caught up in the petty and pretentious concerns of appearances and social position, as inferior to the hard-working and sincere labourers he champions in his novel.

Tressell's denigration of the lower middle class has limited power, however, because of the overtly polemical nature of his book, and because of the obvious narrative

2. Robert Tressell [Robert Noonan], The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955, p. 79. The manuscript for the book was compiled between 1902 and 1911, and a severely edited version was published in 1914. The 1955 Lawrence and Wishart edition, the publisher indicates in his foreword, is "the first to be based faithfully on the author's manuscript."

bias against anything and anyone that is not working class. Thomas Hardy's indirect critique of the lower-middle-class man, as represented by the middle-aged schoolteacher Phillotson in Jude the Obscure, is far more devastating. Not only is Hardy's treatment more subtle, it also ultimately undermines the significance of Phillotson as an individual. Phillotson mainly serves certain narrative purposes, acting in the novel as an instrument of fate and functioning as a foil, dull though he is, for Sue Bridehead's intellectual and emotional brilliance and intensity. Sue and Jude are in a sense classless, or, like George Gissing's Godwin Peak, "born in exile," born into a class that denies them the ability to realise their considerable personal and intellectual potentials. Phillotson is not presented in the novel as a representative of his class, but he definitely belongs in the lower middle class, and it represents what he is: dull, narrow and pretentious. Phillotson's pretentiousness lies not in his aspiring to social position, but rather in his aspiring to a full intellectual and emotional life while lacking both intelligence and compassion.

Phillotson initially appears in a positive light, through the eyes of the child Jude, as a kindly schoolmaster. So close, apparently, is their kinship that Phillotson confesses to Jude what he will tell no one else: that he is leaving Marygreen in hopes of attaining what he sees as "the necessary hall-mark of a man who wants to do

anything in teaching," a university degree. He also dreams of being ordained.³ When Jude goes to see him at Christminster years later, Phillotson has completely forgotten his young admirer. His dreams remain unrealised, "'given up years ago,'" and his bland resignation to failure is a striking contrast to Jude's passionate commitment to learning (Jude, 85).⁴

The extent of Phillotson's intellectual and emotional limitations become tragically manifest in his relationship to Sue. Part of his responsibility to her as his pupil-teacher is to give her lessons. But rather than glorying in the excitement of guiding an intelligence as profound as hers, Phillotson finds comfort in the monotony of their work, "which in itself was a delight to him" (Jude, 86). Still, he is much taken with her brilliance and sensitivity and, though old enough to be her father, courts her. His commitment to Sue seems sincere; he is perplexed

3. Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure, ed. Norman Page (New York: Norton, 1978), p.10.

4. A. Alvarez finds, in contrast to my observations, that Jude and Phillotson are "extraordinarily alike." Phillotson is, in Alvarez's analysis, "a kind of Jude Senior: older, milder, with less talent and urgency, and so without the potentiality for tragedy." But one wonders, with these striking differences, just how significant the similarities which Alvarez notes can be, especially since they are all matters of circumstance rather than character: "they [Jude and Phillotson] are both in love with the same woman, both fail in much the same way at Christminster, both inhabit the same countryside and suffer the same loneliness." See A. Alvarez, "Afterword," to Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure (New York: New American Library, 1961); reprinted in Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure, ed. Norman Page (New York: Norton, 1978), pp.414-423; pp. 421-422.

by the ambivalent letters she writes when they are apart, but nevertheless takes out her picture and kisses "the dead pasteboard with all the passionateness, and more than all the devotion, of a young man of eighteen" (Jude, 129). This somewhat adolescent expression of passion is not something that Phillotson seems able to transfer successfully from "the dead pasteboard" to the real and complex person of Sue, however. At their wedding, he is too consumed by his own feelings to perceive Jude and Sue's distress: he is "surrounded by a mist which prevented him from seeing the emotions of others" (Jude, 140). He is later nonplussed by Sue's apparently neurotic response to the failure of their marriage. "'I hate such eccentricities, Sue,' he tells her, 'There's no order or regularity in your sentiments!'" His response to her physical aversion to him is equally lacking in insight and empathy. "'You are committing a sin in not liking me,'" he tells her; to which she replies: "'For a man and a woman to live on intimate terms when one feels as I do is adultery, in any circumstances, however legal'" (Jude, 176-177). Such philosophical subtleties confound Phillotson. "'I can't answer her arguments,'" he admits, "'she has read ten times as much as I. Her intellect sparkles like diamonds, while mine smoulders like brown paper'" (Jude, 183).

Phillotson is able, finally, to comprehend Sue's position, but only after she has jumped out a window to avoid his touch. He quite courageously defends his decision

to free his wife, however, and as a result must bear severe social sanctions. He loses his job and any prestige he once had, and is reduced to holding the inferior post at Marygreen that he had left so many years before: "'a returning to zero, with all its humiliations'" (Jude, 251). But Phillotson cannot ultimately sustain his benevolent pose. Once Sue is broken by the tragedies that mark her life with Jude, Phillotson is willing to assume the role of dominant husband over her. Although he no longer believes in the forms and attitudes of respectability, he is prepared to pay lip-service to them in order to regain his position in society. Having learned from Arabella that Sue has come to regard her irregular union with Jude as sinful and her union with himself as indissoluble, Phillotson sees an opportunity to remedy the "inconvenience [that he had suffered] from his own charity." Since, according to Arabella, Sue had not consummated her union with Jude at the time that he divorced her on grounds of adultery, Phillotson can now justify, in the eyes of society, taking Sue back:

But artifice was necessary, he had found, for stemming the cold and inhumane blast of the world's contempt. And here were the materials ready made. By getting Sue back and remarrying her on the respectable plea of having entertained erroneous views of her, and gained his divorce wrongfully, he might acquire some comfort, resume his old courses, perhaps return to the Shaston school, if not even to the church as a licentiate.

Jude, 283

Phillotson thus embarks on a course of action with a wilful disregard for Sue's welfare and his own claims to integrity. "'She's affected by Christminster sentiment and teaching,'"

he recognises. "'I can see her views on the indissolubility of marriage well enough, and I know where she got them. They are not mine; but I shall make use of them to further mine'" (Jude, 284).

In all his subsequent relations with Sue, Phillotson insists on the apparently humane condition that whatever she does, she must do willingly. But just as he is now prepared to conform to outward forms of respectability in order to further his own ends, so he accepts literal assent from Sue while he plainly sees her start at the sight of the new marriage license and recoil from his touch. In her misguided belief that she must expiate what she now sees as her sin in abandoning Phillotson, she submits herself to him physically and mentally, and he justifies his complicity in her hysterical self-torture as being the Christian and morally right course of action. Thus Phillotson becomes the willing agent of the respectability that has blighted their lives, the willing agent in what Jude calls Sue's "giving herself like this to what she loathes, in her enslavement to forms" (Jude, 317-318). Accordingly, Phillotson's renewed domestic life fosters a monstrous relationship, infinitely more distasteful than the "armed neutrality" and "cold resignation" which Crosland contends characterises lower-middle-class family life.

Fiction written by middle- and upper-middle-class authors in the Victorian period was generally kinder to the lower middle class than was either the bulk of the non-

fictional literature or of the fiction of working-class writers. The most likeable of the three protagonists in Anthony Trollope's The Three Clerks, for example, is Charley Tudor, a petty clerk in the lowest and least reputable of all branches of the civil service, "the office of the Commissioner of Internal Navigation."⁵ The son of a provincial clergyman of modest means, Charley can maintain only a marginally respectable style of life. Of the other two clerks, Harry Norman is a true Victorian gentleman, as many of the upper level clerks were, and Charley's cousin, Alaric, aspires to be one. But Alaric is not consumed with petty pretensions; he is consumed with large, middle-class ones. Driven by ambition and willing to wink at scruples, Alaric enjoys a meteoric rise to the top of the civil service and suffers an even more abrupt fall from grace, wealth and social status when he is tried and found guilty of misappropriating trust funds. Alaric may represent and be punished for the sin of aspiring above his social position, but there is nothing of the lower-middle-class figure about him. He is impressive--charming, handsome and intelligent. It is Charley who struggles to maintain a marginally genteel status, and Charley has no pretensions whatever.

Charley and his co-workers in Internal Navigation are closer in character to Albert Smith's Gent than to the

5. Anthony Trollope, The Three Clerks (New York: Dover, 1981; rpt. of the 1860 edition, New York: Harper), p. 15.

shabby genteel clerk. They are, as the narrator points out, known to be fast, nay, almost furious in their pace of living; not that they are extravagant in any great degree, a fault which their scale of salaries very generally forbids; but they are one and all addicted to Coal Holes and Cider Cellars; they dive at midnight hours into Shades, and know all the back parlors of all the public-houses in the neighbourhood of the Strand. Here they leave messages for one another, and call the girl at the bar by her Christian name. They are a set of men endowed with sallow complexions, and they wear loud clothing, and spend more money in gin-and-water than in gloves. Clerks, 16

Charley's dissolute life as one of the "Infernal Navvies" leads him into debt and despair, but never beyond the redeeming love of the highly respectable young woman whom he believes he loves in vain. Neither does Charley lose the affection of the narrator or the reader, for while he may be a profligate, he remains ingenuous and unselfish. He dreams not of becoming successful and important, but of acquiring a windfall that would enable him to do "the most munificent actions imaginable . . . ; relieving distress, rewarding virtue, and making handsome presents to all his friends" (Clerks, 172). And in the view of the narrator, Charley's greatest hope for salvation lies in the fact that "he himself reprobated his own sins" and cherished above all a vision of nothing more than quiet and respectable domesticity: "He dreamt of other things and a better life. He made visions to himself of a sweet home, and a sweeter, sweetest, lovely wife" (Clerks, 176).

Trollope does not overtly place his characters in classes, preferring to designate them as being, or not being, gentlemen. Indeed, it is not clear that he would

have been comfortable with the notion of Charley as lower-middle-class, and Charley definitely rises comfortably into the ranks of the solid middle class by the end of the novel. His position as a low-level, impoverished clerk does, however, place him at least on the fringes of the lower middle class, despite his origins. That Trollope's intentions were to champion any level of that class may be doubtful, but he has nevertheless indirectly endorsed certain aspects of the class's self-perception by demonstrating that being a gentleman is not necessarily a function of wealth and position.

Trollope presents a more forcible portrayal of an impoverished gentleman who accepts life in the lower middle class in Hugh Stanbury, a prominent character in He Knew He Was Right, published in 1869.⁶ Hugh is a man of integrity who rejects many of the accepted middle-class norms when he abandons his unpromising career as a lawyer to become a journalist for a radical newspaper, choosing to pursue the work and style of life that suit his temperament rather than society's expectations. In a romantic plot subordinate to the main story, he falls in love with Nora Rowley, who, having refused to marry the heir to a fortune and a title, contemplates with affection the straitened circumstances of the life she will lead as Hugh's wife. Nora fondly

6. Anthony Trollope, He Knew He Was Right, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). First published in one volume in 1869.

anticipates eating mutton chops and leftovers, assuring Hugh that her enthusiasm for impoverished domesticity is not the result of a romantic whim but of a considered judgement. "I have thought about it a good deal," she affirms, "and I know very well that the cold beef-steak in the cupboard is the thing for me" (Right, 909). But then, just how much cold beef-steak Nora will eventually have to suffer is a matter open to speculation. After careful calculation, Hugh determines that "five hundred a year was the income on which they were to commence the world" (Right, 896)--not magnificent but hardly a marginal income. Indeed, in the eyes of her parents, Hugh's marginality as a suitor for Nora lies less in his actual income than in what they perceive as the insecurity of his occupation. And a regular monthly salary, the mark of security so vital to the lower-middle-class ethos, becomes the mark of exclusion to any higher social status in the opinion of Nora's father: "Sir Marmaduke did not feel the slightest respect for an income that was paid monthly. According to his ideas, a gentleman's income should be paid quarterly, or perhaps half-yearly. According to his view, a monthly salary was only one degree better than weekly wages" (Right, 665).

The significance of a monthly salary varies, it appears, with the class of the observer. But the meaning of security, this novel makes clear, can vary in other ways as well. Sir Marmaduke fears that Hugh, with neither a fortune nor an absolutely assured income, may at some point find

himself unable to provide for Nora or their children. But Nora's sister Emily marries a man of fortune whose groundless jealousy precipitates their separation, leaving Emily in a precarious situation. And Sir Marmaduke's eminently gentlemanly income as governor of the Mandarin Islands is not sufficient to guarantee absolute security to his family. He, too, lacks a private fortune and, despite his impressive income of three thousand pounds a year, has "not a shilling saved" (Right, 1). "A governor at the Mandarins," the narrator points out, "who is social by nature and hospitable on principle, cannot save money in the islands even on £3,000 a year when he has eight daughters." Accordingly, Sir Marmaduke is initially unable to provide Emily with the solace or the protection she needs when her husband leaves her, because he cannot afford the expense of the trip to England. Only the contrived expediency of a summons to come home, at public expense, to appear before a parliamentary committee on colonial government allows Sir Marmaduke to be with his daughter. The security that Hugh offers Nora may appear to be insubstantial, but it is in fact sound, based on the quintessentially lower-middle-class ideals of domestic harmony and prudence. Nora and Hugh marry because they are deeply in love. And Hugh, unlike his father-in-law, makes provision for his wife's financial needs in the event of his death: he computes the income on which he and Nora shall live by subtracting from his gross salary a portion to be put aside for savings and for the annual cost of

insuring his life (Right, 896).

Nora and Hugh's union lacks a sense of high romance, but it is nevertheless suffused with a sense of true poetry that goes beyond a conventional romantic image, the poetry of love and life that Hugh contemplates one night, long before he dares to hope for Nora's love:

But beyond that pressing of the hand, and that kissing of the lips,--beyond that pressure of the plumage which is common to birds and men,--what could love do beyond that? There were children with dirty faces, and household bills, and a wife who must, perhaps, always darn the stockings,--and be sometimes cross. Was love to lead only to this,--a dull life with a woman who had lost the beauty from her cheeks, and the gloss from her hair, and the music from her voice, and the fire from her eyes, and the grace from her step, and whose waist an arm should no longer be able to span? Did the love of the poets lead to that and that only? Then, through the cloud of smoke, there came upon him some dim idea of self-abnegation,--that the mysterious valley among the mountains, the far-off prospect of which was so charming to him,--which made the poetry of his life, was, in fact, the capacity of caring more for other human beings than for himself. The beauty of it all was not so much in the thing loved as in the loving. Right, 237

Hugh's ultimate fate may promise to be somewhat less confining than the "dull life" he envisions here, but this vision nevertheless confirms that behind the seemingly limited and unprepossessing appearances of lower-middle-class life there can be a wealth of less obvious sources of true satisfaction.

