

**Men from Nowhere:**  
**Literary representations of class by**  
**writers from the social margins 1880 – 1910**

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## ABSTRACT

The period 1880 to 1910 witnessed the emergence of writers from the social periphery who capitalised on new opportunities for publication. These decades also experienced, however, the highest peak in wealth inequality in Britain in two hundred years, with the top 10% of society owning more than 90% of the country's total wealth.<sup>1</sup> Powerful discourses of class also intensified towards the *fin de siècle*, hardening attitudes towards those from humble backgrounds. Despite Britain's proud legacy of literary achievement by authors from the lower-middle class, the discourse of public school 'character' and pseudo-scientific eugenic theories now challenged the potential for creative genius among those born into working-class or *petit bourgeois* families. For socially-marginalised authors, positive commercial developments and negative social attitudes were in direct opposition.

Authors conversant with life at the social margins, including H. G. Wells, Jerome K. Jerome, George Grossmith, Frank Swinnerton, William Pett Ridge and J. M. Barrie, provide a crucial commentary on the class-based inequalities and biases of the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras. This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of social critique in specific texts published by this group of authors between 1880 and 1910, analysing in detail the methods by which they resisted, challenged and rejected the powerful discourses of class that underpinned inequality of treatment and opportunity in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Analysis of their social critique provides a largely overlooked perspective on individual resistance, as a vital counterpoint to more widely studied collective resistance witnessed during this period in, for example, the emergence of socialism and developments within trade unionism.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014). <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/capital21c/en/pdf/F10.3.pdf>

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## INTRODUCTION

‘A Novel Education’, published in *Punch* in November 1895, provides a useful insight into late-Victorian notions of literature.<sup>2</sup> The lampoon, by an anonymous contributor, was inspired by Yale University’s decision to institute a course in modern fiction, which was seen in this period as a worthy subject for satire. In the article, a tutor at St. Mary’s College, Cambridge, interviews a succession of undergraduates, upbraiding them for the laxness of their literary studies. The humour derives from the notion of a university valuing popular contemporary fiction over classical texts.

“The College is not at all satisfied with you”, the tutor tells Mr. Jones. “Professor KAILYARD tells me that your attendance at his lectures has been most irregular”.<sup>3</sup> He then scolds the unfortunate student saying : “You’ve been wasting your time over light literature – HOMER and VIRGIL, and trash of that sort”. At the end of the article, having cajoled his students into a more serious contemplation of late-Victorian popular fiction, the tutor resumes his own scholarly endeavours, beginning Chapter XXIX, of his Prolegomena to *Three Men in a Boat*.<sup>4</sup> The notion that Jerome K. Jerome’s text could contain anything whatsoever of scholarly interest (much less be deserving of a twenty-four chapter prologue for, presumably, an even longer academic exploration) is the article’s final punchline.

This *Punch* satire may seem a strange choice of cultural artefact for the beginning of a thesis in which popular works by authors such as Jerome feature large. It might even be viewed as a warning from history about the inadvisability of devoting academic study to

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, ‘A Novel Education’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 30 November 1895, p. 255. Full article available as Appendix A. My attention was first drawn to this by a mention in Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914* (London, 1991), p. 456.

<sup>3</sup> The term Kailyard applies to, often sentimentalised, depictions of Scottish village life. The *Punch* article lampoons, in particular, the use of Scottish vernacular/doric expressions.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat (to say nothing of the dog)* (London: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1889).

popular fiction. This article, however, is particularly apposite, given the research questions at the heart of this doctoral project. During the period under analysis (1880 to 1910), new commercial opportunities enabled writers from the social periphery to forge careers in journalism, authorship and writing for the stage. As the satire in this article makes all too clear, however, emerging authors from humble backgrounds could not expect to find a place within the literary establishment of the day.

There are, of course, issues of high and popular culture, and tensions between the ancient and modern, at the centre of this satire, which warrant analysis in their own right. The privileging of Latin and ancient Greek over regional vernacular also deserves further exploration.<sup>5</sup> However, as the article privileges classical texts as the benchmark against which literary merit is to be judged, and selects authors from the social periphery (in particular) for mockery, it is impossible to overlook the class dimensions of this piece. By foregrounding Homer and Virgil, the contributor associates literary merit with a form of elite educational experience unavailable to the vast majority of the British population towards the end of Victoria's reign. In 1861, at the time of the Clarendon Commission, the percentage of young people in England and Wales receiving education in the classics was less than 1.9% of the overall school population.<sup>6</sup> Whilst Jonathan Rose's study of working-class reading habits demonstrates that individuals from humble backgrounds did indeed read classical literature, teaching of these texts was restricted to elite educational settings, to the exclusion

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<sup>5</sup> 'Wessex dialect' associated with Thomas Hardy's working-class characters is lampooned in addition to Scottish vernacular in the article.

<sup>6</sup> In 1861, at the time of the Clarendon Commission, the child population stood at around 2.5 million, of which approximately 1.5 million were in school (all educational settings). P. W. Musgrave, *Society and Education in England since 1800* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1968) p. 23. Of these pupils, the nine public schools covered by the Clarendon Commission had 2,708 pupils, all of whom received a predominantly classical education. Colin Shrosbree, *Public Schools and Private Education: The Clarendon Commission 1861-64 and the Public School Acts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 2. Statistics collected for the Taunton Commission in 1865 revealed that a further 25,210 boys in England and Wales were receiving a classical education, in a variety of other educational settings, including endowed grammar schools and proprietary schools. W. Bamford, *The Rise of the Public Schools* (London: Nelson, 1967), pp. 36 – 37. Even when the one million children receiving no education are removed from this calculation, the percentage of young people in England and Wales receiving education in the classics was, therefore, in the region of 1.9% of the overall school population at this time.

of other pupils.<sup>7</sup> This situation persisted throughout the closing decades of the nineteenth century, with classical education remaining outside the curricula of Board Schools established following the 1870 Education Act.<sup>8</sup>

This 1895 satire, therefore, locates literary discernment and appreciation firmly within (and, in effect, appropriated by) a clearly-defined, classics-educated coterie at the centre of the British establishment. It also demonstrates the late-nineteenth century tendency to use the place and nature of an individual's education as a means by which to re-establish social divisions, thereby addressing post-Darwinian uncertainties around social hierarchy. The authors and texts selected for mockery in the article also reflect a clearly-defined class component with several writers from humble backgrounds, including Jerome, J. M. Barrie (whose career owed much to his early successes in the Kailyard tradition) and Thomas Hardy, finding themselves in *Punch's* firing line. Aspiring authors of scant education, such as Jerome, are reminded of their 'place' in relation to cultural appreciation, achievement and influence.<sup>9</sup> Irrespective of their commercial success, the article suggests, emerging authors from working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds could expect to *remain* at the periphery, both socially and culturally.

The *Punch* article, therefore, has particular resonance for this doctoral project, in that it emphasises the importance of examining class-based attitudes in this period and their

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Education in classics continues to be limited to a small percentage of UK children today, and is delivered, predominantly, in elite settings. In 2020, a report by Classics for All stated that 17,164 UK children were receiving education in classics. Using BESA statistics for 2020, this represents around 0.16% of UK school children. Of the schools providing classical subjects, 75% were independent schools, and 25% were state schools, indicating that the majority of pupils studying classics at GCSE or A level were educated privately. 'Classics for All Impact Report 2010 to 2020', [https://classicsforall.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Classics-for-All\\_ImpactReport2010-20\\_Screen.pdf](https://classicsforall.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Classics-for-All_ImpactReport2010-20_Screen.pdf) [accessed 4th December 2023].

<sup>9</sup> Jerome's biographer, Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton notes that Jerome received 'a bare four years of education'. Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, *Below the Fairy City: A Life of Jerome K. Jerome* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2012) p. 31. Jerome notes in his autobiography that he was nicknamed 'Arry K 'Arry by *Punch*, reflecting the dropped Hs associated with those from working-class backgrounds. Jerome, *My Life and Times* (1926). The term 'Arry' or 'Arriet', in the late nineteenth century, was a derogatory form of address similar to today's term 'chav'.

impacts upon the evaluation and validation of creative outputs and endeavour. It amplifies the tensions that will be explored in this thesis, between the emergence of writers from the social periphery (capitalising on a publishing industry in a period of transition) and the deeply-ingrained social attitudes of their historical moment, which called their intellectual and aesthetic capabilities into question, overtly and without fear of repercussion. A central objective of this thesis is to deepen understanding of how writers from the social periphery interpreted these class-based preconceptions and biases. Powerful discourses, underpinning inequality of treatment and opportunity based on social difference, intensified at the *fin de siècle*, and these assumptions both influenced and inspired the authors from the social margins included in this study. The following chapters analyse the ways in which the selected authors problematised, challenged and rejected these discourses in their literary social critiques. At the heart of this project is the determination to examine representations of the late-Victorian and Edwardian social structure, from the perspective of those writers trapped within its machinery by their economic circumstances in early life. When the Men from Nowhere were given a chance to make their voices heard, what did they decide to say about economic inequality? How did they use their novels and plays to highlight unfairness, and to advocate for those without a voice? Importantly, how were they able to criticise sections of their readerships, whilst still achieving financial success?

## **The Men from Nowhere**

The sobriquet chosen for the group of authors included in this study was inspired by a quotation from H. G. Wells's autobiography: "[T]he last decade of the nineteenth century was an extraordinarily favourable time for new writers and my individual good luck was set in the luck of a whole generation of aspirants. Quite a lot of us from nowhere were "getting on".<sup>10</sup> In addition to Wells himself, the Men from Nowhere analysed here are George

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<sup>10</sup> H. G. Wells *from Experiment in Autobiography and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (Since 1860) Volume 2* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984). I am indebted to Jonathan Wild for introducing me to this

Grossmith (1847 – 1912), William Pett Ridge (1859 – 1930), Jerome K. Jerome (1859 – 1927), J. M. Barrie (1860 – 1937) and Frank Swinnerton (1884 – 1982).

These authors share a number of characteristics which, in combination, provide a rationale for grouping them under the Men from Nowhere sobriquet. The first factor is their relatively humble social backgrounds and, in some instances, prolonged financial precarity born of the absence of inherited wealth or position. Irrespective of their eventual economic successes, each of these writers can be seen to have experienced life at the social periphery, due to the economic circumstances into which they were born and/or precarity of their early lives.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, as Wells describes, these authors were from ‘nowhere’, lacking the patronage and social contacts/acceptance in their early lives which were critical to career success in late-Victorian and Edwardian society. Analysis of their biographies and autobiographies demonstrates the ways in which their interactions with other writers from humble backgrounds, and with those associated more widely with the literary world such as editors and actors, provided an alternative support network for the advancement of their careers, overcoming their early social disadvantages.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, analysis of certain texts by these writers, published between 1880 and 1910, demonstrates thematic similarities in relation to their representations of social class. This thesis compares and contrasts examples of social critique in selected close readings, which focus typically on aspects of unfairness as a result of economic disadvantage and prejudice,

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quotation, in *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Brief biographical descriptions for the authors in question are included in this thesis. J. M. Barrie’s extraordinary success in overcoming the social barriers of his humble background should be noted.

<sup>12</sup> For further information see, for example: H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Volume 1 and Volume 2*; Simon H. James, *Maps of utopia: H. G. Wells, modernity, and the end of culture* (Oxford: OUP, 2012); Michael Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: another kind of life* (London, Chicago: Peter Owen, 2012); George Grossmith, *A Society Clown: Reminiscences* (1888); Stephen Wade, *A Victorian Somebody: The Life of George Grossmith* (Gosport: Chaplin, 2014); William Pett Ridge, *I Like to Remember* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926) and *A Story Teller: Forty Years in London* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923); Jerome K. Jerome, *My Life and Times* (London: Folio Society, 1992); Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, *Below the Fairy City: A Life of Jerome K. Jerome* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2012); Lisa Chaney, *Hide-and-peek with Angels: A Life of J. M. Barrie* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005); Janet Dunbar, *J. M. Barrie: Man Behind the Image* (London: Collins, 1970); Frank Swinnerton, *Swinnerton: an autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1937).

rather than appearing to advocate specific party-political standpoints of their historical moment. Often encoded or presented through comedy/satire or allegory, these important examples of resistance of the hegemony of the dominant centre have received comparatively little scholarly attention to date. This is the first comprehensive comparative study of social critique by these six authors, focusing on their individual responses to key class-based discourses of the period.

### **New Boys Network**

Biographical and autobiographical sources reveal the many ways in which the lives and careers of the Men from Nowhere intertwined. The four authors of this group closest in age (Pett Ridge, Jerome, Barrie and Wells, born between 1859 and 1866) shared particularly close friendships. The schematics below include just some of the many interconnections between all six authors, covering social and career links, and introducing some of the networking opportunities created and maintained by them.<sup>13</sup> Social events such as dinner parties at the homes of these authors, weekend stays, and family gatherings for cricket and croquet matches, provided opportunities for authors to be introduced to other literary figures. These social gatherings were particularly beneficial for those authors who had moved to London from other parts of the UK, or who were just embarking on literary careers. Barrie, for example, was first introduced to Wells at a dinner party hosted by Pett Ridge. Swinnerton (a younger, aspiring writer at the time) was also introduced to important established literary figures, such as George Bernard Shaw, at Wells's dinner parties.

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<sup>13</sup> The material for these schematics has been gathered from William Pett Ridge, *I Like to Remember* (1926) and *A Story Teller: Forty Years in London* (1923); Jerome K. Jerome, *My Life and Times* (1992); Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, *Below the Fairy City: A Life of Jerome K. Jerome* (2012); Ruth Marie Faurot, *Jerome K. Jerome* (New York: Twayne, 1974); Joseph Connolly, *Jerome K. Jerome: A Critical Biography* (London: Orbis, 1982); Tony Joseph, *George Grossmith: biography of a Savoyard* (Bristol: T. Joseph, 1982); and Frank Swinnerton, *Swinnerton: an autobiography* (1937).

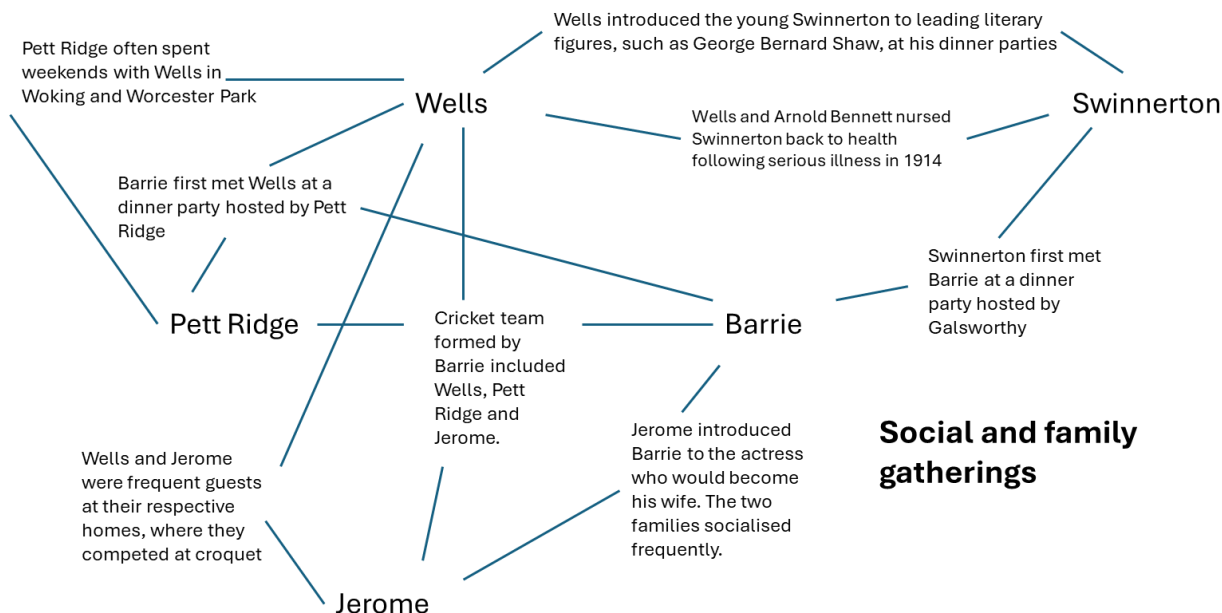


Figure 1: Social and familial connections between the Men from Nowhere

The Allahakbarries (the cricket team created by Barrie), also cemented friendships between the Men from Nowhere and other popular authors of the day, such as Arthur Conan Doyle. These social connections were not solely commercially-driven however. Swinnerton notes in his autobiography that he was seriously ill in 1914, but found himself in ‘unexpected possession of two persistent and untiring friends’, Wells and Arnold Bennett who, with their wives, took a ‘benevolent hand in the cure’, restoring his health. Swinnerton comments that although they were twenty years older than himself and ‘men of genius’, they ‘mingled with their friendship, without the smallest hint of patronage, a paternal and comprehending protectiveness.’<sup>14</sup> The friendships appear genuinely supportive and based on mutual respect.

In addition to social connections, a number of other networking opportunities helped to further the careers of the Men from Nowhere. Jerome, at an early stage in his career in 1884, was a founder member of the Playgoers’ Club.<sup>15</sup> Once established at *The Idler*, Jerome hosted ‘Idler at Homes’, weekly meetings of literati usually held at the magazine’s offices, at which Wells and Barrie were able to mingle with other authors and publishing industry

<sup>14</sup> Swinnerton, p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> Oulton, p. 51.

figures of the day.<sup>16</sup> Barrie, whose university education undoubtedly assisted his acceptance by the literary establishment, opened the door for other writers, such as Pett Ridge, by putting them forward for membership of gentleman's clubs.

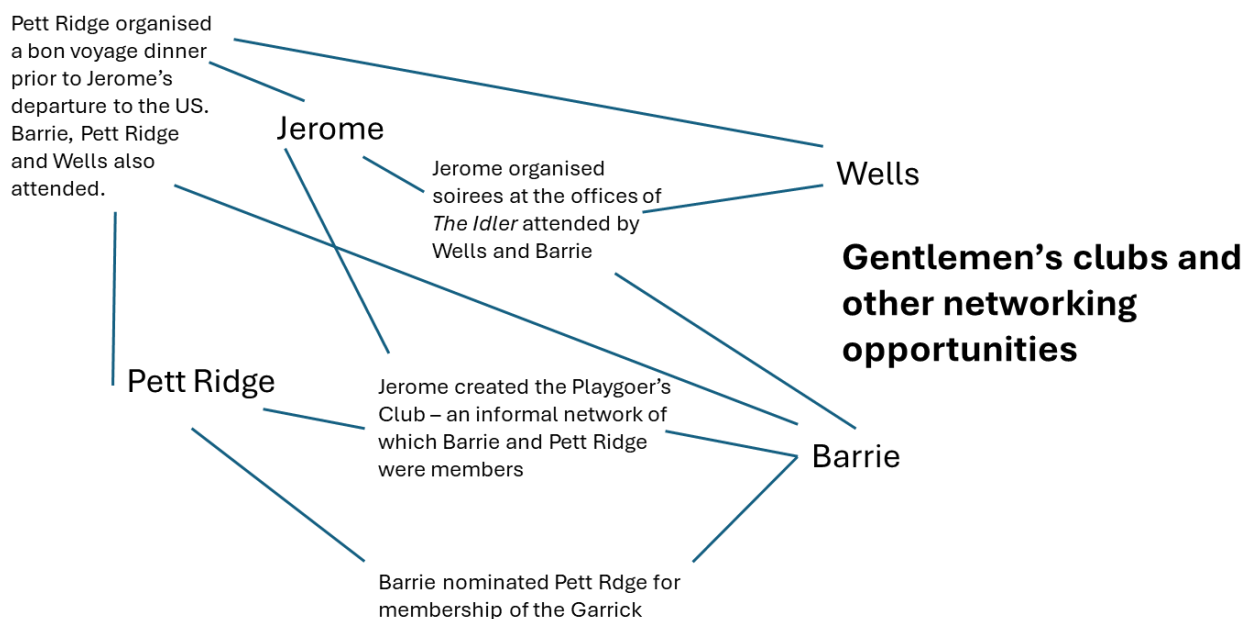


Figure 2: Networking connections between the Men from Nowhere

The activities of all six authors also brought them into contact in a professional capacity, and there are numerous examples of the Men from Nowhere providing practical assistance to one another for career advancement. The age differences also appear to have created situations in which an older member of the group became a mentor for a younger writer at an earlier stage in his career.

<sup>16</sup> Connolly, p. 88.



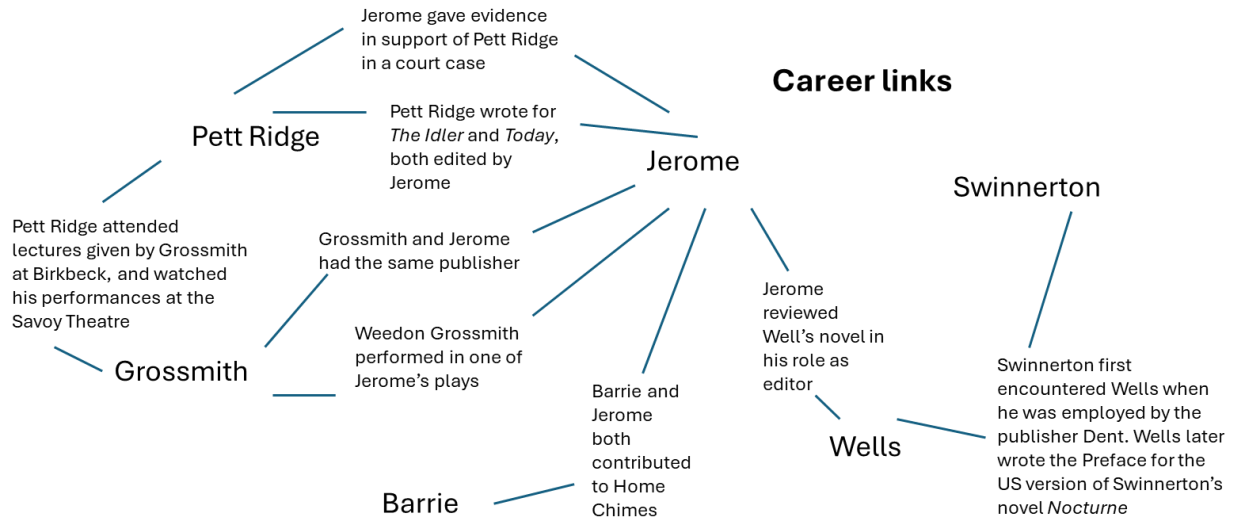


Figure 3: Professional/career connections between the Men from Nowhere

Clearly, a study of these six authors cannot represent the entire field of socially-marginalised authorship during this period. Notable authors with close links to this group, such as Arnold Bennett, have been omitted due to the wordcount limitations of this thesis. Female writers from socially-marginalised backgrounds are also absent. Despite the social relevance of their work, grouping writers such as Ouida and Frances Hodgson Burnett with the male authors in this study would misrepresent the gendered realities of the historical and social context. The cricket teams, gentlemen’s clubs and male-only dinners that created opportunities for networking among the Men from Nowhere were largely inaccessible to aspiring female authors, as Joanne Shattock has demonstrated.<sup>17</sup>

### Thematic links

The advantages of analysing the social critique of these authors in relation to one another, however, is that important thematic links emerge, along with interesting innovations in rhetorical techniques, that have not been discussed in scholarship to date. This thesis will

<sup>17</sup> Joanne Shattock, discussing mid-nineteenth century networks, states that, by contrast with male writers, ‘opportunities [available to women writers] for meeting publishers, editors, and other writers were limited. The clubs and public dinners enjoyed by their male colleagues were not open to them’, leading female authors to create their own networks. Joanne Shattock, ‘Professional Networking, Masculine and Feminine’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 44. No. 2 (2011), pp. 128-140. The evidence from biographies and autobiographies of the specific authors discussed in this thesis suggests that, despite authors of both genders being acquainted and, in some cases, meeting and corresponding by letter, this situation with regard to gender-specific networks of writers, identified by Shattock, persisted in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods.

present, and provide evidence for, the following overarching lines of argument, thereby facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the works of the six authors in question, and making an important contribution to existing scholarship on literary resistance of the dominant centre by socially-marginalised authors.

