

## More Help with the Economic and Social Class Essay (Austen, Brontë, Dickens, Hardy)

Since I'm asking you to synthesize a literary and non-literary text into one argument. I thought a model might be in order.

For my text, I will use Thomas Hardy's 1866 "The Ruined Maid" since I can't model with one of the novel choices (for obvious reasons). It reads as follows:

"O 'Melia, my dear, this does everything crown!  
Who could have supposed I should meet you in Town?  
And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?" --  
"O didn't you know I'd been ruined?" said she.

-- "You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,  
Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks;  
And now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!" --  
"Yes: that's how we dress when we're ruined," said she.

-- "At home in the barton you said thee' and thou,'  
And thik oon,' and theäs oon,' and t'other'; but now  
Your talking quite fits 'ee for high compa-ny!" --  
"Some polish is gained with one's ruin," said she.

-- "Your hands were like paws then, your face blue and bleak  
But now I'm bewitched by your delicate cheek,  
And your little gloves fit as on any la-dy!" --  
"We never do work when we're ruined," said she.

-- "You used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream,  
And you'd sigh, and you'd sock; but at present you seem  
To know not of megrims or melancho-ly!" --  
"True. One's pretty lively when ruined," said she.

-- "I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,  
And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!" --  
"My dear-- a raw country girl, such as you be,  
Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined," said she.

I've chosen to answer the second of the two prompts, but, quite frankly, this could work for either. If you do this right, I suspect yours will as well (the difference in the two being one of emphasis).

The first step is to find something interesting to say about your novel. You're obviously not going to be writing a book, so it should be narrow enough that it's manageable, but broad enough so that you're not confining yourself to a single passage (mine will read this way only because I didn't want to write about a novel you have not read). Note that I am well aware of the trick of getting very, very specific about a passage or passages from early in the novel to disguise the fact that you didn't finish the reading assignment. Your thesis should encompass the entirety of the reading (if not literally the entirety of the novel). It is okay to choose something early in the book as a major focus, but it must be contextualized in terms of its importance to the whole.

What I am suggesting is to write about an aspect of the novel that interests you, and *then* ask yourself how this idea is related to social and economic class. While this may seem to reverse the assignment, this is, in fact, an obvious difference between typical upper and lower half papers on the AP exam and higher and lower scoring papers once you get to college. Nothing is as boring to read as an essay that mechanically links related ideas according to the strict dictates of the prompt. Not only are such papers dull, they seldom have anything interesting to say about the work (as they usually operate on the principle of locating superficial patterns without attempting to explain why they exist).

The second step is to plan your essay in such a way that it seems to develop as a single argument. You can certainly do a "three reason" paragraph, but, again, such an approach is shooting for mediocrity. If you could re-arrange your body paragraphs after you are done and there is no difference in how it reads, you've written a typical high school essay, not the sort of engaged argument that earns As and Bs in college.

I stress the planning because this is a more complicated task than a timed writing, and if you don't know where you are going with your argument, you're very likely to find yourself halfway through with no idea how to proceed further. At minimum, I would understand what my paragraphs are going to argue and the sorts of evidence I was going to be using for each. It is okay to modify plans as you go, but you should have a clear idea what your final destination is going to be. Feel free to show me any outlines or plans to avoid pouring a lot of work into an idea that doesn't really work. Not only can I tell you whether you're screwing up, I can also help suggest sources from the extensive list on my web-site.

Speaking of evidence, this is largely the reason why I am writing this, since I feel that many of you still may be uncomfortable with integrating non-fiction into an analysis of a fictional text. My suggestion is to look at how I do it, but notice a few key ideas:

- First, you have to find a balance between the history stuff and the novel stuff. It can't all be close reading, and it certainly can't all be a summary of the historical backdrop.
- Second, realize that this balance shifts from paragraph to paragraph. Some parts of your argument may only use the novel, and that's okay; however, be aware that it's problematic to have long stretches where it's just a history lesson because the focus of your argument should be the novel.

- Third, the rule of thumb for this sort of thing is you (generally) use quotation for the literary work and paraphrase for the secondary texts. The exception to this would be if you were looking at primary historical texts, but you're not. That does not mean you can't quote from *Daily Life in Victorian England* or *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (assuming these are the two sources that you use), but it should be highly selective (I will sneak a quote or two into mine just to show you what I mean).
- Finally, just because you use paraphrase does not excuse you from using parenthetical references.