In a novel which, as Donald Stone points out, has many parallels to He Knew He Was Right, Henry James creates a very different image of lower-middle-class life.⁷ Like

7. Donald Stone, "James, Trollope and the 'Vulgar Materials of Tragedy,'" paper delivered to the MLA, San Francisco, Dec. 30, 1987.

Nora, Kate Croy in The Wings of the Dove is courted by a lord and by a journalist, Merton Densher.⁸ And while Kate, too, prefers the journalist to her aristocratic suitor, she is unable to reconcile herself to the relative poverty that would undoubtedly be her fate if she married Densher. The model for the kind of life she might then face is the disagreeable household of her sister Marian Condrip, the widow of "the parson of a dull suburban parish" (Dove, 39).

Marian and her four "clamorous children" subsist on an income from her mother's estate of £300 a year, supplemented by an unspecified amount left her by her husband (Dove, 40, 30); not as much as Nora and Hugh begin married life with, but more than twice the annual income considered adequate for a comfortable, though not luxurious, style of life in the late nineteenth century.⁹ But the Condrips' domestic hearth is cheerless and sordid, a "little vulgar grate," situated in "comfortless Chelsea" (Dove, 394, 38). Marian's life is devoid of the kind of poetry that Hugh envisions as part of ordinary life, rendering mundane routines rewarding; and she becomes for Kate the exemplar of "how poor you might become when you minded so much the absence of wealth" (Dove, 39).

8. Henry James, The Wings of the Dove, eds. J. Donald Crowley & Richard A. Hocks (New York: Norton, 1978). First published in 1902.

9. Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), p. 69.

Part of the unattractiveness of lower-middle-class life in The Wings of the Dove is the inevitable result of its contrast with the splendour of the life which Kate leads as the protegee of her wealthy aunt. And central to a satisfactory reading of the novel is the awareness that, however acceptable a Chelsea household might be for some, it would be soul-destroying for Kate, something that Densher recognises as he stands with her in Marian's unattractive small drawing room:

He could have lived in such a place; but it wasn't given to those of his complexion, so to speak, to be exiled anywhere. It was by their comparative grossness that they could somehow make shift. His natural, his inevitable, his ultimate home--left, that is, to itself--wasn't at all unlikely to be as queer and impossible as what was just round them, though doubtless in less ample masses. As he took in moreover how Kate wouldn't have been in the least the creature she was if what was just round them hadn't mismatched her, hadn't made for her a medium involving compunction in the spectator.

Dove, 381-382.

It seems likely that James's unsympathetic portrayal of the Condrips' style of life is intended to emphasize how impossible it would be for someone of Kate's temperament to survive under such conditions. Even in a more congenial household than the Condrips', the essence of what Kate is would apparently be incompatible with life in the lower middle class. The stifling quality of such a life becomes a metaphor for the stifling of the spirit.

In his short story "In the Cage," James brings his reader inside the mind of a character who is more at home than Kate in the lower middle class, but whose ultimate fate in its confined world is hardly more satisfactory than

Kate's would have been.¹⁰ The cage of the story's title is the wire lattice of a post office counter, and the character inside this cage is a young woman who works as a telegraphist. The reader learns neither the young woman's name, nor her exact origins, but her mother and elder sister are apparently teetering on the edge of the dreaded abyss, having "slipped faster and faster down the steep slope" to "all but absolute want" and, on the part of the mother, even drunkenness ("Cage," 141). Whatever their circumstances were previous to this fall, it seems unlikely that they were anything other than lower-middle-class, as the telegraphist considers herself to have "rebounded" from the bottom of the "steep slope." Her persistent striving for a means of transcending the "framed and wired confinement, the life of a guinea-pig or a magpie," suggests that she may have suffered some significant decline in fortunes. She also believes her fiancé, Mr. Mudge, to be somewhat inferior to herself, despite his interest in Shakespeare. His chief attraction is that he is "the perfection of a type," but that type is a grocer; his pre-eminence is marked by "his superior stature, his whiter apron, his more clustering curls and his more present, too present, h's" ("Cage," 167, 140). "His very beauty was the beauty of a grocer," she realises, "and the finest future would offer it none too

10. Henry James, "In the Cage," in The Complete Tales of Henry James, vol. 10, ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia & New York: Lippincott, 1964), pp.139-242.

much room to expand" ("Cage," 167). Accordingly, her life is caged by circumstances just as surely as her body is caged by the wire lattice at work.¹¹ Her only means of escape is through her imagination.

The life of the imagination is infinitely fascinating to the telegraphist, and she cherishes it. "She was perfectly aware," the narrator tells us, "that her imaginative life was the life in which she spent most of her time; and she would have been ready, had it been at all worth while, to contend that, since her outward life didn't kill it, it must be strong indeed" ("Cage," 143). Indeed it seems, as Tony Tanner points out, that "all of her significant activity--except (perhaps) for one notable walk--takes place in her imagination."¹² But her outward life in fact fosters her imagination. Sitting in her cage, the telegraphist fantasises about the people whose messages she transmits. From the fragments of her knowledge of these people--from their appearance and manners, from the messages they send

11. Several critics note the various forms of confinement which restrict the telegraphist. Carren Kaston, in Imagination and Desire in the Novels of Henry James (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984), comments that she "is the prisoner not only of poverty and low class, and of the barred 'cage' in which she works as a telegraphist, but also of consciousness and of the sexual melodrama in which consciousness traps her" (p. 108). Stuart Hutchinson similarly sees the telegraphist as imprisoned in a series of cages: reality, imagination and virginity. See "James's 'In the Cage': A New Interpretation," Studies in the Novel 19 (1982), 19-25.

12. Tony Tanner, The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 311.

and the replies they receive--she pieces together her own visions of what their lives must be. Her fantasies, indeed, take precedence over her real life. She resists Mudge's urgings to apply for a similar job closer to the neighbourhood in which he works and lives because she has become addicted to the imaginative enticements provided by the customers and the messages of the Mayfair telegraph office:

The fascination of the place was, after all, a sort of torment. But she liked her torment; it was a torment she would miss at Chalk Farm. She was ingenious and uncandid, therefore, about leaving the breadth of London a little longer between herself and that austerity. . . [S]he had not quite the courage, in short, to say to Mr Mudge that her actual chance for a play of mind was worth, any week, the three shillings he desired to help her to save. "Cage," 144

She eventually leads a kind of "double life . . . in the cage," and as time goes by she moves "more and more into the world of whiffs and glimpses" ("Cage," 152). She can hardly bear to listen to Mr. Mudge's careful but eager plans for the vacation they are to take together, but revels instead in the "thought of the danger in which another pair of lovers [two of her customers] rapturously lived" ("Cage," 185).

Not only do the telegraphist's fantasies infuse her life with an emotional richness that it otherwise lacks, but they also allow her to develop a sense of personal importance that her position could not otherwise sustain--a kind of imaginative transformation of pretentiousness.¹³ She is as

13. Another fictional lower-middle-class woman created by a middle-class male author also feels the need to brighten the dreariness of her workaday world by exercising her imaginative impulses. Juliet, the protagonist in Grant

anxious to be considered a lady as any clerk ever was to be a gentleman. She remarks, when one of her customers observes that her work "'must be an awful grind--for a lady'": "'It is; but I don't think I groan over it any more than my companions--and you've seen they're not ladies!'" Later in the same conversation the customer asks if she intends to stay in the post office, and the telegraphist assures him that she will because she believes she has "'a genius for that'" ("Cage," 190, 196). Whatever uncertainty there may be about the telegraphist's background, there is no evidence that she is a lady, and, indeed, these pathetically meagre triumphs that sustain her sense of superiority tend to undermine any sense that she harbours a refined soul. To have developed a "genius" for the post office is a most prosaic accomplishment, and it inspires the

Allen's The Type-Writer Girl, interprets the people and situations that she encounters in the course of the most ordinary of circumstances by seeing them as latter-day versions of characters and episodes from Classical literature and mythology, Shakesperean plays, or other examples of great and memorable literature. She also chafes at having to spend her day typing out dry legal documents, and suggests to the legal clerks who draw them up that they could enliven their prose styles by using adjectives other than the ubiquitous "aforesaid," proposing that they inject the odd "crystalline" or "amethystine" in its place. Juliet's fantasies, however, have humourous rather than tragic or pathetic implications. She is essentially a strong and pragmatic character, and her romantic impulses indeed sometimes seem to be at odds with her generally straightforward and practical approach to life. Allen's relatively positive attitude to this lower-middle-class figure does not, however, extend to her male counterparts in the novel, the clerks in the offices in which she works. See Grant Allen (pseud. Olive Pratt Rayner), The Type-Writer Girl (London: Pearson, 1897).

telegraphist with a feeling of power which is flattering neither to her clients nor to herself:

Her eye for types amounted . . . to genius, and there were those she liked and those she hated, the feeling for the latter of which grew to a positive possession, an instinct for observation and detection. There were the brazen women, as she called them, of the higher and the lower fashion, whose squanderings and graspings, whose struggles and secrets and love-affairs and lies, she tracked and stored up against them, till she had at moments, in private, a triumphant, vicious feeling of mastery and power, a sense of having their silly, guilty secrets in her pocket, her small retentive brain.

"Cage," 153-154.

Her genius for the post office requires a good memory, but no intellectual or moral strength. She needs only a "small retentive brain" to acquire the "mastery and power" in which she glories--the vicious power of the gossip.

The telegraphist is not in fact a vicious person, but the limits of her "small retentive brain" and her eventual confusion of fiction, fantasy and reality have the potential to cause disappointment and pain both to herself and to the people around her. Indeed, J. A. Ward rather harshly assesses her "adolescent devotion to those who give her messages to send," a devotion that develops as a result of her fantasies, as "not only juvenile but self-destructive."¹⁴ Accordingly, she endlessly delays her marriage to Mudge, with no thought to his feelings or well-being. And she becomes so imaginatively obsessed with one male customer that she is reluctant to leave her cage because of the deli-

14. J. A. Ward, The Imagination of Disaster: Evil in the Fiction of Henry James (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 64.

cious fear of seeing him and furthering what she believes is a growing intimacy with him: "to be in the cage had suddenly become her safety" ("Cage," 213). The cage thus becomes her refuge not only from reality but also from her imagination.

James's portrayal of the telegraphist is informed by his sensitivity to the vagaries of the human psyche, to the psychological defenses and evasions the central character uses to avoid confronting the dreariness of her life. But the very subtlety of James's approach to her eventually condemns the telegraphist as inferior, demonstrating the limitations of her own fictional style as she tries to interpret her world according to the conventions of "her ha'penny novels" ("Cage," 176). Her ability to remember and decode messages gives her only partial insights into the lives of her fashionable customers, insights which she misinterprets. As a result, her fantasy world ultimately collapses, leaving her trapped in the cage of reality. "Reality," the narrator comments, "for the poor things they both [the telegraphist and her friend Mrs. Jordan] were, could only be ugliness and obscurity, could never be the escape, the rise" ("Cage," 236). In this story, then, lower-middle-class life seems to have no attractions in or of itself. The reader is not left with the impression that the telegraphist will find satisfaction by the cosy domestic hearth of Mr. Mudge, although Mudge himself seems content. But since the reader sees Mudge only through the eyes of the telegraphist, it is impossible to determine if his com-

placency is the result of even greater intellectual limitations or of deeper insight which allows him to be reconciled to his lot. The telegraphist's tragedy is that she has just enough intelligence and insight to recognise the limitations of her situation, but not enough to transcend them.

Lower-middle-class life did not, it seems, grip the imagination of Henry James powerfully or completely. "In the Cage" offers few insights into its material or even its emotional qualities. The story provides, instead, the mental and psychological landscape of a single individual who seems to be temperamentally unsuited to her position in life. James was drawn more to the imaginative potentials in the world of the labour aristocracy, especially for the more sustained treatment of a full-length novel. In the "Preface" to The Princess Casamassima, he describes his responses to walking the London streets when he first lived there:

One walked of course with one's eyes greatly open, and I hasten to declare that such a practice, carried on for a long time and over a considerable space, positively provokes, all round, a mystic solicitation, the urgent appeal, on the part of everything, to be interpreted and, so far as may be, reproduced. "Subjects" and situations, character and history, the tragedy and comedy of life, are things of which the common air, in such conditions, seems pungently to taste; and to a mind curious, before the human scene, of meanings and revelations the great grey Babylon easily becomes, on its face, a garden bristling with an immense illustrative flora. Possible stories, presentable figures, rise up from the thick jungle as the observer moves, fluttering up like startled game, and before he knows it indeed he has fairly to guard himself against the brush of importunate wings.¹⁵

15. Henry James, The Princess Casamassima, ed. Derek Brewer (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 33. First published by

The "urgent appeal" did not result in the reproduction of the characters of clerks or telegraphists, but of artisans, the bookbinder Hyacinth Robinson and his associates. The world of the artisan, with its tradition of political activism and its corresponding opportunities for heroism, intrigue and romance, apparently offered a suggestive richness that overshadowed anything which the conventional and insular world of the lower middle class could provide. And indeed "In the Cage" seems to have been as much the result of James's delight in "telegraphic badinage" as of an interest in the nature of lower-middle-class life.¹⁶

James's treatment of the telegraphist, for all its sensitivity to her humanity, demonstrates a limited awareness of the ways in which members of the lower middle class saw themselves and experienced their lives. James himself suspected that his "brooding telegraphist" might not be representative of her class, but he nevertheless feels the need to censure that class, in virtually the same breath that he acknowledges misrepresenting it, for its lack of vision: "If I have made her [the telegraphist] but a libel, up and down the city, on an estimable class, I feel it still something to have admonished that class, even though obscurely enough, of neglected interests and undivined occasions."¹⁷ James's

Macmillan in 1886.

16. See Leon Edel's discussion of the possible genesis of "In the Cage" in the "Introduction" to volume 10 of The Complete Tales of Henry James, op. cit., pp. 9-11.