Firstly, I will argue that the social critiques of the Men from Nowhere demonstrate a clear departure from other literatures of resistance of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The texts analysed in this thesis differ, both ideologically and rhetorically, from those of earlier socially-aware authors such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, and demonstrate a clear departure from those of politically-engaged authors of their own historical moment, such as Margaret Harkness. Secondly, I will demonstrate that the social critiques of the Men from Nowhere represent a more antagonistic attack on the prejudices and complacencies of the British establishment than is currently realised within literary-critical scholarship. The critical attitudes of these writers have been masked by their exploitation of genre conventions and, in the majority of instances, by their use of humour. Furthermore, I will argue that the liminal nature of these authors (both socially and politically) means that their texts elude effective analysis when approached through a Marxist-inspired theoretical lens. I have developed a theoretical approach specifically for this project, to address the ambiguous social and political aspects of these texts more effectively. Finally, I will introduce an idea for future development, regarding the innovations in technique of the Men From Nowhere in relation to other artforms. This theory is not developed specifically within this thesis, but is promulgated as a suggestion for the future direction that can be taken in this field of literary critical research.

The overarching arguments presented by this thesis will be explored across four chapters, with each section investigating a separate strand of investigation:

Chapter One engages with the damaging social attitudes arising from discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism in the late nineteenth century. Interest among the

British intelligentsia regarding eugenics at the *fin de siècle* created an environment in which the potential for individual talent and social mobility of those born into humble backgrounds was denied on ideological grounds. This chapter includes a close reading of *69 Birnam Road*, in which William Pett Ridge challenges notions of essentialism in his novel of a socially-mobile family in the London suburbs.<sup>18</sup> Capitalising on the narrative trajectory of the novel form, Pett Ridge presents individual growth as a function of human experience, inherent to all persons, irrespective of economic circumstances. He problematises and rejects those ideologies which would assess individuals in terms of ‘capital values’, and emphasises the potential for agency for those from humble backgrounds through hard work, entrepreneurialism and career progression.

Chapter Two applies the discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism to narratives of master/domestic servant relationships. Engaging with the discourse of ‘the servant problem’, this chapter reviews the gap between the social attitudes of the dominant centre towards servants, and the realities of the reliance of employers on their domestic help. Close readings of *69 Birnam Road* by William Pett Ridge, and J. M. Barrie’s play *The Admirable Crichton* will demonstrate how criticism is directed towards the weaknesses of character and lack of practical skills of those from privileged backgrounds.<sup>19</sup>

Chapter Three introduces notions of the Victorian ‘gentleman’ and the discourse of public school ‘character’. Notions of this period regarding the desirable leadership qualities imbued by elite educational settings (specifically the boarding school experience) created an environment in which those educated in such settings were promoted frequently to positions of influence, often contrary to aptitude and ability, and to the disadvantage of Board School-educated candidates. This chapter focuses on key influences in the evolution of this discourse, to provide a framework against which social critique regarding notions of public

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<sup>18</sup> William Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908).

<sup>19</sup> J.M. Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton* (1902) reproduced in *The Plays of J. M. Barrie* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), pp. 159-237.

school character can be analysed. Close readings of *Kipps* by H. G. Wells and *Three Men in a Boat* by Jerome K. Jerome demonstrate ways in which these authors explore, problematise and ultimately reject the discourse of public school ‘character’.<sup>20</sup>

Chapter Four applies analysis of the discourse of public school ‘character’ to narratives of the workplace. It analyses the ways which these authors, who themselves had experience as clerks (first-generation white collar workers) identified ways in which the commercial world was evolving. Close readings of George and Weedon Grossmith’s *The Diary of a Nobody* and Frank Swinnerton’s *The Young Idea* demonstrate how public school ‘character’ is exposed as a myth.<sup>21</sup> Those from humble backgrounds are depicted as better suited to the commercial world of the future, in which entrepreneurial spirit is of greater value than the old school tie.

Before embarking on analysis of the development of class-based discourses and the close readings of these texts, however, it is important to provide some historical, social and economic context, as a basis on which the cultural implications of the social critique of these authors will be examined.

## **Opportunities and challenges for socially-marginalised writers - 1880 to 1901**

The Men from Nowhere at the centre of this doctoral project were assisted in their literary aspirations by a number of developments which made success as a journalist or novelist more feasible than in the past. In *The Pen and the Book* Walter Besant stated: ‘To the thousands of young people whom I address, the Literary Life offers attractions which are almost irresistible. The old bugbear – the prejudice of poverty has vanished.’<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> H. G. Wells, *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* (London: Penguin, 2005), first published 1905.

<sup>21</sup> George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1892). Frank A. Swinnerton, *The Young Idea* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1910).

<sup>22</sup> Walter Besant, *The Pen and the Book* (London: Thomas Burley, 1899), pp. vi to vii.

Circumstances of birth need no longer be an impediment to literary aspiration, Besant asserted.

[A] respectable man of letters may command an income and a position quite equal to those of the average lawyer or doctor. It is also well known that one who rises to the top may enjoy as much social consideration as a Bishop and as good an income.<sup>23</sup>

Besant's assessment of the potential for social mobility through a career in writing is Smilesean in its depiction of an idealised future, and in its determination to ignore the significant attitudinal barriers embedded in long-held notions of social hierarchy.<sup>24</sup> He estimates that the number of authors, editors and journalists in England and Wales will increase from about 5800 in 1891 to around 20,000 by 1898, stressing that educational qualifications are unnecessary.<sup>25</sup>

Besant's vision, whilst over-optimistic, has a basis in historical fact however. Alexis Easley et al assert:

A constellation of social, cultural, and economic factors – including reductions in production costs, the repeal of the so-called 'taxes on knowledge,' a series of educational reforms from 1870 onward, and soaring literacy rates – created the perfect environment for a truly diversified press to emerge in this period.<sup>26</sup>

Developments in technology, introduction of new financial and education policies, and an expanding reading public were creating a more favourable environment in which aspiring authors could establish their careers by catering for increased demand for fiction and

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<sup>23</sup> Besant, pp. vi to vii.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Self Help; with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* (London: Murray 1866).

<sup>25</sup> Besant, pp. 1-2. Besant draws on figures from the 1891 census.

<sup>26</sup> Alexis Easley, Clare Gill and Beth Rodgers, *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s-1900s: The Victorian Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), Introduction, p. 3.

journalism. Peter Keating argues that the decline in publication of the triple-decker novel in favour of single volumes led to a steep increase in demand, stating:

[I]n 1886 the number of adult novels rose sharply to 755 and marked the inauguration of a boom that, with occasional variations, was to continue until just before the First World War. [...] By 1894, the year when the circulating libraries announced the death of the three-decker [...] 1,315 new adult novels appeared, an average of 3.5 per day 'Sunday included'.<sup>27</sup>

The reduced levels of financial risk faced by publishers encouraged investment in a greater number of novels, whilst growing demand increased opportunities for new writers to be considered for publication. Keating also notes the extraordinary proliferation of newspapers and periodicals in the second half of the nineteenth century, stating that the number of newspapers listed in the *Newspaper Press Directory* increased from 1,609 in 1875 to 2,531 in 1903, but estimates that, in total, between 25,000 and 50,000 different newspapers and periodicals were published during the Victorian era.<sup>28</sup> Laurel Brake adds:

The growth and embedding of the newspaper sector of the nineteenth-century press were important catalysts in the fostering of reading - the professionalisation of journalism, literature and authorship, and the separation of journalism from 'literature' in its most general sense.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to expanding the reading public, the sharp increase in journalistic opportunities, in particular the ability to supply short pieces of writing, often published anonymously, provided a means of financial subsistence for aspiring authors, and continued to supplement

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875 -1914* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989), pp. 26, 32 and 33.

<sup>28</sup> Keating, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> Laurel Brake, *Print in transition, 1850 – 1910* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 4.

their incomes from novels throughout their careers.<sup>30</sup> As the biographical sections in the following chapters will demonstrate, writing for newspapers and periodicals (as freelance and/or staff-writers) impacted on the careers of all of the authors studied in this thesis. Further favourable developments discussed by Brake and Keating include the growth in representation by professional literary agents who ‘promised to take the author out of [an] atmosphere of uncertainty and distrust by offering, in return for a percentage of money earned, a specialist knowledge to match that of the publisher’.<sup>31</sup> For socially-marginalised writers, the literary agent could overcome the author’s lack of personal connections, and could be expected to negotiate with publishers on more equal terms. The establishment of the Society of Authors in 1884 also promised to provide protection for authors in matters of remuneration and copyright.<sup>32</sup> From a more informal perspective, this period saw a growing trend for the publication of guidebooks and manuals for aspiring authors, and socially-marginalised authors including Bennett and Jerome were among those creating such manuals.<sup>33</sup> Lastly, Keating argues that new marketing opportunities emerged in the late nineteenth century with the growing popularity of American-style personalised interviews offering writers opportunities for celebrity.<sup>34</sup> As the writers included in this study were involved, principally, in the creation of popular fiction, these new marketing opportunities were of considerable value.

At the *fin de siècle*, Britain could already look back on a proud legacy of literary achievement by writers from the social margins. Taken in combination, these developments in publishing and demand for fiction reduced some of the class and gender-related barriers

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<sup>30</sup> Alexis Easley describes the crucial importance of this publishing industry development for furthering the careers of female writers. See Alexis Easley, ‘Victorian women writers and the periodical press: the case of Harriet Martineau’, *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1997), 39-51.

<sup>31</sup> Keating, p. 69.

<sup>32</sup> Keating, pp. 65-66.

<sup>33</sup> Keating p. 72-73. Examples include Jerome K. Jerome, *My First Book* (1894) and Arnold Bennett, *How To Become An Author* (1903).

<sup>34</sup> Keating, p. 74.

to entry for aspiring writers.<sup>35</sup> These commercial developments need to be examined, however, within the context of wider social and economic inequalities of the period.

## **Economic and social contextual factors**

Assessing economic contextual factors in this period (as a backdrop for the social critiques of these authors) is complex, in that impacts at the micro level (individual opportunities for social mobility) contradict those at the macro level (national economic performance and wealth distribution). Expressing these contradictions, Martin Daunton states:

The quarter-century from 1873 has often been termed the ‘great depression’, and a Royal Commission was established in 1883 to inquire into the Depression of Trade and Industry. Whatever the ‘great depression’ might have been, it was not a period of depression in the standard of living of the working class.<sup>36</sup>

Against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution and expansion of Empire, Eric Lampard states, gross national product had ‘roughly quadrupled’ across Victoria’s reign.<sup>37</sup> When economic performance weakened after 1873, however, particularly in relation to agriculture, certain factors softened the impact of the downturn on the British workforce as a whole.<sup>38</sup> Daunton supports Feinstein’s assessment that ‘real wages grew at an annual rate of 1.58 per

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<sup>35</sup> For further information on gender-related barriers and female authors see Easley et al, eds., *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s-1900s : The Victorian Period*.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1851-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 378. For analysis of economic performance of key industrial sectors during the early twentieth-century see David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (London: Penguin, 2019), particularly Chapter 3: Globalization to Nationalization, pp. 78-101.

<sup>37</sup> Eric E. Lampard, ‘The Urbanizing World’ in H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, eds. *The Victorian City: Images and Realities. Volume 1: Past and Present/Numbers of People* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1973), pp. 3-58, p. 11. This source also provides information on the impact of economic changes on population concentration.

<sup>38</sup> For information of the potential causes and impacts of the ‘great depression’ see James Foreman-Peck, *New Perspectives on the Late Victorian Economy : Essays in Quantitative Economic History, 1860-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).



cent between 1882 and 1899, and fell to a growth rate of 0.29 per cent between 1899 and 1913.<sup>39</sup> Daunton argues:

[I]n general, money wages were maintained during the period of falling prices and employers opted to reduce the wage cost by increasing the workload and imposing tighter discipline. [...] Falling prices gave employers an incentive to push the frontier of control to their advantage.<sup>40</sup>

A reduction in prices, particularly food prices, masked negative trends in the wider economy for the working-class majority. Daunton comments: ‘Consumers did benefit to some extent from changes in relative prices between 1882 and 1899, but the overall impact on trends in real income was modest.’<sup>41</sup> Secondly, attitudes towards employees, and the power dynamics of the employer/employee relationship were affected by revised perceptions of the ‘value’ of employees in terms of contribution to profit.

Furthermore, as Gareth Stedman Jones argues:

[T]here remained the slight but disturbing possibility that the forces of progress might be swamped by the corrupting features of urban life, that, unless checked or reformed, the ‘residuum’ might overrun the newly built citadel of moral virtue and economic rationality. [...] [A]s the boom years were succeeded by the uncertainties of the Great Depression, that problem appeared to pose itself with greater and greater urgency.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> C. H. Feinstein quoted in Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare*, p. 378.

<sup>40</sup> Daunton, p. 379

<sup>41</sup> Daunton, pp. 380-381.

<sup>42</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Oxford: OUP, 1971), p. 16.

An impact of the economic downturn during this period, these historians argue, was a hardening of attitudes towards those marginalised by their economic circumstances, in society as a whole as well as in the workplace.

There are, therefore, contradictions at the macro level, in that artificial maintenance of wages at existing levels during this period was providing a degree of security for many of the employed, against a backdrop of increasing casualisation of labour and intensification of unemployment for others.<sup>43</sup> At the level of discourse, governmental and philanthropic interventions were working towards (and indeed delivering) social improvements at a time in which attitudes towards those receiving assistance were worsening, with increasing representation of the poor as ‘other’.<sup>44</sup>

Thomas Piketty states: ‘The top decile’s share of total wealth was on the order of 85 percent from 1810 to 1870 and surpassed 90 percent in 1900-1910; the uppermost centile’s share rose from 55-60 percent in 1810-1870 to nearly 70 percent in 1910-1920.’<sup>45</sup> In Britain in the period 1880 to 1910, therefore, in excess of 90 percent of the country’s wealth was in the hands of its richest 10 percent of individuals, with the wealthiest one percent of society able to benefit from almost 70 percent of the nation’s total income, property and other assets. This represents the highest level of wealth inequality experienced in Britain since 1810, and this degree of inequality has not been witnessed since.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For further information on causes of poverty, including casualisation and seasonality of employment, in addition to social factors such as age, illness, death of parents and guardians, and family size, see Daunton, p. 394.

<sup>44</sup> Discourses of class, including notions of hereditary and environmental determinism, are examined in depth in the chapters of this thesis. As an introduction see Stedman Jones’s discussion of social imperialism in Chapter 16, *Outcast London*, pp. 281-314, in particular his commentary on intersectionality of discourses of class and race in relation to General Booth’s *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890).

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 343.

<sup>46</sup> For information on developments in wealth distribution in Britain throughout the twentieth century as a whole, see Piketty pp. 346-350.

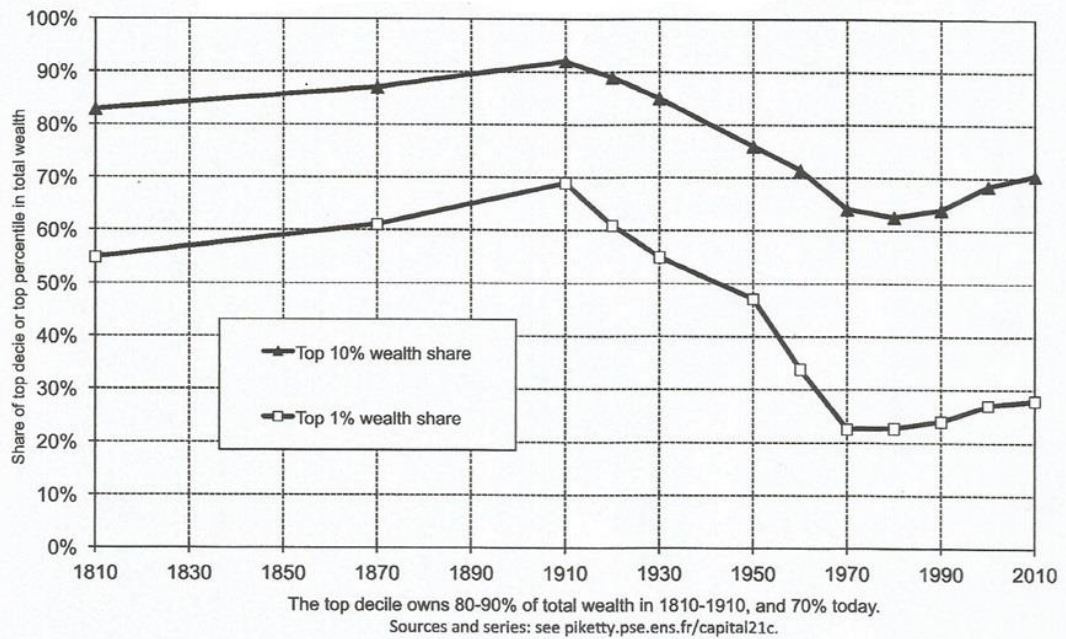


Figure 4: Wealth inequality in Britain 1810 to 2010<sup>47</sup>

Irrespective of the commercial opportunities emerging at this time for the aspiring authors at the centre of this doctoral thesis, their historical moment is characterised by an unprecedented gap between the richest in society and the majority of the remaining population. Piketty notes Britain's position as a 'society of rentiers' in the period before World War I as a consequence of its economic landscape.<sup>48</sup>

Access to wealth contributed to further aspects of inequality in this period as highlighted by David Edgerton:

The standard British member of parliament [...] came from the few percent of families who sent their boys to public school, who supplied officers to the British forces and were gentle. In fact they tended to come from a much smaller group, less than 1 percent, who were not merely gentle but in 'society': those not just with private

<sup>47</sup> Piketty, p. 344.

<sup>48</sup> Piketty p. 278. Rentiers are defined by Piketty as 'people who own enough capital to live on the annual income from their wealth'.

education, but education at elite public schools, who became the high officers of the armed forces, the civil service, the clergy, the judiciary, the directors of businesses, the top scientists, engineers and doctors.<sup>49</sup>

Edgerton argues that economic inequality in this period reflected a wider ability for elite interests to be protected, and advocated for, at an institutional level, to the potential detriment of those with limited financial means. Whilst this thesis will not be utilising an Althusserian theoretical framework, it is perhaps useful here to consider these contextual factors from the perspective of Louis Althusser's theories regarding Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA).<sup>50</sup> Access to positions of influence in key RSA institutions (such as government, the military and the judicial system) as well as ISA institutions (religious bodies and those controlling educational policy) was confined to an extremely narrow social banding in the decades approaching World War I, compounding inequalities of wealth distribution with significant potential for societal control (both actual and ideological) of the majority by an elite minority. It is interesting to note that, by forging careers in the media, the authors in this study move into positions offering the potential for ideological influence, in one of the key ISA institutions open to those from the social margins in this period.

## **Theoretical framework and definition of key terms**

Having stated that this thesis will not be applying an Althusserian theoretical framework, it is important to clarify the basis upon which the social critique of these authors will be analysed. This process of clarification needs to be approached in a series of stages, to define: terms of reference for the nature of social class; the relationship between literature and social

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<sup>49</sup> David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 113-4.

<sup>50</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État. (Notes pour une recherche)', in *La Pensée*, no. 151, June 1970, 67-125.

critique; the current position of class-based analysis within academic study; traditional theoretical approaches for class-based analysis; and the theoretical framework within which these texts can be best interrogated.

### **Towards a definition of class**

The problematical nature of defining social class is widely acknowledged in the social sciences, quite apart from the specific challenges of class-based literary critical analysis.

Fredric Jameson states:

[S]ocial class is at one and the same time a sociological idea, a political concept, a historical conjecture, an activist slogan, yet a definition in terms of any of these perspectives alone is bound to be unsatisfactory. Social class cannot be defined, it can only be provisionally approached in a kind of parallax, which locates it in the absent center of a multitude set of incompatible approaches.<sup>51</sup>

Jameson raises crucial issues of multivalency. A definition of class is historically-contingent, but also reflective of individual attitudes, whilst simultaneously providing a focus for several branches of academic study. Adoption of a single definition would disappoint, Jameson states, and whilst applying multiple perspectives may lead to definitions with demonstrable synergy, this will inevitably involve misalignment and contradiction. Additional challenges are outlined by Mike Savage in his exploration of ‘rugged individualism’.<sup>52</sup> It can be misleading to anticipate attitudes using class-based categorisations, Savage argues, due to an individual’s ability to embrace both collective and individual senses of identity within a single sense of self. For the individual subject, as well as society as a whole, class is

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<sup>51</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Commentary on Volume One* (London: Verso 2011), p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Mike Savage, ‘Sociology, Class and Male Manual Work Cultures’ in John McIlroy, Nina Fishman and Alan Campbell, eds., *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 23-42.

contingent on circumstances and capable of flux, from a temporal as well as economic perspective.

Looking beyond a generalised conception of class, towards a specific framework for literary analysis, Jack Windle believes that class-based criticism becomes particularly problematical when texts by socially-marginalised writers are studied within an academic setting. He states that '[literary theory] has a fraught and complex relationship with the working class and working-class writing in Britain'.<sup>53</sup> He discusses tensions in situations where proletarian forms of expression are interrogated within a predominantly bourgeois setting. He continues: 'The centrality of identity to theory—and the partial or secondary nature of class as a signifier of it—has deep and sinister ideological roots that must be examined in order to understand the internationalism of working-class literature.'<sup>54</sup> Quoting comments made by F. R. Leavis in 1960, Windle argues that 'contempt for working-class people runs deep in the institutions and traditions of cultural commentary and custodianship in Britain.'<sup>55</sup> In addition to the problems of defining social class effectively, Windle warns those studying texts by socially-marginalised authors to be aware of the ideological freight of earlier scholarship.

Given that this thesis cannot be articulated effectively without clear terms of reference, a stated definition of class is necessary, despite these challenges of interpretation. A number of possible definitions present themselves. Luke Seaber's perspective is helpful:

[I]t is useful to consider the British class system in the early twentieth century as being a Saussurean structure of value characterized by the arbitrariness of the sign: what matters is not so much what makes an individual lower class as the fact that they are

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<sup>53</sup> Jack Windle, 'Interwoven Histories: Working Class Literature and Theory' in Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble, eds., *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice* (Springer, 2018), pp. 41-61, (p. 42).

<sup>54</sup> Windle, p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> Windle, p. 57.

not upper class or middle class, each of which is also given meaning by not being of another class, and so on.<sup>56</sup>

This approach, in which the specificity of class is less important than the comparisons that are created by social hierarchies (and their ability to attribute meaning), creates a framework in which the multivalency identified by Jameson can begin to be accommodated. In addition, a useful insight into the historic development of the concept of class is given by Raymond Williams, in *Keywords*, who traces the etymology from its Latin form, through its key stage of development (between 1770 and 1840) and into the twentieth century.<sup>57</sup> Williams's final definitions fall into three categories, based around group, rank and formation. John Clarke's definition in *New Keywords* is also informative, discussing the conflicts between a Marxist analysis of class (as relational), and contemporary attitudes towards class (as a reflection of market position).<sup>58</sup>

The definition of class upon which this thesis will be based, however, is that provided by Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn in *Class and Contemporary British Culture*:

[W]e understand social class as being formed through material conditions and economic (in)securities and as being shaped by early disadvantage or natal privilege and the uneven distribution of life chances and opportunities which these conditions create. But we also choose to recognise class as an ongoing social process experienced across our lifetime trajectories. For example, throughout our lives as classed subjects many of us are buffeted by a variety of changing socio-economic circumstances, which might be precipitated by

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<sup>56</sup> Luke Seaber, 'Kings in Disguise and "Pure Ellen Kellond": Literary Social Passing in the Early Twentieth Century' in Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble, eds., *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice* (Springer, 2018), pp. 81-98, (p. 82).

<sup>57</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New Edition (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 26-34.

<sup>58</sup> John Clarke, 'Class' in Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris, eds., *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 39-42.

family breakdown, redundancy, financial windfalls, exceptional professional success, and so on. [...] In addition, we will argue that classed subjects are shaped by the classed judgments of others and by prevailing political and popular discourses which often work to privilege, protect or normalise particular lifestyles, conducts and values.<sup>59</sup>

This definition has a potential weakness, in its tendency to express class in terms of a rich/poor binary, rather than a more realistic continuum. It provides, however, an effective term of reference for this thesis in that it encapsulates notions of economic advantage/disadvantage in early life as a determinant factor in treatment and opportunity of individuals. It also acknowledges that class position is impacted upon by changing financial circumstances, both positive and negative, throughout a lifetime. The biographies of the authors studied in this thesis reflect these changes in social status in a number of ways, mapping setbacks such as business/occupational failure or death of a father, precarity in working life, and significant financial success. Most importantly, this definition resonates with a key approach to be taken by this thesis, in its acknowledgement of the importance of external attitudes, including discourses of the dominant centre. This definition of class will be applied throughout the thesis as the predominant way in which society and its hierarchies are understood for the purposes of this study.