Here's my example essay. Mine is twice as long as the 600 word minimum, but I'm not suggesting that yours has to be, particularly if you've nothing else to add but feel some misplaced obligation to pad it out to compete with my model. Nothing is more tedious to read than a long, rambling essay with nothing to say. That said, an essay that clocks in at 602 words (for example) probably isn't earning the highest grade either. Shooting for minimum expectations as a goal usually results in minimum grades as a reward.

I am going to stop and comment between paragraphs. However, I would actually suggest that you read through my sample essay in the bold face type (without stopping) and *then* return to my comments in a second reading.

**The dialog in Thomas Hardy's 1866 "The Ruined Maid" occurs between a female farm laborer and a former peer who is now a rich man's mistress. So scandalous was this idea that Hardy waited nearly forty years to publish the poem, and even then, the 1901 text is slightly abridged. Had the titular "ruined maid" been punished for her sins, there would, no doubt, have been little controversy; however, Hardy satirizes both the inflexible social and economic class system that undergirded Victorian English society as well as the moral code that legitimized it. Like much of Hardy's social criticism, such ideas were deeply uncomfortable to his original readership, challenging deeply entrenched beliefs. Not only does the poem draw attention to the miserable living conditions of England's agrarian working poor, but it suggests that even with material progress, there is no real escape from the social stratification that defined individuals into rigidly prescribed roles.**

Let's stop here. Notice that in my intro 1) I set up the piece; 2) I set up the time period; 3) I set up my approach; and 4) I take a position that I am going to defend (Hardy uses the poem to criticize a too-rigid class system).

Choosing an approach is easy for me to do this because I am only writing about a short poem (and so don't really have to narrow my topic). Because you are writing about a 400 page novel, you're going to have to make some choices. Here's how you can narrow your topic to something manageable: 1) only write about a single conflict in the novel; 2) only write about a specific character; 3) only compare or contrast two characters that face a similar challenge; or 4) only focus on a specific turning point in a single conflict (probably adopting a before/after or

cause/effect structure). This list is obviously not comprehensive, but the big idea is that the more narrow your focus, the easier it will be for you to complete this assignment.

You can also use the supplemental secondary sources from my web-site to narrow if you want to focus on a specific aspect of 19<sup>th</sup> century culture. I'm only using the two basic sources from the packet that I gave you in class, but you will find writing this essay easier if you use these sources more as background. It's easy for me to write an essay that seems very specific and focused about the culture because I already know a lot more than you do about this time period, so I understand how to use a more generalized overview in such a way that teases out the most important details. Even if you only work with one or two other sources in addition to the overview ones, I suspect you'll have a lot easier time knowing what to write about.

**To do this, Hardy employs irony to subvert Victorian social mores. Sexual propriety, for instance, was a deeply entrenched norm for the emergent middle class and the genesis of popular notions of “fallen” or “ruined” women (Mitchell 20); for a woman to form a sexual relationship outside of marriage, as in the poem, was to obviously expose oneself to popular censure. For Hardy, however, the sexual dalliance that “ruins” Amelia is linked to “fine garments” (3), gaudy luxury items (7), the more polished elocution of the upper classes (11), the idleness of the leisure (16), markedly increased happiness (20), and refined features, not hardened by work (22). In other words, rather than condemn Amelia for her moral failing, her “ruin” has only led to a “prosperi-ty” (3) that invites more envy than reproach (25). Though Hardy retains the label “ruined” for Amelia, the idea itself has been upended by the logic of the poem, as vice becomes virtue and virtue vice. That Amelia achieves her new status by any means necessary is itself a reminder of changing mores in Victorian society, one where striving for “success” becomes the pre-dominant virtue (Houghton 183-184), and the poem both satirizes the hypocrisy even as it acknowledges that the attitude (if not the specific circumstances) has become the default (popular piety notwithstanding).**

1) My first body paragraph accomplishes one task, and that task is revealed in the topic sentence. 2) Since my task involves reference to the culture and society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before I begin writing about the specifics of the poem, I use my sources to fill in the reader on anything that he or she needs to know. Often (as here) this means summarizing a big idea that might be developed in one or two paragraphs in the original source. 3) My focus, though, is on the poem. I am not proving that 19<sup>th</sup> century people believed in the idea of a fallen woman. I am proving that this idea helps to explain features of the poem. 4) I sneak in another secondary source at the end in the conclusion of my analysis. It's an obviously understandable idea, so (like in my first secondary source citation) I don't feel the need to go on at length to explain it.