17. Henry James, The Art of the Novel, intro. Richard P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner's, 1962 [1934]), pp. 156-

attitude here reflects something of the detachment and condescension that Peter Widdowson sees as shaping E. M. Forster's characterisation of Leonard Bast, the lower-middle-class clerk in Howard's End. "The Basts are poorly-drawn characters," Widdowson contends, "which suggests . . . that Forster is not very familiar with the class or its life style." But Widdowson finds Forster's tone even "more significant" in its implications: "It is . . . the detachment, and the condescension, which constitute the dismissal: the lack of understanding implies the lack of anything worthwhile to understand." Forster is considerably more specific about the material features of lower-middle-class life than is James, however. Indeed, as Widdowson observes, "the Basts' 'background' is attempted in considerable detail, and the treatment of their flat reads more like Arnold Bennett or H. G. Wells than 'romance.'"¹⁸

In many ways, Leonard Bast conforms to the conventional image of the impoverished clerk striving to maintain a minimal standard of gentility and respectability. He attends concerts and takes a pathetic pride in his meagre pursuit of

157.

18. Peter Widdowson, E. M. Forster's "Howard's End": Fiction as History (London: Chatto & Windus for Sussex University Press, 1977), pp. 91-92, 95. John Colmer assesses Forster's treatment of the lower middle class more favourably, seeing Leonard as an "inspired guess at an unknown class." See E. M. Forster: The Personal Voice (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 95.

the cultured life. "I care a good deal about improving myself by means of Literature and Art, and so getting a wider outlook," he tells his fiancée Jacky.¹⁹ But the cultured middle-class women like Helen and Margaret Schlegel, whom he would like to impress, find his imperfect knowledge appalling. Like some of the non-fictional observers, such as Fitzjames Stephens, Margaret is uncomfortable with what she sees as a distortion of middle-class manners and values in Leonard. "His brain is filled with the husks of books, culture," she observes, "--horrible" (End, 150); and she wishes "that he was not so anxious to hand a lady downstairs, or to carry a lady's programme for her--his class was near enough her own for its manners to vex her" (End, 50). But while these reactions of the middle-class characters to Leonard seem authentic, his response to them and his general style of life paradoxically reflect middle-class distortions of lower-middle-class values, rather than the reality of lower-middle-class perceptions and conditions of life.

Leonard Bast's home does not conform to the image of modest lower-middle-class comfort suggested by some of the more objective contemporary observers like Escott, Masterman, and Layard. He lives in a squalid basement flat with his fiancée, later his wife, an aging and faded tart

19. E. M. Forster, Howard's End, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 65. First published in 1910.

who "seemed all strings and bell-pulls--ribbons, chains, bead necklaces that clinked and caught" (End, 63); hardly the image of rectitude to which the lower middle class was so slavishly committed. Leonard and Jacky spend an apparently typical Sunday evening together, after he has gone to a concert alone, dining on reconstituted boullion cubes and a slice of cold jellied tongue, followed by cigarettes, a bit of desultory conversation, and "a little Grieg" which Leonard plays on the piano "badly and vulgarly" (End, 66). And the Basts' relationship is not based on love or respect or any other value typical of the lower middle class, except a kind of misguided honour. Leonard has promised to "make right" their irregular relationship, despite what must be obvious to everyone but himself--that he, young and inexperienced and weak as he is, did not debauch Jacky. "My word's my word," he nevertheless assures her. "I've promised to marry you as soon as ever I'm twenty-one. . . . It isn't likely I'd throw you over, let alone my word, when I've spent all this money. Besides, I'm an Englishman, and I never go back on my word" (End, 65). Accordingly, their proposed union promises little hope of bliss or even comfort, with Jacky's commitment being to her already irreparably damaged reputation, and Leonard's to a skewed version of honour that subordinates the keeping of his word to the financial implications of doing so: parodies indeed of respectability.

Leonard's situation is pitiable, but the narrator denies

him the grandeur of tragedy: "His had scarcely been a tragic marriage. Where there is no money and no inclination to violence tragedy cannot be generated. He could not leave his wife, and he did not want to hit her. Petulance and squalor was enough" (End, 129). It is easy to see how violence could aggravate Leonard's situation, but it is difficult to fathom what impetus to tragedy Forster imagined money might exert. Perhaps he is subtly endorsing the traditional notion that there were correspondences between the lowest and the higher classes of society, correspondences which the anomalous lower middle class did not share. Just as Fitzjames Stephens felt that both real gentlemen and real working men expressed themselves honestly, but that members of the lower middle class did not, so Forster appears to believe that the middle classes and the working classes shared a potential for sublimity which the financially and emotionally marginal lower-middle-class figure could not. Money or violence, middle-class affluence or working-class passion, would apparently confer the dignity required of legitimate tragedy; but the lower middle class, after all, inspired pity and contempt, not Aristotelian pity and fear.

The narrator and the middle-class characters in Howard's End endorse the idea that the Leonard Basts of the world are struggling in vain to better themselves, that they were nobler in their former roles of agricultural labourers.

"Had he lived some centuries ago, in the brightly coloured

civilizations of the past," the narrator says of Leonard, "he would have had a definite status, his rank and his income would have corresponded" (End, 58). Later, the narrator describes the Schlegels' perception of Leonard when he calls upon them to apologise for the intrusion his wife had made the day before:

The three hurried downstairs, to find, not the gay dog they expected, but a young man, colourless, toneless, who had already the mournful eyes above a drooping moustache that are so common in London, and that haunt some streets of the city like accusing presences. One guessed him as the third generation, grandson to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilization had sucked into the town; as one of the thousands who have lost the life of the body and failed to reach the life of the spirit. Hints of robustness survived in him, more than a hint of primitive good looks, and Margaret, noting the spine that might have been straight, and the chest that might have broadened, wondered whether it paid to give up the glory of the animal for a tailcoat and a couple of ideas.

End, 122

For the Schlegels, it is not Leonard's desire for culture or learning that saves him from being a nonentity, but his quixotic midnight ramble in the starlit countryside.

Although they recoil every time they learn that he has read another book, the Schlegels register "a thrill of approval" when Leonard tells them, "I walked all the Saturday night. . . I walked" (End, 125). They wax enthusiastic, tell him he is "a born adventurer," and question him closely while deftly deflecting his tedious attempts to associate his experience with the works of Robert Louis Stevenson or Richard Jeffries. But the narrator concludes that within Leonard's "cramped little mind dwelt something that was greater than Jeffries's books--the spirit that led Jeffries

to write them" (End, 127). Although Leonard cannot achieve the stature of tragedy, it seems he can just muster, within the confines of "his cramped little mind," a suggestion of the poetic.

It is indeed this hunger for romance that Leonard attempts to assuage through his acquaintance with the Schlegels and others of his social superiors:

His was a gray life, and to brighten it he had ruled off a few corners for Romance. The Miss Schlegels--or, to speak more accurately, his interview with them--were to fill such a corner, nor was it by any means the first time that he had talked intimately to strangers. . . . Perhaps the keenest happiness he had ever known was during a railway journey to Cambridge, where a decent-mannered undergraduate had spoken to him. They had got into a conversation, and gradually Leonard flung reticence aside, told some of his domestic troubles, and hinted at the rest. The undergraduate, supposing they could start a friendship, asked him to "coffee after hall", which he accepted, but afterwards grew shy, and took care not to stir from the commercial hotel where he lodged. He did not want Romance to collide with the Porphyryon [the insurance company where he works], still less with Jacky, and people with fuller, happier lives are slow to understand this. To the Schlegels, as to the undergraduate, he was an interesting creature, of whom they wanted to see more. But they to him were denizens of Romance, who must keep to the corner he had assigned them, pictures that must not walk out of their frames. End, 129

As "an interesting creature," Leonard is less a man than an anthropological specimen to his middle-class acquaintances. Like Albert Smith's Gent, Walter Gallichan's Respectables, or T. W. H. Crosland's Suburbans, he is a curiosity to be examined. But to Leonard, the Schlegels and the undergraduate are like minor deities, enshrined in a pristine corner of his mind where they cannot be sullied by the sordid realities of his life.

Like the telegraphist in the cage, Leonard imbues the world of the affluent with the romance he longs for but cannot realise, the life of the spirit he strives for but cannot attain. The lives of those in the classes above them hold everything which is meaningful in the eyes of Leonard and the telegraphist; their own lives hold only the need to be reconciled to dreariness and choking physical, emotional and intellectual confinement. But surely life in the lower middle class offered more than these rather masochistic pleasures. If their lives were indeed empty and unsatisfying, if what they valued more than all else were indeed greater fellowship with the classes above them, why then did the members of the lower middle class not vote with their feet for the supposedly idyllic life of the agricultural labourer? Why did young men like Leonard not rush back to their rural roots, where they could commune with nature and the local squire at their leisure? The question is, of course, disingenuous and the answer obvious: the idyllic pastoral, like the Golden Age, is a myth; and life in the lower middle class, however cramped by physical or financial limitations, could not possibly have been as void of satisfaction as many middle-class observers believed.

Curiously, the most sympathetic treatment of a lower-middle-class figure by a middle-class author is a parody, George and Weedon Grossmith's The Diary of a Nobody.²⁰ Mr.

20. George & Weedon Grossmith, The Diary of a Nobody, London & New York: Dent & Dutton, 1940. These sketches originally appeared in Punch; first published in book form in 1892.

Pooter, the nobody of the title, is a clerk in the office of a city firm who lives with his family in a modest suburban house and who is dogged by the incessant petty frustrations of a small man unable to maintain his dignity or to command respect: Mr. Pooter is the quintessential lower-middle-class man. He is mocked by junior clerks in his office, scorned by tradesmen, and undermined by the charwoman, who uses pages from his diary, in which he has invested "much pride and a great deal of pains," to light the fire (Nobody, 113-114). His servant, an unpolished and undoubtedly overtaxed maid-of-all-work, also subverts him. When his friend Cummings offers him an opportunity to lay down "a few dozen" bottles of "splendid whisky, four years in bottle, at thirty-eight shillings" a dozen, Pooter demurs, saying that his cellars are full. It is unlikely that either Cummings or the reader believes that Pooter has well-stocked cellars, but then who could blame him for wanting to be discreet about refusing as disadvantageous a deal as this one. But the servant appears and inadvertantly reveals that Pooter's motive for telling his little lie has nothing to do with good judgement:

To my horror, [reports Pooter] at that very moment, Sarah entered the room, and putting a bottle of whisky, wrapped in a dirty piece of newspaper, on the table in front of us, said: "Please, sir, the grocer says he ain't got no more Kinahan, but you'll find this very good at two-and-six, with twopence returned on the bottle; and, please, did you want any more sherry? as he has some at one-and-three, as dry as a nut!"

Nobody, 47-49

Pooter's palate is, apparently, as unsophisticated as his mind. As a man who uses his grocer as his vintner, he undoubtedly does not understand the difference between "splendid whisky" and whisky aged in a bottle for four years, nor does he understand that the opportunity Cummings offers is an opportunity to be swindled.

The dislike and even contempt for the lower middle class that members of the working class often demonstrate add to the trials of Mr. Pooter. He suffers the insults of cab-drivers and is dismayed when the ironmonger refers to him as Pooter, instead of Mr. Pooter (Nobody, 72). But for all his sensitivity to small personal slights from tradesmen and his short-lived self-aggrandisement over an invitation to the Mansion House Ball, Pooter does not really aspire to any significant social advancement. "I always feel," he writes in his diary, "people are happier who live a simple unsophisticated life. I believe I am happy because I am not ambitious" (Nobody, 248). And, indeed, Pooter seems to live a contented life. He takes pride in his position at the office and derives enormous satisfaction from his home-life. He confesses that "'Home, Sweet Home'" is his motto and that he is "always in of an evening" (Nobody, 27). His account of one of his evenings is a modest but expressive tribute to lower-middle-class home and family life: "I spent the evening quietly with Carrie, of whose company I never tire. We had a most pleasant chat about the letters on 'Is Marriage a

Failure?' It has been no failure in our case" (Nobody, 116).

Pooter's petty pretensions are born of naïveté rather than of pomposity, and whatever modest ambitions he might silently cherish seem to be pretty much fulfilled by the end of the book: he is promoted to the position of senior clerk by his employer, Mr. Perkupp, who later also purchases for Pooter the freehold on his house as a reward for faithful service. But these social and material gains seem to be less significant to Pooter than is the boost to his self-worth that accompanies them. He is certainly overjoyed by his raise in salary, which he celebrates in a typically Pooterish fashion with a bottle of grocer's champagne at supper; but he is moved to tears by Perkupp's sincere appreciation of his service to the firm and by the generous gift of the freehold. Perkupp refers to Pooter as "'the most honest and most worthy man it has been . . . [his] lot to meet,'" and Pooter is too overcome to respond: "My heart was too full to thank him" (Nobody, 287). However much the tradesmen may sneer at Pooter, his middle-class employer finds him a worthy man who, far from aspiring to a higher station, takes pride in his position as a trusted servant of his firm.

It is difficult, it seems, for many middle and upper-middle-class authors to produce a completely satisfactory representation of the lower middle class. The seriousness and intensity of writers like James and Forster lead them to

focus too narrowly on the negative aspects of lower-middle-class life, the ways in which it appears to cramp the spirit. Trollope does seem to recognise the possible appeals of the modest comforts and quiet domesticity of the lower-middle-class home, although he, too, is finally unwilling to consign Hugh and Nora or Charley to real poverty. But Trollope's and the Grossmith's lighter touch results in a more satisfying treatment of the lower-middle-class figure, whose diminutive frame simply cannot sustain the emotional weight of Leonard Bast's or the telegraphist's intensity. For characters who are consumed by the frustrations and absurdities that often seem to dictate the shape of lower-middle-class life, its quiet pleasures count for nought. Middle-class authors who attempt to represent the lower middle class without responding to the humourous aspects of its foibles seem to find the life they are portraying too appalling for redemption. Alas, down-to-earth rather than visionary souls tended to flourish in the lower middle class, and middle-class fictional treatments that lack humour ultimately misrepresent lower-middle-class life because they, like the telegraphist, cannot transcend the cage of limitations. We could not believe Mr. Pooter happy in his circumscribed life if we had to agonise over his misconceptions and misrepresentations of the world instead of laugh at them.

Chapter 3

To Wear the Colour of Your Heart

Unquestionably, the lower middle class suffered from a bad press during the Victorian period. Its members were regarded as pretentious and absurd and were criticised and mocked by the classes above and below. And while the lower classes sneered at the effete and snobbish clerk and the middle classes snickered at the foibles of Mr. Pooter, the lower middle class joined in the conspiracy of disparagement by laughing at the antics of that parody of the Gent, Ally Sloper.¹ Members of the lower middle class indeed sometimes appeared to be its worst critics. In his analysis of the situation of clerks in Liverpool in 1871, B. G. Orchard, himself a clerk, dismisses the most common complaint of his fellows--that they are underpaid--as "egregiously absurd."² In Orchard's opinion, "clerks, as a class, have singularly overstrained conceptions of the part they play in the great drama of commercial enterprise" (Clerks, 37). Orchard's assessment of the general character of clerks, an assessment

1. See Peter Bailey, "Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday: Comic Art in the 1880's," History Workshop 16 (1983), 4-31; 9, 13.

