

Class Structure in 19th Century England:
A Quick Reference Guide

UPPER CLASS -- ARISTOCRATS AND THE LANDED GENTRY

- The Royal Family
- Spiritual Heads of the Church of England -- bishops, archbishops
- The Peerage – dukes and duchesses (addressed by title or as “Your Grace”); marquesses, earls, viscounts and barons (addressed as “Lord X”); marchionesses, countesses, viscountesses and baronesses (addressed as “Lady X”)
- Titled Gentry -- Baronets and Knights (addressed as “Sir X”)
- The Landed Gentry -- wealthy land owners who could live entirely from rental income

UPPER MIDDLE CLASS

- Factory Owners
- Large Scale Business Men
- Bankers
- Doctors
- Lawyers
- Civil Engineers
- Clergymen

LOWER MIDDLE CLASS

- Small Scale Business Men
- Prosperous Small Scale Farmers
- Shopkeepers
- Merchants
- Civil Servants
- Clerks
- Domestic Servants in Supervisory Roles
- Teachers
- Governesses

WORKING CLASS

- Skilled Labor and Craftsmen -- those who learn a trade by apprenticeship
- Subsistence Farmers
- Domestic Servants in Non-Supervisory Roles
- Tenant Farmers
- Semi-Skilled Labor -- factory workers, miners, textile workers, etc.
- Agricultural Labor -- laborers, cider-makers, dairy workers, copse-cutters, turf cutters, herders, etc.
- Seamstresses
- Unskilled Labor – sweepers, street peddlers, railway porters, non-commissioned soldiers and sailors, etc.

THE POOR

Selection One

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

CHAPTER 2: THE FOUNDATIONS OF DAILY LIFE: CLASS, TRADITION, AND MONEY

The basic quality of daily life for people in Victorian England rested on an underlying structure determined by social class and shaped by traditional ways of life in country, town, and city. English society in the nineteenth century was still highly stratified, although some of the old class distinctions were beginning to blur by the end of the period.

SOCIAL CLASS

The concept of class is sometimes difficult to understand. It did not depend on the amount of money people had-- although it did rest partly on the source of their income, as well as on birth and family connections. Most people understood and accepted their place in the class hierarchy. When the railroads designated different cars for first class, second class, and third class, passengers knew where they were expected to ride. Even if a working man had just won a lot of money on the races and could afford an expensive ticket, he would not dream of riding home in the first-class car. Class was revealed in manners, speech, clothing, education, and values. The classes lived in separate areas and observed different social customs in everything from religion to courtship to the names and hours of their meals. In addition, Victorians believed that each class had its

17

own standards, and people were expected to conform to the rules for their class. It was wrong, people thought, to behave like someone from a class above-- or below-- your own.

In the strictest legal sense, England had only two classes: aristocrats (who had inherited titles and land) and commoners (everyone else). Nevertheless, most Victorians understood that their society was three-tiered. In broad terms, the working classes (both men and women) did visible work. Their labor was physical and often dirty; it showed in their clothes and their hands. They were paid a daily or weekly wage. Men of the middle classes did clean work that usually involved mental rather than physical effort. They earned a monthly or yearly salary. The elite or upper classes did not work for money. They included the aristocracy and the landed gentry. Their income came from inherited land or investments.

The Working Classes

Although members of the working class are not much seen in Victorian fiction or in popular conceptions of Victorian life, about three people out of every four did manual work. The largest number were agricultural laborers, domestic servants, and factory hands. In addition there were a great variety of unskilled, semiskilled, and skilled jobs in mining, fishing, transportation, building, the garment industry, and other manual trades.

Most working people earned just enough to stay alive, and could be thrown into poverty by illness, layoffs, or a sudden misfortune such as a factory fire that caused even short-term unemployment. People in unskilled and semiskilled jobs generally needed additional income from several members of the family. Because manual labor was physically demanding, working men were often most highly paid in their twenties, when they were in peak physical condition. They married then; and for a year or two, while both husband and wife continued to work, there was extra money to buy a few things. Once children came, a woman could not usually continue working a 12- or 14-hour day. She might earn something at home by doing piecework or taking in a lodger, but the family would be quite poor while the children were small. In addition, the man earned less as he grew older. Girls and boys had to start work very young. They had little schooling. Even before they were old enough for regular jobs, they often helped in the work done by older members of the family.

18

Once the children were all at work, the family's income would again rise above the poverty level. The parents might even accumulate some savings-- which they would need after the children married and set up their own households. By that time, hard labor and poor food would have weakened the parents' health. They could not earn nearly as much as when they were younger. If they lived to be old, they would probably be very poor. They might end their days in the workhouse unless some of their children earned enough to take care of them.

Skilled workers, who made up perhaps 15 percent of the working class, were in a more fortunate position. Printers, masons, carpenters, bookbinders, expert dressmakers, shoemakers, and the growing number of highly skilled workers in new trades such as toolmaking had a higher and more dependable income. Because these trades were generally learned through apprenticeship, skilled workers came from families that could afford to do without their children's income while the apprenticeship was served. Many of the girls who trained as teachers and nurses in the later part of the century were the daughters of skilled workers. In effect, the skilled formed a separate subclass within the working class, with differences in education, training, interests, and way of life. Artisans such as saddlers, shoemakers, bakers, and builders sometimes became employers and set up their own shops, thus occupying a borderline territory between working and middle classes.

The Middle Classes

The middle class grew in size and importance during the Victorian period. It made up about 15 percent of the population in 1837 and perhaps 25 percent in 1901. This was a diverse group, including everyone between the working classes (who earned their living by physical labor) and the elite (who inherited landed estates). It's important to remember that money was not the defining factor in

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

determining class. The middle class included successful industrialists and extremely wealthy bankers such as the Rothschilds; it also included poor clerks like Bob Cratchit (of Charles Dickens's *The Christmas Carol*). Cratchit earned only half as much as a skilled worker such as a printer or a railway engine driver, but he would nevertheless be considered middle class.

Within the middle class, those with the highest social standing were the professionals (sometimes referred to as the *old middle class*

19

or *upper middle class*). They included Church of England clergymen, military and naval officers, men in the higher-status branches of law and medicine, those at the upper levels of governmental service, university professors, and the headmasters of prestigious schools. Later in the period some additional occupations such as architecture and civil engineering might be added. The professional middle classes were largely urban. They educated their sons at boarding school and university; later in the period they often demanded quality education for their daughters as well.

The newer portion of the upper middle class was made up of large-scale merchants, manufacturers, and bankers-- men whose success was a direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution. The wealthiest among them achieved some class mobility in the next generation by sending their sons to prestigious schools and preparing them for a profession; their daughters might hope to marry landowners.

Farmers (who employed farm laborers to do the actual physical work on the land) were also part of the middle class. So were men in a number of newer occupations that required a reasonably good education: accountants, local government workers, journalists, surveyors, insurance agents, police inspectors, and so forth.

Small shopkeepers and most clerical workers are generally considered lower middle class. Such work required literacy but not further education. Children of the lower middle class were probably kept at school until age 12 or 14, after which daughters as well as sons might begin working in the family shop or in some suitable commercial post. As London became a world center of business and finance, the number of people doing what was then called *black coated work* (we now call it *white collar*) grew enormously. The group included clerks, middle managers, bookkeepers, and lower level government workers. Women increasingly found clean and respectable work in shops, offices, and telephone exchanges and as schoolteachers.

