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A Discussion on Class

The topic of discussion, or rather question at hand, is the class system in England during the 19th Century. It seems that this idea of class can be divided even further so that individuals are scrutinized by two systems, the caste system and the economic system. The caste system is the power exertion or peer criticism held over individuals less affluent in this society. It is independent of wealth, though wealth may play a part, but rather an individual's worth is based more on birth, education, intelligence, and political savvy. The second division is purely economic in which an individual is pigeon-holed, so to speak, based solely on their economic prestige directly related to a given career choice. For instance, if a character who was once a Hand in Dickens Hard Times were to acquire a great deal of wealth by some means, he or she would be wealthy; however, their social prestige and level in the system would be little changed. This would be directly related to the criticism of his or her peers. They would know of this individual's origins and still allow little movement within the system. In contrast, if an individual who was known as socially prestigious or well bred, but lost his or her wealth, he or she would fall considerable in the social ranks. Take for instance Tom Gradgrind who was exposed to the best education England, at the time, had to offer, but referred to as the 'whelp' throughout the novel due to poor business decisions and the debt he had acquired related to these decisions. As one can see, the class system of England in the 19th Century was a double edged sword continually thwarting the efforts of anyone attempting to subvert the

standard system. As Stephen Blackpool referred to it as a 'muddle' it surely was but even more potent and caustic than he probably comprehended. This idea of class is most evident in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, and Dicken's *Hard Times*. These three novels are exemplary models of this system, and represent its inner workings, and constructs, that created quite the elaborate system of checks and balances.

The aristocratic system as defined by most societies is one in which the social elite have most say or power and influence, while directly reciprocal to these elite few, we have the middle to poor working class. Very few individuals fall outside these two groups which is evident in these three novels. Though some marginal characters may fall outside these two groups, moving freely up and down the social ladder, subverting the theoretical boundaries placed on one another by their fellow man; most fall into this categorization. This is a set back that all three authors attempt to expose and critique in their novels; that is the limited representation in society of the lower class. Surprisingly, this skewed social scale effects both sides as one is held down by the system and the other is both weakened and affected on a political and economic basis. It is difficult to move away from this system, especially when a society is so deeply ingrained in it, in other words, change is nearly impossible, at least over night. A gradual realization of change is needed on both classes for the scales to be tipped at all, in favor of the working class.

In *Pride and Prejudice* we see a family who is on the outskirts of the aristocratic, upper class. They are economically independent, as the Mr. Bennett is not required to submit himself to manual labor, while his daughters are able to remain at home,

concentrating on their education, well.... some of them anyway. We do see; however, that their peers and other individuals who enjoy the same level of prestige, realize that the Bennetts are limited in the social influence and wealth. In saying this, it is clear that the Bennetts suffer from the stranglehold of the caste system of which wealth does play a part. Individual character's views of the Bennetts vary from person to person, but individuals who dwell at the stratosphere of the social elite such as Mr. Darcy or Lady Catherine de Bourgh at first despise them for their shortcomings. It is as though they view them as the lower class, as all persons residing in this upper class should be as mannered and wealthy as they are accustomed to. This is apparent in the first proposal by Mr. Darcy who is rather appalled at his own feelings for Elizabeth Bennett, as she is so ill-connected. "Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own" (Austen 148)? This air of elitism is synonymous with that of the upper class. Many individuals looked down upon those who were positioned in a less favorable place in life, as it was their right and duty, in keeping with the times. Individuals were expected to assert themselves in a manner most favorable to their disposition and obtain means most suitable to their well being, whether it be through marriage, or sound business sense. It is in this light that individuals had little 'wobble room' to move up the social hierarchy. This was especially true of individuals attempting to move into a different social class all together. Say for example, a servant attempting to move into the ranks of social elite. They would in turn be thwarted by those around them, who were subjected to the same misfortunes as they themselves were, or by those in the upper class who had no intentions of allowing someone, perceived as unworthy, to move into their

ranks. One's lot in life was one's own, with little hope for improvement, if it may be less than suitable.