2. B. G. Orchard, The Clerks of Liverpool (Liverpool: Collinson, 1871), p. 26.

he presents as an apparent distillation of the considered opinions of some unidentified "thoughtful observers," is at least as uncomplimentary as the most stinging critiques of the lower middle class which came from outside its ranks:

Certainly thoughtful observers say that they [clerks] have little force of character, and that they manifest little esprit de corps, are somewhat supplanting and treacherous, and in various other ways evince that they are serfs. They are declared to imbibe their masters' vices without their virtues; and while illustrating vividly the debasing effects of penury, to do very little to prove the poets' theory that it strengthens and ennobles. There is a concurrence of opinion that, as a class, clerks properly deserve the mingled pity and contempt with which other classes of society appear to regard them. Clerks, 49

In a like manner, the harsh criticism levelled by the doughty Benjamin Battleaxe is not, according to its author, the carping of a middle-class entrepreneur, but a judicious warning from one clerk to his fellows. In his final letter to the Courier, Battleaxe insists that he is not an employer, as those who responded to his comments had supposed:

[I am] a simple clerk, with no means beyond my salary, earning much less than I should like to have, but still striving to keep a clear head and avoid folly in speech as well as action. All my sympathies are with clerks, as whose friend I have written. The facts I have forced on their notice are facts, nor can they be ignored in practical life.³

Battleaxe's motive, it seems, is not to deride his social inferiors, but to serve his brethren, to call their attention to their collective flaws so that they may set about

3. Benjamin Battleaxe, letter to the Courier, n.d., as quoted in Clerks, pp. 46-47.

correcting them. Did the lower middle class, then, in fact comprise virtually nothing but pretentious and pathetic upstarts? Were its members indeed debased by penury and blighted by respectability?

It seems likely that, with such a large consensus of opinion, there must have been some truth in the stereotypical image of the lower-middle-class figure. It seems just as likely, on the other hand, that however accurate a representation of some characteristics of the class that stereotype might have been, it could not possibly encompass all features of a group so large and so diverse. And while Orchard and Battleaxe, by virtue of their willingness to confirm the shortcomings of their fellows, might seem to offer persuasive evidence for the accuracy of the stereotype, there is reason to question the impartiality of their observations. Orchard contends that "thoughtful observers" find clerks to be "somewhat supplanting and treacherous" and lacking in esprit de corps, an assessment which he feels is confirmed by the recent failure of the Provident and Annuity Association, a self-help group for clerks. Orchard declares "the failure of this excellent society" to be "a fair gauge of their [clerks'] spirit" (Clerks, 49), a statement which smacks of sour grapes, considering that, as the title-page of his book reveals, Orchard was "Formerly Secretary of the Liverpool Clerks' Provident and Annuity Association."

Benjamin Battleaxe provides little ammunition for an

attack on his position. His pseudonym not only conceals his true identity, it also disarms critics with a bit of engaging self-mockery. But one nevertheless cannot help but sense that Battleaxe is being disingenuous. He rather too carefully and too cleverly sets up his opponents. He writes letter after letter that gives the impression that he is an employer, but never indicates that he is in reality a clerk until, apparently, he feels that he has played with his opponents long enough. When the time is ripe, he moves in and demolishes their position by undercutting their main contention that he does not understand the plight of clerks, by confessing that he is one of them. A close examination of the letters reveals the care with which Battleaxe composes them to produce the effect he desires. He adopts an obviously artificial rhetorical stance, formally distancing himself from the position he argues by prefacing his comments with statements such as "the remark is often made by employers." The rhetorical distance seems, however, to be nothing more than a formality, for he argues with such force and conviction that the reader cannot help but identify Battleaxe with the employers for whom he speaks (Clerks, 40-47). The revelation in the last letter comes, and is undoubtedly meant to come, as a shock. It is unlikely that Battleaxe is lying, but then being a clerk does not necessarily mean being poor and insignificant; some clerks' positions, especially those in the higher levels of the civil service, were highly-paid and influential.⁴ So Mr.

Battleaxe, whoever he was, may well, as he says, have no means beyond his salary and may earn much less than he should like to have; so, too, does Sir Marmaduke in He Knew He Was Right. But Battleaxe is by no means just "a simple clerk," although he could be judged to be "somewhat supplanting and treacherous."

Other lower-middle-class writers present a more sympathetic picture of their peers. As early as 1852, J. S. Harrison attempts to draw public attention to the unsatisfactory treatment of white-collar workers in The Social Position and Claims of Clerks and Book-keepers Considered.⁵ Harrison is restrained and rational in his approach to the topic, pointing out that the demands and expectations of most employers are not commensurate with the salaries they are prepared to pay. Employers demand that their clerks be "men of respectability, education, and address," but, Harrison argues, they do not reconcile these expectations with "the impossibility of even a very limited household or family, having any pretension to respectability and comfort, being maintained without the utmost perplexity on the sums frequently paid to clerks" (Claims, 4,9). Harrison focuses on several issues which were to become recurrent themes in

4. Clerks' salaries could range from less than £100 to £1000 or more. See Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), pp. 20-27.

5. J. S. Harrison, The Social Position and Claims of Clerks and Book-keepers Considered (London: Hamilton Adams, 1852).

subsequent lower-middle-class laments, including the difficulty of marrying on a clerk's pay and the long hours and unhealthy conditions of work in most offices. Such disregard for equitable treatment harms not only the individual clerk but, Harrison implies, also has more general unfavourable consequences. "The practice of giving inadequate salaries," he asserts, "has the effect of disparaging mental attainment and respectability" (Claims, 17).

In Clerks; their Position and Advancement, published in 1876, Charles Edward Parsons presents a more melodramatic picture of the plight of clerks. Making many of the same points as does Harrison, Parsons outlines what he sees as the typical life cycle of the average clerk:

Underpaid, with a great deal of laborious and monotonous work, in addition to heavy responsibilities and anxieties as his position gradually 'improves,' his constitution frequently impaired (often ruined) by sedentary duties and confinement in ill-ventilated back offices, without either time or means to enjoy the recreation necessary to everyone so employed, he grows up an unhealthy, dissatisfied man. . . . [He must also face the] fear of losing his precarious situation, and, lastly the anxieties of home-life often destitute, as he increases in years, of the comforts which render middle-age enjoyable to other classes. He commences life as an ill-paid clerk, his ambitions are never encouraged, all the hopes of his manhood are thwarted, his employer can get numberless others to replace him at even less than he earns; and so he continues at the only calling he is capable of following and with nearly every feeling soured by adversity--he dies; a hard-worked, ill-paid clerk from beginning to end.⁶

This fulsome version of clerkly tragedy might certainly inspire in the reader an attitude of "mingled pity and con-

6. Charles Edward Parsons, Clerks: their Position and Advancement (London: [Provost], [1876]), p. 9.

tempt," but Parsons goes on to produce, in somewhat less dramatic style, some impressive evidence for this gloomy picture of lower-middle-class life. He reproduces the rules laid down by an unidentified railroad company for the clerks in its employ, rules that would in effect make indentured slaves of the employees. Not only must the prospective clerk provide security of at least £200, he "'must devote himself exclusively to the Company's service and interest, not only during regular hours, but at all other times when required'" and he "'must reside very near to his customary place of duty'" (Position, 23). The extensive list of rules goes on to dictate virtually every facet of the employee's life, and to establish that, after a probationary period of six months, his salary will be £60 a year or less, depending on his abilities. "Slight indeed," Parsons concludes, "must be the estimation in which the clerk is held by an employer who, for the fulfilment of duties embracing obligations such as those I have quoted, can offer a salary of £60, or even less, per annum!" (Position, 26). It becomes clear that the clerk who can deal competently with this situation deserves pity and admiration; it is the employer who deserves the contempt.⁷

7. Charles Lamb describes similar unreasonable expectations and demands on the part of employers in "The Good Clerk," The Reflector 4 (1812); rpt. in The Complete Works of Charles Lamb, Vol. 4, ed. Thomas Purnell (London: Moxon, 1870), pp. 335-343. For another version of the clerk's lament, see The Clerk's Grievance (London: Pole, 1878), published anonymously.

Although these works of non-fiction by lower-middle-class authors give some idea of the conditions of the life of white-collar workers, they give little sense of the quality of that life, of what it was like to work in a London office or live in a lower-middle-class suburb, of what the people who worked in those offices and lived in those suburbs were like. It is through the fiction written by lower-middle-class authors that the reader can gain real insight into that life, can see its people not from the outside, but from the inside, as they saw themselves. No doubt the view from within presents problems of distortion, just as the views from outside the class have done; but for a class that was defined as much by how others perceived it as by any other criteria, understanding how those external perceptions affected the members of the class themselves is a necessary component of understanding the class. How did the views of other classes affect the lower-middle-class perception of itself? To what extent did life in the lower middle class conform to the stereotype constructed by those who had never been a part of it?

The first great master of the portrayal of the lower middle class was Charles Dickens. George Gissing attests to this mastery, and Gissing, who came from the class, lived in the period when it became most clearly defined, and studied and wrote about it himself, is probably the most authoritative person to make such a judgement. In his Charles Dickens: A Critical Study, Gissing comments that Dickens

treats at once of the lower middle class, where he will always be at his best; with the class below it, with those who literally earn bread by the sweat of their brows, he was better acquainted than any other novelist of his time, but they figure much less prominently in his books. To the lower middle class, a social status so peculiarly English, so rich in virtues yet so provocative of satire, he by origin belonged; in its atmosphere he always breathed most freely, and had the largest command of his humorous resources.⁸

And in its atmosphere, Dickens created an extensive gallery of characters, from minor ones like young Blight, the "clerkly essence" of Mortimer Lightwood's law office in Our Mutual Friend,⁹ to David Copperfield, Dickens's alter-ego. Even a partial list of the lower-middle-class characters that Dickens created includes a rich variety of vivid personalities, the good and the bad alike: the homely and generous Bagnets and the grasping Smallweeds, the insinuating Mr. Guppy and the sensitive Dick Swiveller, the distressingly efficient Sally Brass and the incomparably incompetent Wilkins Micawber. Indeed Dickens's novels abound in these marginal figures in such variety that it is often difficult to place them in a class, an indication, perhaps, of how truly diverse the lower middle class really was. Certainly, Dickens does not concentrate his attention solely on what might be termed the professional or semi-professional portion of the class, the clerks, bookkeepers, schoolteachers

8. George Gissing, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (London: Gresham, 1903) p.42.

9. Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 130-131; first published in 1864-1865.

and the like, but includes various types of shopkeepers and other minor entrepreneurs. In Bleak House alone he presents numerous lower-middle-class characters with what is for the modern reader a bewildering array of occupations and interests: Mr. Guppy, Mr. Jobling and Young Smallweed, low-level law clerks; Grandfather Smallweed, a moneylender; Mr. Snagsby, the law-stationer, and his family, who are oppressively respectable; the Bagnets, who operate a musical instrument shop; police detective Bucket; the Turveydrops, who give dancing instruction; and Mr. Jellyby, whose only identifiable profession is that of being the husband of Mrs. Jellyby, that notable practitioner of "telescopic philanthropy."

Dickens's lower-middle-class creations comprise saints and sinners and all grades of humanity in between; and therein lies the great strength of the depiction of their class by Dickens and other authors whose origins were there--their lower-middle-class characters are individuals, rather than types or stereotypes who represent the class or its features. Indeed, many of the lower-middle-class figures created by Dickens and other lower-middle-class authors seem to be shaped by the stereotypical image only to the extent that they are challenges to or refutations of that image. These characters' lives and personalities may in part be influenced by their class, but their responses to their situations remain the responses of individuals to particular circumstances. Some personality traits may recur in

the different characters, but always with a difference; the meanness of the Smallweeds, for example, is not the meanness of Sally Brass. But paradoxically, the recurrence of themes and characteristics in the representation of otherwise highly individualistic lower-middle-class figures produces a strong sense of a class with distinctive traits.

Among the most striking features of lower-middle-class life that figure prominently in Dickens's fiction are its narrow domesticity and its financial marginality. Observers from outside the class had noted precisely the same features, but Dickens demonstrates the variety of experiences that they could produce. Accordingly, the Smallweeds in Bleak House are a family who strain in concert to improve their financial position, but whose home life is anything but warm and nurturing. Their obsession with money has apparently made them relatively wealthy, despite their humble occupations, Judy being a flower-maker, Bart a minor clerk, and Grandfather Smallweed a money-lender. If rumour and the rantings of Grandmother Smallweed are to be believed, there is, indeed, "property to a fabulous amount" stashed in a drawer in Grandfather's chair, as well as "'fifteen hundred pound in a black box, fifteen hundred pound locked up, fifteen hundred pound put away and hid.'"¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Smallweeds continue to be grasping and

10. Charles Dickens, Bleak House, eds. George Ford and Sylvere Monod (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 258, 261-262; first published in 1853.

mean, hoarding every penny they can; and they persist with their "little narrow pinched ways," living by Grandfather Smallweed's dictum that the only use you can put a friend to is to "live at his expense as much as you can" (BH, 264, 261).

When forced to live at their own expense, the Smallweeds live on little more than bread alone. Food takes on almost sacramental significance in many lower-middle-class homes in Dickens's novels, but evening tea is a barren affair at the Smallweeds'. Prepared by Judy "with a gong-like clash and clatter," it is not only meagre, consisting of nothing more than bread and a scant amount of butter, but it is also lacking in any sense of comfort or ceremony, presented as it is in iron baskets and on iron trays. And if the Smallweeds limit their own fare, they stint the servant-girl, Charley, even more. Her meal consists of "various tributary streams of tea, from the bottom of cups and saucers and from the bottom of the teapot" and "as many outside fragments and worn-down heels of loaves as the rigid economy of the house has left in existence" (BH, 262).