Despite the range in status and income, the middle class was presumed to share a set of standards and ideals. The concept of a distinctly middle-class way of life developed early in the Victorian period. In addition to maintaining a certain kind of house, the middle class despised aristocratic idleness; the majority valued hard work, sexual morality, and individual responsibility. Education was important; sons who were not sent to the elite boarding schools went to local grammar schools or to private schools with a practical curriculum. The middle classes were churchgoers: generally the

20

professional middle class attended the Church of England, while manufacturers and tradesmen were more likely to be Nonconformists. (These terms are explained in chapter 11.)

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

Family togetherness and the idealization of family life were typically middle class: many among the working class had to send children out to work when they were very young, and upper-class children were raised by servants and saw little of their parents. Other middle-class virtues included sobriety, thrift, ambition, punctuality, constructive use of leisure, and prudent marriage-- indeed, the wish to be financially secure before starting a family meant that middle-class men often did not marry until they were past age 30.

A man's status depended primarily on his occupation and on the family into which he was born; a married woman's status derived from her husband. Church of England clergymen in minor parishes could have very small incomes, but they were indisputably gentlemen because of their education, values, and position in the community. It would be inconceivable for such a man's wife or daughters to do paid work. His sons, of course, would support themselves, but extraordinary sacrifices were made to pay for their education so they could enter professions or government service. There were men in skilled trades who earned enough to live in a comfortable house in a decent neighborhood, keep servants, and send their children to good local schools, but they were nevertheless not considered middle class.

The Aristocracy and Landed Gentry

Aristocrats and the gentry made up a hereditary landowning class, whose income came from the rental of their property. A landowner's estate-- some of them owned thousands of acres—was divided into farms that were rented out on very long-term leases. The manor or hall in which the landowner lived was a comfortable country house with a staff of servants. The title (in the case of aristocrats) and the land usually passed intact to the eldest son. With the coming of nineteenth-century moral reforms, an upper-class life of pure leisure and dissipation lost favor. When the eldest son inherited the estate, he was expected to do something useful-- to sit in Parliament, take part in local affairs, use his influence in a charitable cause-- although he did not do any paid work. Younger sons might have some inherited income, but many were prepared to enter a profession, especially as military officers, clergymen, or colonial administrators.

21

In 1842 there were 562 titled families in England. The peerage has five grades: from highest to lowest they are duke (his wife is a duchess), marquess (marchioness), earl (countess), viscount (viscountess), and baron (baroness). An aristocrat is not promoted up the ranks from lower to higher; he continues to hold the title he inherits. Sometimes, however, a new title is created to reward someone for extraordinary public accomplishments. In late-Victorian times, the banker and philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts became the first woman to be made a baroness in recognition of her service to the nation. It may also sometimes appear, in reading novels, that a man has been "promoted," because of the custom of using a courtesy title for an eldest son. A duke or viscount or earl generally holds several additional titles that have passed into his family, over the centuries, through marriage and inheritance. The second-most-important family title is given to the eldest son, by courtesy, while his father is still alive. Thus the Duke of August's son may be known as the Earl of January. When the old duke dies, his son will no longer be called the Earl of January but will become the Duke of August.

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

The head of a titled family had certain responsibilities and privileges. He was automatically a member of the House of Lords. He could not be arrested for debt. And if he were charged with a criminal offense, he would be tried by a *jury of his peers*-- a jury made up of other noblemen, in a special court held in Westminster Hall rather than in an ordinary criminal court.

Knights and baronets are technically commoners; they do not have an aristocrat's privileges, although they are addressed as *Sir*. The baronet's title is inherited. A knighthood must be earned; the title is awarded by the monarch for some important public, military, or artistic accomplishment, and it does not pass down to the knight's sons.

In some European countries, the aristocracy as a whole formed a separate class under law; the children of a titled man were also aristocrats with special rights. In England, the sons and daughters of peers were commoners. If he wanted to be active in government, a peer's son could run for election to the House of Commons. If he broke the law, he would be tried in ordinary criminal courts. Only after his father died would the eldest son become an aristocrat, inherit the title, and take a seat in the House of Lords.

Peers generally had a London residence as well as one or more estates in the country. When Parliament was in session (during spring and early summer), the family lived in their town house and engaged in a round of balls, dinners, and receptions. It held parties

22



Worsley New Hall, a country house surrounded by its park and gardens, was built in the 1840s for Francis Egerton, a poet, member of Parliament, and art patron who became first Earl of Ellesmere in 1846. Courtesy of The Art Archive/Private Collection.

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

to attend the regatta at Henley, horse racing at Ascot, and cricket at Lord's. Men and younger women rode in Hyde Park; older women took drives in the afternoon, made calls, and shopped. During the autumn and winter they returned to their estates for foxhunting and houseparties. Sons were generally educated at the great public schools (which are actually expensive boarding schools, as explained in chapter 8). Daughters were taught at home by a governess.

Baronets occupied an anomalous space between aristocrats and commoners. There were about 850 of them in Victorian times. Although their title is inherited, baronets did not sit in the House of Lords. If they were interested in Parliament, they could be elected to the House of Commons. Even in the middle 1860s, about one third of the men in the House of Commons were either baronets or

23

the sons or grandsons of peers, which helped maintain the political influence of the upper class.

Although aristocrats, who spent half the year in London attending to Parliamentary business, were nationally important, the major local influence in the English countryside rested with the landed gentry. *Burke's Landed Gentry*, which lists their names and lineage, was first published in the year that Victoria became queen (1837). A landed estate typically included a hall or manor house, a home farm that was managed by a bailiff, several farms occupied by tenants, and a village or two in which farm laborers lived.

The landed gentleman usually did not have a house in town. He spent most of the year on his estate and took an active part in local affairs. He was generally called *Squire*, which is not a legal title but rather a customary term for the most influential local landowner. In Victorian times there were about two thousand squires with estates of between one thousand and three thousand acres. Some were knights or baronets, but most had no title. The squire was expected to be a justice of the peace, to take an interest in the countryside, and to promote local charities. His wife and daughters would visit poor people, provide layettes for new babies or soup for the elderly, and probably teach a class in the Sunday school. Theirs was the idealized Victorian life that many people yearn for; there was plenty of time for sports, visiting, hunting, balls, and country festivals.

24

There were vast differences of degree between the upper levels of the nobility and the smaller squires, yet social contact and intermarriage between the two groups were not impossible. Furthermore, the younger sons of both groups might earn their living in a profession. Education at the great public schools created standards of behavior that were shared by boys from the upper middle

7

ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL

Written in 1849 by Cecil Frances Alexander, this hymn from the Church of England's *Hymns Ancient and Modern* was a favorite for use with young children.

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.
Each little flower that opens,
Each little bird that sings,
He made their glowing colours,
He made their tiny wings.
The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate
God made them, high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.

class, the landed gentry, and the aristocracy. In the latter part of the century, leading merchants and industrialists also began to send their sons to Eton, Rugby, and other elite boarding schools, where they acquired the values and manners of the landed classes. Class distinctions became more flexible. Society continued to be hierarchical: people saw themselves as occupying a “place,” and offered deference to those “above,” but some movement was possible. Bankers and businessmen bought country estates and were accepted by the rural gentry. In 1881 the daughter of a manufacturer was, for the first time, presented at court. In the 1890s some industrialists were granted titles.

