



Hierarchies of Power and Identity: The Representation of Social Class in Victorian Literature

Annette Treasa Benny

Assistant Professor, Marian College Kuttikkanam (Autonomous), Kerala, India.

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Abstract

This research examines the complex representation of social class in Victorian literature, analyzing how major authors depicted, critiqued, and reinforced class hierarchies during a period of unprecedented social transformation. Through systematic analysis of canonical works by Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, and Thomas Hardy, this study reveals how literary representations both reflected and shaped contemporary understanding of class identity, social mobility, and economic inequality. The research employs close textual analysis combined with historical contextualization to demonstrate how Victorian writers navigated the tension between social criticism and literary convention. Findings indicate that while Victorian literature increasingly challenged rigid class boundaries, it simultaneously reinforced middle-class values and perspectives as normative. The study contributes to understanding how literature functions as both mirror and constructor of social reality, with implications for contemporary analysis of class representation in cultural texts.

Keywords:- Victorian Literature, Social Class, Class Mobility, Economic Inequality, Industrial Society, Middle-Class Ideology, Social Realism.

Introduction

The Victorian era (1837-1901) witnessed unprecedented social transformation as industrial capitalism reshaped traditional class structures and created new forms of economic inequality. This period of rapid change generated intense literary engagement with questions of social class, as writers struggled to represent and understand emerging class relationships within evolving social hierarchies. Victorian literature thus provides a crucial lens through which to examine how societies conceptualize and negotiate class identity during periods of economic transformation.

The representation of social class in Victorian literature reflects broader tensions between tradition and modernity, stability and change, that characterized nineteenth-century British society. Writers confronted the challenge of depicting new forms of wealth and poverty, emerging middle-class identities, and changing relationships between different social groups. Their literary responses reveal not only contemporary social conditions but also the ideological frameworks through which Victorian society understood class difference and social mobility.

This research addresses the central question: How did Victorian literature represent social class relationships, and what do these representations reveal about contemporary

attitudes toward economic inequality and social change? Secondary questions explore the specific literary techniques employed to depict class difference, the evolution of class representation across the Victorian period, and the ways in which literary texts both challenged and reinforced existing social hierarchies.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond historical interest to contemporary concerns about class representation in cultural texts. Understanding how Victorian writers navigated questions of social class provides insights into the ongoing relationship between literature and social critique, particularly regarding economic inequality and social mobility in modern societies.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis draws upon several theoretical approaches to understand the complex relationship between literary representation and social class. Raymond Williams's cultural materialism provides the foundational framework, emphasizing how literary texts both reflect and construct social reality through their engagement with contemporary class relationships (Williams 145). This approach illuminates how Victorian writers participated in broader ideological struggles over the meaning and significance of class difference.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital proves particularly relevant for analyzing how Victorian literature represented the relationship between economic position and cultural authority (Bourdieu 78). Victorian texts frequently explore how education, refinement, and cultural knowledge function as markers of class identity, often independent of economic wealth.

Additionally, Georg Lukács's theory of realism provides tools for understanding how Victorian writers attempted to represent social totality while remaining embedded within particular class perspectives (Lukács 234). This framework helps explain why Victorian literature simultaneously critiques and reinforces middle-class ideological assumptions about social organization and individual merit.

Terry Eagleton's analysis of ideology and literary form offers insights into how formal literary choices carry ideological implications for class representation (Eagleton 156). The ways Victorian writers structured narratives, developed characters, and resolved conflicts reveal underlying assumptions about social relationships and the possibilities for social change.

Literature Review

Scholarly analysis of class representation in Victorian literature has evolved significantly since the mid-twentieth century. Early criticism, exemplified by Louis Cazamian's "The Social Novel in England" (1903), focused primarily on documenting social conditions depicted in literary texts without examining the ideological implications of different representational strategies (Cazamian 89). This approach treated literature as transparent social documentation rather than recognizing its active role in constructing social meaning.

The emergence of Marxist literary criticism in the 1960s and 1970s transformed understanding of class representation in Victorian literature. Raymond Williams's "Culture and Society" (1958) and "The Country and the City" (1973) demonstrated how literary texts participate in ideological struggles over social organization, revealing the ways in which apparently neutral literary conventions carry class-specific assumptions (Williams 234). This approach emphasized the need to analyze not only what Victorian literature depicted but how these depictions served particular class interests.