In contrast, a strong sense of ceremony pervades the eating and preparation of food in the Bagnets' home. Mrs. Bagnet's birthday is an occasion of particular significance, "the greatest holiday and reddest-letter day in Mr. Bagnet's calendar," and it "is always commemorated according to certain forms" (BH, 587). And this commemoration always centres on the purchase and preparation of a pair of fowls,

"Mr. Bagnet being deeply convinced that to have a pair of fowls for dinner is to attain the highest pitch of imperial luxury" (BH, 588). Mr. Bagnet and the little Bagnets spare no expense or effort in their attempt to make a dinner "'fit for a queen.'" Mrs. Bagnet watches the proceedings in silent anguish as her husband is cheated by the poultry-vendor and the dinner is burned. The self-control required for her to resist interfering with the preparation of the meal is at least matched by the courage required for her to eat what turns out to be a culinary disaster: "Mr. Bagnet, unconscious of these little defects, sets his heart on Mrs. Bagnet eating a most severe quantity of the delicacies before her; and as that good old girl could not cause him a moment's disappointment on any day, least of all on such a day, for any consideration, she imperils her digestion fearfully" (BH, 590). Her family's strained budget undoubtedly cannot accommodate many comparable outlays for domestic celebrations, but the ceremony takes precedence over all else, and Mrs. Bagnet graciously overlooks the poor quality of the food and the cooking, recognising as she does the greater value of the love that drives her family's unsuccessful culinary ventures.

The Bagnets, out of necessity, live a life of material poverty equal to that which the Smallweeds impose upon themselves, but the Bagnets' life is rich in love and mutual regard.¹¹ They, too, must scrimp, but poverty makes them

11. Trevor Blount also notes the contrast between the "Bagnets' warm-hearted family unity" and "the baleful

careful, not mean. When his friend George Rouncewell applies to him for security for an outstanding loan, Mr. Bagnet tells him that his wife has "'a stocking somewhere. With money in it. I never saw it. But I know she's got it'" (BH, 343-344). But Mrs. Bagnet is too preoccupied with arranging her family's dinner to be approached about financial concerns at present. "'Wait till the greens is off her mind,'" advises her husband. "'Then she'll set you up.'" The Bagnets scrimp in order to ensure that their family can enjoy a modest level of comfort and security, not, like the Smallweeds, in order to hoard money for the barren pleasure of hoarding alone. And the Bagnets are willing to risk their small savings for the sake of a friend.

Meals at the Bagnets' home are examples par excellence of what Barbara Hardy refers to as Dickens's "ceremonies of love." Hardy sees meals in his novels as manifestations of "natural domestic and social order." "The meals themselves," Hardy suggests, "are charged with no more than the moral significances of everyday life, where good mothers feed their children lovingly; where meals are sociable occasions; where good table manners are desirable but not all that important; where theft may be condoned if the thief is starving."¹² Meals, in other words, reify the solacing

influence of the cheese-paring obsession with money and usury" as it is manifested in the Smallweeds' treatment of Charley. See "Bleak House and the Sloane Scandal of 1850 Again," Dickens Studies 3 (March 1967), 63-67; 66.

12. Barbara Hardy, "Food and Ceremony in Great Expectations," Essays in Criticism 13 (October 1963), 351-363; 351-352.

ordinariness and the unpretentious virtues of lower-middle-class domestic life. Accordingly, the narrowness of the Bagnets' life is symbolised by Mrs. Bagnet's fixation on the greens for the family dinner. "'I never saw her,' muses George Rouncewell, 'except upon a baggage-waggon, when she wasn't washing greens'" (BH, 341). So, too, does Christmas dinner become the ideal vehicle for expressing the domestic intimacy of the Cratchit family in A Christmas Carol:

Then rose up Mrs. Cratchit, Cratchit's wife, dressed out but poorly in a twice-turned gown, but brave in ribbons, which are cheap and make a goodly show for sixpence; and she laid the cloth, assisted by Belinda Cratchit, second of her daughters, also brave in ribbons; while Master Peter Cratchit plunged a fork into the saucepan of potatoes, and getting the collars of his monstrous shirt collar (Bob's private property, conferred upon his son and heir in honour of the day) into his mouth, rejoiced to find himself so gallantly attired, and yearned to show his linen in the fashionable Parks. And now two smaller Cratchits, boy and girl, come tearing in, screaming that outside the baker's they had smelt the goose, and known it for their own; and basking in luxurious thoughts of sage and onion, these young Cratchits danced about the table, and exalted Master Peter Cratchit to the skies, while he (not proud, although his collars nearly choked him) blew the fire, until the slow potatoes bubbling up, knocked loudly at the saucepan-lid to be let out and peeled.¹³

The Cratchits strive in concert to make a very modest Christmas dinner a great celebration. They may, in the process, also strive for a measure of sartorial splendour which they cannot successfully achieve. Mrs. Cratchit's

13. Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol in Christmas Books, intro. Eleanor Farjeon (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 43-44; A Christmas Carol was first published in 1843.

ribbons and Master Peter's "monstrous collar" would no doubt have inspired scorn in the fashionable Parks where Peter longs to parade in grandeur, but in their desire to dress well there is not any sense of pretentiousness. The Cratchits dress to honour the day, not to foster their own vanity, and Peter, despite his high collar, is not too proud to assist with menial domestic chores.

To be sure, the narrator of A Christmas Carol cannot resist indulging in some of the satire that Gissing acknowledges the lower middle class so readily inspires. Bob Cratchit's diminutiveness is everywhere explicit.¹⁴ The narrator refers to him as "little Bob," and even his name becomes a symbol for the scantiness of his income as Scrooge's underpaid clerk: "Bob had but fifteen 'Bob' a-week himself; he pocketed on Saturdays but fifteen copies of his Christian name." And certainly the narrator's habit of referring to Peter as "Master Peter" is mildly mocking. But lest the reader be tempted to disparage "little Bob" and his family, the narrator is quick to point out that "yet the Ghost of Christmas Present blessed his four-roomed house" (CC, 44-45). The Ghost himself is later even more definite about the Cratchits' relative worth when he suggests that

14. An even more diminutive treatment of a minor clerk appears in the tale of the parish clerk in The Pickwick Papers. Nathaniel Pipkin is a "little man" who lives in a "little house" in the "little High Street" close to the "little church" in the "little town" where he teaches "a little learning to the little boys." Charles Dickens, The Pickwick Papers, ed. Robert L. Patten (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 309; first published 1836-1837.

Heaven may value poor and crippled Tiny Tim far above wealthy Scrooge: "It may be, that in the sight of Heaven, you [Scrooge] are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man's child" (CC, 47). If Dickens satirizes the Cratchits, it is gentle satire that retains a measure of both affection and respect for their humanity and their virtues. And chief among their virtues is a disarming modesty, an unpretentious contentment with their humble lot. "They were not a handsome family," the narrator concedes; "they were not well dressed; their shoes were far from being water-proof; their clothes were scanty; and Peter might have known, and very likely did, the inside of a pawnbroker's. But they were happy, grateful, pleased with one another, and contented with the time" (CC, 48-49).

The concern with dress that so distressed many of the middle-class observers is definitely evident in the Cratchits and in other lower-middle-class characters in Dickens's fiction. Peter's pride in the collar that his father had "conferred upon his son and heir" suggests that dress is heavily symbolic, that it is significant to class identity, and that the conferring of the collar is tantamount to a rite of passage. But despite Peter's bit of youthful flamboyance, dress does not appear to be a means of true self-aggrandisement for these characters. Bob Cratchit is not trying to imitate his employer in his dress; he does not wear a collar because he considers himself to be Scrooge's equal. Indeed, Bob is sincerely deferential, even

toasting Scrooge at Christmas dinner, to the chagrin of Mrs. Cratchit. The Cratchits' clothes, as the narrator points out, are scanty. Their concern with dress reflects not a desire for display but a desire to preserve a level of decency and self-respect.

Similarly, Bella Wilfer's father in Our Mutual Friend is so poor a clerk "that he had never yet attained to the modest object of his ambition: which was, to wear a complete new suit of clothes, hat and boots included, at one time." But again, Mr. Wilfer is not a vain or frivolous man. He is, in fact, so retiring that he is "unwilling to own to the name of Reginald" which he finds "too aspiring and self-assertive," and his "ambition" seems never likely to be realised, given the exigencies of the demands placed upon his "limited salary" by an "unlimited family." Accordingly, as the narrator points out, "his black hat was brown before he could afford a coat, his pantaloons were white at the seams and knees before he could buy a pair of boots, and his boots had worn out before he could treat himself to new pantaloons, and, by the time he had worked round to the hat again, that shining modern article roofed-in an ancient ruin of various periods."¹⁵ An ambition that did not go beyond the acquisition of a new suit of clothes might well seem an inappropriate and superficial one, but there is probably

15. Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 75; first published in 1864-1865.

less vanity in it than might at first appear. Certainly Dickens's characterisation of Mr. Wilfer is of a man who is modestly quixotic, in a material way, rather than vain. Moreover, as a white-collar worker he would have few apparent distinguishing features beyond his white collar, the uniform of respectable attire which identifies him and his occupation. He does not have the artisan's tools as the symbols of his abilities, nor does he have the accumulation of capital or property to reinforce a sense of personal worth that a prosperous member of the solid middle class might have. Accordingly, Mr. Wilfer cannot amass enough to grant even a small measure of financial security; a respectable suit of clothes is the most significant acquisition, both symbolically and materially, to which he is ever likely to aspire and, indeed, even that seems destined to remain beyond his grasp. The importance he places on new clothes appears to be inappropriate only when viewed through the distorting lens of other class values.

The disparity between middle-class and lower-middle-class values is probably best illustrated through the character of Wemmick in Great Expectations. In many ways, Wemmick appears to conform to the stereotypical image of the lower-middle-class figure straining to live up to middle-class expectations that are beyond his means. He is a middle-aged clerk in a lawyer's office who wears shabbily genteel garb and who is obsessed with financial security and with the strictest separation of professional and personal

life. But there is no evidence that Wemmick is actually trying to imitate his social superiors or that his life is an obsessive struggle to keep up appearances. Rather, he accepts with equanimity the difference in social status between himself and his employer, Jaggers, which he indicates in a discussion with Pip about Pip's forthcoming dinner engagements with Jaggers and himself: "'Well,' said Wemmick, 'he'll give you wine, and good wine. I'll give you punch, and not bad punch.'"¹⁶ Wemmick is also satisfied with modest financial assets, the "portable property," in the form of mourning rings and brooches, with which he adorns his person in a most un-middle-class manner, and which is so unlike the substantial property holdings of the solid middle class. Wemmick's property is of questionable taste, comprising mementos of departed former clients, and he freely acknowledges that it is both peculiar and trifling:

"I always take 'em. They're curiosities. And they're property. They may not be worth much, but, after all, they're property and portable. It don't signify to you [Pip] with your brilliant look-out, but as to myself, my guiding-star always is, 'Get hold of portable property'."

GE, 224

Wemmick's property may be inconsequential, but his person is not. Even before he makes an appearance in the novel, Jaggers mentions his name several times to importunate clients and it becomes evident that Wemmick is

16. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Angus Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 224; first published in 1860-1861.

Jaggers's right-hand man. And while Wemmick is clearly a subordinate who recognises and respects the special power and abilities of his employer, he is nevertheless perfectly capable of outfacing the overbearing Jaggers. When Jaggers learns that Wemmick, who is dry and efficient at the office, has, according to Pip, a "gentle heart" and a "pleasant home," Wemmick feels the need to defend what he suspects might be seen as a weakness, and not only boldly defends himself, but challenges Jaggers with the charge that he, too, secretly harbours domestic yearnings:

"What's all this?" said Mr. Jaggers. "You with an old father, and you with pleasant and playful ways?"

"Well!" returned Wemmick. "If I don't bring 'em here, what does it matter?"

"Pip," said Mr. Jaggers, laying his hand upon my arm, and smiling openly, "this man must be the most cunning imposter in all London."

"Not a bit of it," returned Wemmick, growing bolder and bolder. "I think you're another."

Again they exchanged their former odd looks, each apparently still distrustful that the other was taking him in.

"You with a pleasant home?" said Mr. Jaggers.

"Since it don't interfere with business," returned Wemmick, "let it be so. Now, I look at you, sir, I shouldn't wonder if you might be planning and contriving to have a pleasant home of your own, one of these days, when you're tired of all this work."

GE, 423-424

At the conclusion of this exchange, and after the ensuing interview with Pip, Wemmick and Jaggers seem to be on what is psychologically, at least, an equal if uncomfortable footing. As they return to their examination of office accounts, Pip notices that "each of them seemed suspicious, not to say conscious, of having shown himself in a weak and unprofessional light to the other." "For this reason, I

suppose," Pip continues, "they were now inflexible with one another; Mr. Jaggers being highly dictatorial, and Wemmick obstinately justifying himself whenever there was the smallest point in abeyance for a moment" (GE, 426).

Many aspects of Wemmick's character become implicit points of comparison with what might be seen as middle-class norms. Wemmick, for example, is apparently less sensitive than Pip. Wemmick's habit of being absolutely impersonal in all his dealings with people during his hours and at his place of work may make him seem to be somewhat obtuse, unresponsive to the differences among levels of social refinement and the grossness of the accused and convicted criminals with whom he deals. Accordingly, when they visit some of Jaggers's clients together in Newgate, Pip feels "contaminated" by the "soiling consciousness of Mr. Wemmick's conservatory," while Wemmick himself appears to suffer no ill effects. The great irony, of course, is that Pip is especially distressed to have "Newgate in . . . [his] breath and on . . . [his] clothes" because he is on his way to meet "proud and refined" Estella; unaware that her real mother is a murderer who was once confined in the jail he has just left, he thinks "with absolute abhorrence of the contrast between the jail and her" (GE, 284). Pip's sensitivity is in effect only a form of self-deception; Wemmick's workaday impartiality is like that of the legal system he serves, which he indicates in his response to Pip's inquiry about the guilt of a client accused of rob-

bery. After stating categorically that the man did not commit the crime, Wemmick adds: "But he is accused of it. So might you or I be. Either of us might be accused of it, you know" (GE, 280). Certainly, Wemmick betrays no prejudice against the inmates of Newgate, with whom he converses on amiable terms, and he continues to accept with alacrity the various bits of portable property that they offer him.