TRADITIONAL WAYS OF LIFE

Class standing interacted with place of residence to create traditional ways of life. Although actual circumstances were more complex than the idealized picture, these traditions had an effect on the way people lived and thought of themselves. It is often suggested that the golden age of traditional society was between 1850 and 1880, with a fading nostalgic afterlife trailing in memory up to the last happy summer before World War I.

Country Life

In its idealized (and simplified) form, rural life was centered on the squire and his family, who lived in a manor house with stables, gardens, and extensive grounds that he had inherited. Nearby stood a village with a church and village green, two or three pubs, a few shops (grocer, chemist, baker, butcher), and some craftspeople such as a blacksmith, a shoemaker, a dressmaker, and a miller. More than half of the village population would be farm laborers; others worked on the squire’s estate as carpenters or gardeners. Some women had traditional skills in midwifery, nursing, and laying out the dead. The village well supplied water to all of the dwellings and served as meeting place for women and children (who had to haul the water home). The pub was the men’s social center and their

25

source of news and gossip. Women did not drink at the village pub, though they might knock at the back door for beer to take home.

Although the church did not actually belong to the squire, he often had the power to appoint its clergyman. The squire and clergyman might well be the only educated residents; their families generally socialized with one another as well as with neighboring squires. However, the neighborhood might have a few other substantial families-- people who were retired or had independent incomes, and had rented large houses in the vicinity. If the squire’s property bordered on an aristocratic estate, the nobleman and his family exerted a certain presence when they were in residence. They might hand out the prizes at a village agricultural show or enlist support for candidates during an election campaign. Because aristocrats were in the country for only a small part of the year, however, the squire and his family were far more important to village life. Once a year they opened their gardens, put up a tent, and provided a school treat or church festival or some other entertainment for the tenants and villagers.

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

The tenant farmers had comfortable houses and a relatively prosperous style of life, although social distinctions were made. For example, gentry and farmers both enjoyed foxhunting during the autumn. The men sat down as equals for all-male dinners, but it was an unstated custom that farmers and their wives did not attend the hunt ball. The squire was expected to maintain good relations with his tenants, to make sure the buildings were repaired, the land drained, and appropriate improvements made. Relationships between farmers and landlords might last for several generations; the terms of a farm lease were often written to cover three lifetimes.

The village school had one room with separate entrances for boys and girls. It usually stood next to the church and was supported by a voluntary society and by the squire's family. Very young children of farm laborers and village tradespeople learned reading, writing, arithmetic, religion, and (if they were girls) sewing. The farmers' children were sent away to boarding school, but not to the same expensive schools that educated the squire's sons.

Most actual work on farms was done without machinery, and therefore required large numbers of agricultural laborers. They lived in one-room and two-room cottages in the village and in tiny settlements of a dozen or so cottages scattered among the farms. Since the squire owned the cottages, a laborer lost his home if he

26

lost his job. Laborers generally had a little plot to grow some food for their own use—a necessity, since their wages were often below subsistence level. Cottage families had a traditional right to gather firewood by *hook or crook*. That is, they could pick up fallen branches or use a hook to bring down dead wood, but they could not cut trees. Married women earned a little money by knitting or braiding straw for hatmaking; they also did field work in busy seasons. Model family budgets in an 1876 schoolbook suggest that the wife's earnings should be used for postponable extras: shoes, clothing, treats such as sugar and currants and meat for Sunday dinner.

Village girls traditionally went into domestic service. At age 12 or 13 the farm laborer's daughter would become underservant for a farmer or helper in a local tradesman's house. After she had some experience and had saved money for her outfit, she would look for a place in town. Thereafter she came home for a week or two every summer, bringing treats for the younger children and some of her employer's cast-off clothing as gifts for her mother and aunts.

Town Society

The rural village was within reach of a market town. In the days before railroads, towns that held a weekly market day were small and close together; later in the century people could travel further to sell produce and make necessary purchases. A market town had more shops than would be found in a village, and it had a range of artisans, including saddlers, glaziers, carpenters, masons, and plumbers. In addition, there were professionals whose services were needed by the surrounding gentry: bankers, medical men, and solicitors who served as business agents and legal advisors. There might be an old grammar school for sons of the smaller-scale professional men and the more prosperous farmers and tradesmen.

In a town that had a cathedral, or a county town with courts and administrative offices, the upper-middle and professional class would be larger. There would also probably be retired military

and business men, and some upper-middle-class widows or single women with small private incomes. Cathedral and county towns thus had an active social life of calls, visits, dinners, charitable events, evening parties, and annual balls. In addition, the artisans and tradespeople and small employers had their own social and political life centered around the Baptist or Methodist chapel and the town council's business affairs.

36

City Life

Urbanization was the most striking phenomenon of the Victorian age. Cities grew chiefly by migration. Entire families left the village for better jobs in factories; rural girls came into domestic service; younger sons of the gentry looked for opportunities in urban professions. Cities developed patterns of living that were segregated by income. In country towns it was still usual for shopkeepers and even bankers to live on the premises where they worked, but in cities the commercial centers were virtually deserted at night.

The rapid growth of industry meant equally rapid growth in manufacturing cities. Workers' living conditions were miserable in the early part of the century. Developers ran up streets of cheap row houses built back-to-back (so that two rows of housing shared the same back wall). Each dwelling had two rooms, one above the other, with only a single window in the front. There was no indoor plumbing; water had to be carried in buckets from a pump; and a small fireplace with a grate served for both cooking and heating.



Bagot Street, Birmingham, is typical of the rows of terraced housing built for factory workers in an industrial city. Courtesy of The Art Archive.

28

10

The same conditions were found in the rural cottages from which the first generation of industrial workers migrated-- but in cities the sheer mass of people, compounded by the lack of fresh air and sanitation, created public health problems that soon called out for reform.

In the second half of the century, sewers, piped water, gas lighting, and building codes brought massive improvements in city life. There were neighborhoods of substantial homes, "clerks' suburbs" of middle-class row houses, vast areas of rental housing for workers. People lived and shopped and took entertainment in their own neighborhoods. Extensive local social structures were based on church, chapel, trade unions, professional associations, volunteer organizations, sports clubs, amateur musical societies, and so forth. The social relationships of working-class and middle-class urban life became so complicated that they defy any easy description.

MONEY

Although the amount of money people had did not determine their social class, it was evident to Victorians that a certain income was needed in order to maintain a style of living appropriate to the class status one held through birth, education, and occupation. That is, a clergyman's son who was trying to make his living as a novelist would remain middle class even if he earned almost nothing and lived in a single rented room in a working-class neighborhood. But if he wanted to marry and live as a man of his class was expected to live, an income of at least £300 a year was essential. Understanding these target incomes for various standards of living is useful, since it helps in interpreting the sums of money that are often mentioned in novels and biographies.