Feminist criticism has contributed crucial insights into the intersection of class and gender in Victorian literature. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "The Madwoman in the Attic" (1979) revealed how women writers navigated the double constraints of gender and class position, often developing innovative narrative strategies to critique social hierarchies while

remaining within acceptable literary conventions (Gilbert and Gubar 167). This work illuminated the particular challenges faced by women writers in representing class relationships.

New Historicist approaches, particularly the work of D.A. Miller in "The Novel and the Police" (1988), have examined how Victorian literature participated in broader disciplinary mechanisms of social control (Miller 123). This perspective reveals how literary representations of class difference often served to normalize middle-class values and perspectives as universal human norms.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the diversity of Victorian class representations and the complexity of contemporary class relationships. Elizabeth Langland's "Nobody's Angels" (1995) demonstrates how middle-class domestic ideology shaped literary representations of class difference, while also revealing the internal contradictions and tensions within middle-class identity formation (Langland 89). This work highlights the need to recognize the heterogeneity of Victorian class experience rather than assuming unified class perspectives.

Contemporary scholarship by Elaine Hadley (2010) and Andrew Miller (2015) has explored how Victorian literature engaged with new forms of economic organization and class relationship generated by industrial capitalism (Hadley 145; Miller 201). This research reveals how writers struggled to develop adequate representational strategies for unprecedented social conditions, often drawing upon older literary conventions while adapting them to new social realities.

Methodology

This research employs close textual analysis combined with historical contextualization to examine class representation in selected Victorian novels. The primary texts include Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and *Great Expectations* (1861), George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). These works span the Victorian period and represent different approaches to class representation within the realistic novel tradition.

The analysis focuses on four key areas: character development and class identity, narrative perspective and class bias, plot structure and social mobility, and symbolic representation of class difference. Each text is examined for the specific literary techniques employed to represent class relationships and the ideological implications of these representational choices.

Historical contextualization draws upon social history scholarship to understand the contemporary class conditions that Victorian writers sought to represent. Particular attention is paid to the emergence of new middle-class identities, changing conditions of working-class life, and evolving relationships between different social groups during the industrial transformation of British society.

The methodology combines attention to formal literary analysis with awareness of the social and historical conditions within which these texts were produced and consumed. This approach recognizes literature as both aesthetic artifact and social document, requiring attention to both artistic achievement and ideological function.

Analysis and Results

Character Development and Class Identity

Victorian literature reveals a complex understanding of class identity that extends beyond simple economic categories to encompass cultural, moral, and psychological dimensions. Writers consistently explored the tension between inherited class position and

individual merit, often developing characters whose personal qualities challenged conventional class assumptions while simultaneously reinforcing broader ideological frameworks about social organization.

Charles Dickens's characterization strategies demonstrate this complexity most clearly. In *Hard Times*, Dickens contrasts the moral poverty of wealthy industrialists like Thomas Gradgrind with the spiritual richness of working-class characters like Stephen Blackpool. However, this apparent sympathy for working-class experience operates within a framework that ultimately privileges middle-class values of individual morality and benevolent reform over systematic social change.

Stephen Blackpool embodies the idealized working-class character who suffers nobly under economic oppression while maintaining moral integrity. His famous declaration that "aw's a muddle" regarding industrial relations reflects Dickens's tendency to present social problems as moral rather than economic issues (Dickens, *Hard Times* 159). This characterization strategy allows Dickens to critique specific abuses while avoiding fundamental challenges to capitalist social organization.

George Eliot's approach in *Middlemarch* reveals a more psychologically complex understanding of class identity. Characters like Tertius Lydgate embody the emerging professional middle class, whose claims to social authority rest on education and expertise rather than inherited wealth or traditional social position. Eliot's detailed exploration of Lydgate's financial difficulties and social pretensions reveals the internal contradictions of middle-class identity formation during a period of economic transformation.