Wemmick also lacks the intellectual capacity of his middle-class employer. Pip judges Jaggers to be "a thousand times better informed and cleverer than Wemmick," and regrets that Jaggers's stiff and forbidding bearing forces him to rely on Wemmick when he needs guidance. But Pip also admits that he "would a thousand times rather have had Wemmick to dinner" (GE, 311). And Wemmick, unlike Jaggers, seems to have found a workable means for preserving a satisfying home life, untarnished by the "Newgate cobwebs" (GE, 230). Jaggers's entire life and being are defined by his role as London's most formidable criminal lawyer. He makes of his home an open challenge to the criminal world, leaving it at all times unlocked (although judiciously bereft of valuables such as silver serving pieces or cutlery), stating publicly "'I'd like to see the man who'll rob me'" (GE, 228). He also employs as his housekeeper the woman whom he early in his career successfully defended against a charge of strangling another woman, and whose powerful wrists he perversely displays to his guests when Pip comes to dinner (GE, 236). In contrast, Wemmick obsessively separates work

and home, stating that "'the office is one thing, and private life is another.'" "'When I go into the office,'" he tells Pip, "'I leave the Castle [his house] behind me, and when I come into the Castle, I leave the office behind me'" (GE, 231). In doing so, N. C. Peyrouton suggests, Wemmick has developed "a formula for preserving one's sanity."¹⁷

The ironies of Wemmick's apparent deficiencies become clear as the novel progresses, for it is the balance of his sometimes incongruous mixture of clear-headed dryness and "gentle heart" that makes Wemmick such a valuable and loyal friend to Pip, a friend who is both willing and able to help protect Pip's felonious benefactor. Indeed, it is Wemmick to whom the reader must turn for guidance in judging other characters in the novel. As Peyrouton points out, it is Wemmick's willingness to trust Pip, to allow him into the privacy of the Castle, which signals the beginning of Pip's regeneration and which confirms that "his genuine expectations to become a gentleman will be realized At this point it is more our respect for Wemmick's shrewdness and capacity to judge character than anything evidenced in Pip himself which advises us" (Peyrouton, 42). Nevertheless, Wemmick is not the ideal man; many of his characteristics, and certainly his dichotomised life, are extreme to the point of absurdity. These absurdities inhere more in the world he inhabits, however, than in Wemmick himself, who is

17. N. C. Peyrouton, "John Wemmick: Enigma?" Dickens Studies 1 (January 1965), 39-47; 40.

but an ordinary man who has worked out a modus vivendi in nineteenth-century London, which, beset as it was with all the problems of rapid commercial and demographic growth, provided a much less than ideal milieu for combining professional fulfilment with domestic harmony. Despite his limitations, Wemmick is wiser than Jaggers, and more content than Pip.

Like Peyrouton, W. J. Harvey sees Wemmick's strict compartmentalising of his life as a not unsatisfactory means of survival: a "happy dichotomy," a workable response to the "predicament of man in modern industrial society."¹⁸ F. S. Schwarzbach similarly evaluates Wemmick as a "realist but not a moralist" who understands the need to make compromises to accommodate "the distance between real and ideal, expectation and fulfilment."¹⁹ Other critics are not as sanguine, and see Wemmick as a clear representative of various kinds of alienation: an "embodiment of the utterly alienated man of modern capitalist civilization;" one of the many examples of "self-alienation" with which the novel is apparently replete; a tragic victim of a society which forces him to divorce "his best self from his wordly self."²⁰ A few critics do what critics do best, and sit on

18. W. J. Harvey, "Chance and Design in Bleak House," in Dickens and the Twentieth Century, eds. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 145-157; p. 156.

19. F. S. Schwarzbach, Dickens and the City (London: Athlone Press, 1979), p. 191.

20. Grahame Smith, Dickens, Money and Society (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press,

a fence somewhere between an endorsement and a condemnation of Wemmick's divided life, seeing the Castle as symbolic of warm, human, positive values and Little Britain as the scene of all that is unsatisfying and degrading in Wemmick's life. Anthony Winner describes "the Little Britain Wemmick" as "Jaggers' dessicated 'subordinate'" and "a petty tyrant."²¹ "At Jagger's [sic] office in London," Garrett Stewart asserts, "Wemmick is little more than some useful piece of office furniture . . . , a serviceable item in the inventory of 'portable property.'"²² These analyses, however, do not do justice to the character Dickens created. Quite apart from the fact that Wemmick would be unlikely to list himself in his own inventory of portable property, there is nothing in the text of Great Expectations to support an attempt to compare him with a mere piece of furniture, or to characterise him as a petty tyrant. Wemmick is obviously an employee whose services his employer values highly, and while he may be brusquely efficient, he is not a tyrant; he shows more compassion for the inmates of Newgate than does Pip. And

1968), p. 207; Mordecai Marcus, "The Pattern of Self-Alienation in 'Great Expectations,'" Victorian Newsletter 26 (Fall 1964), 9-12; Lawrence Jay Dessner, "Great Expectations: The Tragic Comedy of John Wemmick," Ariel 6:2 (April 1975), 65-80, 65.

21. Anthony Winner, "Character and Knowledge in Dickens: The Enigma of Jaggers," Dickens Studies Annual 3 (1974), 100-121; 108.

22. Garrett Stewart, Dickens and the Trials of Imagination (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 158.

while his life may be aberrant in its division, Wemmick is not truly alienated. Far from being unhappy in his work, he appears to relish it; he is equally content at home. His strict separation of the two spheres of his life may be extreme, but the two are not unrelated. Wemmick's odd but comfortable home and his ability to divorce himself successfully from the world of Little Britain at the end of the day depend on the security, financial and psychological, of his position as Jaggers' chief clerk. Indeed, as the chief clerk in the office of a powerful and successful lawyer sometime in the 1820s, Wemmick holds a position which would have been relatively prestigious, at least in comparison with that of white-collar workers later in the century.

The kind of quasi-modern anomie some critics attempt to read into the characterisation of Wemmick becomes a very real problem for many of the characters created by H. G. Wells, who began writing in the 1890's. The protagonists of many of Wells's novels are underpaid, undereducated and overworked shop assistants who are miserable and insecure in their jobs and who, unlike Wemmick, have no homes that serve as sanctuaries. "Home" may be no more than a narrow bed in a cold dormitory for the poor apprentice haberdasher like Kipps or the young Mr. Polly; or it may be a dull room in a boarding house like the one in which Mr. Hoopdriver lives. Wells's characters are similar to Wemmick, however, in that they, too, demonstrate a level of wisdom despite their limited abilities, a wisdom that enables them to wrest mean-

ing and fulfilment from a life that seems incapable of conferring any but the smallest and most grudging pleasures. Some of Wells's characters come to this wisdom through forms of escape, temporary or permanent, from the confines of lower-middle-class life. Kipps, a draper's assistant who inherits a fortune, initially savours the life of the higher reaches of society to which his money will buy him entry, but he soon realises that an unpretentious life is what will make him happy.²³ Mr. Polly decides to abandon a failing marriage and an unsuccessful haberdashery business and begins a new life as a jack-of-all-trades at a country inn; here he finds the happiness and self-respect that had been stifled by his former acquiescence to social constraints.²⁴

23. H. G. Wells, Kipps (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); first published in 1905. In response to Kipps, Henry James hailed Wells's achievement in the portrayal of the lower middle class as greater than Dickens's. In a letter to Wells, James states:

You have for the very first time treated the English "lower middle" class, [note James's discomfort with the term] etc., without the picturesque, the grotesque, the fantastic and romantic interference of which Dickens, e.g., is so misleadingly, of which even George Eliot is so deviatingly, full. You have handled its vulgarity in so scientific and historic a spirit, and seen the whole thing all in its own strong light.

Henry James to H. G. Wells, 19 November 1905, in Henry James and H. G. Wells: A Record of their Friendship, their Debate on the Art of Fiction, and their Quarrel, eds. Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 105.

24. H. G. Wells, The History of Mr. Polly, ed. Gordon N. Ray (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960); first published in 1910.

But Mr. Hoopdriver, in The Wheels of Chance, begins and ends, within the confines of the novel, as an impoverished draper's assistant. His wisdom initially lies in his intuitive knowledge that he must find some means of making his restricted life bearable:

Mr. Hoopdriver was (in the days of this story) a poet, though he had never written a line of verse. Or perhaps romancer will describe him better. Like I know not how many of those who do the fetching and carrying of life--a great number of them certainly--his real life was absolutely uninteresting, and if he had faced it as realistically as such people do in Mr. Gissing's novels, he would probably have come by way of drink to suicide in the course of a year. But that is just what he had the natural wisdom not to do. On the contrary, he was always decorating his existence with imaginative tags, hopes and poses, deliberate and yet quite effectual self-deceptions; his experiences were material for a romantic superstructure.²⁵

Like the telegraphist of "In the Cage," Mr. Hoopdriver uses his imagination to enliven his dreary life. But rather than using imagination as a means of attempting to transform the circumstances of his life, he uses it as a means of pure escape. "Very many of his dreams never got acted at all," the narrator confirms, "possibly indeed most of them, the dreams of a solitary walk for instance, or of a tramcar ride, the dreams dreamt behind the counter while trade was slack, and mechanical foldings and rollings occupied his muscle" (Wheels, 43). Many of his dreams are indeed pure

25. H. G. Wells, The Wheels of Chance in The Wheels of Chance and The Time Machine (London and New York: Dent and Dutton, 1935), p. 42; The Wheels of Chance was first published in 1896.

romantic fantasy, such as "a gallant rescue of generalized beauty in distress from truculent insult or ravening dog" (Wheels, 44).

Mr. Hoopdriver values above all else in his life his brief respite of ten days annual holiday from the drudgery of his job, an attitude which the narrator universalises by placing what are obviously Hoopdriver's sentiments in the second person:

Only those who toil six long days out of the seven, and all the year round, save for one brief glorious fortnight or ten days in the summer time, know the exquisite sensations of the First Holiday Morning. All the dreary, uninteresting routine drops from you suddenly, your chains fall from your feet. All at once you are Lord of yourself, Lord of every hour in the long, vacant day; you may go where you please, call none Sir or Madam, have a lapel free of pins, doff your black morning coat and wear the colour of your heart, and be a Man. Wheels, 12.

On the particular holiday which is the subject of the novel, Hoopdriver takes to the road on a solitary cycling tour, and the wheels of chance carry him into a romantic adventure as fantastic and improbable as his fondest dreams. He becomes a knight-errant on a bicycle, and he rescues a specific beauty from both a "truculent insult" and a "ravening dog."

The specific beauty who is saved by Mr. Hoopdriver is Jessie Milton, a young woman from the middle class who is trying to escape from the confines of conventionality. The ravening dog is Bechamel, an art critic and friend of Jessie's stepmother, who offers to assist her in getting away. Jessie and Bechamel are, like Mr. Hoopdriver, using bicycles to pursue their adventures, but all three cherish

very different visions of where their adventures will lead. Jessie dreams of liberty; Bechamel dreams of seducing Jessie; and Mr. Hoopdriver just dreams. Because he bears a superficial resemblance to Bechamel, Mr. Hoopdriver is frequently mistaken for him, and as a result is inadvertently drawn into the melodrama of Jessie's flight from her step-mother. He ultimately becomes Jessie's champion, protecting her from her would-be seducer by assisting her in a wild midnight flight on bicycles to elude Bechamel, an adventure that fosters all that is chivalrous and valorous in Hoopdriver's soul. Accordingly, when they stop at a village inn and a brash young man dares to insult Jessie, Hoopdriver will not rest until he has preserved the honour of his lady; he challenges the young man, and while he does not score a resounding physical victory in the ensuing fight, he does score a moral one. His opponent, after an initial skirmish, flees to avoid getting a black eye, leaving Hoopdriver, in his own mind at least, the exultant victor: "He, Hoopdriver, had fought and, by all the rules of war, had won" (Wheels, 155).

As Hoopdriver's adventures begin, he exhibits many of the stereotypical features of the lower-middle-class man. He has a number of affectations of speech and dress. "His remarks," according to the narrator, "were entirely what people used to call cliché, formulae not organic to the occasion, but stereotyped ages ago, and learnt years since by heart" (Wheels, 4). When he first speaks to Jessie, he

attempts to infuse "the faintest flavour of the aristocrat in his voice," and later, when stopping in a village to eat, "gossiped condescendingly with an aged labourer" (Wheels, 22, 56). When at work, he wears "the black morning coat, the black tie, and the speckled grey nether parts . . . of his craft" (Wheels, 4), and as he leaves on his holiday, he dons a new cycling suit of which he is immensely proud. He believes he cuts a very fine figure, and frequently admires those features of his outfit which he can see from his perch on the saddle as he wheels along: "the knees of his brown suit and the chequered stockings were ever before his eyes" (Wheels, 31). The sense of the marginal man attempting to mimic his social superiors in dress and bearing is reinforced by the reaction of Bechamel when he first sees Hoopdriver cycling along the road. "'Greasy proletarian,'" Bechamel mutters with obvious distaste. "'Got a suit of brown, the very picture of this. One would think his sole aim in life had been to caricature me'" (Wheels, 32).

Mr. Hoopdriver's suit is not the only thing that appears to be a poor imitation of the middle-class model. Hoopdriver himself is like a double of Bechamel, cut from inferior cloth. They are of about the same stature and colouring, although Bechamel's bearing is far superior, and they both sport blond moustaches. The similarities between the two men are, however, only superficial, and their moustaches become emblems of the underlying disparities: Bechamel's moustache is thick and luxuriant and Hoopdriver's

is thin and wispy. Appearances, of course, suggest that Bechamel is the superior man, but the progress of the story reveals the true worth of lowly Mr. Hoopdriver. His affectations, it becomes clear, are harmless and, in some cases, are the result of pressure from his employer. To be a draper's assistant, he tells Jessie, is "'to be just another man's hand, as I am. To have to wear what clothes you are told, and go to church to please customers, and work'" (Wheels, 164). Mr. Hoopdriver's preoccupation with clothes and general deportment have been forced upon him by members of the middle class who then mock that same preoccupation. But he does not wear a black coat to mimic his social superiors, he wears it because he has been told to do so. And he does not wear a brown cycling suit to mimic Bechamel, whom he had never seen before, but because he is on holiday and longs to "wear the colour of . . . [his] heart." But more important, Mr. Hoopdriver is a man of honour who honestly wishes to help and protect Jessie Milton, while Bechamel, despite his genteel and sophisticated bearing, is a cad who tries to deceive and seduce her.

However laughable Mr. Hoopdriver may initially appear to be, the reader, like Jessie, comes to see him differently. When he rescues her from Bechamel, Jessie regards him for the first time with eyes unclouded by class prejudice: "She looked at his face . . . , grave and intent. How could she ever have thought him common or absurd?" (Wheels, 100). But it is through his confrontation with the man who dared to

insult Jessie that Hoopdriver is finally able to see himself as worthy. He may win by default, but he stands firm and faces the possibility, indeed the probability, of pain and defeat without flinching; it is the other man who is a coward and runs away.