### **Historical, social and political contexts as a framework for analysis**

The analysis of social critique in this thesis will, of course, draw heavily upon historical, social and other contextual factors. E. P. Thompson argues: '[I] am convinced that we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical

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<sup>59</sup> Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Class and Contemporary Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p. 1.



period.’<sup>60</sup> For Thompson it is inconceivable to remove any discussion of class from its context. Concurring with this viewpoint, the following chapters will explore notions of class/social difference, in detail, taking a range of contextual factors into consideration. It should be noted, however, that in each chapter these explorations of context will be directed towards a meaningful engagement with class-based discourses in relation to literature, rather than having the intention of providing a comprehensive social history of the period as a whole.

Writing in 1937, Alick West argued: ‘The value of literature springs from the fact that it continues and changes the organization of social energy; we perceive value through the awakening of the same kind of energy in ourselves.’<sup>61</sup> For West, literature is not just a passive witness and interpreter of society, it is an active participant with the potential to bring about social change by galvanising readers. Terry Eagleton’s influential *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) discussed the relationship between literature and the creation and exploration of discourses, concluding:

Literature, one might argue, is the most revealing mode of experiential access to ideology that we possess. It is in literature that we observe in a peculiarly complex, coherent, intensive and immediate fashion the workings of ideology in the textures of lived experience of class-societies.<sup>62</sup>

The study of literature, Eagleton asserted at that time, unlocks insights into the mechanics of ideology, explaining the process of its creation, and providing a technique by which to

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<sup>60</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 11.

<sup>61</sup> Alick West, ‘The Relativity of Literary Value’ reprinted in Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne, eds., *Marxist Literary Theory*, pp. 103-106, (p. 105).

<sup>62</sup> Terry Eagleton, ‘Towards a Science of the Text’, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: NLB, 1976), pp. 64-101, (p. 101).

analyse it. ‘Ideology pre-exists the text’, Eagleton argues, but it is the text which defines the nature of that ideology.<sup>63</sup>

More recently, scholars have re-emphasised the crucial role that literature is able to play in working-class studies. Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble argue:

Literature is able to trace the lived impact of these changes [in the way that class is viewed] and the complex relations between the various elements that shape individual and collective identities. Its commitment to what Richard Hoggart called “experiential wholeness,” with the ways in which lives are shaped by many “different orders of things, all at once,” enables it to avoid establishing reductive hierarchies.<sup>64</sup>

Literary engagement with fictional lives and characters provides a conduit for exploration of class identity, Clarke and Hubble assert, providing intersectionality with other characteristics such as gender, race and sexuality. Windle supports this argument, stating:

As Hoggart shows, working-class perspectives can not only enrich the tradition of working-class literature but can also contribute to interdisciplinary understandings—and to a more enlightened wider discourse — of social class.<sup>65</sup>

Examining texts from the perspective of class, in particular those by socially-marginalised authors, in Windle’s view, offers valuable potential for the wider development of class-based discussions.

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<sup>63</sup> Eagleton, p. 85.

<sup>64</sup> Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble, ‘Introduction’, *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice* (Springer, 2018), pp. 1-14, (pp. 5-6).

<sup>65</sup> Windle, p. 58.

It is obvious that the research questions at the heart of this thesis have been developed in the belief that literature plays a role in interpretation of social structures. It is important to state at this point, however, that this thesis does not set out to quantify or prove the social impact of the texts analysed, in support of the claims made by the Marxist commentators mentioned earlier. Neither does it aim to position insights from close readings as statements of historical fact. Its intention is to draw on contextual material in order to understand more deeply the individual viewpoints of the six authors, and their personal responses to the class-based injustices of their day. These insights will, in turn, provide a previously under-scrutinised counterpoint to current scholarship focused on cultural forms of resistance to elitism and bias during this period. It is in this largely unexplored landscape of (primarily lower-middle class) authorship that this thesis will mine for new understandings of the ways in which individual writers challenged unfair attitudes of the dominant centre. It will be argued that, without these insights from the Men from Nowhere and similarly socially-marginalised writers, scholarly assessments of cultural resistance in this period will remain incomplete at best, and skewed at worst.

### **Current developments in class-based literary criticism**

In choosing the field of class-based literary critical research I am cognisant of its recent reemergence after a period of relative scholarly neglect. Windle states:

[M]eaningful academic engagement with working-class culture between 1957 and 1963, by authors including Hoggart, Williams and E. P. Thompson, emboldened and energised the new generation of scholars and writers whose work would embed in literary scholarship and herald a ‘golden age’ of working-class writing on stage, page and screen.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Windle, pp. 42-43.

However Clarke and Hubble argue that this focus was soon diverted, stating: ‘Critical attention began to shift away from questions of class as early as the nineteen-seventies in response to new theoretical ideas, social conditions and emancipatory movements.’<sup>67</sup> Issues relating to race, gender and sexuality began to take precedence over economic inequality Clarke and Hubble argue. Lawrence Driscoll supports this view stating:

This critical assault on the normative has meant that, while gender, sexuality, and race have been thoroughly examined, it has been at the expense of class, with the result, as Peter Hitchcock has pointed out, that class has clearly been “under theorized in terms of the literary, as if what is problematic for the social scientist is transparent or inconsequential for the literary critic”.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to citing Hitchcock, Driscoll demonstrates how commentators including Gary Day, Wendy Brown, Philip Tew and Slavoj Žižek have developed this argument. Biressi and Nunn quote the opinion of J. Pakulski and M. Waters, that ‘for cultural critics themselves class politics was increasingly rejected because it was intellectually unfashionable’ during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>69</sup> Sheila Rowbotham and Hugh Beynon, similarly state that engagement with issues of class during the 1980s became ‘peculiarly unmentionable, politically and theoretically’.<sup>70</sup> Factors within academia itself, they argue, could have discouraged scholars from channelling their research into class-related enquiry.

There is widespread agreement, however, that since the 2008 economic downturn, the need to reassess issues of class has become increasingly relevant and urgent. John Clarke

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<sup>67</sup> Clarke and Hubble, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> Lawrence Driscoll, *Evading Class in Contemporary British Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).  
p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> Biressi and Nunn, p. 14.

<sup>70</sup> Sheila Rowbotham and Hugh Beynon, *Looking at Class: Film, Television and the Working Class in Britain* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2001), pp 3-5. For a detailed summary of historical developments in class-based study see Mike Savage and Andrew Miles, ‘Politics and the British Working Class’, *The Remaking of the British Working Class* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-20.

argues: ‘Despite the recurring attempts to shrug class off and to naturalize inequalities, attention returns to it.’<sup>71</sup> Biressi and Nunn support this view, stating:

[I]t makes little sense to insist we have moved entirely beyond class when people are still subjected to it and by it and when class continues to be deployed as an ‘obvious’ explanatory framework by many ordinary Britons.<sup>72</sup>

Whilst class-based scholarship experienced a drop in popularity in the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the imperative to deepen understanding of these issues remains urgent due to its inescapability as a factor in human experience. The recent publication of academic texts aimed specifically at literary critical analysis from the perspective of class bears witness to this reawakening of scholarly interest. These texts focus primarily on later twentieth century or contemporary fiction, and provide a strong international perspective. There are individual essays, however, which address literary engagement with class in the period covered by this thesis.<sup>73</sup>

In the view of some commentators, external political factors have functioned to suppress academic engagements with class. Driscoll discusses the post-Blair era in terms of ‘clear evasions and erasures of class’. He heralds ‘the return of class as a troubling subterranean and repressed element in contemporary literature, theory, and culture.’<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> John Clarke, p. 41.

<sup>72</sup> Biressi and Nunn, p. 18.

<sup>73</sup> For example: Gloria McMillan, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Class* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021); Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning, *The British Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Cultural Concerns – Literary Developments – Model Interpretations* (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2018); Lawrence Driscoll, *Evading Class in Contemporary British Literature* (2009); Nick Hubble and Matthew Taunton, *The Making of the Working Class: Proletarian Writing in the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), and Nick Hubble, *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017). Notable essays focused on the late Victorian and Edwardian periods include Ingrid Hanson, ‘Victorian Socialist Obituaries and the Politics of Cross-Class Community’, Matthew L. Reznicek, ‘Abject Capitalism as the Sight of Dead Bodies in Nineteenth-Century Novels’ in Gloria McMillan, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Class* (2021). Agnieszka M. Will also outlines an interesting new theoretical approach in ‘The “Metaholon” Method for Class-Based Literary Analysis’ in the same essay collection, influenced by the work of Bourdieu and Mutersbach.

<sup>74</sup> Driscoll, p. 1.

Driscoll's image of class-based literary critical analysis as an underground movement is an interesting one, in that it echoes opinions expressed by scholars of working-class writing regarding the problematical position of proletarian texts within academia. Driscoll argues: '[T]he *representation* of class positions in British culture allows us to see how the middle-class institutions of Literature/Culture and academia have appropriated, channelled, and rebranded the troubling working-class subject.'<sup>75</sup> Driscoll continues:

[W]orking-class experience has been revised and rewritten [...] so as to eliminate it as an object of knowledge and power and that this rewriting of both middle- and working-class identity can be delineated and traced through the pages of the contemporary British novel.<sup>76</sup>

Driscoll, in common with Windle, perceives tensions around literary representation of class, and the battle to convey the reality of working-class experience. These representations are deeply conflicted in contemporary fiction, Driscoll argues, exacerbated by the predominantly bourgeois nature of the settings in which these texts are studied, and the social backgrounds of the individuals involved in their analysis.

The complexities of analysis identified by Driscoll and Windle can be related to this particular study. A key challenge for this thesis has been to find a theoretical framework in which the class-based commentaries in the social critique of the chosen texts can be analysed effectively and comparatively. Moreover, the theoretical framework needs to be informed by the misgivings of prominent twenty-first century literary critical scholars such as Driscoll, Windle and others, regarding the problematical position of texts by socially-marginalised writers within an academic context.

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<sup>75</sup> Driscoll, p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> Driscoll, p. 3.

## **Towards a theoretical framework: traditional and new analytical approaches**

Traditionally, Marxist-derived theories have provided the default framework for class-based literary critical analysis. Irrespective of a literary scholar's own political views, Eagleton argues, Marxist-inspired theoretical positions have provided a basis from which to interrogate society through literature. Eagleton argues, however, that as a result of the 'dwindling of a left "public sphere" in society as a whole' in recent decades, the nature of Marxist literary theory has evolved away from its early roots.<sup>77</sup> He discerns a 'steady academicization of what for Trotsky, Breton, Caudwell and Brecht had been a mode of political intervention. [...] Part of the task of socialist intellectuals is to preserve precious traditions, which is for the most part more a matter of reflection than action.'<sup>78</sup> He describes a situation in which the flame of Marxism has been kept burning within the academic setting, in the absence of other opportunities available to individuals to bring about actual political and social change.<sup>79</sup> Eagleton describes a disconnection between the theoretical aspects of Marxist thinking and its efficacy (as perceived in academic circles) as a catalyst for reform, in a process Eagleton describes as 'creative deflect[ion]'.<sup>80</sup> This phenomenon described by Eagleton might explain, perhaps, a reluctance to innovate in the area of class-based literary critical theory in such ways as might question/undermine established Marxist theoretical frameworks.

There are, of course, problems associated with applying Marxist theoretical positions, and these have been discussed widely. Drew Milne states: 'To judge a writer against a given schema or class origin as being idealist, bourgeois or racist – or alternatively as materialist, progressive or transgressive – may serve as polemical shorthand. But this amounts to a reductive mode of judgement if taken as the end of the analysis'.<sup>81</sup> Milne

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<sup>77</sup> Eagleton, 'Introduction Part I', p.12.

<sup>78</sup> Eagleton, 'Introduction Part I', p. 12.

<sup>79</sup> Eagleton, 'Introduction Part I', p. 12.

<sup>80</sup> Eagleton, 'Introduction Part I', p. 12.

<sup>81</sup> Drew Milne, 'Introduction Part II', *Marxist Literary Theory* (2000), p. 23.

explains the difficulties of achieving a sufficient degree of nuance when analysing texts in this way. It is my contention that novels of socially-marginalised authors, in particular, can elude satisfactory interpretation via these traditional approaches. The political positions, individualistic world-views, and support for social mobility expressed in the texts studied in this thesis, for example, often place their authors at odds with the assumptions of collectivism that underpin Marxist-derived ideological positions. In his monograph *Blue Collar Theoretically*, about the analysis of working-class writing John F. Lavelle argues:

Although workable at a macro level, [interpretations of working-class literature based on Marxist tenets] fall apart at the micro level, and because literature is written at the micro level of the population, at the level of the individual, [...] texts have obvious problems, inconsistencies, contradictions, and readings [...] without textual support.<sup>82</sup>

Lavelle argues that it is difficult to reconcile overarching political ideologies - based on assumptions of collectivism - with the individuality of thought of socially-marginalised authors – particularly novelists – where their chosen literary form focuses, typically, on a central protagonist. These issues are even more pronounced in this thesis, as the authors at the centre of the study, in the period 1880 to 1910, are socially marginalised by the economic circumstances of their upbringings, but do not typically identify as working-class. The social critique in their texts often expresses oppositional attitudes, but these do not align, typically, with Marxist thinking, or indeed (with rare exceptions) with party political standpoints of their day. The authors themselves (often first-generation white collar workers) occupy a liminal space – socially, culturally and politically. Swinnerton, for example, says of himself:

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<sup>82</sup> John F. Lavelle, *Blue Collar Theoretically: A Post-Marxist Approach to Working Class Literature* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2012), p. 86.



An exasperated *Times* reviewer [...] recently accused me of posing as a man of the people. He did not know what he was talking about. I have never posed, and I never was a man of the people. But then I never was a man of the bourgeoisie or the intelligentsia.<sup>83</sup>

The very act of authorship in the Edwardian period positioned a writer from humble circumstances in an ambiguous social position – that of the *petit bourgeois*.

Within Marxist thinking, there is an attitudinal legacy with regard to the *petit bourgeois* which becomes problematical for literary critical analysis of texts by authors such as Swinnerton – that can be categorised as lower-middle class. Critiquing the work of Wells, for example, Christopher Caudwell stated: ‘[The *petit bourgeois*] is rootless, lonely, and perpetually facing, with its hackles up, an antagonistic world. It can never know the security of the rich bourgeoisie or the companionship of the worker.’<sup>84</sup> Caudwell acknowledges the precarity of the lower middle class, evoking the day-to-day struggle for survival in the face of inequality of treatment and opportunity and the alienation faced by many in their working and domestic lives. He also, however, appears to despise this section of society arguing:

[O]f all the products of capitalism, none is more unlovely than this class. It is necessarily a class whose whole existence is based on a lie.<sup>85</sup>

It is the most deluded class, for it has not the cynicism of the worker with practical proof of bourgeois fictions, or the cynicism of intelligent bourgeois [...]<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Swinnerton, *Swinnerton: An Autobiography*, p. 19.

<sup>84</sup> Christopher Caudwell, ‘H. G. Wells: A Study in Utopianism’, *Studies in a Dying Culture* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1938), pp. 76-77. Caudwell’s essay was published posthumously, following his death in the Spanish Civil War.

<sup>85</sup> Caudwell, p. 76.

<sup>86</sup> Caudwell, p. 77.

[The petit bourgeois] has no traditions of its own and it does not adopt those of the workers, which it hates, but those of the bourgeois, which are without virtue for it, since it did not help to create them. This world [...] is like a terrible stagnant marsh, all mud and bitterness, and without even the saving grace of tragedy.<sup>87</sup>

These attitudes are problematical in that they deny the possibility of a distinct cultural identity for the lower-middle class, and assert that authors from this section of society are entirely complicit with bourgeois values. In reality, this section of society had a rich and distinct cultural life in the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras, which is often evoked by the lower-middle class authors at the heart of this study. Most importantly, these texts voice important oppositional attitudes, resisting hegemony of the dominant centre, which would remain entirely unexplored if application of Marxist theoretical positions prevented analysis from going beyond a reductive categorisation of these authors as merely *petit bourgeois*.

The application of traditional Marxist theoretical approaches to these texts, therefore, has a number of potential shortcomings. Firstly, there is the risk of imposing an ideological framework which is alien to the author's own perspective. Indeed, the ideas enshrined in Marxist thinking might perhaps have been rejected by the author involved at the time the text was written and published. As a result, there is a risk of 'identifying' attitudes through close reading that the author did not intend to express. Furthermore these approaches can lead to the analysis of social critique in terms of absence or lack – discussing what is missing from the text, rather than what is present. Given these theoretical difficulties, it is no surprise perhaps, that the oppositional voices of authors such as Swinnerton and Pett Ridge have failed to receive in-depth literary critical analysis. The liminality of these authors (socially) and the liminality of their social critique (when you try to analyse this through a theoretical

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<sup>87</sup> Caudwell, p.77.

framework predicated on such an unavoidable binary) functions to create blind spots/gaps in knowledge which the traditional literary critical tools have been inadequate to interrogate.

It is clear, therefore, that an alternative framework must be applied for the purposes of this study, which creates opportunities for a more nuanced interpretation of the texts, and accepts the validity of the specific cultural and social contexts in which they were written. Most importantly, to interrogate the attitudes expressed in the social critique of each novel, the framework needs to have sufficient robustness to facilitate the unpacking of multi-faceted representations of economic inequality.

### **The theoretical framework applied in this study**

Informed by the definition of class given by Biressi and Nunn, this study will take, as its theoretical basis, specific class-based discourses associated with systems of discrimination and disadvantage in the period 1880-1910.<sup>88</sup> Intensive engagement with the selected texts reveals that the writers in this thesis are challenging, resisting and rejecting class-based discourses, and the (often institutionalised) processes by which these discourses are able to underpin inequalities of treatment and opportunity based on economic circumstances. The thesis, and the close readings contained within it, are structured around two key meta narratives of social differentiation:

- The notion that social class is defined by family background and/or environment (nature and nurture).
- The notion that social class is defined by educational experience and occupation.

Two chapters will be devoted to each of these meta-narratives. The first, in each case, will consider powerful discourses of the dominant centre associated with each meta-narrative.

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<sup>88</sup> It is important to state the meta-narratives and class-based discourses explored in this thesis are not the only ones prevalent in this period. Important discourses (for example the discourse of the deserving and undeserving poor, and notions of criminality associated with the working classes) are not addressed here. It has been necessary to prioritise specific discourses, guided by the nature of the social critiques analysed.

The contextual factors (historical, social, political, economic, cultural, philosophical and scientific), which combined to create and shape these discourses, will be considered in depth to create an understanding of the class-based preconceptions and biases which these authors can be seen to challenge in their work. Close readings will apply these ideas to specific texts. The second of the two chapters focuses on a specific category of classed subject, with narratives grouped by theme to provide a forum for deeper consideration of literary representation. Aspects of the class-based discourse will then be applied to analyse this category of classed subject, through close readings, to cast new light on the specific nature of resistance and rejection expressed by the selected authors. The categories of classed subject selected for study are the domestic servant and the clerk (first-generation white collar worker). Representations of both figures have proven to be problematical in class-based literary critical analysis in the past, due in part to misalignment with aspects of traditional theoretical frameworks. The alternative theoretical framework applied in this thesis, however, is designed to uncover new insights into these liminal figures.

## **Existing scholarship**

In common with all doctoral projects, this thesis stands ‘on the shoulders of giants’.<sup>89</sup> In addition to the texts already referenced in this chapter, a number of monographs have been particularly important as inspiration for, and contribution of knowledge towards, this thesis. Early development of this research was informed by Kevin Swafford’s, *Class in Late-Victorian Britain: The Narrative Concern with Social Hierarchy and its Representation* (2007).<sup>90</sup> Its key contribution has been to challenge thinking relating to the ideological motivations of representations of social class (by authors from backgrounds in the established middle class in this period) and the ways in which subsequent scholarship has been influenced by interpretations ‘from the top down’. Similarly, John F. Lavelle’s

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<sup>89</sup> There are a number of attributions for this quotation, including that of Sir Isaac Newton in 1675.

<sup>90</sup> Kevin Swafford, *Class in Late-Victorian Britain: The Narrative Concern with Social Hierarchy and its Representation* (New York: Cambria Press, 2007)

monograph questions the effectiveness of traditional theoretical frameworks and encourages experimentation with new approaches to class-based literary critical analysis.<sup>91</sup> Throughout the thesis, Jonathan Wild's monographs have provided extremely valuable insights into the classed subject of the clerk (particularly the first-generation white collar workers of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras), and supplied a rich cultural foundation for discussion of comparatively overlooked authors such as Swinnerton and Pett Ridge, who emerged from this section of society.<sup>92</sup> Representations of the domestic servant, similarly, have been studied by Bruce Robbins in the seminal text *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (1993).<sup>93</sup> Two monographs published over fifty years ago remain relevant and comprehensive guides to working-class representation, namely Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, and P. J. Keating *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*.<sup>94</sup> The body of work by Angelique Richardson has also provided a detailed examination of hereditary determinism at the *fin de siècle*.<sup>95</sup> Her examination of these discourses and their influence on female writers has provided a basis from which I could examine intersectionalities of gender, race and class, and expand upon this existing scholarship with research into class-specific ramifications, and their impact on male socially-marginalised authors. Biographies of specific authors have also, of course, provided context for each close reading. These sources are reviewed in the relevant chapters.

Having introduced the key research questions at the heart of this thesis, defined key terms, and discussed the approach to be taken to analyse the chosen texts through close reading, the following two chapters will now address the discourses of hereditary and

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<sup>91</sup> Lavelle, *Blue Collar Theoretically* (2012).

<sup>92</sup> Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880 – 1939*, and *Literature of the 1900s: The Great Edwardian Emporium* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

<sup>93</sup> Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>94</sup> Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (1971) and P. J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

<sup>95</sup> In particular, Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and New Woman* (Oxford: OUP, 2003)

environmental determinism and the ways in which the Men from Nowhere challenged the class-based inequalities of their historical moment through social critique.

# CHAPTER 1

## RESISTING AND REJECTING CLASS-BASED DISCOURSES OF HEREDITARY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM

The Men from Nowhere were born into a period in history in which the capabilities and potential of those born into humble circumstances were deeply contested, as these two quotations, from 1866 and 1865, demonstrate:

The instances of men, in this and other countries, who, by dint of persevering application and energy, have raised themselves from the humblest ranks of industry to eminent positions of usefulness and influence in society, are indeed so numerous that they have long ceased to be regarded as exceptional. Looking at some of the more remarkable, it might almost be said that early encounter with difficulty and adverse circumstances was the necessary and indispensable condition of success.<sup>96</sup>

Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* (1866)

The old English rough proverb is irrevocably true, - you can make no silk purse of a sow's ear. And this great truth also holds – though it is a disagreeable one to look full in the face – that, named or nameless, no man can make himself a gentleman who was not born one. If he lives a right life, cultivates all the powers, and yet more all the sensibilities, he is born with, and chooses his wife well, his own son will be more of a gentleman than he is, and he may see yet better

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<sup>96</sup> Smiles, *Self Help; with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance*. Public Domain ebook, p. 18.

blood than his son's in his grandchild's cheeks, but he must be content to remain a clown himself – if he was born a clown.<sup>97</sup>

John Ruskin, *Modern Painters V* (1865)

The opposing ideological positions expressed here, in relation to class-based hereditary determinism, continued to predominate throughout the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. Smiles asserts that social mobility is now achieved so frequently that it is no longer just the fate of a fortunate few. Adversity experienced in formative years can, in his view, be a prerequisite for the high achiever from humble beginnings. By contrast, Ruskin rejects social mobility for those born without privilege, framing his opinion in terms of the incontrovertible 'common sense' of folklore. Suggesting that the viewpoint is not of his own creation, Ruskin presents the discourse as a long-established, widely-held belief of those from humble backgrounds. The result is an eradication of the Smilesean discourse of self-help, which asserted that those born into humble circumstances could elevate their social status through hard work, intelligence, innovation and entrepreneurship, within a single generation. Ruskin's evocation of essentialism foreshadows a hardening of social attitudes during the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Importantly, his sentiments are symptomatic of a later tendency, amongst the intelligentsia at the *fin de siècle*, towards interest in (and in some cases support for) eugenic thinking focused on social class.