There were of course very few means by which people could attempt to advance up the social ladder, thus casting off the shackles of the poor or middle class. One such means was marriage, by which a lady could marry into a family more well off than her own. This of course was the goal of many women, as everyone regardless of their social standing generally looked after their own well being. Mrs. Bennett is of course guilty of this as her sole aim is to marry her daughters into more favorable conditions. What is interesting to note is that in *Pride and Prejudice*, the upper class can be divided even further into the socially affluent and wealthy, as apposed to those being well-to-do, safe from subjecting themselves to manual labor, or any base function. The Bennetts were of this lower status, as previously mentioned, and were treated so by parties more accustomed to luxury. This was most notable in the case of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who with a poisoned tongue, degraded Elizabeth's connections and worth in the matter of one sitting.

“....and now, at the moment when the wishes of both sisters would be accomplished, in their marriage, to be prevented by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family” (271)!

This disdain held by the upper class is apparent in all three novels and provides a basis for many of the individual characters actions. This is not to say that the entire upper class is an intellectual, elitist, tyrannical mob, ruling the lower class under an iron boot. Many did extend a charitable hand or olive branch to those less fortunate. This can be seen in the actions of Mr. Darcy who continually provides for his 'whelp' of an adopted brother Wickham, and even in Lady Catherine de Burough's generosity towards Mr.

Collins. Most of these actions were justified by inherent benefits to the benefactors, however, these charities did tend to normalize situations and create a much needed bridge between the social classes. These upper class individuals were necessary to the preservation of harmony between the two very different people groups, and also to put a perspective on the whole situation. This new perspective is held by those able to move up the social ranks, once less fortunate and well-to-do. They now had the perspective of both worlds and could feel for the plight of their begotten fellows. Though this may have not been the case, as human greed and the encroaching nature of power take hold, in theory this is true.

An excellent example of this freedom of movement in the ranks is Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, who had once been a poor, beggar boy, now wealthy, and powerful, within the realm of his encompassing reach. However, Heathcliff was only affluent through economic prowess, still held back by birth and upbringing, always to remain an outcast to the true upper class. This obscurity of social identity becomes a curse to this man who struggles to find a place in life. He wants power and property yet cannot help but feel jaded by the upper class these holdings are synonymous with. In the case of Heathcliff, as well as a few other novel characters, wealth is a double-edged sword. The more he attains, the more of his past and identity he loses, or at least feels as though he does. He grows to scorn this upper class, directing much of his hatred, for this as well as other reasons, towards the Linton family, who is the embodiment of this upper class.

In the novel *Wuthering Heights*, social class and the social system to which the individual is a slave is defined and adhered to in a much more subversive manner as compared to the other novels. It is here that we see a man literally torn apart because of

the loss of his true love. But why did Catherine decide to marry Edward Linton instead of Heathcliff? For this we turn to social status. As mentioned before it was expected for an individual to attain the most beneficial and prudential means by economic wealth. It is in this light, that Catherine, regardless of where the love of her heart resided, chose Linton because of his financial abundance and social prestige. Once accustomed to this way of life it would be very difficult to revert back to a lower social status. Supposing that she had now tasted the fruit of well being, it would be nearly impossible for her not to continuing tasting this proverbial fruit, most likely to her satisfaction. It is only when her true love returns that she is forced to make a choice between her divine intended and her current husband. Naturally, in keeping with societal norms, she chooses the later of the two. Yes, it can be said that Heathcliff was wealthy, however, he did not hold the social clout, the place in the social caste system that Linton did. It would have almost been a degrading act for Catherine to return to Heathcliff, much like being stripped of a title. There are many underlying factors that attributed to the rejection of Heathcliff, this is simply one of the most undisclosed, yet poignant reasons for it. The results on Heathcliff are of course drastic as he is torn limb from limb, his heart ripped apart, and his individuality divided between that of remaining true to his subservient beginnings, or casting away his nature, and joining those of the social elite. For him it is not an option.