**As a consequence, Amelia's rise in status is measured in economic terms, the visible marker of “ruin” being Amelia's newfound security that is a marked contrast to her former state. Before her hands were “like paws” (13), presumably from “digging potatoes, and spudding up docks [a type of weed]” (6)-- a reminder**

**of the grueling physical conditions of farm work before such labor was mechanized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a lifestyle that, in the words of historian Sally Mitchell, “showed in their clothes and their hands” (18). Now, however, Amelia’s garments are “fair” (3) and her features are “delicate” (14). Because Victorian farm laborers only earned some £25–£35 a year, well below the poverty line (Mitchell 38), all family members would have to contribute to the economic well-being of the household, including women and children, who, like the men, could expect to work a full twelve hour day. Even then, most of the working poor only earned enough to barely sustain life (Mitchell 18), a lifestyle that seriously impacted health and well-being (Mitchell 19). Little wonder, then, that Amelia views her former life as a “hag-ridden dream” (17), as the endemic malnutrition and poor working conditions of the lower classes would break down the body and prematurely age those who lived in such a manner (Mitchell 19).**

Strictly speaking, I don’t need this paragraph. It is an elaboration of the idea that is found at the end of my first body paragraph: Victorian culture stressed the importance of individual success. It defines what this “success” meant in context. Because this is a development paragraph, it’s not a problem that it focuses as much on the history as it does the poem. The heavy lifting in my argument occurs in body paragraphs one and three.

I also snuck in a quotation from a secondary source to show you how this is done. Do not use quotations from secondary sources to *make* your argument, use a snippet (a word or phrase) that expresses the idea that you are communicating in a particularly effective way. Notice also that because I wrote that “historian Sally Mitchell” was the one who said the words that I quoted, I didn’t include the author’s last name in my parenthetical citation (just the page number).

Notice also that this is the first instance of me using a secondary source to cite a specific example (the salary of Victorian farm laborers). In other words, secondary sources can be used for more than just identifying a broad trend.

**The poem’s alternative, Amelia’s new middle class lifestyle, could not be a more stark contrast. In her former life, she dressed in “tatters, without shoes or socks” (5), but now she sports “gay bracelets and bright feathers three” (7) and wears “a fine sweeping gown” (25), clear evidence that she no longer works (given the impractical nature of such accessories) and an inference Amelia explicitly verifies as reality (16). Even the fact that she is encountered in town suggests her improved station-- a setting increasingly associated during this time period with both the rising middle class and the possibility of social mobility (Mitchell 20, 28), and only someone from the upper middle class would have the financial wherewithal to support female or young dependents without their having to earn an income themselves (Mitchell 21), though it is unlikely that Amelia’s benefactor hails from anywhere higher on the social ladder given her former life as a laborer “in the barton” (9) [farmyard], where she would be extremely unlikely to come in contact with actual aristocrats. Whomever he may be, her benefactor**

**(given the clothes Amelia wears and the fact that she no longer has to work) must have earned anywhere from several hundred to over a thousand pounds per annum, very different from a lifestyle of someone with an annual income of less than £50 (Mitchell 35). To say, at least in this context, that Amelia knows “not of megrims [depressions] or melancho-ly” (19), is if anything, an understatement, and would have been recognized as such, for she has not only improved her station, she has done so by more than a factor of ten.**

If an idea derives from multiple pages in a source, do like I did here: (Mitchell 20, 28). If the idea had occurred in multiple *contiguous* pages, my citation would have looked like this: (Mitchell 20-8). If the idea had derived from the synthesis of multiple sources, my citation would have looked like this: (Mitchell 20, 28; Fakesource 99).

This is also a paragraph where I do some close reading of specific lines (essentially arguing that the speaker’s fashion accessories connote either poverty or wealth) as well as make some more generalized inferences about plot points. You should be doing this too. You don’t want to write an essay that reads like a Q2 essay, focused only on a single page or two of a 400 page work (where all you do is a close reading). At the same time, you don’t want an over-generalized overview without specific examples or without any examination of the text at the language level.

Here’s my advice: narrow your focus for your thesis, and then zero in on two or three passages that you will use as specific examples of the larger trend that you are analyzing. If you identify these specific passages before you start writing, the writing task will go much smoother for you. Also, since you’ve already looked at some short passages for class assignments in terms of social and economic class, consider using them.