This chapter will discuss the interrelated and problematical discourses of social difference defined by ancestry and surroundings, and will argue that the Men from Nowhere responded to an unprecedented crisis of credibility in this period. It will demonstrate the ways in which these specific authors addressed and reframed these discourses, against the political, scientific and cultural tide. The close readings in this chapter will analyse how William Pett Ridge resisted and rejected class bias based on heredity and environment,

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<sup>97</sup> The extract appeared as a footnote in John Ruskin's, *Modern Painters*, vol. v. pt. ix. ch. vii. § 3 n. (New York: Wiley, 1865), and was reprinted (posthumously) in John Ruskin, *Of Vulgarities* (London: 1906).



challenging reductive representations of working-class and lower middle-class lives and identities. Pett Ridge adopted the novel (often considered a bourgeois literary form) and harnessed its narrative trajectory of personal growth to counter the damaging class-based assumptions of essentialism inherent in these discourses.<sup>98</sup> His working-class and lower-middle-class characters problematise notions of hereditary and environmental determinism, by conveying narratives of social mobility within a realist aesthetic.

A particularly problematic attitude for the socially-marginalised author, within the discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism, was the intrinsic linking of low economic status with a lack of (or indeed absence of) the ability to feel and express deep emotion. Ruskin articulated these sentiments in ‘Of Vulgarities’:

[T]hough rightness of moral conduct is ultimately the great purifier of race, the sign of nobleness is not in this rightness of moral conduct, but in sensitiveness. When the make of the creature is fine, its temptations are strong, as well as its perceptions; it is liable to all kinds of impressions from without in their most violent form; liable therefore to be abused and hurt by all kinds of rough things which would do a coarser creature little harm.<sup>99</sup>

Here Ruskin associates social status with the degree of sensitivity and emotion an individual is capable of experiencing and expressing. The ‘coarser creature’ does not have, he asserts, the capacity to feel as deeply as individuals placed higher in the social scale. These assumptions of inferior aesthetic and emotional sensibility mitigated, within the discourse,

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<sup>98</sup> For discussions on the novel as a bourgeois literary form see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987) and Alex Woloch, *The One Vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>99</sup> Ruskin, *Of Vulgarities*, p. 43.

the unfair treatment of individuals on the basis of race and class, on the assertion that ‘coarser creatures’ had a lower capacity to experience suffering.

Within a cultural context, these notions called into question the aesthetic sensibilities and creative capabilities of aspiring authors born into humble surroundings.<sup>100</sup> A hierarchical framework for the validation of artistic endeavour is established via these discourses, in which the marginalised social status of the author relegates his or her literary output to an automatic position of inferiority, irrespective of the quality of the text itself. These discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods created, therefore, a cultural landscape which functioned to undermine and exclude socially-marginalised authors to an extent which had not been experienced in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Whilst English literature at the *fin de siècle* could look back on a proud legacy of influential works penned by authors from the lower-middle class, for example, the discourses establishing artistic sensibility as a reflection of social status contributed to a climate in which the potential for individual ‘genius’ among the socially-marginalised was denied.<sup>101</sup>

These powerful discourses also impacted, of course, on individuals marginalised due to gender, race and ability, and a body of academic scholarship addresses the impacts of these problematical attitudes. Literary critics such as Angelique Richardson, for example, have demonstrated ways in which New Woman writers of the period harnessed (and in notable cases rejected) the discourse of hereditary determinism to claim validation for female authorship.<sup>102</sup> A growing field of research is also devoted to the impact of eugenic thinking

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<sup>100</sup> Rob Breton argues: ‘Ruskin’s philosophy of difference, the idea that souls, nations, and natures are ‘unlike’, leads to ‘appointed’ roles, expectations, prescriptions, and above all permanence in those distinctions.’ He describes the tensions between Ruskin’s championing of better working conditions for craftsmen and his conservatism in relation to the maintenance of class divisions. See Rob Breton, ‘The Stones of Happiness: Ruskin and Working-Class Culture’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 10(2) (2005), 210-28

<sup>101</sup> This discourse is articulated at length in Francis Galton, *Hereditary genius: an inquiry into its laws and consequences* (London: Macmillan, 1869).

<sup>102</sup> Key texts by Angelique Richardson include: *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*: (2003); ‘Against Finality: Darwin, Mill and the end of essentialism’, *Critical Quarterly*, 53(4), (2011), 21-

on attitudes towards black identity and British colonialism.<sup>103</sup> Further scholarship has focused on how discourses of hereditary determinism shaped policy decisions for those suffering from mental illness and disability in this period.<sup>104</sup> By contrast, comparatively little literary critical scholarship to date has focused on attempts to challenge these powerful discourses by authors who were marginalised as a result of *economic* inequality.<sup>105</sup> It is on such examples of class-based literary resistance that this chapter will focus.

## **Evolution of the discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism**

The discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism at the *fin de siècle* reflect the ways in which emerging scientific theories of the second half of the nineteenth century were appropriated for ideological purposes. Darwinian theories of human evolution (published from 1859) problematised earlier notions of social hierarchy, enshrined in the concept of the Great Chain of Being, which had provided a rationale for economic inequality dating back to Aristotle and Plato.<sup>106</sup> David Cannadine argues that the Great Chain of Being ‘mimicked

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44; ‘Essentialism in Science and Culture’, *Critical Quarterly*, 53(4), (2011), 1-11; ‘The New Fiction and the New Women’ in P Parrinder, A Gasiorek (Eds.) *The Oxford History of the Novel in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010); ‘The Difference between Human Beings: Biology in the Victorian Novel’ in O’Gorman F (Ed), *Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Blackwell: 2005), 202-231. For further discussions see: Nicole Lyn Lawrence, ‘Sarah Grand, George Egerton and the Eugenic Social Debate: Marriage, Civic Motherhood, and the New Woman Writer’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, Volume 62, Number 3 (2019), 371-390; Helena Ifill, *Creating character: theories of nature and nurture in Victorian sensation fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Barbara Rogers, *A Matter of Life and Death – Women and the New Eugenics* (Bath: Brown Dog Books, 2018)

<sup>103</sup> See for example Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995), ‘Darwin, Social Darwinism and Eugenics’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and *Politics of Heredity: Essays on Eugenics, Biomedicine and the Nature-Nurture Debate* (1998). The intersectionality of race and class is explored in Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Oxford: OUP, 1971).

<sup>104</sup> For further information see: Mark Jackson, *The Borderland of Imbecility: Medicine, Society and the Fabrication of the Feeble Mind in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000); Lennard J. Davis, ‘Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century’, in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997) 9–28; Mathew Thomson, *The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy, and Social Policy in Britain c.1870 – 1959* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998);

<sup>105</sup> Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (1971) remains the most cited text.

<sup>106</sup> The seminal text is Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936). For a brief overview see J. A Cuddon, ed., *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 365-366.

on earth the celestial hierarchies of heaven, and that it was, thus, divinely sanctioned'.<sup>107</sup> This 'natural' social order, mirroring the hierarchy of angels, was widely considered mutually beneficial for all ranks, and an essential pre-requisite for peaceful co-existence and national progress.<sup>108</sup> Emerging theories regarding human evolution problematised these long-standing justifications for social inequality, reframing acceptance of inequity as a matter of individual conscience/culpability. As Faber observes:

[F]or most Victorians, inequality on earth was to be completed or compensated by a different kind of inequality after death. Rank conferred its temporary distinction; but equality in the sight of God would ensure that, in the long run, virtue met with its reward.<sup>109</sup>

The religious certainties which had consoled those at the bottom of the ladder, and salved the consciences of the privileged, were problematised by scientific explanations for the development of human societies.<sup>110</sup> Gary Day argues: 'The great chain of being, which had offered an idealised model of social integration, gave way to laissez-faire. The Victorians, therefore, had no ready means of conceptualising the relations between individuals.'<sup>111</sup> The

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<sup>107</sup> David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 26.

<sup>108</sup> An early sixteenth century homily warns 'Take away kings, princes, rulers, magistrates and such states of God's order, [and] no man shall ride or go by the highway unrobbed, no man shall sleep in his own house or bed unkilld, no man shall keep his wife, children, and possessions intact.' See Lawrence James, *The Middle Class: A History* (London: Little, Brown, 2006) p. 21. Richard Faber observes, 'Even in times of distress, responsible and established people were slow to question a social structure which had enabled the country to become rich and powerful – and which still allowed room for growth'. Richard Faber, *Proper Stations: Class in Victorian Fiction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 11. Eric E. Lampard notes: 'Over the entire length of Victoria's reign, gross national product had roughly quadrupled in size. Net national income per capita, adjusted for price changes, had more than doubled, rising from £18 in 1855 to £42 in 1901'. Lampard, p. 11. Asa Briggs also notes that the imperial project reached its height between the 1880s and 1914 adding 4,500,000 square miles to the British Empire. Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), p. 247.

<sup>109</sup> Faber, p. 22.

<sup>110</sup> Cannadine argues that Darwin's theories, 'secularised and temporalized' earlier notions of 'religiously sanctioned linear hierarchy' stating: 'Inequality, so this argument ran, was the natural result of natural selection: men like animals, were not born equal, nor could they be made equal'. He believes that Darwin's theories provided new justification for the hierarchical structure of society and its resulting inequalities, shoring-up traditional philosophies. It will be argued, however, that the removal of a moral justification for social inequality destabilised and reshaped discourses of class. Cannadine, p. 125.

<sup>111</sup> Gary Day, *Class* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 142.

removal of earlier certainties created a conceptual vacuum around social difference which alternative explanations were quick to fill, in the form of emerging socialist and Marxist challenges to traditional capitalism, as well as the ideologically-loaded discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism which are the focus of this chapter. Authors from all social backgrounds were fundamental, in this period, in the redefining of class identities, and discourses of ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ were central to these rhetorical missions.<sup>112</sup>

### **Fin de siècle sensibilities**

Whilst narratives of ‘nature versus nurture’ preoccupied Victorian fiction as a whole, the period 1880 to 1910 witnessed a high point in the intensity and influence of hereditary and environmental essentialist discourses, exacerbated by specific historical, social, political and cultural factors, underpinned by ideological appropriation of scientific theories.<sup>113</sup> Intensification of these discourses was experienced Europe-wide. Shearer West compares millennial thinking across Europe in the 1890s with similar crises of the 1490s and 1790s, arguing:

No longer were writers and preachers talking so heatedly about the Second Coming of Christ, the Apocalypse, the Antichrist and the Last Judgement. However [...] the power of this secularized millenarianism was strengthened by the growth of mass communication, which stimulated racism, nationalism and other forms of extremism on a vast scale.<sup>114</sup>

The ‘models of decay and death, progress and renewal’ associated with millennial thought, found their expression, towards the close of the nineteenth century, in discourses of

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<sup>112</sup> Francis Galton is credited with the coining of the twin terms ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’. Francis Galton, *Men of Science: Their Nature and Nurture* (London: Macmillan, 1874).

<sup>113</sup> Stedman Jones argues middle-class anxieties regarding the London slums, which reached a peak in 1890s, were eased during the First World War and came to be seen as ‘modest and remote’ by the 1920s. Jones, *Outcast London*, pp. 322-336.

<sup>114</sup> Shearer West, *Fin de Siecle: Art and Society in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993) p.15.

difference, as explanations for societal, rather than spiritual, ‘sickness’.<sup>115</sup> Developments in communication and the media facilitated widespread dissemination and discussion of these ideas and concerns. William Greenslade explains:

The late Victorian establishment and the propertied classes generally harboured anxieties about poverty and crime, about public health and national and imperial fitness, about decadent artists, ‘new women’ and homosexuals. The loose assemblage of beliefs which can be marked out as “degenerationism”, especially when these beliefs claimed the ratification of empirical science, offered a displacement and transference of guilt, and of fear of the uncontrollable and baffling energies of material existence.<sup>116</sup>

The concept of degenerationism, defined above by Greenslade, was publicised by Max Nordau’s text *Degeneration* (1892), which criticised what the author saw as degenerate art and literature.<sup>117</sup> As Greenslade describes, however, the term came to encapsulate numerous areas of societal concern.<sup>118</sup> Lynn Pykett describes degenerationism as ‘one of the great

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<sup>115</sup> For further information on the fin de siècle see: Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siecle* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996); William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Daniel Pick, *Faces of degeneration: A European disorder, c.1848–c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Lyn Pykett, ed., *Reading Fin De Siecle Fictions* (London and New York: Longman, 1996); Angeliq ue Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2003); David Trotter, *English Novel in History, 1895-1920* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis, 1993).

<sup>116</sup> Greenslade, p.2.

<sup>117</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (1892), English translation published 1895.

<sup>118</sup> Factors in the evolution of degenerationism include, but are not limited to, concern regarding fitness of the fighting man, falling birth-rates among the middle classes, worsening urban conditions, increasing crime rates, tensions regarding the role of women, moral panic regarding creative industry lifestyles, and fear of anarchy. For concise overviews see Greenslade, pp. 15-31, and Arata, pp. 11-32. For information on concerns of the physical condition of Boer War recruits see Richard Soloway, ‘Counting the Degenerates: The Statistics of Race Deterioration in Edwardian England’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Decadence (1982), 137-164. For discussion of middle class birth rates see Lawrence James, p. 359, and F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830 – 1900* (London: HarperCollins, 1988), pp. 51-64. For concerns regarding urban slums and inner-city crime see Stedman Jones, pp. 281-314. For degenerationism and the New Woman see Angeliq ue Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, pp. 1-57. For degenerationism and Decadence in the arts see Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siecle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). For fears of collapse of society into anarchy see Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895).

organising ideas of the late nineteenth century’, noting that ‘theologians, natural scientists, social scientists, philologists and literary critics’ all viewed their areas of specialisation in terms of this model.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, the pessimism and moral panic of the *fin de siècle* consciousness was exacerbated by emerging scientific theories. Angelique Richardson explains:

The Darwinian idea that development might move in a direction that could be conceived as backward – that humans might reel back to their primordial ancestors – posed a terrifying threat to the Victorian narrative of progress.<sup>120</sup>

Through the notion of degeneration, or de-evolution, the discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism became, in this period, vehicles for ideological freight within a wider ‘organising idea’ which appeared to explain the nature of society, and purported to provide context for the fears inherent to modern life. The debate of ‘nature versus nurture’, gaining credibility through pseudo-scientific validation, underpinned numerous discourses of difference, including notions of social differentiation.

### **Darwinian theories and their appropriation: Eugenics and Social Darwinism**

The impact of Darwinian theory on late Victorian and Edwardian thought is undeniable. Piers J. Hale argues: ‘Interpretations of Darwinism and how it might be applied to the human experience dominated discussion of practically all social issues throughout the 1880s and 1890s’.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, George Levine states: ‘His history of the development of species gave authoritative form to a new narrative – or set of narratives – that has permanently reshaped the Western imagination’.<sup>122</sup> The nature of the class system, and the development

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<sup>119</sup> Pykett, p. 13.

<sup>120</sup> Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, p. 42.

<sup>121</sup> Piers J. Hale, ‘Labor and the Human Relationship with Nature: The Naturalization of Politics in the Work of Thomas Henry Huxley, Herbert George Wells, and William Morris’, *Journal of the History of Biology*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), 249-284 (p. 252).

<sup>122</sup> George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 1. Gillian Beer also explores the impact of evolutionary thought on literature

of the novel itself, in the view of Levine and others, were shaped by Darwinian ideas. Peter Bowler notes the resulting destabilising effects, maintaining that ‘Darwin opened up a Pandora’s box, offering us a vision of nature which radically undermines a host of long-cherished beliefs’.<sup>123</sup> It is inevitable, therefore, that analysis of literature of the *fin de siècle*, particularly novels engaging with notions of class difference, must take into consideration the impact of evolutionary thinking.

Effective analysis of the impact of Darwinian theories at the *fin de siècle*, however, requires acknowledgement of a number of important factors. Firstly, evolutionary thought was widely contested in this period. Bowler describes a ‘fully-fledged “neo-Lamarckian” school’ in direct opposition to Darwinism, and notes that evolutionism was ‘often conceived within a theoretical framework that allowed the retention of teleological values that Darwinism is popularly supposed to have destroyed’.<sup>124</sup> This was a period in which alternative explanations and worldviews were contested and co-existing. Theories such as those outlined in J. B. Lamarck’s *Zoological Philosophy* (1809) pre-dated those of Darwin, but persisted throughout the period.<sup>125</sup> Bowler also notes that Victorian anthropologists continued to employ the theoretical framework of developmentalism, thereby rejecting Darwinian theory.<sup>126</sup>

Secondly, levels of understanding of Darwinian theories were limited at this time.

Sherrin Berezowsky notes: ‘While Darwin’s theory of natural selection stressed the

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in *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>123</sup> Peter J. Bowler, ‘Revisiting the Eclipse of Darwinism’, *Journal of the History of Biology*, 38 (2005), 19-32 (pp. 30 – 31).

<sup>124</sup> Peter Bowler, *The Mendelian revolution: the emergence of hereditarian concepts in modern science and society* (London: Athlone Press, 1989), p. 46 and p. 7.

<sup>125</sup> Peter Bowler, *The invention of progress: the Victorians and the past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 88-89. For an excellent summary of the differences between the theories of Lamarck and Darwin see Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, pp. 10-12.

<sup>126</sup> Peter Bowler, *The invention of progress: the Victorians and the past*, p. 11. Developmentalism involved the notion of ‘parallel evolution’ in which multiple lines of human development climb the same ‘ladder’ but at different rates. This provided a conceptual framework in which other societies would be considered ‘primitive’ in comparison to Western societies. European colonisation was viewed as proof of ‘cultural maturity’.



importance of inheritance, without a connection to Mendelian genetics, which would not be rediscovered until the turn of the century, there was no sense of the mechanism by which it worked.’<sup>127</sup> The discourse of hereditary determinism evolved at a time when scientific knowledge was incomplete. The Victorian populace also tended to learn about scientific development through non-specialist sources, outside educational settings, which could result in additional interpretations/misinterpretations of emerging theories.<sup>128</sup>

Thirdly, it is important to consider the extent to which Darwinian theories were appropriated and exploited for the furtherance of individual careers, and to provide justification for ideological positions. Bowler argues:

Without denying the important factual consequences that have flowed from the development of genetics, the history of the field will show that the new science was invented to serve human purposes – it did not grow automatically as a consequence of factual observations.<sup>129</sup>

The development of genetics has been shaped by its potential for the furtherance of ideological and economic objectives. Richard Barnett, for example, argues that following the Paris Exhibition of 1867, ‘British scientists felt increasingly under threat from their European counterparts’ and blamed underfunding for their inability to compete.<sup>130</sup> Leveraging concerns around de-evolution strengthened financial justifications for projects, and provided opportunities for career advancement for individuals across numerous

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<sup>127</sup> Sherrin Berezowsky, ‘STATISTICAL CRITICISM AND THE EMINENT MAN IN FRANCIS GALTON'S "HEREDITARYGENIUS"’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2015), 821-839 (p. 824).

<sup>128</sup> For further information see Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>129</sup> Peter Bowler, *The Mendelian revolution: the emergence of hereditarian concepts in modern science and society*, p. 12.

<sup>130</sup> Richard Barnett, ‘Education or degeneration: E. Ray Lankester, H. G. Wells and *The outline of history*’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 37 (2006) 203–229, p. 204.

disciplines, whilst simultaneously developing and validating notions inherent to the discourse of hereditary determinism.

Inevitably, the appropriation of Darwinian ideas often extended beyond simple opportunism, with misinterpretations providing scientific underpinning for damaging social theories. Gillian Beer emphasises that Darwin took ‘considerable pains – not always successfully – to avoid legitimating current social order by naturalising it’.<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, the appropriation of evolutionary theories provided the scientific ballast for the, often problematic, social attitudes impacting upon (and explored in) novels of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The most notable, for the purposes of this study, include the emergence of eugenic thinking and notions of Social Darwinism.

### **Francis Galton and the rise of eugenics**

Whilst the blame for eugenic thinking is laid frequently at the door of Francis Galton, this aspect of hereditary determinism has to be positioned within its wider context.<sup>132</sup> John C.

Waller states:

By attaching too much importance to individuals we lose sight of the fact that—in terms of causal agency—the idea of eugenics arose from a general fascination for heredity (intensified, but not initiated by the publication of *The Origin of Species*) and a particular set of social, institutional and political circumstances of the mid-Victorian period.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Beer, p. 53.

<sup>132</sup> For details on the life and career of Francis Galton see: Nicholas W. Gillham, ‘SIR FRANCIS GALTON AND THE BIRTH OF EUGENICS’, *Annual Review of Genetics*, Vol. 35 (2001), 83-101; David Redvaldsen, ‘Eugenics, socialists and the labour movement in Britain, 1865-1940’, *Historical Research*, Vol. 90 Issue 250 (2017), 764-787; Berezowsky, pp. 821-839; Emel Aileen Gökyiğit, ‘The Reception of Francis Galton’s “Hereditary Genius” in the Victorian Periodical’ Press, *Journal of the History of Biology*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1994), 215-240.

<sup>133</sup> John Waller, ‘Ideas of Heredity, Reproduction and Eugenics in Britain, 1800–1875’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2001), 457–489, (p. 484).

Waller views the popularisation of Galton's theories in the late-Victorian period as a 'mere accident of timing', arguing that 'had Galton not advanced eugenical ideas in the 1860s there can be absolutely no doubt that another scientist or social theorist would (equally unhelpfully) have been dubbed the "founder of the faith".' Whilst eugenic thinking became an ideological crusade at the hands of Galton, Karl Pearson and others, the intensification of notions of hereditary determinism in the late-Victorian period should also be seen as an inevitable consequence of the *fin de siècle* historical moment.<sup>134</sup>

To appreciate the relevance of eugenic thinking for this particular study it is necessary to compare the late-nineteenth-century context with our own historical moment.

Richardson explains:

The development of the idea of eugenics as rational reproduction in late Victorian Britain has been largely overlooked. For this, there are several reasons. One is the atrocities of Naziism, which have overshadowed early manifestations of eugenics [...] Another is the assumption that eugenics [was] primarily to do with race [in this period]. Eugenics was deeply inflected by different national concerns, so that while in Germany it centred on issues of mental health and in the United States it was a discourse on race, in Britain it was primarily a discourse on class. It was here part of the debates on class and poverty that intensified with the increasing unrest of the urban poor in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. A third factor is that the most virulent expression of eugenic ideas was not

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<sup>134</sup> Waller lists notable advocates of eugenic thinking as William Farr, William Greg, William Lawrence, Henry Maudsley and Thomas Rowe Edmonds. Waller notes, 'the idea of selective human breeding, far from being original to Francis Galton, has many Classical and Roman antecedents' and argues that his theories were grafted onto earlier discourses of hereditary madness. Waller, 'Ideas of Heredity', pp. 458-459, and pp. 462-466. For further information on the development of eugenic thinking in this period see Peter Bowler, *The Mendelian Revolution*, pp. 162-170.

within legislative acts and public policy, but within popular and intellectual cultural discourses; early British eugenics was primarily a matter of rhetoric and representation.<sup>135</sup>

Richardson raises a number of issues that are important to this study. Eugenic thinking provided in this period a framework within which members of the British population could be categorised according to ‘capital values’.<sup>136</sup> Moral panic focused on social groups at both extremes of the economic spectrum (the residuum and the aristocracy) associating weakness of ‘character’ with ‘bad blood’.<sup>137</sup> The result was a powerful validation of the established middle class underpinned by hereditary essentialist discourses. Despite the campaigning of organisations such as the Eugenics Education Society (established in 1907), proposals originating in eugenic thinking did not, ultimately, pass into UK legislation.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, Galton’s pseudo-scientific approach, for example his attempts to prove his hypothesis with the collection of statistical data, failed to wholly convince the medical fraternity.<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless, as Richardson points out, the locus for British eugenic thinking in the late-Victorian period was a social and cultural coterie of intellectuals and creatives. These individuals, I will argue, had the potential to function as cultural gatekeepers, dictating the terms for acceptance/rejection of authors and their work, ostensibly on grounds of taste, but

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<sup>135</sup> Richardson, ‘Prologue’, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*.

<sup>136</sup> This expression is taken from Leonard Darwin’s ‘The Need for Eugenic Reform’, *The Economic Journal* Vol. 36, No. 143 (1926), pp. 483-486: ‘It must be remembered that it is not only inanimate objects, but human beings also, which differ in regard to their capital values’.

<sup>137</sup> For discussions of hereditary determinism in relation to the aristocracy see Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, pp. 150-155.