This subservience and baseness can most clearly be seen in the disposition and manners of Hareton and Joseph, who are the epitome of a vile and ill-bred nature. These two men are uneducated, a sign of good breeding, brash, and depraved human beings, little concerned with their status in society. In Hareton this last point changes as he attempts to impress himself upon Cathy, but it remains all together evident in his general

behavior. For example, even when he is a grown man, he is still unable to read, unable to speak well, and has an accusatory, suspecting nature of those different than him.

Together, with the guidance of Heathcliff, they transform *Wuthering Heights* into something to be feared, an expected result of being raised in such an undesirable way.

Wuthering Heights is thus set apart from the rest of society, by means of inclusion in the lowest caste system. By residing in this ill-respected position, it is nearly impossible to bridge the gap between this lower class and the upper class. This can be seen in the treatment of upper class individuals who are unfortunate enough to enter into the low class of people. "I'll make the porridge! Mr. Earnshaw, I continued, directs me to wait on myself—I will—I'm not going to act the lady among you, for fear I should starve"

(Bronte124). This passage is a perfect example of two warring social classes. It is here, as Isabella Linton is admitted into *Wuthering Heights* and expected to wait upon herself, that we see a total collapse of one social system. It is not always the case, and in fact rarely, that these two social classes reside in harmony with little conflict, the stronger of the two most always smothers the other under power, influence political or economic, or by some other means. Where in *Pride and Prejudice* we see the two social classes residing together in some harmony, it is quite the opposite in *Wuthering Heights* as one continually struggles to stay alive, while the other thrives on its misery.

"I shall have my supper in another room," I said. "Have you no place you call a parlour," said Isabella? "Parlour! Nay, we've no parlours. I yah dunnut loike wer company, they's maister's; un' if yah dunnut loike maister, they's us." "Then I shall go upstairs," I answered; "shew me a chamber" (125)!

This passage is further proof of the difficulty each class has in adjusting to the demands and lack of certain provisions of the other. As was suggested before, Catherine would face the same troubles as her sister did if she decided to rejoin Heathcliff, thus moving

down the social ladder. Individuals are thus controlled by a desire to move up the social ladder, rarely the other way around. The reciprocal of this advancement, likely causing a great deal of strife and adjustment the individual might not be prepared for, as was the case with Isabella and her argument with Joseph.

Wuthering Heights sets itself apart from the other two novels due to its complete lack of regard for the higher or lower class. The individuals in this novel fully attempt to set themselves apart from any differing social status, by way of a depraved distaste for it. Heathcliff is guilty of this in spades as his actions govern, or at the very least influence the actions of those around him. He hates the upper class, and raises Hareton to feel likewise. His servants hold similar sentiments, and by doing this a social vacuum is created in which very rarely is change allowed or welcomed.

Hard Times is different and more like Pride in Prejudice inasmuch as social aspects are concerned. In these later two, the idealistic depravity and hatred are not apparent for the upper class, with the exception perhaps of rousing speeches of Slackbridge, containing all the vehement distaste for the upper class apparent in Wuthering Heights. Instead, we have a handful of individuals representing the upper class, a similar but much larger group representing the lower class, and a few individuals who move freely about the social hierarchy. The author purposefully however, separates these two groups by a sea of mistreatment, doubt, disbelief, and economic stranglehold. As Stephen Blackpool, time and time again, calls the entire system in which they all live a 'muddle', it is really no more than this. An interesting aspect arises from this novel, not quite as obvious in the other two. This is the idea of duality, that is poor and rich, Hands and non-Hands, lower class and upper class, educated and uneducated, even as specific as