The Monetary System

In 1971 Britain switched from its old system of currency to a decimal system similar to the one in the United States. The old system used traditional non-decimal English measures such as dozens and scores. The Victorian monetary scheme was based on the penny, the shilling, and the pound. The *penny* was a large copper coin; its written symbol was d. (The plural of *penny* is *pence*.) The *shilling* was a silver coin worth 12 pence; its written symbol was s. The *pound* was equal to 20 shillings or 240 pence; its written symbol was £. The pound coin, made of gold, was referred

29

to as a *sovereign*. In addition, there were coins for the following amounts:

- Farthing (one-fourth of a penny)
- Halfpenny
- Twopence
- Threepence
- Groat (4 pence)
- Sixpence
- Florin (2 shillings)
- Half crown (2 shillings and sixpence)
- Double florin (4 shillings)

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

Crown (5 shillings)

Half sovereign (10 shillings, or one-half of a pound).

The *guinea* coin, worth 21 shillings, was not minted after 1813. The word remained in use, however, especially for luxury goods. A rich customer would presumably not care if something was priced at 20 guineas rather than 20 pounds, although 20 guineas is another way of saying “20 pounds and 20 shillings” and the customer would therefore actually be paying 21 pounds.

Almost all money circulated in the form of coins. The government did not print paper money. Paper *bank notes* were issued by individual banks. If the bank failed-- which was not uncommon-- its banknotes became worthless. Five-pound notes were the smallest ones issued. Careful people insisted on using gold coins even for very large amounts. Checks were not commonly accepted. Merchants used other complicated means of transferring large sums of money.

It is not possible to translate the value of Victorian money into modern terms by using a simple system of multiplication. There are too many differences in relative prices, costs, values, standards. House rent, for example, was very low: the middle-class rule of thumb was that 10 percent of one’s annual income might be spent on rent. In the contemporary United States, a family generally spends at least one-third of its income on housing costs. On the other hand, even the most modest middle-class Victorian family had at least one servant, although that did not mean that the woman of the house spent her days in idleness. It took much more time and energy to do housework without washing machines, refrigeration, piped water, or central heating. Servants did a great deal of manual labor that is no longer necessary: filling and cleaning lamps; carrying coal, tending fires and emptying ashes; heating

30

water for baths and carrying it upstairs; baking bread, preserving fruit, making almost all meals from scratch; going on foot to do daily marketing and other errands; taking rugs outside to clean by beating; boiling water for laundry (and wringing it out by hand); and so forth. Servants’ wages seem absurdly low to us, but the servant also got room and board and some of her clothing; her meals were almost certainly more plentiful than when she lived in her parents’ cottage.

A few sample prices will suggest what some commonplace things cost:

The standard quartern loaf of bread (a large, dense loaf which weighed just over 4 1/4 lb.) cost 8 1/2d. in the 1840s, 7d. in 1875, 6d. in 1887, 5d. by 1895. Because North American grain made bread so much cheaper, working-class people had more money available for other food.

At midcentury cotton stockings cost from 4 1/2d. to 4s. 11 1/2d. a pair, depending on the quality. At the end of the century, silk stockings could be had for 5s. a pair and a ready-made woman’s suit for £1. A woman’s riding habit made to measure cost a minimum of 10 guineas, and it might come to a great deal more.

A pair of workingman’s boots cost 11s. A workingman’s shirt could be bought for 1s. 4d. and his socks for 9d.; he probably wore a second-hand coat purchased for about 4s.

The usual London cab fare inside a 4-mile circle with its center at Charing Cross was 1s. for any distance under 2 miles and 6d. a mile thereafter.

A bicycle in the 1880s could be had for £4–£5. By the end of 1890s, cheap newspapers advertised

factory-refurbished second-hand cycles at £1.

Books were expensive. A new hardbound novel in three volumes cost 31s. 6d. (i.e., more than an inexpensive woman's dress or a second-hand bicycle); people joined private libraries for a subscription of a guinea a year instead. Dickens and other popular writers issued their books in paper-covered installments at 1 shilling a month, which brought the total price down to £1 and spread it over almost two years.

Working-class schooling until the 1890s (when it became free) typically cost 1d.–4d. a week for each child. Fees for a middleclass boy at a moderate boarding school came to £100–£150 a year. One year at an Oxford or Cambridge women's college towards the end of the century was £105. Expenses for a man, who expected to drink wine and have a more luxurious standard of living while he attended the university, ran two or three times that much.

31

The daily newspaper sold for 7d. early in the period. Once the stamp tax and paper duty were repealed and cheap paper was invented, newspapers fell to a penny and then to a halfpenny. The cost of an adult's burial, even at the most minimal standard, was between £4 and £5.

Annual Income and Standards of Living

One good way to get a sense of relative prices is through looking at household guides that suggest how people should live and what they can afford at various levels of income. One common way of putting the question was to list how many servants a family could employ. A single woman with an income of £100 a year or a married couple with £150–£200 could afford a young maid-of-all-work. At £300, the family could afford a maid-of-all-work and a nursemaid to look after the children, although the woman of the house would still be doing much of the daily labor, including some cooking.

If the income was £500 a year, household manuals said, there should be three servants: cook, housemaid, and nursemaid. (If no children were at home, the nursemaid would be replaced by a *tweenie*, whose job was to help both cook and housemaid as needed, or by a boy for cleaning boots, running errands, carrying heavy loads, and doing outdoors work.) At £750, the servants should include cook, housemaid, and nursemaid, as well as a boy; at this level, the woman of the house exercised supervision but no longer did household work herself.

An income of £1,000 a year marked a significant dividing line. At that figure, a family could afford four women (cook, two housemaids, nurserymaid) plus a coachman and stableboy; thus they could keep one or two horses and a carriage. They no longer had to depend on public transportation to get around. Above £1,500 a year the number of servants rose rapidly, including a variety of specialists to tend the larger house and grounds. A family with £5,000 a year, one manual suggested, could employ 11 women and 13 men: housekeeper, cook, lady's maid, nurse, two housemaids, laundry maid, stillroom maid, nurserymaid, kitchen-maid, scullion; butler, valet, house steward, coachman, two grooms, one assistant groom, two footmen, three gardeners, and a laborer. (Servants' duties will be explained in chapter 3.) At over £10,000 a year there would almost certainly be both a London house and country estate. Most servants would move with the family from one to the other,

but additional estate servants such as gamekeepers would remain in the country.

32

Another common way of putting the question, for Victorian writers, was to ask how much income a man must have in order to marry. Single men and women, it was assumed, could maintain their class status even if they lived in an eccentric way, but a married man needed enough to set up housekeeping and provide the proper class background for his children. (Children were born soon after marriage, because there was no effective birth control.) The numbers presented in the table entitled "Typical Annual Incomes" are useful markers for interpreting Victorian daily life.

The 250 wealthiest aristocrats had incomes of more than £30,000 a year. These men owned landed estates in several counties (which is why newly rich city merchants could sometimes find an impressive property to rent) and a mansion in a fashionable part of London such as Grosvenor or Belgrave Square, Park Lane, or Piccadilly.