<sup>138</sup> Stedman Jones argues: ‘In part this was due to the strength of individualist objections at a party level, to all forms of collectivist social legislation except when political expediency demanded their enactment.’ Stedman Jones, p. 335. Whilst policies such as the introduction of old-age pensions had passed into legislation despite the general reluctance for collectivist social measures, policies arising from eugenic thinking (understandably) did not have the backing of influential working-class organisations necessary to support their introduction.

<sup>139</sup> For further information on statistical approaches adopted by Galton see: Berezowsky, pp. 830-831; Gillham, p. 92; and Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, pp. 82-83. For information on Galton’s alignment of eugenics with religious doctrine see: Berezowsky, p. 833; Christine Ferguson, ‘Eugenics and the Afterlife: Lombroso, Doyle, and the Spiritualist Purification of the Race’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 12(1) (2007), 64-85, (p. 64); Laura Vorachek, ‘Mesmerists and Other Meddlers: Social Darwinism, Degeneration, and Eugenics in Trilby’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2009), 197-215, (p. 209).

also influenced by class-based notions of aesthetic superiority/inferiority.<sup>140</sup> The discourse of hereditary determinism therefore functioned as a ‘glass wall’ for aspiring authors from humble backgrounds. Access to the mainstream literary milieu was already closed to many based on the social status of writers marginalised by their economic circumstances. In addition, class-based preconceptions regarding the potential aesthetic inferiority of their work, and the validity of working-class and lower middle-class characters that might be represented in these texts, provided similar obstacles to admittance into British literature’s inner circle. It is not suggested, of course, that acceptance into the *fin de siècle* literary coterie was an impossibility for authors from humble backgrounds. H. G. Wells and J. M. Barrie, for example, accessed such social circles particularly successfully. Nevertheless, the discourse of hereditary determinism, underpinned by powerful discussions of the ‘capital values’ of social groups at the *fin de siècle*, contributed to a cultural climate in which first-generation white collar authors, hoping to live by their pens, faced a tangible (but largely unacknowledged) crisis of credibility.<sup>141</sup>

### **Discourses of environmental determinism and Social Darwinism**

The hereditary essentialist discourse of ‘genius’, promoted through eugenic thinking of the *fin de siècle*, supported an ideological position in which those from humble beginnings could be considered least likely to achieve authorial brilliance due to their inescapable ‘nature’.

The opposing ideological position, that of ‘nurture’, argued that individuals were shaped,

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<sup>140</sup> For opinions on the appeal of eugenics for intellectuals of this period see: Ferguson (2007) p. 74; and Gillham (2001), pp. 98-99. There were, of course, notable rejections of eugenic thinking in this period. See Gökyiğit, pp. 233-237. For discussion of H. G. Wells’s interest in and rejection of eugenics see: Barnett, pp. 203-229; Martin Danahay, ‘NEW AGENDA: Wells, Galton and Biopower: Breeding Human Animals’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2012), 468-479; Anne Maxwell, “‘Becoming Martianized’: Liberal Eugenics and H. G. Wells’ *Star-Begotten*’, *English Studies*, 93:6 (2012) 683-699; Greenslade pp. 196-198. For G. K Chesterton’s anti-eugenic essay see: Ferguson (2007), p. 66; Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, pp. 205-206. For an earlier rejection of eugenic thinking see Diane B. Paul and Benjamin Day, ‘John Stuart Mill, innate differences, and the regulation of reproduction’, *Stud. Hist. Phil. Biol. & Biomed. Sci.*, 39 (2008), 222-231; Angélique Richardson, ‘Darwin and Reductionisms: Victorian, Neo-Darwinian and Postgenomic Biologies’, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2010).

<sup>141</sup> The Introduction of this thesis discusses the social and intellectual networks formed by authors from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds to overcome barriers to admittance to more established sectors of late-Victorian and Edwardian literary world.

equally inescapably, by their surroundings. Finding scientific validation, similarly, in Darwinian theory, the discourse of environmental determinism engaged with *fin de siècle* societal concerns by seeking to explain the ways in which individuals developed in response to the worlds around them.<sup>142</sup> In instances where these discourses focused on spaces such as the suburb and the slum, notions of environmental determinism found expression in negative preconceptions regarding the individual qualities and intellectual potential of individuals from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds, based on the locations in which they spent their formative years.

The credibility of authors from humble backgrounds, therefore, was undermined by a ‘double whammy’ of essentialist discourses. Both sides of the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate involved ideological positions with adverse consequences for aspiring working-class and lower-middle-class writers, with notions of inferior aesthetic and emotional sensibility (arising from hereditary deterministic thinking) compounding assumptions of negative environmental conditioning. These discourses of environmental determinism, for example, involved notions of the coarsening effects/atavism of the slum, as well as the supposed cultural stultification associated with discourses of suburban life (the typical domicile of the lower-middle class).

Authors creating representations of working-class and lower-middle-class life were drawn, inevitably, into the discursive aspects of these spaces, and authors (from all social backgrounds) were compelled to adopt their own ideological position in relation to these discourses. For writers who were categorised by the establishment of the day as heralding

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<sup>142</sup> For information on the derivation of the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ and the misunderstandings surrounding it, see Diane B. Paul, ‘The Selection of the "Survival of the Fittest"’, *Journal of the History of Biology*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1988), 411-424. Social Darwinism has its roots in the evolutionary philosophy of Herbert Spencer, rather than in Darwinian theory. For a concise summary of the appropriation of Darwinian theories within Victorian ‘social Darwinism’ see Bowler, *The Mendelian Revolution*, pp. 158-159. For a social sciences perspective on social Darwinism see Laurie A. Rudman, Laurie A. and Lina H. Saud, ‘Justifying Social Inequalities: The Role of Social Darwinism’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 46(7) (2020), 1139–1155. For further discussion on social Darwinism in a cultural context see Raimund Schöffner, ‘“Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven”: Aspects of Social Darwinism in John Davidson’s poetry’, *Journal of European Studies*, 33:2 (2003) 119–144.

from (or being in daily contact with) spaces such as the slum or the suburb, such as William Pett Ridge, Frank Swinnerton, George Gissing, George Grossmith, Arthur Morrison and others, the negotiation and articulation of ideological position was crucial. The social positioning of the author within the wider late-Victorian and Edwardian literary scene hinged upon the position he or she adopted in relation to their individual background and current place of residence. It also impacted upon their representation of characters from and/or within these spaces, and called upon them to answer aesthetic, political and moral questions regarding the ways these characters should be conveyed through narrative. In short, neither side of the 'nature versus nurture' debate offered a favourable outcome for the socially-marginalised writer within these discourses.

### **Political marginalisation**

A final contextual factor is that, in this period, authors hoping to challenge discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism could not attach themselves easily to existing political mandates. The absence of an organised, party-sanctioned, anti-eugenic voice within the political landscape of the period meant that authors did not have the opportunity to harness the rhetorical and parliamentary muscle of an existing ideological 'army' sympathetic to their aims for social reform. Bowler argues:

If there was one thing upon which politicians of the extreme left and the extreme right agree [in this period] it is a distrust of liberal, laissez-faire policies. Both sides want to control society [...] The right prefers biological determinism because this builds the notion of a social hierarchy into the system from the beginning: human beings are unequal because they inherit unequal genetic potential. The left wants to dismantle the hierarchy and has sometimes

conceded that it would be easier to do this if biologically inferior characters were eliminated.<sup>143</sup>

Eugenic thinking appealed to both extremes of the political divide, as well as the emerging socialist organisations.<sup>144</sup> It also appeared to provide solutions for the more moderate, political centre, specifically in relation to serious concerns around 'national efficiency'.

Gareth Stedman Jones argues:

The residuum was no longer feared as a revolutionary threat, but as a dangerous source of weakness to the imperial race [...] General Maurice's revelations about the low standards of recruits for the war raised once more the spectre of physical deterioration and racial degeneration. [...] Draconian measures would be necessary if the empire was not to be dragged down by its unfit.<sup>145</sup>

Bodies addressing urban poverty and overcrowded housing conditions appear to have given credence to discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism in their development of potential solutions, with plans for labour colonies receiving serious attention throughout the period. Stedman Jones argues that, whilst discussions in the 1880s 'generally envisaged only limited state interference' in such labour colonies, during the final decades of the nineteenth

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<sup>143</sup> Bowler, *The Mendelian Revolution* (1989), p. 155.

<sup>144</sup> Similarly, Diane B. Paul states: 'The history of eugenics has been presented so often as though it were simply the extension of nineteenth-century social Darwinism, reflective of the same conservative values and the interests of the identical social groups, that we have nearly lost sight of the fact that important segments of the Left (as well as the women's movement, which deserves to be treated as a separate category) were once also enthusiastic about the potential uses of eugenics'. Diane B. Paul, 'Eugenics and the Left', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (1984), 567-590, (pp. 568-569). For further information see also Redvaldsen, pp. 764-787.

<sup>145</sup> Stedman Jones, p. 330. For more information on concerns regarding national efficiency at the time of the Boer War, and the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, see Stedman Jones, pp. 330-333. Also see 'Chapter 9: Race-regeneration' in Greenslade, pp. 182-210. Class-based discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism in this period are closely linked with those of race. William Booth's text *In Darkest England, and the Way Out* (1890), for example, represents English urban centres, in particular parts of London, in terms reminiscent of Henry Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* (1890). Stedman Jones argues that 'the work of Booth, the new liberals, and the social imperialists constituted a literature of crisis' around the slums of the East End. Stedman Jones, pp. 312-313.



century, ‘both Liberals and Fabians came to advocate compulsory detention’.<sup>146</sup> Redvaldsen, Stedman Jones, Diane B. Paul, Richardson and others have discussed the ways in which Fabians considered and, ultimately, supported ‘state-directed activity to eliminate the “unfit”’.<sup>147</sup> Stedman Jones quotes Fabian Tract No. 72 (1896), in which Sidney Ball states:

The Socialist policy, so far from favouring the weak, favours the strong [...] it is a process of conscious social selection by which the industrial residuum is naturally sifted and made manageable for some kind of restorative, disciplinary, or, it may be ‘surgical’ treatment’.<sup>148</sup>

Even those political positions sympathetic to social reform were broadly in support of eugenic discourse in this period. The process of categorisation applied to the British population at this time, based on ‘capital values’, reflected, at its heart, the reductive preconceptions of hereditary and environmental discourses.<sup>149</sup>

## **Literary responses to discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism**

Greenslade notes: ‘There were few writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, who were not vulnerable to the explanatory lure of biological determinism’.<sup>150</sup> Issues of evolution, degeneration and ‘nature versus nurture’ provided rich sources of inspiration for *fin de siècle* authors in France and Germany, as well as Britain, with the enticing promise of providing ontological clarity for readers at a time of social uncertainty.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Stedman Jones p. 332.

<sup>147</sup> See the following: Redvaldsen, p. 62; Schäffner, pp. 119–144: and Stedman Jones, pp. 330–333.

<sup>148</sup> Stedman Jones, p. 333.

<sup>149</sup> This expression is taken from Leonard Darwin’s *The Need for Eugenic Reform* (1926): ‘It must be remembered that it is not only inanimate objects, but human beings also, which differ in regard to their capital values’.

<sup>150</sup> Greenslade, p. 5.

<sup>151</sup> Space in this chapter does not allow discussion of several additional literary genres of the period which reflect an interest in evolutionary theory/hereditary and environmental determinism, and can be analysed fruitfully alongside the types of text described here. These include novels and plays by New Woman writers, Victorian sensation fiction, and the ‘scientific romance’ genre.

Scholars have argued that Darwinian theories shaped developments in literary form, as well as inspiring content. Beer argues that evolutionary theory disrupts narrative form in this period because it ‘excludes or suppresses certain orderings of experience’ and ‘has no place for stasis’.<sup>152</sup> Similarly, Levine argues: ‘The underlying assumption [...] is that nothing in life is complete or perfect. Everything on the Darwinian model is conditional’.<sup>153</sup> Referring in particular to the *Bildungsroman*, he argues that Victorian narratives reflect a sense of ‘unidirectional change’, commenting that ‘Pip cannot go home again’.<sup>154</sup> Narrative forms, Beer and Levine argue, responded to Darwinian ideas by mirroring wider evolutionary development of species in the personal growth of characters.

Levine, drawing on the theories of Foucault, also observes a ‘cultural shift’ in characterisation, away from a ‘focus on the adventures of a noble, “memorable”, figure to a concentration on the ostensibly ordinary protagonist’. He argues that ‘Darwinian theory sanctions this shift of perspective’, in which literary representation is expanded to encompass a broader section of society.<sup>155</sup> Both Beer and Levine also attribute specific developments in narrative technique to the impact of Darwinian theory, including the undermining of earlier forms of omniscient narration. Beer argues: ‘Victorian novelists increasingly seek a role for themselves with the language of the text as observer or experimenter, rather than as designer or god. Omniscience goes, omnipotence is concealed’.<sup>156</sup> Notions of ‘organising power’ are problematised by the alternative explanations for individual and societal development

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Key sources for New Woman writers include: Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*; ‘Against Finality: Darwin, Mill and the end of essentialism’, pp. 21-44; ‘Essentialism in Science and Culture’ (2011), pp. 1-11; ‘The New Fiction and the New Women’ in (2010); ‘The Difference between Human Beings: Biology in the Victorian Novel’ (2005), 202-231. For further discussions see: Lawrence, pp. 371-390; and Rogers (2018). A comprehensive study regarding Victorian sensation fiction is Helena Ifill, *Creating character: theories of nature and nurture in Victorian sensation fiction* (2018).

Key sources for the scientific romance include: Kathryn Hume, ‘Eat or Be Eaten: H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*’ in *H. G. Wells* ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2005), pp. 35-51; Simon H. James, *Maps of utopia: H. G. Wells, modernity, and the end of culture* (Oxford: OUP, 2012); Maxwell (2012), 683-699; and Danahay, pp. 468-479.

<sup>152</sup> Beer, p. 27 and p. 8.

<sup>153</sup> Levine, p. 111.

<sup>154</sup> Levine, p. 111.

<sup>155</sup> Levine, p. 213.

<sup>156</sup> Beer, p. 40.

supplied by evolutionary theory. At a fundamental level, a tension is created between fate as the central force in narrative development, and the notion of hereditary or environmental determinism as the driver of fictional causality and the development of characters. Both narrative form and content are shaped by the responses of authors to these key questions.

### **French Naturalism and East End slum fictions**

Darwinian ideas also impacted upon social realism in literature. Emile Zola argued:

Determinism dominates everything. It is scientific investigation, it is experimental reasoning, which combats one by one the hypotheses of the idealists and which replaces purely imaginary novels by novels of observation and experiment. [...] I consider that the question of heredity has a great influence in the intellectual and passionate manifestations of man. I also attach considerable importance to the surroundings. [...] And this is what constitutes the experimental novel: to possess a knowledge of the mechanism of the phenomena inherent in man, to show the machinery of his intellectual and sensory manifestations, under the influences of heredity and environment'.<sup>157</sup>

The approach to the 'experimental novel' advocated by Zola replaces the metaphysical and 'imaginary' with that which can be deduced through observation, informed by scientific theory. Earlier narrative forces, depending on fate or free will, are replaced by a determination to drive cause and effect through outcomes that might be expected based on the development of the human as 'animal'. The discourses of both nature and nurture receive similar weighting in this creative process, with the legacy of birth having similar influence as environmental conditioning. Through literary engagement with these ideas, Zola aims to surpass the omniscience of the author as 'god', to achieve a realism that is only made

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<sup>157</sup> Emile Zola, *The Naturalist Novel* (1892). Extracts reprinted in Arnold Kettle, ed., *The Nineteenth Century Novel: Critical Essays and Documents* (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 302-329.

possible by the author as scientific observer. This reorientation of narrative described by Zola intensifies literary engagement with discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism within the aesthetic of French naturalism, allowing increased potential for articulation of the ideologically-loaded assumptions underpinning these discourses.

In Britain in the final two decades of the nineteenth century, P. J. Keating argues, the rise of French naturalism was seen as evidence that ‘the art of fiction was at a critical stage of its development’.<sup>158</sup> Keating describes a ‘brief’ but ‘bitter’ public debate on naturalism, led by Swinburne, W. T. Stead and the National Vigilance Association among others. The candid presentation of sexual and violent content, and the use of colloquial language in Zola’s work, in particular, attracted criticism in the 1880s. Keating argues, however, that when criticism abated in the early 1890s, it was clear that French naturalism had brought about a change in British attitudes towards social realism in fiction. He comments:

[I]n 1893-4 when slum life began to emerge as a popular fictional subject it no longer received the hostile press reception that Gissing, for example, writing just a few years earlier, expected as a matter of course. [...] Critics and reading public were now more willing to accept the novelist should be allowed to explore subjects hitherto ignored in English fiction, so long as those subjects were treated with due artistic sincerity. The slum novelists, if they were big enough to rise to the occasion, were given advantages possessed by no earlier English working-class novelist.<sup>159</sup>

The slum novelists of this period, however, can be seen to have favoured commercial opportunism over social activism.<sup>160</sup> Capitalising upon their access to working-class

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<sup>158</sup> P. J. Keating, *The working classes in Victorian fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 125.

<sup>159</sup> Keating, *The working classes in Victorian fiction*, p. 137.

<sup>160</sup> This refers specifically to the short lived trend, during the 1890s, for narratives capitalising on slum environments and communities. These sensationalist popular fictions should not be confused with texts such as those by George Gissing, in which representation of slum life is, typically, more nuanced.

communities, the slum novelists of the 1890s broadly reinforced discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism to feed the, often salacious, fascination with slum life and to reinforce ruling class prejudices, for commercial purposes.<sup>161</sup> Discussing Arthur Morrison's classic slum narrative *A Child of the Jago* (1896) Kevin Swafford argues:

The absolute negativity of the people of the Jago is the representational vehicle that carries Morrison's implicit resolution (i.e. the need for control and/or eradication of the slum environment through heavy handed social intervention) [...] Thus, the rhetoric of the grotesque representation of the people of the Jago and their (ab)normal lives seeks to establish the absolute difference between the subject of the narrative (the Jago) and the reality of the readers (with whom Morrison identifies). [...] All of the references to isolated environmental determinacy and abnormality become so many swerves away from issues Morrison wishes to elide, primarily the gross inequities of material wealth and success.<sup>162</sup>

By reinforcing biased preconceptions inherent in the discourse of environmental determinism, in particular, Morrison represents the urban poor in terms of 'absolute difference'. Having established these communities as entirely 'other', his narratives can substitute inherent negative character traits of slum dwellers (over which the ruling classes have no control, and therefore cannot be blamed) for crippling economic inequality of opportunity (over which the urban poor have no control) as an underlying cause. This ideological sleight of hand is made possible by the multiple layers of 'meaning' conveyed by the discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism in these literary depictions of slum environments and communities.

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For a detailed discussion of slum environments in Gissing's novels see 'Chapter 3: George Gissing', in P.J. Keating, *The working classes in Victorian fiction*, pp. 53-92.

<sup>161</sup> For a detailed study of this genre see Eliza Cubitt, *Arthur Morrison and the East End: The Legacy of Slum Fictions* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).

<sup>162</sup> Swafford, p. 77.

## Representations of the suburb

Discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism were also shaping attitudes towards lower-middle class environments and communities in this period. Lara Baker Whelan argues that ‘a new standard image of the suburb begins to emerge after 1880, one far less flattering to its inhabitants [...] The new image is of a bourgeois and grasping population inhabiting a cultural wasteland.’<sup>163</sup> As the social demographic of suburbs changed towards the end of the century, with more first-generation white collar workers moving to (often poor-quality) housing, attitudes towards the inhabitants of the suburb soured. Baker Whelan continues:

As the suburb’s usefulness for distinguishing among classes faded, an individual’s degree of culture took over. No longer focused on physical space, class markers at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century shift to intellectual “space” which was thought to be less subject to misuse or appropriation by lower class groups [...] an opposition develops in literature of the period between the cultured city dweller and the suburban Philistine.<sup>164</sup>

The re-framing of social difference in terms of culture, intelligence and aesthetics had particular implications for those hoping to establish careers in creative professions. Whilst lower-middle class authors, for example, could distance themselves from the atavism of the Jago, they faced more direct challenges to their credibility that were driven by preconceptions of inferior creative and emotional sensibility relating to the suburban locations they considered home. Contemporary texts demonstrate these discourses in action. T. W. H. Crosland’s *The Suburbans* (1905) laments the ruin that has been wreaked by New Suburbanites (of lower social status than the early-century occupants). Drawing on colonial

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<sup>163</sup> Lara Baker Whelan, *Class, Culture and Suburban Anxieties in the Victorian Era* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 150.

<sup>164</sup> Whelan, p. 151.

discourses employed by Mayhew, William Booth and others, Crosland comments that ‘when it comes to speech and manners, one is constrained to admit that the young of the suburbans are but slightly differentiated from the young of the Kickapoo tribe of Indians’.<sup>165</sup> Essentialist discourses of race and class merge in representations of the lower middle-class as entirely ‘other’, expressing and perpetuating hereditary and environmental determinist sentiments.

Crosland’s early-twentieth century criticism of suburban life builds on a negative discourse that was already well-established. John Ruskin’s 1849 essay ‘The Seven Lamps of Architecture’ encapsulates many of the key strands of hereditary and environmental discourse that perpetuate *fin de siècle* thinking with regard to the suburb:

And I look upon those pitiful concretions of lime and clay which spring up in mildewed forwardness out of the kneaded fields about our capital – upon those thin, tottering, foundationless shells of splintered wood and imitated stone of formalised minuteness, alike without difference [...] not merely with the careless disgust of an offended eye [...] but with a painful foreboding that the roots of our national greatness must be deeply cankered when they are thus loosely struck in their native ground; that those comfortless and unhonoured dwellings are the signs of a great and spreading spirit of popular discontent; that they mark the time when every man’s aim is to be in some more elevated sphere than his natural one, and every man’s past life is his habitual scorn; when men build in the hope of leaving the places they have built, and live in the hope of forgetting the years that they have lived.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> T. W. H. Crosland, *The Suburbans* (London: John Long, 1905).

<sup>166</sup> John Ruskin, ‘The Seven Lamps of Architecture’ (New York: Wiley, 1849), p. 19.

The poorly constructed suburban properties are anthropomorphised by Ruskin, merging the disintegrating masonry of the new homes with their ‘thin, tottering’ suburban occupants. A lexical field of death and decay suggests that these spaces and, by association, their inhabitants, represent a cancerous threat to national health and progress that cannot be contained. The discourse is expressed through architectural sameness and lack of authenticity, in the ‘imitated stone [...] alike without difference’. The implication is that the inhabitants of these spaces, which are the human embodiments of its architecture are, similarly, without individuality or potential. Nothing creative or original can emanate from these spaces, Ruskin argues, and aesthetic beauty or intellectual truth are impossibilities. Ruskin also likens the impermanence of the structures to the desire for social mobility among suburban communities. It is this refusal to accept lowliness of social position with good grace, Ruskin suggests, that threatens to destroy British society by rotting its very roots.<sup>167</sup>

Taken in combination, the preconceptions underpinned by the discourses of slum and suburb established a reductive framework for the literary representation of working-class and lower-middle-class individuals and communities in this period. It is not surprising, perhaps, that established authors, such as Henry James, doubted that problems of working-class representation could be overcome. Keating references the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, in which James comments:

[T]he agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations; since the consciousness, on their part, of the complication exhibited, forms for us their link of connexion with it. But there are degrees of feeling – the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient, the barely intelligent, as we may say; and the acute,

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<sup>167</sup> For a detailed discussion of Ruskin’s complex attitudes towards the working class see Breton (2005), pp. 210-28.



the intense, the complete, in a word – the power to be finely aware  
and richly responsible.<sup>168</sup>

James implies that, if working-class characters are not fully cognisant of the nuances of emotion associated with the dramas in which the narratives place them, the author is at risk of over-attribution or exaggeration. The resulting portrayals therefore risk appearing untruthful, as they assume a degree of sensitivity available to the working-class characters that might be considered, by the reader, to be unrealistic. James also had concerns that placing a working-class protagonist in the foreground of the narrative could risk alienating readers. He wrote: '[O]ur curiosity and our sympathy care comparatively little for what happens to the stupid, the coarse and the blind'.<sup>169</sup> James cannot imagine how to depict characters from social classes other than his own successfully, and doubts that readers can empathise and associate with such characters. Specific authors with direct experience of life at the social margins, however, were successful in resisting, challenging and rejecting these crises of representation and reputation.

