Romanticizing Middle-Class Ideals in Victorian Novels

Many individuals in the Victorian era saw the rising middle class as an affirmation of hope: class fluidity was a thrilling new concept, and thus, many Victorian authors romanticized it. One of those authors is Charlotte Brontë, who romanticizes class fluidity and middle-class ideals in her novel *Jane Eyre*. She uses Jane Eyre herself as an idealistic example of class progression, rejecting poverty through Jane's experiences and aristocracy through her characters John Reed and Blanche Ingram. Another of these authors is Wilkie Collins, who romanticizes the idea of middle-class citizens as perfect, instinctually moral, and virtuous through his heroic character, Walter Hartright. Moreover, he rejects the parasitism of the aristocracy through his hyperbolically frail character, Frederick Fairlie. By analyzing these Victorian novels, it becomes evident that these authors perceived the middle class as highly sought-after and idealized, while seeing poverty as morally degrading and aristocracy as parasitic and idle.

This rising middle class had a unique set of morals and values, including self-sufficiency, refinement, education, piousness, family, and domesticity: "middle-class life was relatively sober, hard working, law abiding and pious," Mike Huggins reports in an article about the secret lives of Victorian middle-class men (586). "Good citizenship, temperance, and firm commitment to the values of hearth and home were expected" of the Victorian middle class (Huggins 586). Darby Lewes writes in her article "Middle Class Edens" that the middle class embodied "the Victorian passion for educational and cultural self-improvement; and living sober, family-oriented…and devout lives" (15). However, caught up in the electrifying possibilities of their own positions, middle class citizens often despised those whose values went against their own, simultaneously detesting the moral degradation of poverty as well as the idleness and parasitism of the rich. Religion was a central part of the middle-class domestic, and often, they practiced

evangelicalism, which "saw the pursuit of pleasure and personal gratification as sinful, and duty and responsibility as central"; thus, they saw the leisurely lives the upper classes led as sinful (Huggins 586). Furthermore, since they valued education and refinement, they despised the ignorance of the lower class. Due to their values of self-sufficiency through skilled careers, such as solicitors or doctors, the middle class often looked down upon the poor for their inability to provide for themselves, equating dependence on assistance with moral degradation. Authors romanticizing the middle class often felt that they were "in a position to reject both patrician and plebian extremes – upper-class idleness and decadence, lower-class ignorance and depravity – in a staunch affirmation of their own class-based Golden Mean" (Lewes 17). Romanticizing the wholesome, self-sufficient, and diligent values of the middle-class soon became popular in Victorian literature, and with it came a disdain for those 'patrician and plebian extremes.' This dynamic proliferates in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, as well as in *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins.

Jane Eyre, the central character in Charlotte Brontë's revolutionary 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*, progresses from a parasitic, classless orphan to a self-sufficient married woman. After both her parents die, Jane's Aunt and Uncle Reed take her under their wing. After Mr. Reed dies, Mrs. Reed grudgingly takes care of Jane, carrying out her promise to her husband. As an orphan living in an upper-class household, Jane is constantly degraded by those around her when she acts out against the cruelty of her aunt and her aunt's children: a lady's-maid tells her, "'you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep'" (Brontë 15). Later, a doctor named Mr. Lloyd visits young Jane, and asks her if she had any family members, whether she would rather be with them, even if they were poor, rather than with the cruel Reeds. Jane reflects and decides "poverty…[is] synonymous with degradation," and that she could not fathom how poor people could be kind

(Brontë 30). Jane rejects poverty outright as a child, but later in life, when she flees from Rochester with nothing but the shirt on her back, she must experience poverty as an adult. She sleeps in the woods and walks around town, begging people for employment, food, or money. Reflecting on the situation, her take on poverty is not much altered from that of her childhood opinion: she reflects, "I can scarcely bear to review the times to which I allude: the moral degradation, blent with the physical suffering…I blame none of those who repulsed me" (Brontë 378). Jane now understands the plight of the poor, but still rejects their humanity and right to basic needs like employment and food. Jane's experiences with poverty reflect Brontë's own rejection of the lower class; she considers poverty to be morally degrading, and would blame no one for refusing the poor compassion.