Hoopdriver thus lives out the totality of the chivalrous romance, the knight-errant who rescues and preserves the honour of his lady. As Jessie hails him as courageous, he is finally able to discard the fantasy and accept reality. He confronts his social position in the lower reaches of the lower-middle-class, where he is scorned not only by the middle and lower classes, but even by those above him within his own class, the clerks, and he is able to discuss his assessment of the life of a draper's assistant with Jessie:

It's not a particularly honest nor a particularly useful trade; it's not very high up; there's no freedom and no leisure--seven to eight-thirty every day in the week; don't leave much edge to live on, does it?--real workman laugh at us, and educated chaps like bank clerks and solicitors' clerks look down on us. You look respectable outside, and inside you are packed in dormitories like convicts, fed on bread and butter, and bullied like slaves. You're just superior enough to feel that you're not superior.

Wheels, 168

Rather than being pretentious, however, Hoopdriver is, in Jessie's opinion, just the opposite: "'You are so modest,'" she observes; "'you think so little of yourself.'" Hoopdriver himself recognises his limitations as the result not of some form of inherent personal incapacity, but of a faulty education. With the encouragement of Jessie, he resolves to embark on an ambitious programme of self-education through reading, with the hope of securing a

brighter future. Thus, the narrative is, like the protagonist, able to discard the romantic conventions. Hoopdriver and Jessie go their separate ways, and undoubtedly Jessie's stepmother does not believe her protestations that he is "'one of the bravest, most unselfish, and most delicate'" of young men (Wheels, 188). Hoopdriver must go back to his dreary job and his circumscribed life, but with a new level of wisdom: "He is back. To-morrow, the early rising, the dusting, and the drudgery, begin again--but with a difference, with wonderful memories and still more wonderful desires and ambitions replacing those discrepant dreams" (Wheels, 196). It no longer matters that other people may not believe in him, because while Mr. Hoopdriver may not have won the girl, he has won something more valuable: belief in himself.

Not only does Mr. Hoopdriver appear in a different light by the end of the novel, but so do the middle-class characters. Bechamel is dishonourable and Jessie's stepmother and the male friends who come to her assistance to bring Jessie back to the bosom of her family are pretentious and absurd. They affect intellectual superiority, when, as Jessie recognises, "'they know such little things'" (Wheels, 169); and they strike the poses of concerned parent and gallant deliverers, when their real concerns are not with Jessie's well-being, but with appearances. The men use a horse-drawn cart and tandem bicycles to pursue Hoopdriver and Jessie, and take tumbles and wrong turns at a more prodigious rate

than Hoopdriver himself, whose dignity increases as theirs diminishes. Thus the positions of the middle- and the lower-middle-class characters are in a sense reversed, a circumstance which occurs frequently in lower-middle-class fiction.²⁶

Arnold Bennett presents a flamboyant portrayal of this type of reversal in The Card. The central character, Denry Machin, is a clerk in a solicitor's office in Bursley, one of the Five Towns which form the settings for many of Bennett's novels. To his delight, Denry is dismissed from his job. He sings and whistles as he contemplates starvation and then revels in his freedom as he begins to develop money-making schemes of his own: "No longer a clerk; one of the employed; saying 'sir' to persons with no more fingers and toes than himself; bound by servile agreement to be in a fixed place at fixed hours!"²⁷ Denry is most definitely pretentious, but at a level far beyond the limited aspirations usually ascribed to the lower middle class: Denry aspires to real social prominence in Bursley, and, if pos-

26. Indeed, Wells confirms this intention to Frederick Macmillan with reference to Kipps, which "is designed to present a typical member of the English lower middle class in all of its pitiful limitations and feebleness, and by means of a treatment deliberately kind and genial links a sustained and fairly exhaustive criticism of the ideals and ways of life of the great mass of middle-class English people." Quoted in David C. Smith, H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 201.

27. Arnold Bennett, The Card (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 31; first published in 1911.

sible, beyond. He longs to become a member of the stylish Sports Club and he consciously adopts "a wordly manner, which he had acquired for himself by taking the most effective features of the manners of several prominent citizens, and piecing them together so that, as a whole, they formed Denry's manner" (Card, 42). His ambitions and pretensions have a quality of pure fantasy about them, however, and their eventual realisation does not constitute a hackneyed image of an aspiring lower-middle-class man attaining his goal of middle-class affluence and respectability. On the contrary, Denry achieves success through Sloperesque flouting of all the accepted standards of middle-class behaviour. He becomes rich through slightly questionable business schemes that require a minimum of effort on his part, and his social prominence is the by-product of his flamboyant public faux pas. It is the middle class that is mocked in The Card, as its members constantly find themselves beaten at their own games, disarmed by a mere wag in the venues of business and public affairs which they traditionally dominate. As their pretentiousness becomes apparent in their consternation over Denry's ability to secure the interest of the crème de la crème of Bursley society, the Countess of Chell, he becomes the driving force in the debunking of the myth of middle-class superiority.

A more subtle form of reversal takes place in On the Staircase, by Frank Swinnerton. The characters in this novel are almost all lower-middle-class, and Swinnerton

admits to modelling two of the characters on himself and George Gissing:

Of the two chief male characters one was a fancy drawing of George Gissing, while the other was an even more fancy drawing of myself. I was the hero. But (as far as I remember) I did not deny Gissing his superiorities, and merely contrasted two temperaments for the sake of the intrinsic interest in such a contrast. All the other characters in this book were invented.²⁸

This assertion notwithstanding, some of the inspiration for On the Staircase appears to come from Swinnerton's response to E. M. Forster's Howard's End. Swinnerton found that novel maddening; in some respects entirely believable, in others, and especially in the portrayal of Leonard Bast, entirely incredible:

As for the uneducated Cockney clerk and his wife, I am an uneducated Cockney, and I have been a clerk. I have been for many years to symphony concerts at Queen's Hall, not to improve myself, but because I enjoyed them. I do not ask that all uneducated Cockney clerks should behave as I behave (for one thing I was never educated enough to be employed in a bank, where the standard is higher than Forster realizes); but I do ask that they should behave in accordance with the laws of behaviour known to me. These are not fantastic people offered as fantastic people; they are fantastic people offered as real people. I do not believe a word of them.²⁹

In On the Staircase, Swinnerton presents believable lower-middle-class characters, and in doing so, whether intentionally or not, he reverses the roles of the middle- and lower-middle-class characters of Howard's End in a plot that also mirrors many of the structural and thematic features of

28. Frank Swinnerton, Swinnerton: An Autobiography (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1936), p. 136.

29. Frank Swinnerton, The Georgian Scene (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1934), p. 298.

The most attractive and sympathetic characters in Howard's End are Margaret and Helen Schlegel. Offspring of an idealist German father and a moderately wealthy English mother, they represent the cultivated middle class rentiers, with a certain continental flair, and they are at the emotional and intellectual core of the novel. On the Staircase is similarly dominated by a pair of siblings, Joseph and Susan Amberley, along with their neighbour, Barbara Gretton. These characters, like the Schlegels, are attractive, intelligent, compassionate and dignified, but complex. Joseph Amberley, the character who is "a fancy drawing" of Swinerton, for example,

was twenty-seven, and was just under six feet in height. He had black hair, a rather thin nose, eyes that nobody had ever been able to read, and a solemn mouth that portended mischief. He was neither handsome nor distinguished in appearance, but he carried himself with resolution. He could talk to anyone as an equal, and he did, which made some of his associates think him

30. The title of Swinerton's novel is also suggestive. In Howard's End, the "narrow, rich staircase" which the Schlegels ascend to their flat is symbolic of the cultural and class differences between them and Leonard. To Leonard's mind, they mount the staircase to occupy "some ample room, whither he would never follow them, not if he read for ten hours a day." See Howard's End (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 67. As Pat C. Hoy II points out, this staircase represents "the distance between him [Leonard] and his guides [the Schlegels]" which "is so great that neither books nor the intellect nor diligence can deliver this lower middle-class man from cultural bondage." See "The Narrow, Rich Staircase in Forster's Howard's End," Twentieth Century Literature 31 (1985), 221-235; 226. The staircase of On the Staircase, on the other hand, is the one connecting the various levels of the house in which several of the characters rent rooms. It is "their highroad," and it connects rather than separates them from one another. See On the Staircase (London: Methuen, 1914).

impertinent, but which made none of them think him condescending. They thought him hard and shrewd, or curious and comical, or a dark horse. He thought himself none of these things: he thought himself simple and averse from self-deception. He never sought to impose himself on others: he tried always to act naturally and to keep his inner self remote and contemplative. He was also prompt to act and capable of long waiting. He disliked displays of emotion, and tried always to keep cool and not to lose his head. That was his constant endeavour.

Staircase, 53-54

Unlike the Schlegels, however, the Amberleys and the Gretttons are solidly lower-middle-class; Joseph is a solicitor's clerk, Barbara is a typist, and Susan, to her chagrin, stays at home and keeps house for her mother and brother. Nevertheless, they enjoy many of the same cultural and intellectual pursuits as do their middle-class counterparts. They read good books as a matter of course, gather with friends to discuss ideas, and go to concerts. They do none of these things for the sake of conscious or artificial attempts at self-improvement; they do them because they enjoy them. They are not obsessively concerned with their own status, and, indeed, demonstrate considerable concern for the welfare of others; like the Schlegels, they wish to connect. Joseph Amberley shows special interest in Adrian Valencourt, a rather pathetic young man who works as a clerk in the same office building as Amberley.

Valencourt is in many ways similar to Leonard Bast. He is weak and ineffectual, and only marginally employable. Like Leonard, he loses his job during the course of the novel. Valencourt also marries an unsuitable woman, the ignorant and somewhat vulgar daughter of his landlady, and

he settles uncomfortably into a life of domestic squalor and disharmony. Valencourt's present condition is, of course, lower-middle-class, but the narrator leaves his background vague. His name, however, suggests a genteel continental ancestry similar to the Schlegels, and "he came of a very old family" (Staircase, 132). There is also a suggestion that his immediate ancestors may have been members of the English industrial middle class, like the Wilcoxes of Howard's End. The narrator states that "for two centuries the Valencourt family had been engaged in the Wiltshire cloth industry" and that "failure made Charles Valencourt [Adrian's father] remove first to Trowbridge and then to Salisbury" (Staircase, 13). The lack of reference to seeking employment, by either Adrian or his father, and their final move to lodgings in Camden Town suggests a life of genteel poverty supported by the remnants of savings from a more prosperous past. Valencourt seems, then, to represent the declining vigour of the middle class, and certainly his employer conforms to this model. Valencourt works for "a moribund firm of solicitors named Robinson, Seares, & Turnpike." The only surviving partner, Seares, is an elderly man without family, who, being "possessed of a small property, which kept him pleasantly in the Surrey hills," allows "his affairs to dwindle into a state of slow consumption" (Staircase, 13-14).

The remnants of ambition and energy of which Valencourt is possessed are also consumed during the course of the

novel. He is beset with misfortune, most of which is the result of his own bad judgement in choosing a wife. Cissie, like Jackie in Howard's End, has no sympathy for, or understanding of, her husband's intellectual pretensions. He prizes books, while she prizes a complete suite of furniture for their spare flat. Dogged by the financial woes brought about by his imprudent marriage and bereft of the solace of a meet companion, Valencourt sinks into despair:

He was fast in the dull hopeless mediocrity of his stifled desires. He was not dead, nor alive; but without pain, without ambition. Despair was creeping upon him, numbing his heart, dogging his steps and forcing him upon the inevitable path of servile inglorious failure.
Staircase, 211

Faced with failure in both his work and his private life, Valencourt seeks comfort in communion with nature. When he loses his job and is faced with what seems like inevitable ruin, Valencourt, like Leonard Bast, spends an entire night walking through the streets of the city and beyond. But Valencourt is unable to find either comfort or a resolution to his problems, and so he drowns himself.

Like the Schlegels, Barbara and the Amberleys find the life and trials of their unfortunate acquaintance both terrible and fascinating to observe. Valencourt, like Leonard, becomes something of "an interesting specimen." Barbara finds him a vaguely romantic figure, and feels "that he could suffer greatly" (Staircase, 169), while Amberley senses the limitations of Valencourt's passionate response to life: "Valencourt saw everything with his blind emotions," Amberley observes. "He was an insensitive when it

came to actual shades of spiritual quality" (Staircase, 252). But these lower-middle-class characters are more compassionate towards others who seem clearly to be their inferiors than their middle-class counterparts are.

Amberley may perceive Valencourt's limitations, but he does not recoil because of them. When Valencourt asks his opinion of a woefully inadequate essay that he has written on Keats's poetry, Amberley does not, even in the privacy of his own thoughts, condescendingly deplore his friend's lack of critical acuity, as Margaret Schlegel deplores Leonard's "familiarity with the outsides of books" (End, 123).

Amberley instead lends Valencourt a volume of scholarly essays, and attempts to show him how to develop critical skills. "He showed him that it was not enough to be excited by the sensuous beauty of Keats's poetry, and that to write an intelligent criticism of anything, it was necessary to have at least some rough code of first principles"

(Staircase, 187). If, as the narrator comments, this advice is "good, but unacceptable," it is not because Amberley has prejudged Valencourt's ability to understand by his class or his circumstances.

Valencourt's death at the end of the novel prompts Barbara and Amberley to contemplate the philosophical considerations of life and death in general, and of Valencourt's in particular, much as the Schlegels do at the conclusion of Howard's End after Leonard's death. The Schlegels, however, focus on themselves and their families,

and more or less dismiss Leonard; a surprising response, considering that he is the father of Helen's baby and was murdered by Margaret's stepson. Nevertheless, Margaret advises Helen to forget Leonard:

"I can't have you worrying about Leonard. Don't drag in the personal when it will not come. Forget him."

"Yes, yes, but what has Leonard got out of life?"

"Perhaps an adventure."

"Is that enough?"

"Not for us. But for him."

End, 328

And if Leonard is hardly worth considering, his wife is even less so. After her husband's death, Jackie is apparently left to sink anonymously into the abyss; no one mentions her, no one betrays the least interest in what has become of her.

In a discussion similar to the one between Margaret and Helen, Barbara advises Amberley not to interpret Valencourt's actions as he would his own:

"I see you're thinking of him as if he had your nature. He hadn't. He'd got another kind of nature all together. You couldn't kill yourself--you've got too much . . . well, I suppose it's a sense of the ridiculous. I couldn't, because I'm too self-important. But he did, because death was a necessity to him. He wanted to get behind life altogether."