The character of Fred Vincy illustrates Eliot's analysis of how economic pressure shapes individual development. Fred's evolution from idle gentleman to working farmer reflects broader social pressures toward productive labor and middle-class values of self-improvement. However, Eliot's narrative structure suggests that this transformation represents moral progress rather than economic necessity, reinforcing ideological assumptions about the relationship between work and personal worth.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* presents perhaps the most radical challenge to conventional class representation through its first-person narrative perspective. Jane's position as governess places her in the ambiguous social space between working and middle classes, allowing Brontë to explore the arbitrary nature of class distinctions while maintaining focus on individual development and moral worth.

Jane's famous declaration of equality with Rochester—"Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?"—directly challenges class-based assumptions about human worth (Brontë 287). However, the novel's resolution through Jane's inheritance of independent wealth suggests that economic equality remains necessary for social equality, potentially undermining the radical implications of Jane's moral arguments.

Narrative Perspective and Class Bias

The narrative techniques employed by Victorian writers reveal subtle but significant class biases that shape reader understanding of social relationships. Despite their apparent sympathy for working-class characters, most Victorian novels employ narrative perspectives that privilege middle-class viewpoints and values as universal human norms.

Dickens's narrative voice in *Great Expectations* exemplifies this pattern. Although the novel follows Pip's evolution from working-class origins to middle-class aspirations and eventual moral enlightenment, the narrative perspective consistently judges characters and situations according to middle-class moral standards. Working-class characters like Joe Gargery are praised for virtues (simplicity, loyalty, contentment) that conveniently align with middle-class preferences for working-class passivity.

The novel's treatment of Magwitch reveals the complex class dynamics underlying Dickens's narrative sympathy. While Dickens presents Magwitch's devotion to Pip as admirable, the narrative perspective maintains clear distinctions between Magwitch's crude generosity and the refined sensibilities that mark true gentility. This distinction reinforces cultural hierarchies even while appearing to critique purely economic class differences.

George Eliot's narrative technique in *Middlemarch* demonstrates a more sophisticated awareness of class perspective while ultimately reinforcing similar biases. Eliot's famous narrative voice, with its claims to comprehensive social understanding, operates from a position of cultural authority that reflects middle-class educational privilege. The narrator's ability to analyze and judge characters from different social positions assumes a standpoint outside and above class conflict that actually reinforces middle-class claims to social leadership.

The treatment of working-class characters in *Middlemarch* reveals these biases most clearly. Characters like the Garths are presented sympathetically but primarily as moral exemplars rather than complex individuals with their own perspectives and interests. Their contentment with modest social positions is presented as virtue rather than potential limitation, suggesting that social harmony depends upon each class accepting its appropriate role in a stable hierarchy.

Plot Structure and Social Mobility

Victorian novels frequently organize their plots around questions of social mobility, revealing contemporary anxieties about class boundaries and the possibilities for individual advancement. These plot structures typically reinforce middle-class ideologies about merit and respectability while appearing to challenge rigid class hierarchies.

Great Expectations provides the most systematic exploration of social mobility themes. Pip's journey from forge to London society and back to moral understanding follows a pattern that initially appears to critique social ambition while ultimately reinforcing assumptions about the relationship between moral worth and social position. The novel's circular structure, which returns Pip to his origins with greater moral understanding, suggests that true gentility derives from character rather than wealth or social position.

However, this apparent critique of social ambition operates within assumptions that limit its radical potential. Pip's return to his origins is made possible by his education and cultural development, which distinguish him from his working-class background even when he returns to honest labor. The novel thus reinforces the value of middle-class cultural capital while appearing to reject pure economic ambition.

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* presents a more pessimistic view of social mobility that challenges Victorian optimism about individual advancement. Tess's tragic trajectory from rural working-class origins through various forms of sexual and economic exploitation to ultimate destruction reveals the structural limitations that constrain individual agency within capitalist social organization.

Hardy's plot structure emphasizes how economic necessity and gender vulnerability combine to limit Tess's options for social advancement. Unlike Dickens's male protagonists, who retain agency even in difficult circumstances, Tess confronts systematic disadvantages that prevent individual merit from achieving social recognition. This structural analysis challenges middle-class ideologies about opportunity and merit while revealing the particular constraints faced by working-class women.