**Economic class, however, is not the same as social class, and it is here that Hardy suggests that Amelia is not as fortunate. For example, the course country dialect of her former existence, when she “ said thee’ and thou,’ / And thik oon,’ and theäs oon,’ and t’other” (9-10), would have been one obvious marker of her social station (Mitchell 17), though the “polish” (12) gained in her “ruin” mitigates this distinction somewhat. Notice, however, the final “ain’t” of her last sentence (24). Whether viewed as Amelia communicating in a language that she feels would be best understood by her audience (her former peer), or as a reflexive slip that betrays her origins, the implications are the same: she is not as fully integrated into her new life as appearances would suggest-- the advantages being more material than cultural or social. In other words, she remains in her station despite the superficial polish. Similarly, the strictly metered arrangement of the poem, with its sing-song repetitions at the end of stanzas, is strongly reminiscent of popular poetry for the masses (printed in broadsides or chapbooks). Hardy’s appropriation of this popular idiom is not, however, because his readership lies with the working poor (for whom the subject matter would read as grim reality, not satire). Rather, the poet’s use of this format aligns with the social class of the speakers in the poem, mirroring the types of literature they**

would have themselves consumed. This, again, suggests that Amelia's escape from her station is more illusory than real, given that she continues to speak in the parlance of her origins. Finally, and most obviously, there is simply no way that Amelia could ever meet the standards of middle class morality, which stressed not only sexual decorum (Mitchell 20) but also of knowing one's place in society (Mitchell 18). Whether Hardy states this directly or not, his readership would have understood that Amelia would remain an outsider to a social class that could never possibly accept her, just as her pretensions would now alienate her from her original station too. Thus, she improves her lot by opting out of any connection to either her former peers (who would view her with suspicion) or those with whom she now shares a similar prosperity (who would view her with either condescension or condemnation).

Strictly speaking, this paragraph (like Body Paragraph 2) is unnecessary to developing my argument. However, whereas Body Paragraph 2 elaborated on a single idea from Body Paragraph 1, this paragraph complicates and qualifies an idea from Body Paragraph 3. It turns an argument that could have been simplistic (one's class is all about the money) into one that is much more nuanced (not so fast: social status often lags behind rises in economic status). This paragraph also changes my conclusion, since I'm going to argue that this qualification is actually the big idea about class in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or at least it is the big idea that Hardy critiques in the poem.

I'm explaining the function of my paragraphs to illustrate how I took a four paragraph structure (contrasting the pitfalls and benefits of being a fallen woman) and expanded them into something more complicated and developed with paragraphs that expand upon ideas in the frame essay (essentially, body paragraphs one and three). Even if you're still trying to just barely squeak by in this essay (rigidly adhering to the minimum paragraph, source count, and word limit), understand that this isn't going to cut it in college (unless you're fond of Cs, Ds, and Fs).

**This, then, is largely Hardy's point. While it is true that Amelia has improved her standard of living, and while this is undeniably a comparative advantage over her old life, the rigid patterns of social class that define one's place in life are not so easily abandoned. However, whether the reader views this through the lens of middle class morality (in which Amelia has gained the world at the expense of her soul) or a more working class sensibility (in which she would be viewed with suspicion for having disdainfully abandoned her roots), Hardy's irony suggests that the trade-off is still well worth the social isolation-- that moral and ethical principles (even if these are not viewed ironically) are a luxury when one is struggling to merely survive. Consequently, Amelia's choice is completely rational when compared to the alternative: to be trapped in a cycle of poverty, hunger, and disease. The poem, then, reads as an accusation against any social arrangement that would condemn people to such a lifestyle in the name of safeguarding their "moral" health, and its especial target are those who would use**

**such social norms to pass judgment on those who desperately want (and need) to share in the prosperity of the more privileged classes, no matter the cost.**

### **Works Cited**

**Hardy, Thomas. "The Ruined Maid." *Poems of the Past and the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1901. Harper and Brothers, 1902.**

**Houghton, Walter E. *The Victorian Frame of Mind*. Yale University Press, 1957.**

**Mitchell, Sally. *Daily Life in Victorian England, Second Edition*. Greenwood, 2009.**

The conclusion follows the format that I suggest you always use in conclusions. First I sum up how my body paragraphs proved that my thesis was correct, and then I transition into a discussion of the implications of what I have proved (in this case, a thematic statement about snobbery).

Here's some help with theme:

### ***Emma***

#### **Economic and Social Class**

Guiding questions: *Is it wise to have intimate relations too far outside of one's class? Why or why not? How should one relate to money? What role does money play in people's lives and people's happiness? If one's social and economic classes are not aligned, what are the results? If one possesses more wealth than others, how should one relate to those who have less?*

#### **Gender**

Guiding questions: *What is the scope of women's lives during this time period? Does Austen mostly approve, or is there room for improvement? How does courtship temporarily give women more control over their lives? How is courtship still ultimately a power imbalance? What are the excesses of men and the excesses of women; which are worse? If ultimately women take a subordinate position, is this mostly good or mostly bad?*

#### **Self-knowledge**

Guiding questions: *How does one's biases or point-of-view sometimes blind one to the truth? How do understanding one's strengths and weaknesses lead to maturity? In what ways do people blind themselves to what should be obvious, and how does this affect their happiness?*