However, the lower class is not the only class Brontë rejects. She also criticizes the upper class, villainizing several upper-class characters in her novel. The first aristocratic character she criticizes is John Reed, Mrs. Reed's spoiled brat of a son. Jane describes John's as having "dingy and unwholesome" skin, as well as "heavy limbs and large extremities…bleared eyes and flabby cheeks" (Brontë 12). He has "'delicate health,'" according to his mother, and thus, he is coddled in every respect. When John happens upon Jane as she is reading one of the Reed's books, he tells her, "'You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma's expense'" (Brontë 13). Then, he flings a book at Jane's head, causing her injury, and then grasps Jane's hair and shoulder as she bleeds. She reflects, in a frenzied fury, "I really saw in him a tyrant: a murderer" (Brontë 14). While clearly hyperbolic, John Reed embodies the tyrannical, spoiled, idle, and immature nature often perceived of the aristocracy in the Victorian era. Brontë uses

John's character to characterize her negative views of the aristocracy, rejecting the upper class altogether.

Brontë's rejection of the aristocracy doesn't stop there, though. When Jane is a governess for Rochester's adopted child Adele, she meets the beautiful, wealthy Blanche Ingram. Upon first glance, Jane describes Miss Ingram as having "the noble bust, the sloping shoulders, the graceful neck, the dark eyes and black ringlets" she expected (Brontë 200). She is the beau ideal of the Victorian era. Later, Jane sits in the room with Rochester, Miss Ingram, and all of the other guests while they play charades, and begins to reflect on the character of Miss Ingram. She first addresses the reader directly and reminds them that she is in love with Mr. Rochester, and "could not unlove him now" despite him focusing all his attention on his new love interest (Brontë 215). She remarks that this should make her jealous, but it fails to because Miss Ingram is "a mark beneath jealousy" and "too inferior to excite the feeling" (Brontë 215). Jane goes on to defame her, noting that Miss Ingram was "very showy, but she was not genuine," and that "her mind was poor, her heart barren…she was not good; she was not original; she never offered, nor had, an opinion of her own" (Brontë 215-16). Deprecating her further, she mentions Miss Ingram's unmotherly traits: "tenderness and truth were not in her…she betrayed this, by the undue vent she gave to spiteful antipathy she had conceived against little Adèle…always treating her with coldness and acrimony" (Brontë 216). Through Jane's slandering, Brontë begins to construct her own ideals in contrast to the ideals of the aristocracy: virtuosity through motherliness, intelligence, originality, and kindness. Despite the fact that Miss Ingram is the ideal of the Victorian era in her outward beauty and wealth, Brontë argues that these attributes will never make her beautiful or morally upright on the inside, and therein rejects the values of the aristocracy.

By rejecting both the upper and lower classes, Brontë leaves but one class: the middle class. Jane, once a classless orphan who is repeatedly ensured that she has no worth or valid socioeconomic status, suddenly inherits a fortune from a distant relative, and splits it between herself and her cousins. The 5,000 pounds she's left with places her in the middle class. She marries Rochester at the end of the novel, acting as his caretaker, as he is partially blind and disabled, and has a child with him. Jane progresses from a parasitic, orphaned child living with the Reeds to a woman who embodies the domestic ideals of the middle class virtually overnight. Having gone through years of schooling and governessing, Jane has become educated and refined; she is married, she has children, and she is a caretaker. She is able to support herself and those around her, and by the end of the novel, she has developed from a parasite to the perfect middle-class woman. Jane's sudden progression from orphan to ideal woman is severely unrealistic; Brontë romanticizes class fluidity, showing Jane's progression as almost effortless, despite how difficult this transition would be (for a woman, no less) in the real world. She romanticizes the ideals of the middle-class and one's ability to move into it through arduous work and diligence, while slandering the ideals of the lower and upper classes in preference of the middle class.

Charlotte Brontë was not the only Victorian author to romanticize middle-class ideals, though. Wilkie Collins demonstrates similar views in his novel *The Woman in White*. In the novel, there is a significant contrast in character between the middle-class characters and the aristocratic characters. The master of Limmeridge House, Mr. Fairlie, embodies the undesirable characteristics of the aristocracy that Collins despised. The author emphasizes his dislike of the upper class by portraying Mr. Fairlie as a parasitic, effeminate hypochondriac who is cruel towards his servants and demanding of those around him. The reader first meets Mr. Fairlie