The novel's treatment of Alec d'Urberville and Angel Clare represents different forms of middle-class masculinity and their relationship to class exploitation. Alec embodies the predatory capitalism that transforms rural social relationships, while Angel represents middle-class intellectual pretensions that prove equally destructive when confronted with real social

complexity. This dual critique suggests that both traditional and progressive middle-class responses fail to address the systematic nature of class oppression.

Symbolic Representation of Class Difference

Victorian writers employed sophisticated symbolic strategies to represent class relationships, often encoding complex social analysis within apparently simple narrative elements. These symbolic patterns reveal underlying assumptions about the nature of class difference and the possibilities for social harmony.

Domestic space serves as a crucial symbolic arena for representing class relationships. Dickens's description of different household arrangements consistently links domestic organization to moral worth, with middle-class domestic ideals serving as standards for judging other forms of social organization. The contrast between Wemmick's cottage and his office in *Great Expectations* symbolizes the tension between public economic relationships and private moral values that characterizes middle-class consciousness.

Similarly, Charlotte Brontë's detailed attention to domestic arrangements in *Jane Eyre* reveals how physical space encodes social hierarchies. Jane's progression through different domestic environments—from the oppressive wealth of Gateshead to the modest comfort of Moor House to the restored grandeur of Ferndean—mirrors her social and moral development while revealing the complex relationship between economic position and emotional fulfillment.

Clothing and personal appearance function as particularly important symbolic indicators of class position and individual worth. Victorian novels consistently employ detailed descriptions of dress and physical appearance to signal character traits and social positioning. However, these symbolic patterns typically reinforce cultural hierarchies by linking physical refinement to moral superiority.

George Eliot's treatment of Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch* exemplifies this pattern. Rosamond's physical beauty and fashionable appearance initially suggest social and moral superiority, but Eliot's narrative gradually reveals the superficiality of purely aesthetic accomplishments. This symbolic pattern reinforces middle-class values of substantial education and moral development over aristocratic emphasis on surface refinement.

Evolution Across the Victorian Period

Analysis of texts from different periods reveals significant evolution in approaches to class representation throughout the Victorian era. Early Victorian novels typically maintain greater confidence in the possibility of social reform through individual moral development and benevolent leadership. Later Victorian works increasingly emphasize structural limitations and the tragic consequences of class conflict.

Dickens's early optimism about social reform, evident in novels like *Hard Times*, gradually gives way to greater pessimism about the possibilities for systematic social change. *Great Expectations* reveals more complex understanding of how class relationships shape individual development while maintaining hope for individual moral progress within existing social structures.

Thomas Hardy's later novels represent a fundamental shift toward naturalistic analysis of social conditions that emphasizes environmental and hereditary factors over individual agency. This evolution reflects broader intellectual developments during the Victorian period, including the influence of scientific materialism and sociological analysis on literary representation.

The increasing prominence of women writers throughout the Victorian period also influences approaches to class representation. Women writers consistently pay greater attention

to the intersection of class and gender, revealing how economic dependence and limited legal rights compound class disadvantages for women across different social positions.

Discussion

The analysis reveals that Victorian literature developed sophisticated strategies for representing class relationships while remaining embedded within middle-class ideological frameworks that shaped both literary convention and social understanding. Writers demonstrated remarkable awareness of contemporary social conditions and genuine sympathy for working-class experience, but their representational strategies ultimately reinforced middle-class claims to social and cultural leadership.

This pattern reflects broader tensions within Victorian society between democratic ideals and hierarchical social organization. Writers sought to address obvious injustices within existing class relationships while maintaining belief in the fundamental legitimacy of class-based social organization. Their literary innovations thus served simultaneously as social criticism and ideological reinforcement.

The emphasis on individual character and moral development as solutions to social problems reflects specifically middle-class perspectives on social organization. This focus allows Victorian writers to acknowledge social problems while avoiding systematic analysis of economic structures that might challenge fundamental assumptions about capitalist social organization.

However, the complexity and psychological depth of Victorian characterization also created space for more radical implications than writers may have consciously intended. Characters like Jane Eyre and Tess Durbeyfield embody challenges to class hierarchy that extend beyond their narrative resolutions, suggesting possibilities for social transformation that exceed their immediate textual contexts.