TYPICAL ANNUAL INCOMES	
Wealthiest aristocrats	£30,000
Other aristocrats	
Wealthy merchants, bankers, manufacturers	£10,000
Smallest landed gentry	
Some clergymen, physicians, barristers, businessmen	£1,000–£2,000
Most of the middle class: doctors, barristers, solicitors, civil servants, senior clerks	£300–£800
Lower middle class: clerks, head teachers, journalists, shopkeepers	
Highly skilled mechanics and artisans	£150–£300
Skilled workers, including cabinetmakers, typesetters, carpenters, locomotive drivers, senior dressmakers	£75–£100
Average earnings for semiskilled working men and for skilled women in factories and shops	£50–£75
Seamen, navvies, longshoremen, some domestic servants	£45
Farm laborers, soldiers, typists	£25
Lowest ranked shop assistants, domestic servants, needleworkers	£12–£20

33

The figure of £10,000 a year was generally seen as the lower limit for an aristocrat's establishment. There were perhaps 750 families with incomes between £10,000 and £30,000. Not all of them were aristocrats, but it is fairly safe to assume that anyone with a title had at least £10,000 a

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

year. In addition to maintaining his country estate and London town house (and the staff of servants these two establishments required), the peer spent at least £600 a year on his horses. He was advised to put aside £150 a year for each son, from the day of his birth, in order to send him to Eton, and to save £100 a year for each daughter to cover the expenses of her social debut.

By the end of the period, leading bankers and industrialists were also likely to be earning £10,000 a year. Although that did not make an industrialist a member of the upper class, he could afford a country estate, send his sons to Eton, and arrange a proper debutante season for his daughters. Some of his sons and daughters might thus marry into the aristocracy.

Upper-class incomes were often stated in terms of land rather than money. The rule of thumb was that land brought in £1 per acre per year. Thus when an earl was said to have 20,000 acres, his income can be estimated at about £20,000 a year. Landed estates were almost always protected by wills or deeds requiring them to be passed to the eldest son (a system known as *primogeniture*). In addition, there were often further deeds of entail, which restricted what a landowner could do with the property he inherited. Entail ensured that the estate would be passed on intact to the next generation. It was quite possible to be land poor-- in bad times, when farm rents fell, the owner of an entailed estate could not sell any property or even mortgage it to raise money. There might also be charges on the estate as a result of other legal agreements: support for the previous landowner's widow, specific capital sums or large allowances to maintain younger sons, marriage portions for daughters, debts contracted in previous generations. Sometimes the income a landowner could actually use for himself and his family was less than half of the money he received from the tenant farmers' rents.

These restrictions affected the landed gentry as well as the aristocracy. The exact conditions of primogeniture and entail differed, depending on what was written in the deeds. In some cases, daughters inherited if there were no sons. In other cases the entail required that the property be passed to a male relation. That is the case in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*: the Bennet family has five daughters but no sons and therefore will have very little

34

income after Mr. Bennet dies and his landed estate goes to a distant relative.

Upper-class people who were not themselves landowners generally lived on the investment income produced by money they had inherited. Safe investments that provided a steady income were the *funds* (government bonds returning about 5% a year) or consols (a kind of annuity that was more stable and secure but paid only 3%). The word *fortune* meant inheritance, not income. Thus if a widow had a fortune of £10,000, put into safe investments, her income was at most £500 a year (5% of £10,000). That provided a comfortable life, but was entirely different from an income of £10,000 a year. The fortune, however, remained intact to be inherited by someone else. When reading Victorian novels, it is important to keep this distinction in mind-- and also to realize that any Victorian investment that paid more than 7% was probably unsafe. The character who was tempted to put all of his money into mining shares, Brazilian railway stock, or some other speculation that promised a high return was very likely to lose his fortune and be plunged into poverty.

For the landed gentry, £1,000 a year was judged to be the smallest income that would permit life as a country squire (i.e., the squire's estate had to include 1,000 acres of farmland that produced rent). A thousand pounds a year was also an income that would support a solid upper-middle-class life for a professional man and his family or for a successful banker or merchant. On that figure, a man

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

could afford to live in a house with 10 or more rooms and a garden; he could provide a governess for his daughters or a reasonably good (if not elite) school for his sons. He could also keep a horse, which not only required feed, stabling, and wages for a manservant, but also made him liable for the luxury tax that was imposed on carriage horses but not on working horses.

Although a successful barrister or a doctor with a fashionable practice might earn between £1,000 and £2,000 a year, a comfortable (if horseless) middle-class life for a businessman, a less prominent professional man, or a civil servant was possible on an income of £600–£800 a year. One magazine's sample budget suggested a semidetached house (called a twin or duplex in the United States), a private neighborhood day school for the children, a daily supply of wine with meals, and an annual holiday in seaside lodgings or a Swiss hotel.

In the 1860s, a *London Times* debate on the causes of late marriage proposed that the smallest possible sum on which a middleclass man could support a wife was £300 a year. On that income, the

35

family would live in a three-story semidetached or row house and have one general servant in addition to a young nurserymaid. The wife would sew her own clothes after they had been cut and fitted by a professional dressmaker. They would worry a lot about school fees if there were many children and if the man did not get promotions that raised his income.

Later in the century, educated single women who taught in good schools, worked in social services, or wrote for the press earned between £75 and £125 a year. A single middle-class woman could live comfortably in ladies' chambers, which were two-room apartments with a small kitchenette. Cleaning services were provided and there was a restaurant in the building, so a woman with a fulltime job did not need to cook her own meals or employ a servant. Her salary would allow her to buy the good clothing she needed, go to concerts, and travel to the Continent with a group of friends during her summer vacation.

For men of the lower middle classes, an annual income of £150 was the minimum needed for marriage. Some London banks dismissed any tellers who married before their salary reached that amount, on the grounds that a respectable man who tried to raise a family on less would be too tempted to steal from the cash drawer. In addition to bank clerks, others who typically earned £150–£200 a year were head teachers in board schools (equivalent to the neighborhood public school in the United States), senior clerks in business offices, reporters on metropolitan papers, and minor civil servants such as sanitary inspectors, poor-law administrators, or police inspectors. Many shopkeepers and small businessmen also fell into this range of earnings.

A magazine article on expenses suggested that if the number of children was not large, the lower-middle-class London family could afford a two-story row house in a cheaper suburb such as Clapham, Wandsworth, Walthamstow, Kilburn, or Finsbury Park. A monthly rail ticket would enable the man to commute into the city for work. He would have to spend some money on his clothing, because he needed a businesslike appearance. (A skilled mechanic, whose income would be similar, did not have this expense.) His wife would do her own dressmaking and remake hand-me-down clothes for the children. Her only servant would be a young maid of- all-work or an occasional cleaning woman. The children would be sent to board schools.

Similar gradations existed in the working class. The most highly skilled workers in essential trades such as shipbuilding and

36

steelmaking could earn between £100 and £200 a year. Their standard of material comfort was similar to many clerical workers in the lower middle class, although they tended to live in different neighborhoods-- indeed, in different cities, because the industries that employed the most highly paid manual workers were concentrated in the midlands and the north of England.

The labor aristocracy of skilled artisans in regular employment earned 30–40 shillings a week (i.e., £75–£100 a year). The group included cabinetmakers, typesetters, jewelers, scientific instrument makers, carpenters, locomotive drivers, and the mechanics who made and repaired factory machinery. To enter these trades, a boy was generally apprenticed after he left school at age 12. By age 20 he was established in a good job that he got through family connections or his father's union (in much the same way that young men in a higher station got desirable posts in the church or diplomatic service). He married in his middle twenties or later, after saving money to furnish a house; the woman he married would have been accumulating linens and housewares with her earnings. Thus prepared, they could anticipate a reasonably comfortable life with an adequate diet, a carpet in the front room, and a seaside excursion in the summer. Their children would be sent to board school. The boys would leave at age 12 for an apprenticeship, but the girls might stay on as pupil teachers to prepare for an independent career of their own.