through the eyes of master artist Walter Hartright, who is the omniscient, middle-class hero of the novel. He describes Mr. Fairlie as "frail, languidly-fretful…and unpleasantly delicate," having "effeminately small" features and "womanish" clothing (Collins 23). His voice has "a discordantly high tone," and his manners are rather poor, cutting Mr. Hartright off and asking him to bend to the wills of his imaginary illness (Collins 24). Collins assures the reader that Mr. Fairlie's condition is not based in reality – he wants everyone surrounding him to wait on and pity him. Mr. Hartright concludes that "Mr. Fairlie's selfish affectation and Mr. Fairlie's wretched nerves [mean] one and the same thing" (24). To further emphasize his distaste for the upper class, Collins depicts several interactions between Mr. Fairlie and his servants. Degrading and insulting his servant, Mr. Fairlie barks, "'Louis, go away. What an ass you are,'" and continues to Mr. Hartright, "'servants are such asses, are they not?'" (Collins 25). Receiving etchings from the servant, Mr. Fairlie remarks that they smell "'of horrid dealers' and brokers' fingers,'" to which Mr. Hartright mentally replies that his own "nerves were not delicate enough to detect the odour of the plebian fingers which had offended Mr. Fairlie's nostrils" (25). Later in the novel, Collins depicts a similar interaction, wherein Mr. Fairlie debases and dehumanizes his servant: "'He might have been a man half an hour ago, before I wanted my etchings, and he may be a man half an hour hence…at present he is simply a portfolio stand'" (Collins 104). This interaction shows Collins's rejection of the upper class, portraying members of that class as parasitic and heartless. Not only is Mr. Fairlie unnecessarily cruel to those he perceives to be below him, he's also single and hates children: he comments to Mr. Hartright, "'I hear some horrid children in the garden,'" and continues, "'nature's only idea seems to be to make [children] machines for the production of incessant noise'" (Collins 26). Ostensibly unable to withstand the slightest disturbance to his nerves, Mr. Fairlie takes great pains to ensure that those

around him are quiet and still, inevitably placing children at the top of the list of things he hates. The man's conduct disgusts Mr. Hartright, further attesting to the author's own views of the aristocracy; through his characterization of Mr. Fairlie, the author demonstrates his perception of the aristocracy as parasitic, arrogant, conceited, deceitful, inconsiderate, and weak.

Walter Hartright, however, is quite the opposite of Mr. Fairlie: his character is idealistically heroic and instinctually good. *Mr. Hartright* is always right in his heart! Firstly, Mr. Hartright has a certain omniscience in the novel. He narrates much of the piece, and has power over what evidence is presented in the novel. This automatically builds trust for his character. Furthermore, Collins continually portrays Mr. Hartright as a heroic man whose life is dedicated to pursuing his father's career as a drawing-master and to helping those around him. When he stumbles upon a strange woman (who the readers later discover is the escaped lunatic Anne Catherick), Mr. Hartright promises to help her, telling her, "'You may trust me for any harmless purpose…Tell me how I can help you; and if I can, I will'" (Collins 12). This becomes like a mantra for Mr. Hartright, who continues to help everyone he can – even his worst enemy, Sir Percival Glyde. When he comes across a burning vestry and realizes that Percival is inside, he does not hesitate to help him: "I rushed to the door…All remembrance of the heartless injury the man's crimes had inflicted…passed from my memory like a dream…I felt nothing but the natural human impulse to save him from a frightful death" (Collins 350). By the end of the novel, Mr. Hartright marries his love, Laura, and together, they have a son. His life develops into the perfect middle-class existence: he is skilled, educated, domestic, and self-sufficient. Along with Mr. Fairlie's negative description, Mr. Hartright's incredible heroism as a middle-class man demonstrates Collins's romanticization of the middle class and its virtuous ideals, as well as his disdain for the idleness and parasitism of the aristocracy.

By rejecting the moral degradation of poverty and the parasitism of aristocracy, Wilkie Collins and Charlotte Brontë leave only one class to analyze: the middle class. Each of them idealizes and romanticizes it through characters in their novel: from Jane Eyre, who goes from orphan to perfect middle-class woman virtually overnight, to Walter Hartright, middle-class superman. It's hard to blame them, though: the idea of being able to move up in life, as close to impossible as it may be, was exhilarating in the Victorian era. Unfortunately, though, to get married, have kids, have a career, be virtuous and pious, to sustain oneself through skilled work and live a complete life was often but a dream. It's still a dream for many today.

Works Cited

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