Mechanisms of Ideological Reinforcement

Victorian literature reinforces middle-class ideology through several subtle but systematic mechanisms. The consistent privileging of individual moral development over collective social action encourages readers to understand social problems as personal rather than structural issues. This focus deflects attention from systematic analysis of economic relationships while maintaining faith in gradual reform through individual enlightenment.

The narrative technique of moral education, whereby characters learn to accept their social positions through painful experience, naturalizes existing class hierarchies by presenting them as moral necessities rather than historical constructions. Characters who challenge class boundaries typically suffer consequences that reinforce the wisdom of accepting established social roles.

The symbolic association of cultural refinement with moral worth reinforces class hierarchies by presenting middle-class cultural capital as evidence of superior individual development. This pattern suggests that existing class distinctions reflect natural differences in human worth rather than arbitrary economic advantages.

Contradictions and Tensions

Despite these ideological patterns, Victorian literature also reveals significant contradictions and tensions that expose the limitations of middle-class social understanding. The gap between stated moral principles and actual social relationships creates space for critical analysis that extends beyond conscious authorial intention.

The treatment of working-class characters often reveals middle-class authors' limited understanding of working-class experience and perspective. Idealized working-class characters

like Joe Gargery or Stephen Blackpool embody middle-class fantasies about working-class virtue rather than realistic representation of working-class consciousness and interests.

Similarly, the resolution of class conflicts through individual advancement or moral reconciliation often appears forced and unconvincing, suggesting the inadequacy of individualistic solutions to systematic social problems. These narrative weaknesses point toward structural issues that cannot be resolved through the literary and ideological resources available to Victorian writers.

Implications

This analysis carries significant implications for understanding both Victorian society and contemporary approaches to class representation in cultural texts. The Victorian example demonstrates how literary texts participate in ideological struggles over social organization while appearing to maintain neutral aesthetic distance from political controversy.

The persistence of middle-class perspective in Victorian literature, despite authors' conscious sympathy for other social groups, reveals the difficulty of transcending class position even within imaginative literature. This finding suggests that cultural texts inevitably reflect the social positions of their creators while also revealing the potential for literature to expose contradictions and tensions within dominant ideological frameworks.

The Victorian emphasis on individual solutions to social problems continues to influence contemporary approaches to class representation in cultural media. Understanding how Victorian literature developed and reinforced these patterns provides tools for analyzing similar ideological mechanisms in contemporary cultural texts.

The intersection of class with other forms of social identity, particularly gender, receives increasing attention throughout the Victorian period and anticipates contemporary intersectional approaches to social analysis. Victorian women writers' exploration of how class and gender constraints interact provides historical perspective on ongoing struggles for social equality.

Conclusion

This examination of class representation in Victorian literature reveals a complex pattern of social criticism and ideological reinforcement that reflects broader tensions within nineteenth-century British society. Victorian writers demonstrated remarkable awareness of contemporary social conditions and genuine concern for social justice, but their literary strategies ultimately reinforced middle-class perspectives and values as normative standards for social organization.

The analysis demonstrates that literary texts cannot be understood simply as transparent reflections of social conditions but must be recognized as active participants in ideological struggles over social meaning. Victorian literature both challenged specific aspects of class hierarchy while reinforcing fundamental assumptions about individual merit, cultural authority, and the legitimacy of class-based social organization.

The evolution of class representation throughout the Victorian period reflects broader intellectual and social changes that increased awareness of structural limitations on individual agency while maintaining faith in gradual reform through cultural and moral development. This tension between recognition of systematic problems and commitment to individualistic solutions continues to characterize contemporary approaches to social inequality.

The sophistication of Victorian literary analysis of class relationships, combined with the limitations of middle-class perspective, provides valuable insights into both the possibilities and constraints of cultural criticism within existing social structures. Understanding these patterns enhances appreciation of Victorian literary achievement while revealing the ongoing

challenges of representing social inequality in ways that transcend the ideological limitations of particular class positions.

The enduring influence of Victorian approaches to class representation suggests the importance of continued critical analysis of how cultural texts participate in contemporary ideological struggles over economic inequality and social justice. The Victorian example demonstrates both the potential for literature to expose social contradictions and the tendency for cultural texts to reinforce dominant ideological frameworks even while appearing to challenge them.

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