Staircase, 326-327

Barbara and Amberley, unlike the Schlegels, are not simply dismissing the life and death of their friend. Barbara makes a similar plea for seeing Valencourt as someone very different from themselves, but her point does not, like Margaret's, constitute an implication of his inferiority. Barbara sees his nature as different, but not deficient. And Amberley, while conceding the possibility of this dif-

ference, nevertheless does Valencourt the courtesy of judging his actions by the same standards as he would his own. He deplores Valencourt's lack of responsibility in disregarding the effect of his suicide on his wife, for, unlike the Schlegels, Amberley does not see vulgar, uneducated Cissie as beneath consideration. "'I shall never be able to forgive him,'" Amberley tells Barbara. "'She's going to have a baby'" (Staircase, 331).

The lower-middle-class characters in On the Staircase thus demonstrate their superiority over their middle-class counterparts in Howard's End. Barbara and Amberley are as well-read and culturally sophisticated as the Schlegels, but they are not complacent; they do not condescend to Valencourt, and, indeed, in judging herself to be self-important, Barbara demonstrates that she is also self-critical. And Barbara and Amberley have more true compassion for Valencourt than the Schlegels do for Leonard. They assiduously develop insight into Valencourt's problems by fostering his friendship with them, showing an interest in his wife despite her limitations, and granting him the right to his own views and opinions without privately censoring them. Valencourt is more than just an interesting specimen to Barbara and Amberley. He is an individual with, to paraphrase Denry Machin, as many fingers and toes as themselves, and he is as worthy of aspiring to a full intellectual and emotional life. In comparison, the Schlegels barely connect.

The kind of angst experienced by Valencourt is not common among lower-middle-class characters created by lower-middle-class authors. Not surprisingly, however, the man after whom Valencourt is patterned, George Gissing, does portray a number of characters whose lives in the lower middle class are unrelievedly melancholy. Godwin Peak, for example, the tortured protagonist of Born in Exile, finds life in the lower middle class intolerable.³¹ But not all of Gissing's characters are as suicidal as H. G. Wells would have us think. Gissing does portray the lower middle class in a more positive light in other works. In Will Warburton, the eponymous hero is a middle-class gentleman who loses his fortune and becomes a grocer. Although he has some difficulty adjusting to his loss of prestige, he eventually finds happiness in marriage with a young woman of taste and breeding from the lower middle class.³² And In the Year of the Jubilee again presents a reversal of roles between the middle and lower middle classes. A self-satisfied young gentleman, Lionel Tarrant, seduces and then reluctantly marries the lower-middle-class heroine, Nancy Lord, who courageously bears his neglect and eventual abandonment of her. Tarrant ultimately returns to provide a home for Nancy and their young son, and the novel closes with his free admission to

31. George Gissing, Born in Exile (London: Hogarth, 1985); first published in 1892.

32. George Gissing, Will Warburton (London: Hogarth, 1985); first published in 1905.

his wife, when she timidly asks if he is ashamed of her, that he now recognises her superiority:

"Are you--ever so little--ashamed of me?"

He regarded her steadily, smiling.

"Not in the least."

"You were--you used to be?"

"Before I knew you; and before I knew myself. When, in fact, you were a notable young lady of Camberwell, and I--"

"And you?"

"A notable young fool of nowhere at all."³³

The recurrent theme of reversal of middle- and lower-middle-class roles betrays a preoccupation among lower-middle-class authors with how their class was perceived by those outside it, and especially by the middle class. The characterisations of the Cratchits, Wemmick, Mr. Hoopdriver, Denry Machin, Joseph Amberley and Barbara Gretton suggest that the lower middle class strove to justify itself through implicit but favourable comparisons of its members, its culture, and its values with those of the middle class. Allusions to working-class responses and values are much less common, though not completely absent, in lower-middle-class fiction. Several rural and town labourers, for example, pass judgement on Mr. Hoopdriver during his travels; and Cissie and her family have mixed reactions to Valencourt,

33. George Gissing, In the Year of the Jubilee (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, n.d.); rpt. of the 1895 one-volume edition (London: Lawrence & Bullen); p. 443. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, Camberwell had become the quintessential lower-middle-class suburb, the symbol of all that was narrow and drab and blighted by respectability. See H. J. Dyos, Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1973), pp. 191-192.

and do not consider what he does for a living to be "real work." This relative lack of concern with working-class perceptions of the lower middle class suggests either that the conflict with the class below was less irksome and less threatening to their identity, or that lower-middle-class writers hoped to influence responses from outside the class, but did not expect to reach a working-class readership. Certainly, the ways in which the middle class perceived members of the lower middle class would likely have a more profound effect on them than the perceptions of the working class, given that those people who had the most power to influence their lives directly--employers, politicians, customers--were largely from the middle class.

Daily intercourse in trade and business with people who seemed to misinterpret everything about them, from the way they dressed to what they read, could not fail to influence how members of the lower middle class perceived themselves. While, as I suggested in Chapter 1, the middle-class animosity towards the lower middle class was in large part defensive, the response of the lower middle class to this animosity was even more so. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for clerks and other white-collar workers to separate themselves completely from the distorted image of their kind that was projected by those they served in offices and shops. Certainly, in the fiction, characters such as Mr. Hoopdriver and Joseph Amberley are continuously confronted with people who misinterpret their manners or

actions: Bechamel suspects that Mr. Hoopdriver's "sole aim in life" is to caricature him, and Amberley's ability to "talk to anyone as an equal" makes "some of his associates think him impertinent." Perhaps what seemed to outsiders to be inappropriate pretensions to levels of culture and sophistication beyond his station were in fact attempts by beleaguered lower-middle-class man to assert his integrity, and to resist, for the sake of his own sense of identity, the stereotype with which he was branded. Unfortunately, such attempts at self-assertion only reinforced the misperceptions. But fiction presented a means to set the record straight. Lower-middle-class authors could present their fellows as they saw them, and life in the lower middle class as they experienced it. Through their fiction, they could not only justify their class to outsiders, but they could define it against the middle class, inferring contrasts through the implied comparisons. Accordingly, in the fiction, lower-middle-class man is not an impostor, an inferior being trying to pass himself off as something he is not. Rather, he is an individual who must try to find a place for himself in a society dominated by middle-class culture and values; and he is an individual who must try to define what home and family, collars and black coats, books and concerts mean to him, quite apart from what they mean to other classes, or what other classes assume they mean to him.

Afterword

The depiction of members of the lower middle class in late nineteenth- and early twentieth century literature tends to vary according to the class of the author. At some level, it would seem, the conflict between the lower middle class and the classes above and below it was waged within the pages of contemporary periodicals and novels. As the most visible and identifiable symbols of the rapid changes taking place in late Victorian society, white-collar workers became the logical focus for the hostility of other classes, a hostility engendered by apprehensiveness about the disturbing alterations in the social order and traditional way of life. Accordingly, members of the culturally dominant middle class, fearful of incursions into their ranks from their social inferiors, responded with defensive disdain for lower-middle-class culture and values. The working class, too, expressed contempt for the expanding armies of clerks and office workers. Middle- and working-class authors' portrayals of lower-middle-class figures reflect the scorn with which the writers viewed the class. At worst such representations are, like T. W. H. Crosland's assessment of the Suburbans, unrelentingly contemptuous; at best they are, like E. M. Forster's portrayal of Leonard Bast, essentially

patronising. These representations conform, to a greater or lesser extent, to the contemporary stereotype of lower-middle-class man as an unimpressive individual of limited taste, breeding and intelligence whose life is narrow, dull and stifling.

Lower-middle-class authors, however, create characters who transcend the stereotype. Rather than being merely representatives of a type, these characters are true individuals who simply happen to come from the lower middle class. However much their lives may be shaped or controlled by the unalterable conditions of class--by income, education or employment--the characters themselves are not defined by limitations. Indeed, lower-middle-class authors often challenge the stereotype by reversing the conventional roles, presenting lower-middle-class characters as dominant, sensitive or intelligent and middle-class characters as pretentious or absurd.

There remains much work to be done on the representations of the lower middle class. More research and analysis can, I believe, shed light on many difficult issues, including the problem of defining the boundaries of the class more precisely. The works of Trollope and Gissing promise to be especially good sources for the examination of its upper and lower limits. Novels and memoirs alike promise to offer insights into what seems to be a great paradox: that lower-middle-class culture, despite its emphasis on conventionality and respectability, apparently provided a

haven along its shadowy margins for individuals with unconventional and even bohemian styles of life. Thus Verloc, in Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent, uses his shop as a cover for his anarchist activities; V. S. Pritchett's family rides a domestic roller-coaster of excess and privation more typical of the financially less secure working class, as recounted in Pritchett's memoir, A Cab at the Door; and Maud Blandy, in Henry James's tale "The Papers," engages in the highly unrespectable activities of smoking cigarettes and drinking beer.¹

Both fiction and memoirs can also provide insights into a particularly important issue that I have not been able to treat in the thesis, that of women's roles in the lower middle class. Life as a homemaker and mother in a lower-middle-class suburb may well have been even more restricting than life as a petty clerk in an office. As Geoffrey Crossick observes, "for wife and children, the repressive force must have been enormous. Without wider contacts of any real intimacy, with an isolated existence in a shapeless suburb where appearances had to be maintained, and entrance into the street had to be regulated for display, the tedium and frustration must have been intense."²

1. See Joseph Conrad, The Secret Agent (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963); V. S. Pritchett, A Cab at the Door (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); and Henry James, "The Papers," in The Complete Tales of Henry James, vol. 12, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Lippincott, 1964), pp. 13-123.

2. Geoffrey Crossick, "The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain: A Discussion," in The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914, ed. Geoffrey Crossick (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 11-60; p. 27.

Several women writers, such as May Sinclair and Alice Dudeney, examine the lives of lower-middle-class women in domestic roles in their novels, providing a significantly different and more intimate perspective on this aspect of lower-middle-class life than it is possible for male novelists to do.

Many fictional women, however, do not stay home, but join the forces of white-collar workers, if only temporarily in some cases. And while attitudes towards specific types of characters and situations in the novels of the period tend to vary according to the sex and class of the authors, there is a surprising consistency in the portrayals of women who elect to (or, in the case of Nora Rowley in He Knew He Was Right, only wish to) become white-collar workers. Whether created by middle-class male authors like Trollope or lower-middle-class female authors like Amy Levy, these fictional women see work as independence; what suggests only drudgery, confinement, and stagnation to so many male characters represents liberty to their female counterparts. The telegraphist of "In the Cage" is a rare exception to this rule.

The greater understanding of the lower middle class--both as it existed and as it was perceived--which this thesis and further study can provide, must change how we read and interpret late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature. Scholarly insights into the literature can be enhanced by this refined understanding, which can

clarify the thematic and symbolic functions of lower-middle-class characters and the significance of their roles within the novels. The function of lower-middle-class characters in fiction that has as its underlying theme the structure of society or the relations among the classes must be examined more extensively than it has been to date. A better understanding of what a figure like Leonard Bast would represent to the imagination of an upper-middle-class author like E. M. Forster, for example, should lead to greater insights into the ways in which Forster dramatises what Lionel Trilling recognises as "the class struggle . . . within a single class, the middle class" in Howard's End.³ In such a struggle, Leonard must have a more significant role than the one which Terry Eagleton claims most critics would assign him: that of "a mere cypher."⁴

Similarly, Phillotson's role in Jude the Obscure demands more attention than critics have given it to date. In their analyses of the novel, critics almost always discuss both Sue and Jude, most also consider Arabella, but few even mention Phillotson, and those who do often give him the most cursory of treatments. In "Jude the Obscure as a Tragedy," for example, Arthur Mizener analyses Jude, Sue, and Arabella as characters and as forces within the novel,

3. Lionel Trilling, E. M. Forster (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 118.

4. Terry Eagleton, Exiles and Emigres: Studies in Modern Literature (New York: Schocken, 1970), p. 39.

but mentions Phillotson only in order to indicate that Sue married and subsequently left him.⁵ But Jude the Obscure recounts the disintegration of the lives of two people, Sue and Jude, who try to define their beliefs and values in ways that do not conform to society's mores and expectations. As the representative, and often the mouthpiece, of conventional society within the novel, Phillotson plays a role whose symbolic and thematic significance has largely gone unrecognised.

Analysis of fiction which, in whole or in part, examines the role of the gentleman must also take into account the place of the lower-middle-class man in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, a study of Trollope's treatment of the gentleman in his novels, such as that done by Shirley Robin Letwin, could be enriched with the inclusion of his treatment of figures like Hugh Stanbury and Charley Tudor.⁶ Similarly, Robin Gilmour's otherwise excellent interpretation of Great Expectations, which he

5. Arthur Mizener, "Jude the Obscure as a Tragedy," Southern Review 6:1 (1940), 193-213. See also A. Alvarez, "Afterword," to Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure (New York: New American Library, 1961); reprinted in Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 414-423; Peter Buitenhuis, "After the Slam of A Doll's House Door: Reverberations in the Work of James, Hardy, Ford and Wells," Mosaic 17:1 (Winter 1984), 83-96; Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 132-146; Jeannette King, Tragedy in the Victorian Novel: Theory and Practice in the Novels of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Henry James (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 120-126.

6. See Shirley Robin Letwin, The Gentleman in Trollope: Individuality and Moral Conduct (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

sees as a dramatisation of the relationship among the various levels of society in nineteenth-century England, is not complete without an analysis of Wemmick's place in that society and of his role in the novel.⁷

The generally unacknowledged importance of the lower middle class in England has perhaps also led to an underestimation of the importance of much of the fiction of writers like H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett. Although there has recently been a considerable upsurge in scholarly interest in Wells, most of the resulting criticism has focused on his utopian and science fiction novels.⁸ But the social novels of Wells and Bennett, and of other neglected writers from their class, have enormous significance. In what might be termed the lower-middle-class novel of manners, their depiction of that class constitutes a reflection of a large and otherwise silent segment of society whose perception of the world must be apprehended by those who wish to attain a true appreciation of the period and of its literature.

7. See Robin Gilmour, The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981).

8. See, for example, a recent special issue of English Literature in Transition (vol. 30:4, 1987) devoted to Wells, which virtually ignores his works of social fiction. See also David Y. Hughes, "Recent Wells Studies," Science-Fiction Studies 11:1 (March 1984), 61-70.

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