### **Challenging discourses of class in William Pett Ridge's memoirs**

Jonathan Wild describes William Pett Ridge as 'the foremost chronicler of the London lower middle classes in comic and light literature', and Pett Ridge's sixty published works articulate subtle, yet comprehensive, counter-discourses of class.<sup>170</sup> Pett Ridge's work has failed, however, to retain the popularity it experienced at the time of publication. Whilst there has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in recent decades, literary critical engagements with Pett Ridge's texts are few, and biographical details of the author are similarly scarce. Given the importance of this comparatively rare, socially-marginalised voice, further analysis of Pett Ridge's work is essential to build an understanding of social critique 'from below' during this period.

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<sup>168</sup> Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, p. 46.

<sup>169</sup> Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, p. 46.

<sup>170</sup> Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880 – 1939*, p. 73.

The absence of material on Pett Ridge's early years is significant in that the author published two memoirs, *A Story Teller: Forty Years in London* (1923) and *I Like To Remember* (1925), but across 609 pages of autobiography, he provides astonishingly little detail about his parents, childhood or education.<sup>171</sup> His father came from Bideford, Devon, and Pett Ridge moved to London from 'a village in Kent', accompanied by his mother and sisters, taking a house in New Cross.<sup>172</sup> His first job, on arriving in London, was as a clerk on the salary of 'twenty-one shillings each week, payable on Fridays'.<sup>173</sup> This autobiographical statement of salary mirrors a similar candour regarding remuneration in his fiction, where the salaries and capital assets of characters are stated frequently. Wild explains that 'Pett Ridge belonged to the first generation of Board school educated clerks (in his case in the Continental goods office of a railway)'.<sup>174</sup> It is interesting to compare Pett Ridge's memoirs with those of Wells, who writes at length about his parents, early life and education.<sup>175</sup> The sparsity of such detail in Pett Ridge's memoirs perhaps suggests a desire for ambiguity around his upbringing and ancestry.

Discussing his educational background Pett Ridge states: 'I joined the Birkbeck Institution in Southampton Buildings, because I ascertained that abridged education in the country had not sufficiently furnished me for City Life'.<sup>176</sup> He then deflects the focus from himself to discuss the formation of the Institute, its leadership and notable alumni. Having dispensed with his early life in the first two pages of one of his memoirs, the remaining pages mention his published work in passing (including his first success as a freelance journalist, with a sketch for the *St. James's Gazette*) but focus primarily on his extensive network of contacts and his philanthropic work, as well as comments on London of the past and

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<sup>171</sup> William Pett Ridge, *A Story Teller, Forty Years in London* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923). William Pett Ridge, *I Like to Remember* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925).

<sup>172</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, p. 281 and p. 1.

<sup>173</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, p. 1.

<sup>174</sup> Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880 – 1939*, p. 73.

<sup>175</sup> See H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Volume 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

<sup>176</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, pp. 2-3.

present.<sup>177</sup> With the exception of mentioning that, during the First World War, he was asked by the Red Cross to ‘take the congenial duties of honorary librarian in the Third London General [Hospital] at Wandsworth’, his memoirs are predominantly outward-looking, without references to his private life.<sup>178</sup> He makes no mention, for example, of his marriage to Olga Hentschel in 1909, or the birth of his children.

Whilst his memoirs provide few clues to his upbringing, they combine to create a comprehensive picture of Pett Ridge’s social attitudes in the 1920s, which appear to have been extraordinarily liberal for this period and, in fact, would still be considered ‘left of centre’ today. At first glance, his support of charitable projects reflects a form of Victorian philanthropy, in particular his attachment to causes for children. He comments:

Childhood is no joke where the streets are narrow. The mites become old too soon; they have no childhood; the faces are young without being youthful. Few take the trouble to teach them how to laugh. The State could do it, but the State would do it badly; the State would find a remedy and probably the wrong one.<sup>179</sup>

Pett Ridge took action himself, establishing a Babies’ Home and Day Nursery in Hoxton, in London’s East End. To raise money for the Babies’ Home (which cost ‘about a thousand a year’ to run) he gave lectures across the UK, speaking publicly and at ‘drawing room meetings’.<sup>180</sup> His networking skills attracted notable patrons, such as Princess Alexandra of Teck, and supporters including J. M. Barrie. Significant sums were raised through theatrical performances and concerts.<sup>181</sup>

Pett Ridge’s more surprising social attitudes, however, are reflected in anecdotes from both memoirs which demonstrate anti-capitalist sentiments and other similarly progressive views. An anecdote states, for example:

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<sup>177</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, p. 9.

<sup>178</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, p. 213.

<sup>179</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, p. 36

<sup>180</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, p. 111 and pp. 131 -137.

<sup>181</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, p. 112.

At a dinner at the Carlton, I had for a neighbour an enormously wealthy man on whom, from his own confession, money had rained persistently for thirty years. He talked, almost with sobs, of death duties, and, in brighter mood, of improvements at his London house which were to cost seventy-five thousand pounds. He had five cars, and wanted a sixth.<sup>182</sup>

Whilst this was written in 1923, in the wake of changing attitudes resulting from experiences of the Great War, this critique of his social ‘superior’ is extremely direct for this period. He criticises privilege saying:

London can scarcely be called an excessively altruistic town. Most of its well-to-do people are too intent upon their own careers to give thought to any one else, and those who have the desire to give are frequently the people without means to do so’.<sup>183</sup>

He challenges economic inequality head-on, stating that those from humble backgrounds have a more developed sense of social responsibility, and accusing the ruling classes of greed and self-interest. Similarly, he challenges discourses of class in his anecdotes, appearing to confront bias and encourage tolerance. One discussion of criminal behaviour, for example, mitigates on behalf of young people:

London huddles its people so closely together in certain quarters that the young, being first of all imitative, see and copy the defects of their elders. [...] The wonder is not that a child in such surroundings grows up a nuisance to society, and a costly one; the astonishing thing is that sometimes he develops, by the sturdy help of outside influences, into a decent member.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, p. 58.

<sup>183</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, p. 253

<sup>184</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, p. 250. A separate section expresses Pett Ridge’s empathy for young offenders, see *A Storyteller* p. 229.

Pett Ridge acknowledges the discourse of environmental determinism, apportioning blame for criminal behaviour to over-crowding. He then challenges dominant social attitudes by confronting readers with the ‘proof’ which refutes the discourse of hereditary determinism. The ability to change outcomes lies in the hands of those able to provide the ‘sturdy help of outside influences’. Culpability and remedy reside with society as a whole, and criminal behaviour is not predetermined by heredity. Even in the early 1920s, this view could have contradicted the perspective of the dominant centre.

Pett Ridge also challenges biased social attitudes regarding anti-social behaviour. He describes the revelry of crowds on days of the Boat Race and Derby, which often result in windows being broken by high-spirited youngsters, attracting the ‘exacting’ interest of the police.<sup>185</sup> A few pages later, he describes the revelry of university students who ‘obtain possession’ of advertising shop fittings such as a ‘wooden figure of a Highlander’ and a ‘fashionably dressed lady with waxen features, and bearing the title “Straight from Paris”’ and march ‘in their hundreds’ with these trophies along Oxford Street, Park Lane and Piccadilly.<sup>186</sup> Well-to-do observers of these student revels add these scenes to ‘the stock of those memories recalled and inspected afterwards and chuckled over. The demure and elderly like to think of the time they were neither elderly nor demure.’<sup>187</sup> Anti-social behaviour results from an outpouring of youthful high spirits, in each case, Pett Ridge asserts, but the responses (from both the general public and law enforcement) have obvious class-based dimensions, reflecting double-standards arising from bias.

Several socially-marginalised groups are depicted with empathy, in fact, in Pett Ridge’s memoirs. He comments that ‘new arrivals from the Continent of Europe to work in the East End appear so genuinely grateful to London for taking them into its service that they model their behaviour on strict lines’. Their focus on hard work ensures they are more law-

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<sup>185</sup> Pett Ridge, *I Like to Remember*, pp. 107-109.

<sup>186</sup> Pett Ridge, *I Like to Remember*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>187</sup> Pett Ridge, *I Like to Remember*, pp. 112.

abiding than the average visitor, he comments.<sup>188</sup> In a separate anecdote, Pett Ridge praises ‘Mrs. Finlay, the mother of a good friend’ who was visiting London from her home in Ireland. Her son had taken her to the theatre and as they left they were caught in a torrential downpour:

A very attractive young woman took shelter with them, and the three had an animated talk about the play. The rain stopped; the girl prepared to go.

“It has been very agreeable and novel for me, this chat” [the young girl] said, with frankness. “Because, you know, I am not what is called respectable.”

“My dear,” said Mrs. Finlay gently, ‘if I had your features, I’d not be respectable either!’”

Mrs. Finlay’s refusal to condemn on moral grounds, and her willingness to make a conversational connection with the young woman (presumably a sex worker or mistress) are admired by Pett Ridge.

Despite the sparsity of biographical detail in Pett Ridge’s two memoirs, therefore, a clear picture begins to emerge. He is critical of ruling class conservative social attitudes and greed, whilst promoting individual responsibility for social improvement, encouraging balance and tolerance in relation to a number of socially-marginalised groups. It would be a mistake, however, to locate Pett Ridge within the emerging wave of socialism of the late-Victorian and Edwardian period, or indeed within mainstream Liberalism or New Liberalism. As with other *petit bourgeois* authors discussed in this study, his ideological viewpoint is more complex, evading categorisation within the party political frameworks of his day. Arguably, the ambiguities relating to Pett Ridge’s own social standing, and the difficulties of positioning his resistance of dominant hegemony, either politically or

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<sup>188</sup> Pett Ridge, *A Storyteller, Forty Years in London*, pp. 250-251.

theoretically, has contributed to the comparatively limited literary critical engagement with his work to date and has led to clear misunderstandings of his authorial intentions in the appraisals provided by early critics.

## **Literary critical engagement with the work of William Pett**

### **Ridge**

Pett Ridge's novels have undergone a process of literary critical reappraisal in recent years. This was clearly necessary, as early critical engagements are unconvincing. The dismissive tone of Vincent Brome's 1965 review perhaps explains why Pett Ridge's novels received little scholarly attention for the following thirty years. Discussing realist representations of London's East End Brome argues: 'He was a writer unaware of the wider implications of what he wrote. This lack of depth of awareness marks the limitations of his work.'<sup>189</sup> Brome overlooks the fact that Pett Ridge had extensive direct experience of the East End at the time of writing his novels (albeit as a philanthropist). Brome's further claim that '[w]ith the work of Arthur Morrison, the genre [of urban working-class representation] achieved its most significant expression' suggests a certain blindness, on the behalf of the critic, to the ideological freight of late-nineteenth-century slum fiction. Brome asserts: 'No single novelist in [the English realist school] achieved a completely representative picture'.<sup>190</sup> The notion that it is actually possible to produce a 'completely representative picture' of this complex, multi-faceted community suggests that Brome expects stereotypical representation, and that Pett Ridge's work, which refuses to supply simplistic/reductive characterisation, is being criticised for a weakness that today would be considered a strength.

Similarly, David Trotter's 1993 review of Pett Ridge's *Outside the Radius* (1899) has internalised the environmental determinist discourse of the suburb and deems Pett Ridge to be complicit in its creation. Referencing Ruskin, Trotter states: 'Suburbia permitted neither

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<sup>189</sup> Vincent Brome, *Four realist novelists Arthur Morrison, Edwin Pugh, Richard Whiteing, William Pett Ridge* (London: Longmans, 1965), p. 32.

<sup>190</sup> Brome, p. 32

difference nor community'. He argues that *Outside the Radius* describes 'an environment which regularly produces a certain type of person, and eliminates, by one means or another, any variants', and that '[c]ritics of suburbia seized on this monotony'.<sup>191</sup> The discourse of the suburb is reframed by Trotter as fact, and it is implied that Pett Ridge provided fuel for the fire. It is difficult, however, to discern the 'monotony' and alienation that Trotter describes in Pett Ridge's texts and, given the author's success throughout his lifetime, it is difficult to reconcile 'monotony' of content with the popularity of his novels.

More recent literary critical engagements, however, have highlighted the role played by Pett Ridge in challenging discourses of class, in relation to his representations of both working-class and lower-middle-class characters. Wild states that Pett Ridge 'offers a unique literary window onto the new social caste' of the suburbs.<sup>192</sup> He argues:

[U]nlike the political sledgehammer often wielded by Wells in his fiction, Pett Ridge's politics are applied with a companionable touch. They take the form of a mild but persistent affirmation of the positive qualities of life – primarily the opportunity for happiness and contentment – that were characteristic features in his view of modern suburban existence.<sup>193</sup>

The subtlety of Pett Ridge's social critique (which Wild describes as 'quietly political') is now fully acknowledged in scholarship, and the corrective nature of his depictions of lower-middle class life are seen as attempts to challenge reductive representation and the 'flattening' of characterisation.<sup>194</sup> By countering the preconception that suburban life is inherently inferior to that lived in spaces associated with the ruling classes, he rejects the

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<sup>191</sup> Trotter (1993), p. 129.

<sup>192</sup> Jonathan Wild, *Literature of The 1900s: The Great Edwardian Emporium* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 65.

<sup>193</sup> Wild, *Literature of The 1900s: The Great Edwardian Emporium*, p. 67. Lynne Hapgood, similarly, asserts that 'happiness is a political act' in fictionalisations of the suburbs in this period. See Lynne Hapgood, *Margins of Desire: The suburbs in fiction and culture 1880-1925* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 172.

<sup>194</sup> Wild, *Literature of The 1900s: The Great Edwardian Emporium*, p. 67.



discourse of the suburb, along with the negative perceptions of the communities inhabiting these spaces.

### **Rejection of the discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism in William Pett Ridge's *69 Birnam Road* (1908)<sup>195</sup>**

The intention of this close reading is to provide, for the first time, an extended analysis of Pett Ridge's social critique in his 1908 novel *69 Birnam Road* from the perspective of its resistance and rejection of discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism.<sup>196</sup> Social class provides the central narrative drive for *69 Birnam Road*, and the repercussions for individuals and their extended families (of moving both up and down the social scale) supply the plot and shape characterisation. Social mobility is so deeply-embedded within the novel, that notions of hereditary essentialism are overturned entirely. The realist aesthetic of the novel positions social mobility as an unarguable feature of modern life, demonstrating the ways in which characters transform in response to the opportunities or challenges presented by their changing financial circumstances. Pett Ridge undermines theories of hereditary determinism still further by problematising notions of class-based bias driven by eugenic thinking, in which individuals are seen in terms of 'capital values'. He does this by severing links between perceived 'values' of characters as responsible citizens, and their 'capital values' based on their economic circumstances. Reflecting similar facets in the close readings of Wells, Grossmith, and Swinnerton, Pett Ridge challenges the preconception, within essentialist discourses of class, that the personalities and probity of characters are, in some way, a reflection of their financial means. Social status, in fact, is presented by Pett Ridge as entirely fluid. He stresses the performative nature of class, which in turn denies position in the social hierarchy as an essentialist categorisation.

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<sup>195</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road* (1908).

<sup>196</sup> Wild, *Literature of The 1900s: The Great Edwardian Emporium*, p. 67.

Pett Ridge's resistance and rejection of the discourse of *environmental* determinism is equally comprehensive, in his total redefinition of the suburb and its inhabitants. He acknowledges that the suburb is a transitional space, but demonstrates that there are multiple trajectories. Individuals move down the social ladder in addition to up, whilst others emigrate, or move across it without changes in social status. He challenges the notion of social mobility as a slavish imitation of the ruling classes by suburbanites, demonstrating the hard work, dedication and sacrifice required to just retain a foothold in these spaces. He redefines the move away from the suburb as being motivated by the imperative of escaping financial insecurity and poor quality housing, rather than a superficial desire for social pretension. Community is not absent in Pett Ridge's suburb. It is expressed in the need to address the collective economic survival of extended families. Lastly, but importantly, in an extremely rare instance of symbolism (within an essentially realist aesthetic) Pett Ridge characterises working-class and lower-middle class existence as being driven by the fact that charitable involvement and inherited capital in these communities simply cannot address the problems of crippling economic inequality.

### **Resisting and rejecting discourses of hereditary determinism**

Pett Ridge's novel *69 Birnam Road* has at its centre the relationship between Ella Hartley and her husband Fred. The characters are introduced as newly-weds, returning from their honeymoon on the Continent to their first home in the suburbs (69 Birnam Road). The novel follows the joys and challenges of their marriage over a period of around twelve years, maps Fred's rise through the ranks from railway clerk to line supervisor, and concludes with their relocation from 69 Birnam Road to a neighbourhood associated with the established middle class. As this precis of the plot suggests, this is a novel with social mobility at its heart. Importantly, however, this is not a narrative of the workplace. Fred's career success, and the changes brought about in his personality and demeanour as a result of his experiences in the workplace, are not the focus of the novel. Indeed, this process of transformation takes place

‘off stage’. Instead, the focalisation is overwhelmingly that of Ella Hartley. The suburban home is the setting for the majority of the novel, and it is the pressure placed on the Hartley’s marriage by Fred’s social mobility that provides the narrative drive.

The focalisation of the novel has an important impact on the text’s engagement with the discourse of hereditary determinism. If the novel had been focalised through Fred, suspense within the narrative would have come from wondering if he would succeed in breaking through the ‘glass ceiling’ of the Edwardian workplace, making the transition from lowly clerk to middle management. The possibility/impossibility of social mobility would be at stake. By focalising the novel through Ella in the suburban domestic space, however, *Pett Ridge* presents social mobility as a ‘fact of life’. Social mobility is positioned within this realist aesthetic as a common occurrence, and the suspense focuses on whether the marriage between the two characters can survive Fred’s rapid social elevation. The question is no longer ‘if?’ but ‘what happens when?’ social mobility occurs. Against the backdrop of hereditary discourses of class at the *fin de siècle*, discussed earlier in this chapter, *Pett Ridge* refutes essentialist assumptions by demonstrating social mobility through the novel’s content, whilst simultaneously normalising this process of individual growth through focalisation.

There are differences in social status between Ella and Fred from the outset. Their opening lines of dialogue and initial actions indicate this disparity:

[A]s the train stopped [...] a tall young woman descended easily [...]

“Come along Fred. How slow you are!”

“Half a tick,” he said.

She caught her husband as he neared the ground, swung him once masterfully before allowing him to touch the cobble-stones [...] it

was the girl who put a question to the official, replied to wails of porters eager to render assistance.<sup>197</sup>

Fred's Cockney slang suggests a working-class background. His new wife, however, is from a lower-middle class family. Her height, strength and confidence in managing the details of their journey, reflect the imbalance of power at the outset of their relationship which, it becomes clear, stems from differences in social station. Pett Ridge's representation of Fred in the opening chapters reflects the 'littleness' associated with first-generation office workers in literature of the period. Fred is described as being below average height, in comparison to his 'tall young' wife and, by being manoeuvred so 'masterfully' by a woman as he dismounts from the train, the emasculation of this character is emphasised, suggesting weaknesses of 'character' in addition to those of physical strength. Further clues to Fred's working-class roots come from his table manners:

Ella's husband stood back respectfully sipping at his cup, and apparently tempted to make use of the saucer [...] [H]e took another thin slice of bread and butter. He was about to take two, in order to fold them and make thus a comfortable mouthful, but his young wife stayed the second piece.<sup>198</sup>

Described as 'Ella's husband' rather than by name, Fred takes no part in the conversation, as his wife chats to fellow travellers. In the company of those of higher social status, he is forced to resist his usual ways of eating and drinking, to avoid revealing his social status.

Ella, meanwhile, has been able to dupe a society lady, Mrs. Featherstone, and her two nieces, encountered in France, into accepting her as one of their own class.

[Mrs. Featherstone said] "We called at the Grand afterwards, because my nieces wanted to see you again, but apparently you'd gone. The hall porter didn't seem to know the name."

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<sup>197</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>198</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, pp. 13-14.

“They know nothing,” [Ella] remarked calmly, “at some of these large Paris hotels. Look upon one as a mere number – a number that does not count.”

“True, true!” Mrs. Featherstone spoke thoughtfully as one for whom the veil had been lifted from some scientific mystery; the two nieces ranged themselves on either side of Ella, carrying gratitude for her smiles to the point of confusion.<sup>199</sup>

Ella has claimed to be staying in an expensive hotel to perpetuate the pretence of upper-class status. She is unashamed to be ‘caught out’, and her mimicking of ruling-class condescension and sense of entitlement makes her deception even more convincing. She is not just capable of imitating society ladies, she plays this role more successfully than those whose financial means entitle them to occupy this place in the social hierarchy (such as Mrs. Featherstone’s nieces). There is nothing innate in social class Pett Ridge suggests. The appearances of superior social class, on which so much reliance is placed in Edwardian society, can be easily simulated, and notions of class-based hereditary determinism are without foundation.

Ella’s motivations for this pretence are not immediately clear in the opening chapter. When out of earshot, however, Fred reveals that he is aware of Ella’s deceptions:

“You’ve fairly done it this time, Ella,” he said amusedly. “It’s a ten to one chance now that everybody can tell with half an eye. You’ve given yourself away, that’s what you’ve done.”<sup>200</sup>

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the motivation is not to cheat Mrs. Featherstone for financial gain or social advancement. Although Mrs. Featherstone gives Ella her card on their return to London, and insists they should meet at a later date, Ella has no intention of exploiting opportunities presented by friendship. The explanation for the pretence is provided in Chapter 3, where it is revealed that pretending to be of another social

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<sup>199</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, p. 4.

<sup>200</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, p. 2.

class is a type of fantasy role-play from which the young couple derive great amusement.

Ella sets the scene as they embark on a trip round London on a leisurely Saturday.

“We’re not married,” she went on, as they settled down on a Baker Street omnibus. “We are strangers in a foreign town, and you happened to sit next to me at lunch to-day in the Hotel de Quatre Saisons.”

“Did I speak first?” He fixed the tarpaulin cover across.

“Your manners are perfect,” she explained, as the horses started. “We are both highly connected, and that makes our adventure the more daring and courageous.”

“I see!”

“Take two threepenny tickets and listen. We talk a good deal after lunch, you and I, and as neither of us is acquainted with the town, we have taken our Baedekers and set out together to get our first impressions. I know rather more about it than you do, because I’ve read up the subject. Now here on the right is the Palais de la Reine.”

“My word!”

“Say ‘Do you mean that?’ or some polite phrase of astonishment.”

“I’ll have a go at it,” he promised. “Whether it comes off or not, I can never be sure. You’re better at games than what I am.”<sup>201</sup>

The couple continue on their omnibus journey around London, acting out their fantasy. Social class is depicted as entirely performative in these opening chapters. From the outset, Pett Ridge problematises the criteria employed for social differentiation. Social status, in the world of the novel, is fluid rather than fixed, involving simple changes in speech and actions. To the two central characters, in fact, social class it is nothing more than a game.

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<sup>201</sup> Pett Ridge, 69 *Birnam Road*, p. 50.

The novel explores, however, the implications for individuals of moving up or down the social hierarchy in 'real life'. Fred is transformed as a result of his advancement through the bureaucratic structures of the railway company. Over time he develops the confidence and social skills necessary to enable him to merge easily into the established middle class. By contrast Ella lacks confidence in her ability to make this transition and, with the balance of power in their relationship reversed, their marriage is put under intense strain. Personal growth is a factor of modern life in this text, overturning the notion that an individual's 'character' is fixed at birth.

Pett Ridge resists the discourse of hereditary determinism still further by fracturing the link established within the discourse between an individual's ancestry and innate (negative or positive) aspects of 'character'. Problematizing categorisation of individuals based on their 'capital values', Pett Ridge establishes an alternative framework for the 'valuing' of individuals which privileges hard work, loyalty, generosity and tolerance over family background. I describe these personal characteristics, for the purposes of this close reading, as 'citizenship values', as they appear to reflect the qualities that Pett Ridge considers essential for responsible members of society. To explore these conflicting sets of values, Pett Ridge employs techniques of 'doubling', that were popular in literature of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.<sup>202</sup> Parallels are created between specific characters, and the actions of these characters are compared throughout the narrative. The 'capital value' of an individual is often stated directly by Pett Ridge as part of the narrative. The characters are then placed in situations in which they reveal their 'citizenship values' and the difference between the 'assumed' and 'actual' worth of each character becomes clear.

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<sup>202</sup> For further information see: Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Dimitris Vardoulakis, *The Doppelgänger: Literature's Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

### **Doubling as a technique to challenge ‘capital values’ and eugenic thinking**

The young couple settle down to married life, with Fred working as a railway clerk, and Ella supplementing income by teaching piano in the family home. Despite their differences in social background Ella refuses to allow her lower-middle class family to treat her husband and mother-in-law condescendingly. Overhearing her family’s criticisms at a party she tells them:

“[M]y husband is my equal.”