The lower ranks of skilled workers and large numbers of men in semiskilled occupations earned between 20 and 30 shillings a week. In common speech, the rule-of-thumb lower limit for a tolerable standard of living was set at a pound a week, or about £50 per year. A survey of wages in 1867 reported that hatmakers, glassworkers, upholsterers, skilled seamen, and butchers' and bakers' men earned 28–30s. a week. Hairdressers, dockyard workers, gas workers, tanners, blacksmiths, hosiery workers, and lacemakers earned 25s. Railway workmen, postmen, miners, chemical workers, textile workers, millers, coalheavers, and boot and shoe workers were paid 21–23s. In jobs of this sort wages were sometimes brought up by overtime, but they could also fall short if work was slack or weather was bad.

On wages of 1 pound a week, reasonable comfort could be achieved only if the family was very small or if more than one person was earning. About 60 percent of adult male workers averaged under 25s. a week. But although wages stayed relatively stable during most of the Victorian period, the cost of living fell dramatically

37

in the latter part of the century. Cheap food from Australia and North America, cheap clothing and shoes owing to factory production, and cheap coal as transportation improved meant that late-Victorian workers could spend more of their income on housing and could keep their children in school longer.

Towards the end of the century, social scientist Charles Booth determined that the poverty line was 18s. a week (£45 a year). That was about the usual wage for ordinary seamen, fishers, police constables, quarrymen, longshoremen, and stable hands. After food prices had declined, a small family that could depend on 18s. a week in regular income could make ends meet, though just barely.

If earnings fell much below that amount, however, malnutrition and ill health would soon make it impossible to do a day's hard physical labor even if work could be found.

At the bottom of the earning scale for adult male workers, farm laborers, and some general laborers earned between 10s. and 14s. a week (£25–£35 a year). A wage that small could not support a family. However, farm laborers generally had a chance to grow some of their own food; rural women and children could earn extra money at planting and harvest season. General unskilled laborers were almost inevitably single men or had wives in full-time work. Some seamstresses earned as little as 7 or 9 shillings. Unless they were contributing to a family's income, they could not support themselves on that sum; they would almost certainly suffer from malnutrition.

38

Selection Two

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

Chapter 8: THE COMMERCIAL SPIRIT

I do not know any thing more dreadful than a state of mind which is, perhaps, the characteristic of this country, and which the prosperity of this country so miserably fosters. I mean that ambitious spirit, to use a great word, but I know no other word to express my meaning-- that low ambition which sets everyone on the look-out to succeed and to rise in life, to amass money, to gain power, to depress his rivals, to triumph over his hitherto superiors, to affect a consequence and a gentility which he had not before.

Newman, 1836

The commercial Spirit has always existed in human society. What was peculiar to the nineteenth century was its "overbalance:" it became the "paramount principle of action in the nation at large." This emphasis, consequent on the great increase of business activity which accompanied the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions, had emerged before 1830, and by then had become an established fact, recognized by John Sterling in "The State of Society in England" (1828) and by Southey in his *Colloquies on Society* (1829). "*Wealth! wealth! wealth! Praise be to the god of the nineteenth century! The golden idol! the mighty Mammon!* Such are the accents of the time, such the cry of the nation. ... There may be here and there an individual, who does not spend his heart in labouring for riches; but

183

there is nothing approaching to a class of persons actuated by any other desire." As Sterling implies, the worship of Mammon was not confined to business circles. It was almost as common among the landed as the monied aristocracy.' It infected all the professions. "Even artists and men of letters, with

18

here and there a brilliant exception, let the bankers' book become more and more the criterion of their being on the right road." Tom Brown discovered that at Oxford itself "the worship of the golden calf was verily and indeed rampant ... side by side, no doubt, with much that was manly and noble, but tainting more or less the whole life of the place."

1. *Respectability*

In the middle classes the passion for wealth was closely connected with another, for respectability. Indeed, their economic struggle was focused less on the comforts and luxuries which had hitherto lain beyond their reach than on the respect which money could now command. "From early childhood, the sayings and doings of all around them" indoctrinated the Victorians with "the idea, that wealth and respectability are two sides of the same thing," and prompted "the expenditure of all their energies in money-making." Comparing French with English society, Mill pointed out that in the former "any man who can dress decently may dine with or go to the soirees of anybody, and mix on terms of perfect equality with all whom he meets"; and consequently there was "very little of the artificial demand for mere money which the striving and straining for respectability occasions here."

The increasing emphasis on riches produced a new attitude toward poverty. In the past it had been pitied, relieved, or ignored, and only rarely considered an object of scorn or a source of shame. But now Tom Brown at Oxford soon learned "that poverty is a disgrace to a Briton, and that, until you know a man thoroughly, you

184

must always" assume that "he is the owner of unlimited ready money." His friend Hardy, who was a servitor, not only found himself looked down upon but was so carried along by "the spirit of the place" he became for the first time "ashamed" of being poor."

In itself wealth alone was hardly enough to make a Victorian respectable. He had not only to be rich but to be a gentleman; so that the struggle for money in the middle class was complemented, and to a considerable extent motivated, by the struggle for social advancement." At first, however, in the earlier decades of the century, that was not the case. Disraeli's Millbank, for example, was "a capitalist as anxious to raise a monument of the skill and power of his order as to obtain a return for the great investment"; and he proudly attributed the transformation of forest land into an area of thriving population and large financial returns to Saxon (i.e. middle-class) industry, competing successfully with Norman (i.e. aristocratic) manners." And Mrs. Gaskell's John Thornton wanted only to be the head of a firm that should be known for generations, even in "foreign countries and far-away seas." To be a merchant prince was a far finer thing than to be a gentleman; or, as Wingfield-Stratford put it, men like Bright and Cobden "were too proud to be gentlemen." A respectable British citizen, with top hat and frock coat all complete, was on a level with any lord in the land." But by the 1840's all this was becoming old-fashioned. The younger generation was determined to push-and buy-its way into the upper classes: to exchange trade for a profession and Dissent for the Church of England; to own a gig and, if possible, a country estate, perhaps even a title. Their representative, in contrast to Millbank or Thornton, is Alton Locke's

185

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

uncle, who began life as a clerk in a grocery store, then became foreman and married his master's blooming widow, "and rose and rose, year by year, till ... he was owner of a first-rate grocery establishment in the City, and a pleasant villa near Herne Hill, and had a son ... at King's College, preparing for Cambridge and the Church-that being now-a-days the approved method of converting a tradesman's son into a gentleman." But the struggle for social advancement, like that for wealth, was not limited to merchants and manufacturers. By 1840 Mill was saying that "that entire unfixedness in the social position of individuals-- that treading upon the heels of one another-- that habitual dissatisfaction of each with the position he occupies, and eager desire to push himself into the next above it" had become or was becoming a characteristic of the nation. No one seems to care any longer to cultivate "the pleasures or the virtues corresponding to his station in society, but solely to get out of it as quickly as possible."