#### **Self-improvement**

Guiding questions: *What is the process of self-improvement, and what is required to gain wisdom about oneself or the world around oneself? To what extent is this process driven by experience or luck? To what extent is this process driven by a better understanding of oneself? Is this a process that one undergoes alone, or does it require the interaction of others?*

## **Jane Eyre**

### Love versus Autonomy

Guiding questions: *To what extent do human connections matter to one's happiness or self-definition? Can (or should) people discover themselves in isolation? If one does form human connections to others, does that also entail subordinating oneself or one's point-of-view to others? If one does compromise one's point-of-view, is this desirable or undesirable in terms of self-knowledge and happiness?*

### Spiritual Duty

Guiding questions: *What is the proper balance between personal desire and spiritual duty? Is this an either/or conflict, and should one seek only one or the other? What happens when one chooses either personal desire or spiritual duty? Are the results of either course of action mostly positive or mostly negative?*

### Economic and Social Class

Guiding questions: *Are hierarchies of class mostly good (proving social stability) or mostly bad (proving oppressive)? To what extent can material wealth trade off with spiritual understanding? At the same time, is this conflict either/or, or is there some kind of balance that can be struck? Are social divisions within society supportive or destructive of human aims? To what extent do they matter in determining the course of people's lives?*

### Gender

Guiding questions: *What is the scope of women's lives during this time period? Does Brontë mostly approve, or is there room for improvement? To what extent do women suffer as a result of their gender? Do women deserve a voice in determining the course of their own lives? If so, is this the same thing as claiming that the two genders should be equal in rights and responsibilities?*

## **Great Expectations**

### Ambition

Guiding questions: *Is ambition mostly good or mostly bad? More pertinently (since the question is too simple), at what point does ambition become a negative trait, and what is the proper balance between it and one's duty toward others? On balance, which is more important: social improvement or moral improvement? Are the two necessarily in conflict with one another, or is it possible to achieve both? If it is possible, how does one go about achieving the proper balance?*

### Appearances and Reality

Guiding questions: *Think about these concepts: happiness, love, beauty, wealth, and criminality. Does how society defines them necessarily align with their true nature? To what extent do social constructs interfere with true understanding? How do these social constructs drive people to "improve" themselves in self-destructive ways?*

### Economic and Social Class

Guiding questions: *Are hierarchies of class mostly good (proving social stability) or mostly bad (proving oppressive)? To what extent can material wealth trade off with moral understanding? At the same time, is this conflict either/or, or is there some kind of balance that can be struck? Are*

*social divisions within society supportive or destructive of human aims? To what extent do they matter in determining the course of people's lives?*

## Love

*Guiding questions: Think about love in four ways: friendship and the value of forming human connections, familial duty and the value of remaining true to one's family, romantic love and the value of forging partnerships based on mutual support and understanding, and self-love and the dangers of isolating oneself from human connections. To what extent should love be unconditional and based in personal loyalty? To what extent can love become obsessive and destructive? To what extent does forming human connections improve people's lives?*

## **Tess of the d'Urbervilles**

### Fate

*Guiding questions: To what extent are people in control of their own lives? Is there any sense of divine justice or providence? Are outcomes based on moral decisions that people make, or is this process more arbitrary? More specifically, do people get what they deserve? If there is a God, is he beneficent or indifferent?*

### Modernity

*Guiding questions: What has been gained and what has been lost by changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution? Which is more desirable, material or spiritual happiness, and to what extent has modernity changed the relative value of each? With the emergence of the middle classes, to what extent does the emergence of middle class morality affirm or negate life, and what role does hypocrisy play in this process? Is organized religion (the guiding principle of middle class morality) mostly a force for good or ill in society, and how is it opposed to nature? More generally, how do new developments in society work to undermine older connections to nature? Is this a good or bad thing?*

### Economic and Social Class

*Guiding questions: Are hierarchies of class mostly good (proving social stability) or mostly bad (proving oppressive)? To what extent can material wealth trade off with moral understanding? At the same time, is this conflict either/or, or is there some kind of balance that can be struck? Are social divisions within society supportive or destructive of human aims? To what extent do they matter in determining the course of people's lives?*

### Gender

*Guiding questions: What is the scope of women's lives during this time period? Does Hardy mostly approve, or is there room for improvement? To what extent do women suffer as a result of their gender? To what extent is society privileged toward males and male points-of-view? In particular, how does this impact thinking about sexuality or sexual desire, and to what extent are social attitudes towards these ideas worth defending or preserving?*