A slight murmur of contradiction.

“My equal,” she persisted. “I am still earning some of the money, but it is only a small proportion, and he is earning most. He works hard from nine o’clock in the morning until six o’clock every evening, to earn an income which keeps me and keeps this house at Sixty-nine Birnam Road going. And if he likes his mother to come here, there is no good reason why she should not come here, and you, if you also come here, must treat her with respect as you would show to me. [...] Must you all go now?”<sup>203</sup>

Her family members are ejected from her home for insisting upon their social superiority over Fred and his mother, and their attitudes remain silenced in future encounters. Fred’s hard work, leadership skills and entrepreneurship are rewarded by career advancement. His modest salary (around £190 per annum at the outset of the novel) soon rises to £230 after a promotion.

Another married couple, the Jephsons, provide a ‘double’ for Fred and Ella. The Jephsons married on the same day as the Hartleys, and Billy Jephson is also a clerk. The Jephson’s are more prosperous, however, and live in an area of London associated with the established middle class.

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<sup>203</sup> Pett Ridge, 69 *Birnam Road*, p. 75.



[Mrs. Jephson] rattled on without waiting for a reply. “We have the dearest flat in Ashley Gardens – I don’t mean that it’s expensive; Billy has only got his £400 a year besides the little he earns, and of course we can’t afford to be reckless; I hadn’t a penny piece when we married.”

“I had three pounds five and six”, [Ella replied]<sup>204</sup>

Billy Jephson’s independent allowance of £400 per year means that, irrespective of earned income, the couple have more money than the Hartleys. As Billy is a clerk at a legal firm, he is employed in a sector recognised for its high salaries, compared to Fred’s employment by the railway, known for the lowest remunerations.<sup>205</sup> Despite Mrs. Jephson’s protestation that they ‘can’t afford to be reckless’, their circumstances are a world away from the precarity of the typical lower-middle class household, as Ella’s precise statement of her exact financial position at the time of her marriage exemplifies. Whilst the Jephsons have higher ‘capital values’ than the Hartleys, their ‘citizenship values’ are depicted by Pett Ridge as being lower. In comparison to the diligent Fred, for example, Billy ‘comes home from the Temple at most extraordinary hours’, (early), devoting little time to his profession.<sup>206</sup> When the couples meet for tea at the zoo, Billy exhibits traits of condescension and intolerance that Ella clearly frowns upon:

Mr. Jephson, in charging the straw-hatted waiter with many crimes, especially with gross negligence in allowing the sun to send its rays across a corner of the round table, gave evidence, made a speech on

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<sup>204</sup> Pett Ridge, 69 *Birnam Road*, p. 54.

<sup>205</sup> Only 10% of railway clerks had annual salaries in excess of £160. David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness* (London, 1966, rev. ed. Oxford: OUP, 1989), pp. 42-43. For information on the financial situation of railway clerks see Peter Scott and James Trevor Walker, ‘Demonstrating distinction at ‘the lowest edge of the black-coated class’: The family expenditures of Edwardian railway clerks’, *Business History*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (2015), 564–588; and Michael Heller, *London Clerical Workers, 1880-1914: Development of the Labour Market* (London and Brookfield: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), pp. 37-38.

<sup>206</sup> Pett Ridge, 69 *Birnam Road*, p. 54.

behalf of the prosecution, summed up and delivered verdict and sentence.<sup>207</sup>

Billy's sense of entitlement reflects itself in unfair criticism of the waiting staff, whilst his obvious flaunting of the rhetorical 'tools of his trade' contrasts with Fred's modesty and reticence. The phrase 'corner of the round table' is perhaps a satirical hint that Billy's performance within his role at the Temple will display inconsistencies that are equally obvious and undermining. As the novel progresses, the fortunes of the Jephsons take the opposite trajectory to those of the Hartleys. Spending his time at the races rather than in the Temple, Billy experiences financial difficulties, and when the couple separate, Mrs. Jephson moves to 70 Birnam Road, signifying her descent in the social hierarchy. Whilst Ella continues to teach piano throughout her marriage, and even after the birth of the couple's daughter Victoria, Mrs. Jephson refuses to work, even after her move to the suburb. In fact, 'Mrs. Jephson sent in word to the effect that it was impossible to obtain two consecutive moments of afternoon sleep', due to the sound of Ella's piano practice. Such indolence in suburban Birnam Road is seen as weakness of character, and when Mrs. Jephson begins to entertain the attentions of potential (wealthy) male partners, Ella fears for her reputation.

These gossipy aspects of plot are perfectly at home within a work of 'comic and light literature'.<sup>208</sup> Their relevance from the perspective of the discourse of hereditary determinism, however, has been much underestimated. This and other 'doublings' of characters in the novel combine to confuse 'capital values' to such an extent that the notion that the 'worth' of an individual is a reflection of his or her economic circumstances is entirely overwritten. At the outset of the novel, Fred is compared negatively to Ella's tall, socially-confident, lower-middle-class brother Charles. But Charles's spendthrift lifestyle and spiralling debts destroy Ella's financial security, whilst it is Fred who elevates the entire

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<sup>207</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, p. 55.

<sup>208</sup> Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880 – 1939*, p. 73.

family socially. The narrative strands continually resist the linking of financial ‘worth’ with the value of individuals. Class identity is entirely fluid in Pett Ridge’s fictional world and, given the diversity of personalities and narrative trajectories of the individuals depicted, the idea that individuals are incapable of change, or are inherently less ‘valuable’ to society based on their ‘capital value’ is seen to be a gross simplification of a more nuanced reality.

### **Resisting and rejecting discourses of environmental determinism**

Pett Ridge also challenges and problematises discourses of environmental determinism in *69 Birnam Road*, through his representations of the suburb and of a wide range of characters occupying this space. Misconceptions regarding suburban life and communities are addressed almost immediately. In Chapter One Mrs. Featherstone describes the ‘poor mistaken suburbs’ as ‘long straight roads with houses on either side all precisely alike. And the people in the houses, all of one pattern’.<sup>209</sup> Ella leaps to the defence:

You’re wrong,” she cried rapidly. “You’re altogether wrong. People take their own souls and their bodies and their own lives with them, and whether they reside in Berkeley Square or at Forest Hill, they can be themselves, and are not obliged to imitate their neighbours; they’re not compelled to know them.” She went on defiantly. “There’s as much intelligence in the suburbs as anywhere else in London; more. There’s as much happiness in the suburbs as anywhere else in London; more. There’s as much goodness and decency of behaviour in the suburbs as anywhere else in London; more!”<sup>210</sup>

Ella rejects the discourse of environmental determinism in relation to the suburb, refusing to accept that the identities of individuals are shaped by their surroundings. A person’s innate ‘nature’ resides always within them, irrespective of the neighbourhood in which they may

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<sup>209</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, p. 16.

<sup>210</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, pp. 16-17.

live. She refutes the accusation of sameness, and addresses the assumptions of inferiority levelled at suburban life, claiming that the intellectual life, moral standards and contentment of suburban communities is greatly underestimated. Mrs. Featherstone's nieces are impressed by Ella's forwardness:

“Do you know,” they whispered, “Auntie's never been contradicted before.”

“I'm sorry,” [Ella] said.

“It was noble of you.” She made a protest. “But it was,” insisted one.

“To stand up for the poor dreary London suburbs in that way.”

“They are not all poor, and but few of them are dreary.”

“Of course!” they agreed hastily.<sup>211</sup>

By voicing this rejection of the discourse of environmental determinism through the focalised character of Ella, the class-based bias relating to the suburb is challenged openly from the outset. Despite their admiration of Ella, the nieces are unable, at this stage, to accept her view of the suburb, emphasising the deep-rooted nature of such prejudice.

In Chapter 21, Ella challenges the discourse of environmental determinism once again. Ella has assumed the responsibility for protecting Mrs. Jephson from unwise relationships with potential male partners. Mrs. Jephson tries to gain acceptance for her behaviour:

“My dear,” said [Mrs. Jephson] with a plaintive air of reasonableness. You know what I mean as well as I do. You and I don't belong to the suburban type of woman.” [...] [Ella] controlled herself.

“I wish you'd understand,” she said, definitely, “first that the word suburban used as you are using it, goads me to violence; second that

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<sup>211</sup> Pett Ridge, 69 *Birnam Road*, p. 17.

I can never endure the trick some women have of pretending themselves to be worse than they really are.”<sup>212</sup>

Ella is angered by Mrs. Jephson’s suggestion that ‘the suburban type of woman’ is characterised by an outdated and stale lack of sexual adventure. Within this strand of the discourse ‘values’ such as loyalty and monogamy are reframed as negative characteristics. Ella is aware that Mrs. Jephson’s motivation for promiscuity is not the desire for sexual freedom, but the need to attract a wealthy lover in order to avoid working to support herself. She refuses to accept the reductive view of ‘suburban’ female identity, and challenges Mrs. Jephson’s use of the discourse to shirk individual responsibility.

### **Social critique in Pett Ridge’s *69 Birnam Road***

In addition to his extensive resistance of the discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism, Pett Ridge’s social critique in *69 Birnam Road* also challenges issues of economic inequality directly. The communities of the suburbs, Pett Ridge suggests, are as nuanced and various as those of the established middle class. The key difference is that these communities face daily challenges to their tenacity, loyalty and probity presented by the difficulties of their economic circumstances. The ‘nature’ of an individual is not fixed at birth, nor is it determined entirely by its surroundings, but aspects of personal growth for the lower-middle class are shaped by the need to survive in a world that is sometimes hostile and always characterised by precarity. Social critique around economic inequality, however, is handled by Pett Ridge with a comparative lightness of touch for literature of this period, employing comedy and a rare example of symbolism.

Ella travels to Euston station to meet her husband who is returning on the ‘boat train’ from a business trip to the United States. The transition into social critique in the narrative is signalled by an incident during Ella’s train journey from the suburbs to the centre of London.

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<sup>212</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, pp. 324-325.

A lady traveller seated opposite insisted on giving the particulars of a serious railway disaster in which she had been involved. Never begrudging a three-penny piece as acknowledgement for help given with four large trunks (she knew the men were not paid well) she discovered that at Waterloo, owing to a blunder for which one never could forgive oneself, she had given a coin from the sixpenny compartment of a purse; as the distracted lady very properly and truly argued, it might have been half a sovereign. She begged earnestly for advice, and asked Ella to support her in hoping that the South Western, application being made in a nicely-written note, would refund the amount overpaid by inadvertence, and on Ella declining to encourage this view and counselling her to dismiss the incident from memory [...] the other sulked in the corner of the carriage [...] and, lifting her veil, presently dried tears with a lace handkerchief that, sold in the public market, would have kept a railway porter and his wife and family for a week.<sup>213</sup>

This passage shares similarities with the anecdote discussed earlier in this chapter from Pett Ridge's memoirs. The wealthy figures, in each case, are unaware of their greed, and the self-pity expressed in each text emphasises their blindness to the financial difficulties faced routinely by others. Free indirect discourse enables Pett Ridge to satirise the lack of altruism, reframing social critique within a comic aesthetic.

In the same chapter, Pett Ridge extends his social critique within a realist aesthetic. When her husband's train is delayed, Ella takes a walk in the streets surrounding Euston station. The fact that this is a slum neighbourhood is indicated by Pett Ridge's description of the surroundings. The railings are 'be-flagged by the week's wash' which 'having given up

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<sup>213</sup> Pett Ridge, 69 *Birnam Road*, p. 211

the white purity with which they started life, made no effort to gain any colour but that of a light brown'.<sup>214</sup> Lack of money to replace ageing garments, and the grime of the city, defy the best attempts of local women to uphold standards of appearance. Ella is moved by the children she encounters:

Certain of the smaller infants gazed up at her with a diverted air, as though she added to the impression already gained that this was an amusing world, and that if you were provided with a crust and the leg of a doll, and if your mother did not in a rare access of energy come out and sling you indoors, there was really not a great deal at which one could grumble. [...] Ella took the eldest and sagest by the hand and led her to Seymour Street where the child accepted charge of a box of chocolates, promising to do her best to distribute the contents fairly, expressing however, a fear that, try as one might, it would be impossible to satisfy everyone.<sup>215</sup>

So little is expected by these children, yet the need is so great. Ella assuages her sense of guilt by buying a box of chocolates, but it is clear that the inability of this gift to address the deprivation of the children is used symbolically. Pett Ridge pricks the consciences of those whose sense of social responsibility stops at the point of making small charitable donations. The problem is the insufficiency of the assumed solution, given the extent of the problem.

This symbolism resonates with a separate aspect of the plot in which a similarly insufficient gift fails to address the economic circumstances of lower-middle class characters. Ella's Aunt Grace has £500 to pass on to her family on her death. Members of Ella's extended family each have plans for how they will spend this inheritance. Cousin Gertrude, for example, 'talked of the perfectly sweet little tea shop she would start down in

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<sup>214</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, p. 217.

<sup>215</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, pp. 217-218.

Surrey, if anybody were to leave the money to her'.<sup>216</sup> The sum, of course, cannot possibly help all of the family members to achieve relatively modest dreams such as this. Aunt Grace leaves the entire sum to Ella who, in turn, hands it to her spendthrift brother Charles to pay his debts. Charles, however, takes the money and absconds to South Africa, leaving Ella to pay off his creditors from her own limited financial resources. As with the box of chocolates, 'it is impossible to satisfy everyone' with this modest bequest. There is some money in the suburbs, but there is never *enough* money. The preconception of the suburb is that it is a space of alienation and self-interest. Pett Ridge's novel, however, redefines the suburb by demonstrating the sense of community arising from the financial interdependency of these extended lower-middle class families, their domestic help and lodgers. The economic gains of the most successful member of the family have to be offset to secure the survival of those family members facing the greatest financial difficulties. Social mobility in Pett Ridge's suburb, therefore, is a collective process for survival, rather than a social Darwinist notion of competition between individuals.

Finally, in a separate episode, Pett Ridge employs parody to challenge ruling class attitudes and behaviour. Ella goes window-shopping in the West End with Dickson, the paying lodger who shares 69 Birnam Road with the Hartleys. When the fashions are disappointingly similar to those in 'Clapham Junction', Dickson says:

"Let's have a look at Society and see what it's up to".

Ella, five minutes later, declared it did not matter, but Dickson said it did matter; Society must in her opinion, be lurking about somewhere, and as it was not to be found amongst the thick forest of chairs north of the Achilles statue, it stood to reason that Society must be in another quarter.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, p. 271.

<sup>217</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, p. 161.



Through Dickson's observation of 'Society', Pett Ridge reverses the 'gaze' of Victorian London of the late nineteenth-century, where observing inhabitants of slums (and indeed the city's asylums) was a popular pastime. By suggesting that Dickson is hunting 'Society' in its natural habitat, Pett Ridge emphasises the dehumanising nature of the class-based 'gaze'. When Dickson becomes an aspiring writer she observes 'Society' at close quarters, eavesdropping and recording, in her short stories, the phrases she has overheard from the upper classes. This parodies the slum fiction trend of late 1890s, in which writers such as Morrison turned observations of working-class London into sensationalised fiction, drawing on the use of Cockney slang.

Pett Ridge's extensive engagements with discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism in *69 Birnam Road*, along with other aspects of his social critique, provide important insights into the author's attitudes towards Edwardian society 'from below'. Pett Ridge resists and rejects, in this novel, the powerful dominant ideological positions of his historic moment which were providing a disincentive to social reform, and which had created a crisis of credibility for the aspiring lower middle class author.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE SERVANT PROBLEM: ESSENTIALIST DISCOURSES OF CLASS IN NARRATIVES OF LATE-VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN DOMESTIC HELP

In addition to having negative implications for socially-marginalised authors, discourses of environmental and hereditary determinism also provided authors with opportunities to exploit widely-held beliefs to provide increased traction for their social critique. By *harnessing* the prejudices inherent in these discourses, socially-marginalised authors were able to use the rhetoric of essentialism to their advantage, to challenge (rather than reinforce) class-based attitudes of the dominant centre.

There is a comprehensive body of scholarship exploring how female writers utilised notions of hereditary determinism in this period to challenge gender attitudes. The evolution of eugenic feminism is analysed extensively by Angelique Richardson, who provides the following definition:

The central goal of eugenic feminism was the construction of civic motherhood which sought political recognition for reproductive labour; in the wake of new biological knowledge they argued that their contribution to nation and empire might be expanded if they assumed responsibility for the rational selection of reproductive partners.<sup>218</sup>

Exploiting interest in, and broad support for, the discourse of hereditary determinism, the women's movement in this early stage of its development sought to leverage notions of

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<sup>218</sup> Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, p. 9.

selection of sexual partners as a means by which to validate the role of women in society.

Justin Prystash states:

[T]hey argued that eugenics would allow women to accelerate the development of what feminist evolutionists, such as Frances Swiney and Eliza Burt Gamble, claimed were their inherent mental strengths: rapid perception, sympathy, greater endurance, intellect, and moral sense.<sup>219</sup>

The widely-held assumption that personality traits (both positive and negative) could be passed on through subsequent generations provided an opportunity for women to underscore the vital role played by women in the strengthening of the nation and the phasing out of undesirable weaknesses of character. This early feminist agenda was explained and promoted through fiction by female authors. Nicole Lyn Lawrence comments:

By explicating the connections they forge between eugenics and women's roles as wives and mothers of future generations, we see that Victorian women writers actively deployed eugenic thought in their writing to argue for increased social recognition as "rational" mate selectors and to raise questions regarding gender inequality within the institution of marriage and society.<sup>220</sup>

Hereditary determinist discourses, harnessed by New Woman writers of the period, problematised reductive gender attitudes as part of a wider campaign for cultural, societal and political recognition.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Justin Prystash, 'Sexual Futures: Feminism and Speculative Fiction in the Fin de Siècle', *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2014), 341-363, (p. 342).

<sup>220</sup> Lawrence, p. 372.

<sup>221</sup> For further scholarship on this topic see: Oliver Lovesey, "'The Poor Little Monstrosity': Ellice Hopkins' Rose Turquand, Victorian Disability, and Nascent Eugenic Fiction', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2013), 275-296; Richardson, 'The Eugenization of Love: Sarah Grand and the Morality of Genealogy', pp. 227-255; Redvaldsen, pp. 764-787; Ifill (2018).

To date, however, scholarship has largely overlooked the ways in which authors from socially-marginalised backgrounds leveraged similar essentialist discourses to challenge potentially damaging class-based attitudes. By highlighting aspects of personality that could be considered innate/inescapable (within the discourses of environmental and hereditary determinism) socially-marginalised authors could harness the biases at the heart of essentialist thinking to advance notions of character weakness resulting from elite lineage and surroundings. The objective of this chapter is to address this gap in scholarship by focusing on an important locus of class tension of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, specifically relationships and comparisons between domestic servants and their masters/mistresses. The close readings demonstrate how preconceptions of hereditary and environmental determinism were harnessed by Pett Ridge and J. M. Barrie to reject notions of social inferiority of those from humble backgrounds. Through their representations of domestic servants, these *Men from Nowhere* accentuated the potential for Edwardian working-class agency, highlighted the shortcomings of their employers in practical matters of day-to-day survival, and redefined the true nature of the master/servant power balance.

The figure of the domestic servant is an important one in the social critiques of the *Men from Nowhere*. Domestic service was the major employer of women in this period. Quentin Outram notes:

Just under 1.7 million girls and women were employed as domestic and other servants in England and Wales in 1901 out of a total female occupied population of 4.2 million. In addition, 124,000 boys and men were occupied in the industry. Measured by employment, female and male, domestic service was bigger than agriculture in 1901, bigger than coal-mining, and bigger even than textiles.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Quentin Outram, 'The Demand for Residential Domestic Service in the London of 1901', *Economic History Review* 70, no. 3 (August 2017), 893–918, (p. 893).

There has been significant scholarly debate regarding the period at which employment of servants reached its highest point in England.<sup>223</sup> Its importance as a locus for interaction between classes is uncontested however. John R. Gillis argues that, in London specifically (a key setting for the texts of the *Men from Nowhere*), domestic service provided employment during this period to 95% of working women, with other occupations (such as teaching) accounting for just 5%.<sup>224</sup> Furthermore, as Eve Lynch points out, these female workers were supervised, primarily, by women (mistresses of households).<sup>225</sup> A focus on narratives of domestic service provides, therefore, an important opportunity to analyse paradigms of power involving women as both employers and employees in these texts.

Despite the importance of the domestic servant in this period, both in terms of social history and class-based literary criticism, it has been argued that such figures occupy

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<sup>223</sup> Leonore Davidoff notes the sharp increase in employment of female servants in the latter half of the nineteenth century, rising from 750,000 women in the 1850s to 1,300,000 by the 1890s. See Leonore Davidoff, 'Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick', *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 1 (1979), 86–141, (p. 94). Dorice Williams Elliott argues that the rate of increase slowed after 1870. See Dorice Williams Elliott, "Servants and Hands: Representing the Working Classes in Victorian Factory Novels." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28, no. 2 (2000): 377–90, (p. 380). For detailed statistics on the numbers of male and female domestic servants employed over the period 1851 to 1901 see: Jill Franklin, 'Troops of Servants: Labour and Planning in the Country House 1840-1914', *Victorian Studies* 19, no. 2 (December 1, 1975), 211–39, (pp. 220-221); Leonard Schwarz, 'English Servants and Their Employers during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *The Economic History Review* 52, no. 2 (May 1, 1999), 236–56.

Edward Higgs draws attention to changes to the National Census in 1891, which saw all women performing housework within the home recorded as domestic servants. See Edward Higgs, 'Domestic Servants and Households in Victorian England', *Social History* 8, no. 2 (1983), 201–10, (p. 202). For probabilities of demand for servants based on employer's income, location, family-type and age of head of household see Quentin Outram (2017). A number of scholars also discuss the continuing importance of domestic service beyond this period of study. Selina Todd argues that 'the "disappearance" of service already heralded in the 1920s, never happened', and that examining the relationship between servant and employer remains central to our understanding of class today. See Selina Todd, 'Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain 1900-1950', *Past & Present* 203, no. 1 (May 2009), 181–204. For scholarly discussions of domestic service in the period after WW1 see: Judy Giles, 'Dependence and Power in Accounts of Twentieth Century Domestic Service', in Lucy Delap, Ben Griffin and Abigail Wills, eds., *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 204 – 222; Frank Edward Huggett, *Life below Stairs : Domestic Servants in England from Victorian Times* (London: J. Murray, 1977), pp. 161-163; Rosie Cox, *The Servant Problem : Domestic Employment in a Global Economy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); and Lucy Lethbridge, *Servants : A Downstairs View of Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 158, 253 and 295.

<sup>224</sup> John R. Gillis, 'Servants, Sexual Relations, and the Risks of Illegitimacy in London, 1801-1900', *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 1 (April 1, 1979), 142–73, (p. 147).

<sup>225</sup> Eve M. Lynch, 'Out of Place: The Masquerade of Servitude in Victorian Literature', *Pacific Coast Philology* 31, no. 1 (1996), 88–106 (p. 93).

academic ‘blind spots’. Laura Schwartz and Leonore Davidoff, for example, have highlighted problems around intersectionality of gender and class during this period as obstacles for social historians.<sup>226</sup> Furthermore, it is widely argued that employment in domestic service has continually been overlooked in class-based analysis, as well as in the theoretical frameworks of political philosophy upon which these interpretations are based. Selina Todd argues:

[R]elations between servants and their employers illuminate the important and dynamic role that class has played in modern British history — though we would not know it from the silence on service that characterizes the major historical studies of class in twentieth-century Britain.<sup>227</sup>

This absence of the domestic servant perspective has been, in the view of Edward Higgs, a decision rather than an oversight. Higgs argues that there has been a ‘fundamental ideological reluctance to regard the work of female domestic servants, and of women in the home generally, as of economic importance’, which has contributed to the scholarly neglect of important questions around the role played by women in the economic system.<sup>228</sup> It is worth taking some time to review the underlying reasons for the apparent scholarly neglect of this aspect of working-class experience. Todd argues:

Servants lived by their labour; their social position was defined by it, their daily lives shaped by this reality. In a general Marxian sense, then, they were working-class. Why, then, have they been excluded

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<sup>226</sup> Laura Schwartz, for example, examines the ‘uneven and ambivalent response’ of the women’s movement towards the formation of the Domestic Workers’ Union, due to the reliance of many female activists on domestic help in order to carry out their campaigns . Laura Schwartz, ‘A Job Like Any Other? Feminist Responses and Challenges to Domestic Worker Organizing in Edwardian Britain’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 88 (October 1, 2015), 30–48.