It was the continued existence of class lines at the same time that the dividing barriers were breaking down, consequent upon the increasing wealth of the bourgeoisie and the declining wealth of the aristocracy, which made this ambition practical, and without which the keen incentive to economic battle would not have existed. The distinguishing feature of the Victorian social structure was its mean between the extremes of equality (in France and the United States)

186

and of irremovable inequalities (in the East, and still existing, substantially, in most European countries). Either extreme would have made the struggle to rise unnecessary or futile. But in a system of removable inequalities, where the aristocracy was prepared to intermarry with the new rich and the gentry to accept into county society (if not at once, in a few years) the commoner who bought an estate, there existed the indispensable combination of opportunity and incentive. No doubt this had always been true to some extent, but the system had become noticeably more flexible. It seemed to Frances Cobbe that "life among all classes in the last generation" (1800-30) was "much less a struggle than it is with us" because class lines were then "more marked, and there was very little possibility of rising ... into higher grades of society." The contrasting picture of the present generation was drawn by Ruskin: "The very removal of the massy bars which once separated one class of society from another, has rendered it tenfold more shameful in foolish people's, *i.e.*, in most people's eyes, to remain in the lower grades of it, than ever it was before. ... Now that a man may make money, and rise in the world, and associate himself, unreproached, with people once far above him ... it becomes a veritable shame to him to remain in the state he was born in, and everybody thinks it is his *duty* to try to be a 'gentleman.'"

We should recognize here the precision and the novelty of the word "duty." Formerly it had simply meant the obligation to fulfill one's calling: everyone was "to do his duty in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call him." But that was alien to both the principles and the temper of the new era. "To push on, to climb vigorously on the slippery steps of the social ladder, to raise ourselves one step or more out of the rank of life in which we were born, is now converted into a duty." The reference is to the liberal theory

187

that to do the best for yourself was to do the best for society. Social ambition, driving one to the utmost economic effort, was the blessed means of social progress. Beatrice Webb has described the creed of self-advancement as she knew it in her own home:

It was the bounden duty of every citizen to better his social status; to ignore those beneath him, and to aim steadily at the top rung of the social ladder. Only by this persistent pursuit by each individual of his own and his family's interest would the highest general level of civilisation be attained. ... No one of the present generation realises with what sincerity and fervour these doctrines were held by the representative men and women of the mid-Victorian middle class.

When duty and respectability combined to make gentility the goal of existence, the phenomenon of snobbery was pervasive. To pretend to be higher in the social scale than one really was, or to cultivate and flatter one's superiors while he despised and insulted his inferiors, without reference in either case to moral or intellectual merits--these were the tendencies which Thackeray in particular explored through all their ramifications, starting with *The Book of Snobs* (1848) and continuing in the novels. One particular form he dissected provides an amusing contrast with the "honest" pride of the early industrialists in their own class. It may be called the snobbish pride of not being snobbish. Mrs. Hobson Newcome "will not bow down to kiss the hand of a haughty aristocracy. She is a merchant's wife and an attorney's daughter. There is no pride about her. Her brother-in-law, poor dear Brian ... was welcome, after banking-hours, to forsake his own friends for his wife's fine relations, and to dangle after lords and ladies in Mayfair. She had no such absurd vanity-- not she." At her own soirees one met something far finer than fashionable people, namely, a motley group of travelers, poets, and painters of dubious genius, collected on the principle she expounds to Colonel Newcome: "If I can be the means-- the *humble* means-- to bring men of genius together-- mind to associate with mind-- men of all nations to mingle in *friendly unison*-- I shall not have lived *altogether* in vain. ... I do not say there are not in our own family persons who worship mere wordly rank, and think but of fashion and gaiety; but such, I

188

trust, will never be the objects in life of me and my children. We are but merchants; we seek to be *no more*."

2. *The Bourgeois Dream*

In a business society, and one that was strongly under Puritan influence, work was an absolute necessity. Without it there was no hope of achieving the twin goals of life-- respectability and salvation. Hence, parents and preachers, writers and lecturers, proclaimed as with a single voice that man was created to work, that everyone had his appointed calling in which he was to labor for God and man, that idleness was a moral and a social sin. Pigeon-shooting aristocrats living in parasitic luxury were special objects of clerical and middle-class scorn. If a man were rich enough not to work, he was to do good works among the poor or serve his country in public office, local or national." And so, after reading hundreds of passages on the necessity and obligation to work, one comes with a

start on a remark of Gladstone's: "How are we to secure to labor its due honor? ... How are we to make ourselves believe ... that in the sight of God and man labor is honorable and idleness is contemptible?" The desperate tone of almost hopeless insistence betrays the strength of exactly the opposite values. The truth is, however paradoxical it may seem, that the businessman who thought of work as a supreme duty dreamed of retiring from work-- into idleness; and those who made the idle aristocrat an object of scorn found him also an object of envy. The son of Alton Locke's old employer, "fired with the great spirit of the nineteenth century ... resolved to make haste to be rich" so that he could emulate the dozens of men who had begun business long after his old-fashioned, slow-money-making father, and "had now retired to luxurious ease and suburban villas." The hero of Froude's *Nemesis of Faith* lives in a provincial town where there are many "business people, who have either retired from business themselves,

189

or have withdrawn their families out of its atmosphere to make idle ladies and gentlemen of them."

These statements explain the paradox. For one thing, the ambitious merchant or manufacturer who exalted work valued idleness as a badge of status: it showed, as the saying went, that one was "a gentleman of independent means." But more important, even as he threw himself ardently into his work, he longed for a life of ease. Not of mere ease-- luxurious ease. At the heart of the bourgeois dream was the ideal of gracious living, symbolized by the country house. The middle-class businessman longed to escape from drudgery in hideous surroundings into a world of beauty and leisure, a life of dignity and peace, from which sordid anxieties were shut out. This was the vision which the "Goddess of Getting-on" held up before the Bradford captains of industry.

Your ideal of human life then is, I think, that it should be passed in a *pleasant undulating world*, with iron and coal everywhere underneath it. On each *pleasant bank* of this world is to be a *beautiful mansion*, with two wings; and stables, and coach-houses; a *moderately-sized park*; a *large garden* and hot-houses; and *pleasant carriage* drives through the shrubberies. In this mansion are to live the favoured votaries of the Goddess; the English gentleman, with his *gracious wife*, and his *beautiful family*; he always able to have the boudoir and the jewels for the wife, and the *beautiful ball dresses* for the daughters, and hunters for the sons, and a shooting in the Highlands for himself.

Nothing is said there about social prestige. In the words I have italicized Ruskin defines the kind of life that is dreamed of, utterly removed from the smoke and dirt and grimy battles of the mill. This and no mere do-nothing rest is the content of "idleness."