light and dark, though the point of discussion is the dual nature of the Hands and non-Hands, and educated and uneducated. What is meant by Hands and non-Hands is those referred to as Hands in the novel solely confined to manual labor. The non-Hands would include those above manual labor, perhaps in charge of the Hands, such as Mr. Bounderby, or perhaps an individual involved in the educational system, such as Thomas Gradgrind. These two groups form a duality in which they are both equally dependent on each other. Though the non-Hands may not realize the influence that the Hands actually have, if they were to fail, the results would be devastating. In a sense, both groups rely on each other for their own success. This dependency gives rise to a number of things but most notable resentment. The Hands resent their position in life as they are on the whole just as necessary to the success of the system as the non-Hands, yet they live a meager existence, barely surviving. While the non-Hands resent their dependency on the Hands, viewing them as a weak and greedy folk, interested in only their own well being. The true feelings of the upper class are no better expressed than in the conversation between Stephen Blackpool and Josiah Bounderby. Bounderby seems to have this notion of what all Hands want, "you don't expect to be set up in a coach and six, and to be fed on turtle soup and venison, with a gold spoon, as a good many of em' do" (Dickens106). This passage is a question directed at Stephen, who by all rights has no intention or delusions of ever eating with a gold spoon. This accusatory manner with which Bounderby conducts most his affairs is a direct result of this before mentioned dependency and also a fear of losing what he has gained. Obviously, there can't be enough wealth to be spread around, so it be only fair that he or anyone in his position should live luxuriantly, as not everyone can. His actions are guided by dependency and greed, while at the same time he

is a hypocrite, as he is in fact the one who has grand delusions of eating venison and turtle soup with a gold spoon. The wealthy always want more wealth, in keeping with human nature, while the poor want a little wealth. Nevertheless, both groups remain dependent, and there are only a few individual exceptions to this. The first already mentioned, Stephen Blackpool, who is ostracized by his own kind on the grounds of a “self-interested deserter” (177). The term self-interested is key here as it denotes this idea of dependency, and contrary to these persons are those who attempt to subvert this system, who remain independent, are then cast out. In one meeting with Bounderby, Stephen is asked to “tell us about yourself and this Combination” (177). This word “Combination,” is also key as we can see from the authors’ capitalization of this word, and for it working hand-in-hand with this notion of dependency. The “Combination,” of a group of people, to Combine into one unit of poverty stricken, lower class Hands. What self-respecting individual, individual being the key word here, would want to Combine with this poor working class?

The other individual that moves freely and subverts the notions of a social system is Sissy Jupe. She begins the novel as a circus performer, one of the lowliest professions available, yet is extended a hand from the upper class, thus a bridge has been formed, whereby a single person is allowed to cross. She however, does not conform to their model of a well educated, aristocratic, lady, but rather causes them, more specifically Thomas, Tom, and Louisa Gradgrind to second guess their social system, to deny to some extent. She is accepted into the upper class on the grounds of education, thus creating a duality of her past and future. Naturally, being the independent person she is, never relying on the system, she clings to her past and is able to undo her teachings in the

school of Facts. Sissy remains in the upper class, yet her heart is always tuned to the beat of the lower class, that is her origin, which it turns out cannot be denied. Her second guessing the system causes Louisa and Thomas, her father, to falter in their own education, thus creating change. It could be said that prior to Sissy's influence, their social upbringing was a curse they could not escape. Louisa violently admits this when she throws herself before her father, recognizing her incompleteness. Thomas recognizes this more subtly, as he suggests near the end that Sissy was and is always right. "Sissy has affected it, father." He raised his eyes to where she stood, like a good fairy in his house, and said in a tone of softened gratitude and grateful kindness, "It is always you, my child" (296). This is a direct affirmation to the lower class directly influencing the lives of individuals in the upper class; the key words here being "softened gratitude", "grateful kindness", and "my child". This is one of the two major times, the other toward Louisa, his own daughter, in which Mr. Gradgrind shows such love, appreciation, heartfelt care. He also refers to her as his child, one of the key moments in the novel, as a mere circus performer is finally, and completely, inducted into the family of Thomas Gradgrind, a very influential upper class family.

It can be reaffirmed that two major classes exist, the lower and upper classes. These are dependent on one another, affecting change in both. They both strive for wealth, yet only one seems to attain it. Very few characters have leeway in this system, and those that do retain their individuality are at times outcasts. It can also be burdensome to both classes, as miss happenings of one most assuredly affect the other. The social system in the 19th Century England has been considered a great many things, most of them negative, but the word the best describes it is simple, it is nothing more than

a “muddle”, whereby change more often than not, does not happen or take hold.

However, once in a while, at key moments in texts such as these, we catch a glimpse of change in working-motion that will lead English society and literary texts as well, into the 20th Century.