190

3. Success

Much as each was desired, money, respectability, "lovely ease"-- none of them was the chief idol of the commercial spirit or the major motivation of the economic struggle. The *summum bonum* for everyone not born into the aristocracy was success. To win the race of life, to outdistance your

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

competitors, to reach the top and hold a position in which you gave the orders that others executed-- this was the crowning glory. At the end of a hard struggle from obscurity to the head of a great factory, Mr. Thornton in *North and South* is proud to say that he has raised himself "to a level from which he might see and read the great game of worldly success, and honestly, by such far-sightedness, command more power and influence than in any other mode of life." That indeed was the "idea" of the mercantile life from which he had started. "Her merchants be like princes," his mother had said, "reading the text aloud, as if it were a trumpet-call to invite her boy to the struggle." This is not fiction but fact. Daniel Gooch, engineer and inventor, who rose to be chairman of the Great Western Railway-- and Sir Daniel as well-- once quoted to his workmen a sentence his mother had repeated to him every morning as he went to work, the "beautiful" sentence which Matthew Arnold treasured "as Mrs. Gooch's Golden Rule, or the Divine Injunction 'Be ye Perfect' done into British": "*Ever remember, my dear Dan, that you should look forward to being some day manager of that concern!*" And with that end in view 20,000 young men in the year of publication (1859) and 130,000 more in the next thirty years bought Samuel Smiles' handbook to success called *Self-Help*.

In this environment failure is the worst fate one can imagine. "What is it," asks Carlyle, "that the modern English soul does, in very truth, dread infinitely, and contemplate with entire despair? What is his Hell? ... With hesitation, with astonishment, I pronounce it to be: The terror of 'Not succeeding.'" "Terror" is scarcely too strong a word. To be left behind in the race of life was not only to be defeated, it was to be exposed to the same kind of scorn and humiliation visited upon poverty (itself a symbol of failure). The Victorian world "huzzas at prosperity, and turns away from mis-

191

fortune as from some contagious disease." Beatrice Webb, a little later, noticed in London society "the making and breaking of personal friendships according to temporary and accidental circumstances in no way connected with personal merit: gracious appreciation and insistent intimacy being succeeded, when failure according to worldly standards occurred, by harsh criticism and cold avoidance." The word "criticism" is revealing. Men who reached the top by their own dogged persistence and concentrated effort could readily attribute the failure of other men to weakness of character. Because "everyone who rules himself to decency and sobriety of conduct, and attention to his duties [like me], comes over to our ranks [as I did]," John Thornton is sure that those who fail to do so are "self-indulgent, sensual people" who deserve only "contempt for their poorness of character." That they might not be able to succeed in this special way-- might even be successful in another way, by another standard-- did not occur to him, or to most Victorians. But Mrs. Gaskell has Margaret say, "The poor men around him-- they were poor because they were vicious-- out of the pale of his sympathies because they had not his iron nature, and the capabilities that it gives him for being rich."

Social sympathy, indeed, was hardly compatible with the commercial spirit. The cutthroat competition of the time bred a hard and ruthless selfishness that was arraigned by the Victorian moralists. There is Thackeray's acid advice: "If a better place than yours presents itself just beyond your neighbour, elbow him and take it. ... By pushing steadily, nine hundred and ninety-nine people in a thousand will yield to you. ... You may be sure of success. If your neighbour's foot obstructs you, stamp on it; and do you suppose he won't take it away?" It is true, no doubt, that some men, perhaps

192

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

many, felt distaste and even shame for the life they lived, at least ill retrospect. Their frame of mind was that of the dying Jacob in Clough's poem:

Ah me! this eager rivalry of life,
This cruel conflict for pre-eminence,
This keen supplanting of the dearest kin,
Quick seizure and fast unrelaxing hold
Of vantage-place; the stony-hard resolve,
The chase, the competition, and the craft
Which seems to be the poison of our life
And yet is the condition of our life!
To have done things on which the eye with shame
Looks back, the closed hand clutching still the prize!

Not that Jacob and his fellow Victorians were without ethical principles, but the principles were personal rather than social. "I have striven," he goes on to say, "to do my duty to my house and hearth, and to the purpose of my father's race." In this respect, he may be compared with Beatrice Webb's father, railroad magnate and entrepreneur extraordinary, who symbolizes the higher echelons of this society at their best:

He was an honourable and loyal colleague; he retained throughout his life the close friendship of his partners ... he never left a colleague in a tight place; he was generous in giving credit to subordinates; he was forgiving to an old enemy who had fallen on evil times. But he thought, felt and acted in terms of personal relationship and not in terms of general principles; he had no clear vision of the public good. "A friend," he would assert, "is a person who would back you up when you were in the wrong, who would give your son a place which he could not have won on his own merits." Any other conduct he scoffed at as moral pedantry. Hence he tended to prefer the welfare of his family and personal friends to the interests of the companies over which he presided, the profits of these companies to the prosperity of his country, the dominance of his own race to the peace of the world."

193

But for all the scathing comments of the Victorian critics, the creed of success, like its practitioners, rose to the top; and since 1870-- aided, I think, by the steady decline of religious faith-- has stood almost unquestioned, even in intellectual circles. An essay called "Success," published in 1860, is not only a full documentation of its amoral values but is also clear evidence of the transition from criticism to enthusiastic acclaim, for its author was a country gentleman, Sir John William Kaye, historian and essayist, and the article appeared in *The Cornhill Magazine*. The opening words mark a change in attitude of immense significance:

I have a great opinion of successful men; and I am not ashamed to confess it.

It was the fashion, some years ago, to sneer at Success-- nay, indeed, sometimes to revile it, as though it were an offence, or at best a pretentious humbug. ... But a healthier

19th Century Novels
Readings for Social and Economic Class Assignment

social philosophy is now enthroned amongst us. We have begun to think that men who make their way to the front, becoming rich or famous by the force of their personal characters, must, after all, have something in them. ... To prostrate oneself before what Success has won, be it power, or riches, or what not, may rightly be called Hunkeyism; but to honour what has won success is worthy worship, not to be condemned or restrained. It is veneration for that type of manhood, which most nearly approaches the divine, by reason of its creative energy. It is a good sign of the times that we appreciate it at its true worth.

“But what, it may be asked, is Success? and who is the successful man?” The answer is simple and obvious. If a man “has kept a certain object steadily before him, and has attained it-- no matter what the object be-- he is a successful man.” True, he may not be happier than he was before, and what he has won may give him no satis-

194

faction. *Vanitas vanitatum!* But that is not the subject of discussion. It is beside the point, for after all “the positive success was there.” (And the successful type of manhood, we remember, approaches the divine.) Nor is it relevant to ask if he deserved to win. Addison’s Cato is quoted:

‘Tis not in mortals to command success,
But I’ll do more, Sempronius-- I’ll deserve it.

But Sir John is more disposed to admire the misquotation:

‘Tis not in mortals to deserve success,
But I’ll do more, Sempronius-- I’ll command it.

This does not mean, as he goes on to say later, that one should cut any corners. By all means “keep your hands clean.” But “go directly to the point, looking neither to the right nor to the left,” and never for a moment forget “the Market-place or the Council-house.” Not that we should always be working in one or the other. By taking time off to dine with friends, we may often make a greater stride toward success than by staying at home to post up a ledger.

Then follows a revealing bit of autobiography: “When I was a very young man, I wrote essays in illustration of what I then believed to be the folly of such a course. But as I grow old, every year convinces me more and more that social intercourse, of the right kind, is a material aid to success.” That personal change I suggest, is representative of the changing attitude in the age. The naked creed of success is now becoming eminently respectable. In course of time, those who best succeed in being successful will become the men of distinction in modern society.”

195