<sup>227</sup> Todd, p. 181.

<sup>228</sup> Edward Higgs, pp. 201–10. Leonore Davidoff puts forward a similar argument in *Worlds between : Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 83-84.

from histories of the working class? Steedman has identified the major reason: their exclusion from modern labour theory, explained by their involvement with reproduction rather than commodity production. As a consequence, Adam Smith defined servants' labour as 'not-work'; Marx marginalized them, and they are neglected in social historical narratives of modern Britain, including E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>229</sup>

Todd attributes the absence of the domestic servant perspective in political thought and social history to the fact that the labour of the servant is frequently located outside the 'centre' of working-class experience. The nature of the work carried out has excluded domestic servants from the wider proletariat in Marxist philosophy. Marx expressed these attitudes as follows:

The creation of surplus labour on the one side corresponds to the creation of minus labour, relative idleness (or not-productive labour at best), on the other. This goes without saying as regards capital itself; but also holds then also for the classes with which it shares; hence of the paupers, flunkeys, lickspittles, etc. living from the surplus product, in short, the whole train of retainers; the part of the servant class which lives not from capital but from revenue.<sup>230</sup>

This dismissal of domestic service as an accepted form of labour disqualifies the servant from membership of the wider working class. In effect, a hierarchy of labour is created, ideologically, in which the contribution of domestic service is nullified. Bruce Robbins comments: 'For Marx, the servant is a textbook case of luxurious, unproductive labor (and

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<sup>229</sup> Todd, pp. 188-189. Todd refers to Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) which explores this perspective over a wider time period.

<sup>230</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse, Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (1973), p. 401, reprinted in Higgs, p. 201.

technically, therefore, not even an instance of exploitation).<sup>231</sup> The domestic servant's experience (and any inequalities faced as a result of the employer/employee paradigm) lie outside the parameters around which class struggle is imagined. Robbins argues further, that within the framework of Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), servants are signs of their employer's ability to pay/signs of status and, as such, lack individual agency.<sup>232</sup>

Retrieval/recovery of the domestic servant perspective is now seen as an imperative for class-based study. Jean Fernandez states: 'Servants, most especially, were a site for [...] competing discourses on class' and argues that inability to control domestic servants was viewed as a body blow to society and the empire.<sup>233</sup> Schwartz, similarly, argues that 'a great many feelings and political aspirations' were 'projected onto' domestic servants during the history of the women's and workers' movements, and that our understanding of both movements is incomplete without an understanding of this section of society. Richard Rodger argues that notions of the rise of the working class, and 'associational solidarity amongst employers to confront an increasingly muscular presence amongst the [working class] workforce' are undermined by the failure to take into consideration the large body of employees (in particular domestic servants) for whom paternalistic employer/employee paradigms remained unchanged for much of the nineteenth century.<sup>234</sup>

The tendency to overlook domestic servants within class-based analysis is mirrored by the apparent absence/silencing of the servant perspective in literature/fiction of the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century. Whilst servants feature frequently in novels and plays of the earlier Victorian period, creating memorable central characters in

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<sup>231</sup> Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (New York: Columbia Press, 1986), p. 15.

<sup>232</sup> Robbins, p. 16.

<sup>233</sup> Jean Fernandez, *Victorian Servants, Class, and the Politics of Literacy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 21. Schwartz, p. 44.

<sup>234</sup> Richard Rodger, 'Mid Victorian Employers' Attitudes', *Social History*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1986), 77-80 (p.78).



novels by the Brontës, for example, and playing pivotal roles in sensation fiction, critics such as Bruce Robbins and Alison Light discuss the increasing invisibility of such characters at the *fin de siècle* and beyond. Light comments that '[s]ervants are everywhere and nowhere', and argues that, despite their numbers and importance in the lives of the authors themselves, '[t]he kitchenmaid's story has not yet found its place in accounts of how the English working class was made'.<sup>235</sup>

The close readings selected for this chapter write against the grain. Each narrative is unusual in that domestic servants are conceived as major characters/protagonists. Fictional worlds are created in which the prejudices inherent in essentialist discourses are put to work, in the name of social critique, with the domestic servant as *agent provocateur*. The authors of these close readings respond to, and comment upon, a period of transition in which attitudes towards domestic servants were changing, and power relationships between employer and servant were being redefined. These analyses have been brought together to examine the role played by essentialist discourses in these reactions against reductive representations of domestic servants. Whilst some authors challenged discourses of hereditary determinism by creating central characters who were domestic servants, and 'fleshing out' these representations fully, others developed narratives which challenged attitudes of the dominant centre and reframed the master/servant relationship. In each case, the author exploits the unconscious biases implicit in these discourses to develop counter-discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism, in which the ruling classes are satirised for their inability to carry out practical tasks that are 'second nature' to those from more humble backgrounds. It is necessary, however, to first locate master/servant relationships within the historical, social, political and cultural context of the *fin de siècle*.

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<sup>235</sup> Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (London: Penguin/Fig Tree, 2007), pp. 2-3.

## Late-Victorian and Edwardian employer/domestic servant relationships in context

Domestic servant narratives have continued to excite interest within popular culture, with particular focus on the Victorian/Edwardian country estate and upper middle-class home.<sup>236</sup> This complicates, to a degree, the contextualisation of employer/domestic servant relationships, by contributing to widely-held assumptions that could be misleading. Firstly it is important to recognise that this period did not signal the end of domestic service as a facet of British life. Rosie Cox estimates that there are approximately two million domestic workers in the UK today, with 2.7 million households employing domestic help of some description.<sup>237</sup> Statistically, this is a higher figure than for the Victorian period. The analyses in this chapter should therefore be seen as attempts to understand more clearly a specific period of transition within a continuum of domestic service, rather than discussions regarding ‘the end of an era’.

Secondly, whilst TV and film dramatisations suggest a relatively equal balance between male and female servants, this is not reflected in statistics for the period. Around 800,000 households employed servants in 1911, but by this period female servants greatly outnumbered males.<sup>238</sup> Frank E. Huggett argues: ‘The great age of the male servant had passed by the time Queen Victoria came to the throne’.<sup>239</sup> Lucy Lethbridge comments:

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<sup>236</sup> Earlier television dramatisations include *Upstairs Downstairs* (London Weekend Television, five series 1971-1975). Two further series 2010-2012 (BBC One/BBC Wales/Masterpiece). Interest was reignited by Oscar-nominated film *Gosford Park* (USA Films/Capitol Films/The Film Council/Sandcastle 5 Productions/Chicagofilms/Medusa Film, 2001). More recent dramatisations include *Downton Abbey*, Carnival Films/ITV, six series for television 2010-2015, and two film adaptations *Downton Abbey* (2019) and *Downton Abbey: A New Era* (Carnival Films/Perfect World Pictures, 2022).

<sup>237</sup> Rosie Cox, *The Servant Problem : Domestic Employment in a Global Economy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 3. Selina Todd argues that one in ten British households employs domestic help. Todd, pp. 181–204.

<sup>238</sup> Lucy Lethbridge, *Servants : A Downstairs View of Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Preface p. ix.

<sup>239</sup> Huggett, p. 23.

The male servant, though he still maintained a high profile in the grander houses, was increasingly in retreat. In 1861 the census tells us that there were 62,000 male indoor servants and 962,000 female servants. But by 1901, the numbers had changed to 47,000 male indoor servants and just under 1.3 million female ones. A tax in 1777 on male servants (brought in to raise funds to fight the Americans in the war of independence) probably sparked the decline.<sup>240</sup>

Lethbridge also notes significant differences in salary between male and female servants. The most senior male member of indoor staff, the butler, could expect an annual salary of £50 to £80 in 1912, compared to a salary of £30 to £50 for the most senior female worker, the housekeeper.<sup>241</sup> Discussions of domestic service in this period must also, therefore, take these gender-based factors into consideration.

Thirdly, Lethbridge states that 80% of servants in 1911 were employed in households with a domestic staff of three or less. The Edwardian country house relationship between employer and staff, projected in recent popular culture, was therefore the experience of only a minority of servants in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. Siân Pooley notes, similarly, that employment of only ‘one or two, usually female, servants, [resulted] in little job differentiation’.<sup>242</sup> Whilst hierarchy and specific job roles were a feature of large servant halls, most households employed a ‘maid of all work’. Pooley’s study, based on servant-keeping households in the urban north-west of England, argues that ‘the stereotype of the leisured middle-class woman waited on by her servants could not be further from the

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<sup>240</sup> Lethbridge, p. 48. Lethbridge notes that in Ireland, where no such tax was imposed, the number of male servants did not decrease to the same extent. For more detailed statistics on numbers of male servants see Franklin, pp. 211–39.

<sup>241</sup> Lethbridge, p. 48. For further details regarding conditions of employment including remuneration see Huggett, pp. 41–42; Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1986), pp. 184–188; Gillis, pp. 142–73; Schwartz, pp. 30–48; and Huggett, pp. 21, 35–39, 41–42 and 54.

<sup>242</sup> Siân Pooley, ‘Domestic Servants and Their Urban Employers: A Case Study of Lancaster, 1880–1914’, *The Economic History Review* 62, no. 2 (May 1, 2009), 405–429 (p. 406).

truth'.<sup>243</sup> Pooley continues: 'It is likely that household tasks were shared between paid servants and unpaid wives and daughters in most homes'.<sup>244</sup> The majority of servants, therefore, were in closer proximity to their employers than the images inspired by popular culture suggest. This was particularly the case where childcare duties were concerned. The factors outlined above, with regard to gender balance, remuneration and integration/separation are key to the social critiques explored in this chapter.

### **Conditions of employment**

Numerous studies have emphasised the adverse conditions of domestic service employment during this period in history, and these can be interrogated alongside first-person testimonies written by those employed in such roles.<sup>245</sup> Importantly, attempts to improve the circumstances of servants encountered significant barriers. Huggett describes the creation of the London and Provincial Domestic Servants' Union in 1891, noting that by 1894 it had attracted 'only a thousand members'. The majority of members were male, as were the 'twenty-four members of the governing committee'.<sup>246</sup> The Female Servants Union, formed in 1892 by employers of servants, rather than servants themselves, was also unsuccessful. Shortly after the end of the period for this study, in 1911, Lloyd George proposed the inclusion of servants in his National Insurance Bill. Huggett states:

False rumours were circulated that official snoopers would be able to burst into private kitchens to inspect the cook's stamp card; one medical officer of health seriously suggested that licking the stamps might help to spread consumption and diphtheria: and the campaign culminated in a rally at the Albert Hall, London, attended by twenty-

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<sup>243</sup> Pooley, p. 420.

<sup>244</sup> Pooley, p. 421.

<sup>245</sup> Key monographs include: Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*; Lethbridge, *Servants: A Downstairs View of Twentieth-Century Britain*; Huggett, *Life Below Stairs*; Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost*; Davidoff, *Worlds between*. For first person accounts see: Michelle Higgs, *Servants' Stories: Life below stairs in their own words, 1800 – 1950* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword History, 2015). Unpublished accounts can be found in archives such as the Working-Class Movement Library, Salford.

<sup>246</sup> Huggett, pp. 160-161.

thousand people, where the men servants joined with their masters  
in denouncing the Bill.<sup>247</sup>

Fernandez provides an explanation for this counter-intuitive rejection of compulsory sickness benefit and medical care by those employed as domestic staff, stating: ‘Servants were often numbered as family, even within census figures, and failed repeatedly in their efforts to unionize.’<sup>248</sup> Proximity within a domestic space created a more complicated paradigm for negotiation of terms. Doris Williams Elliott argues:

If servants were part of the "family," however, they were clearly positioned as dependent children who needed constant supervision in return for the protection and patronage they were supposed to need and enjoy. [...] Factory workers, on the other hand, were supposedly ruled only by what Carlyle called the "cash nexus".<sup>249</sup>

The ambiguities of the servant’s position, and the disempowering effects of paternalistic management, undermined individual agency, thereby weakening collective attempts to improve remuneration and conditions.<sup>250</sup> In her study of the Domestic Workers’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland (established 1909–1910), Laura Schwartz highlights additional practical obstacles, stating that ‘servants found it so difficult to participate in the regular round of meetings and demonstrations, not to mention highly public and/or illegal actions’.<sup>251</sup> Furthermore, Schwartz explains why women working in domestic service received so little assistance from the women’s movement of the day. Rejecting the argument that this was ‘simply a case of selfish suffragists unwilling to share their new-found emancipation with their militant maids’, Schwartz argues that the ambivalence of the

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<sup>247</sup> Huggett, p. 161.

<sup>248</sup> Fernandez, p. 20.

<sup>249</sup> Elliott, p. 381.

<sup>250</sup> Later attempts were more successful. For example, the Domestic Servants’ Insurance Society, founded in 1912, had a membership of 75,000 by 1915. See Huggett, p. 161. Light discusses Labour Party and trade union movement support of domestic workers in the 1930s. See Light, pp. 239-243.

<sup>251</sup> Schwartz, p. 33.

women's movement needs to be 'understood in relation to a much wider discussion about the nature of work and women's relationship to it'.<sup>252</sup> Schwartz continues:

To recognize domestic labor as valuable and necessary was to risk undermining a longstanding feminist commitment to women's entry into the public sphere. It was all very well to praise the work women performed in the home, but in the hands of the "anti-suffragists" this could all too easily become a justification for keeping them there.<sup>253</sup>

Support by female employers for their domestic servants was more than a simple conflict of interest for the suffragette requiring domestic help in order to play an activist role. It also threatened to undermine a central ideological pillar of the women's movement.

### **The 'servant problem'**

Whilst collective attempts to improve conditions for domestic servants were hampered by attitudinal factors, the late-nineteenth century was, nevertheless, a period of transition for the master/servant relationship. Individual actions, and the effects of supply and demand, created the potential for a shifting of power. Pooley argues that a 'long-running discussion in the national press took it for granted that there was a new "crisis in service"' (regarding the suitability and number of available servants), which was 'rapidly intensifying from the 1890s, and which placed servants and employers in antagonistic positions'.<sup>254</sup> This was an intensification of conflict rather than an emergence. Cox explains:

The 'servant problem' was the traditional bugbear of the British middle and upper classes [...] Generation after generation of employers complained that modern servants did not know their

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<sup>252</sup> Schwartz, p. 36.

<sup>253</sup> Schwartz, p. 39.

<sup>254</sup> Pooley, pp. 425-426.

place, didn't know when they were on to a good thing, were insubordinate and lazy.<sup>255</sup>

Cox notes early eighteenth-century treatises and satires by Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift on the insubordination of servants, predating the Victorian age, whilst Light and others have explored the social implications of the 'servant problem' after the Great War and beyond.<sup>256</sup>

The ability to attract and retain domestic servants in this period cannot be applied in any comprehensive sense across all households. Pooley cautions:

[T]he public discourse seems to have amplified into a national problem a situation that was perhaps characteristic of only certain areas or elite households, thus ignoring the diversity of localized class and occupational structures, as well as the variety of cultural attitudes to domestic service.<sup>257</sup>

Nevertheless, the 'crisis in service' highlighted in the late nineteenth-century press can be seen to respond to contemporary concerns regarding a shortage of candidates, and loss of control over domestic servants. Commenting on the shortage of domestic help, Jill Franklin notes:

[By] the last quarter of the nineteenth century the supply of domestic servants was showing signs of drying up. The number of indoor men-servants [fell] from 74,000 in 1851 to 56,000 in 1881, a drop of twenty-four percent against a population rise of forty-five percent. By 1881 women servants also were becoming less plentiful, and for

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<sup>255</sup> Cox, p. 8.

<sup>256</sup> Cox, pp. 8-11. Light, Chapter 4 and postscript. For further information on domestic servants in the period prior to the nineteenth century see Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost*. For information on servants moving to other occupations after WW1 see: Lethbridge, p. 144 and p. 153; Light, p. 136; Huggett, pp. 161-163; and Judy Giles, 'Dependence and Power in Accounts of Twentieth Century Domestic Service', pp. 204 – 222. For information on the 'servant problem' during the 1920s and 1930s see: Light, pp. 179-186 and pp. 227-228; and Lethbridge, p. 158.

<sup>257</sup> Pooley, p. 426.

the first time their numbers failed to keep pace with the growth in population, which increased 14.4 percent from 1871 to 1881, while the number of female servants rose by only 1.9 percent.<sup>258</sup>

Franklin argues that the reduction in numbers of servants coincided with an increase in the number of households able to afford domestic help, and provides statistical evidence that remuneration for both men and women in the larger country houses rose steeply from the 1880s onwards in response to a skills shortage, overtaking wages for factory work in the early 1890s.<sup>259</sup> Lethbridge notes a similar problem in urban centres, saying: ‘Demand for servants in wealthy areas outstripped supply (in Westminster in 1900 there were twelve servants for every one hundred residents)’.<sup>260</sup>

Explaining the skills shortage, Huggett argues: ‘Domestic service was never popular from the start. [...] When there were other opportunities for employment, they were eagerly seized. [...] Contrary to much popular belief, it was servants who were despised among the working classes, not factory girls.’<sup>261</sup> The paternalistic nature of the master/servant relationship, and the curtailment of leisure time when ‘living in’, resulted in a loss of personal freedom, identity and status that many potential candidates found unacceptable.

The discourse of the ‘servant problem’, however, focused particularly on the attitudes (rather than the number) of potential candidates. Julie Nash explains: ‘Periodical articles and other forms of social journalism of the nineteenth-century reflect a significant amount of anxiety about the autonomous behavior of domestic servants’.<sup>262</sup> Pooley argues:

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<sup>258</sup> Franklin, p. 220. Franklin includes detailed statistics based on National Census records.

<sup>259</sup> Franklin, pp. 222-223. See Tables II to VI.

<sup>260</sup> Lethbridge, p. 61.

<sup>261</sup> Huggett, p. 70.

<sup>262</sup> Julie Nash, *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell* (Aldershot, England: Routledge, 2007), p. 22. Huggett notes the proliferation of household manuals written to help employers maintain/retain control over unruly servants. See Huggett p. 146.



[A]lthough employers were in a position of economic, legal, social, and public moral authority, the possibility that apparently powerless individuals create a ‘veneer of consensus’, whilst generating ‘back stage’ resistance, suggests the inadequacy of polarized concepts of power distribution.<sup>263</sup>

Servants and employers were highly conscious of their mutual dependency, making it impossible to characterize these relationships as a dichotomy between employer authority and servant submission [...] While deference and submission were ideals that superficially epitomized service, and that most employers made some attempts to apply, servants were aware that relationships had no need to be more than functional. Their position in the household was transitory, they had equal power to terminate the relationship, and they often had a strong network of support outside employers’ households.<sup>264</sup>

The domestic servant could display outward deference whilst harbouring inner defiance, and retained the ability to move to an alternative employer at will. Within the discourse of the ‘servant problem’, the exercising of agency could be presented in terms of weakness of character on the part of the employee, whilst blame for the failure to retain a servant was explained in terms of the fecklessness of the individual rather than the inadequacy of remuneration and conditions of employment, thereby misrepresenting the skills shortage and the unpopularity of domestic service as an occupation.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Pooley, p. 407.

<sup>264</sup> Pooley, p. 425.

<sup>265</sup> Light notes: ‘Complaints were frequently made about the ‘roving disposition’ of women servants, who moved places as they felt like it. One estimate in 1876 reckoned that 10 per cent of London domestic servants were looking out for a new post, and there were clearly servants who relished the chance to direct their own fortunes.’ See Light p. 28.

Authors from socially-marginalised backgrounds found opportunities for social critique in the exploration of fault-lines between reality and discourse. In the narratives analysed in this chapter, authors can be seen to interrogate discrepancies between the need of the dominant centre to view the employer/servant relationship as one of authority and subordination/gratitude, and the reality of the paradigm, in which the servant is able to exercise agency by withholding deference and labour.

### **Paternalism versus the ‘cash nexus’**

Traditional notions of social hierarchy, and Darwinian challenges to these attitudes, can be seen to have influenced the shifting of power in master/servant relationships in this period. Commenting on David Roberts’s assertion that, from a paternalist perspective, each person occupied an ‘appointed and harmonious’ part of the ‘body politic, Nash argues that ‘it was God who did the appointing, and it was not for mere mortals to challenge His authority.’<sup>266</sup>

Fernandez comments further:

Traditionally, servants were subjects of religious discourses on fidelity and obedience [...] [I]deologies of service extended far back in time to a pre-industrial age, where faithfulness, loyalty, and obedience characterized the “good servant,” who was often powerfully mystified in religious and political discourse [...]<sup>267</sup>

Subordination could be seen as preordained and indicative of individual service to God and humanity. Fernandez argues: ‘Servants were, ideally, willing agents in the sustenance of a divinely ordained social order’ whilst, from the viewpoint of the employer, ‘the servant’s plight did not stir the consciences of bourgeois Victorians’.<sup>268</sup> In the earlier part of the

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<sup>266</sup> Nash, pp. 12-13.

<sup>267</sup> Fernandez, p. 8

<sup>268</sup> Fernandez, p. 8.

century, a theological underpinning for domestic service, it can be argued, insulated those involved from more radical notions. Nash asserts, however:

By the middle of the nineteenth century, such aristocratic pretensions had become enough of an anachronism to be gently mocked, yet the paternalistic thinking that had fostered these dynamics continued to govern domestic life as a comforting alternative to the harsh realities of a free market economy.<sup>269</sup>

The notion of God as Father had been partially replaced in the public consciousness, Nash argues, with the notion of master of a household as Father. Nash argues:

The problem with paternalism (as well as the servant problem) centers on [a] contradiction: a seemingly ethical approach to the preservation of class distinctions was typically espoused in good faith by people with benevolent intentions. In practice, however, this system could be condescending under the best of circumstances and cruel under the worst.<sup>270</sup>

Paternalistic management of servants provided protection whilst creating a framework for exploitation. In promising the maintenance of social stability, however, paternalism received wide support. Nash argues: ‘Carlyle’s notion of “noble loyalty in return for noble guidance” appealed to the many people in England who lived in fear of a “French” Revolution at home or who merely felt distanced from a past world in which “everyone knew their place”’.<sup>271</sup> It is also important to note that paternalistic approaches to the management of servants were not as gender-specific as the term suggests. In many households the role of the paternal head

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<sup>269</sup> Nash, p. 14.

<sup>270</sup> Nash, p. 15.

<sup>271</sup> Nash, p. 16.

was fulfilled by the mistress of the house, a role given the oxymoron ‘female paternalist’ by Nash.<sup>272</sup>

A domestic servant exercising individual agency, therefore, was far more radical than it might appear to an observer today. For the dominant centre, the discourse of the ‘servant problem’ reduced the sense of threat to social order by characterising the issues in terms of individual failings of servants themselves. Far more concerning were the realities of the master/servant paradigm, expressed in the loss of power over subordinates and the revolutionary potential suggested by working-class autonomy.

At the heart of the master/servant relationship in this period was an ideological tension around the ‘cash nexus’ as an alternative to paternalism. Davidoff argues:

Servants [...] deliberately stressed the ‘modern’ cash side of service partly because other working-class occupations were increasingly seen in this light and partly because by stressing their monetary attachment to the household they had a defence against the persuasive paternalism of service.<sup>273</sup>

In the absence of any form of collective campaign for better remuneration and conditions, by focusing on the financial rather than emotional aspects of the employer/employee relationship, servants could draw on external precedents, and redefine the nature of their position within the household. Robbins also asserts: ‘Servants too began to be assimilated to contractual, “cash-nexus” thinking, and even at times to take it over as a weapon.’<sup>274</sup> Robbins argues that servants could leverage the ‘reciprocal obligations’ and hierarchy of paternalism as a ‘standard to judge present abuses and a source of retribution against them’.<sup>275</sup> The ideals

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<sup>272</sup> Nash, p. 17.

<sup>273</sup> Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p. 27.

<sup>274</sup> Robbins, p. 42.

<sup>275</sup> Robbins, p. 43.

of paternalism presented a benchmark against which employers could be assessed and found wanting.

Nineteenth-century literary representations of domestic servants can be seen to have engaged with these notions of paternalism. Nash's analyses of Elizabeth Gaskell and Maria Edgeworth argue that, even in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, these authors were highlighting the potential for exploitation within paternalistic master/servant relationships. Nash insists that neither author can be considered a 'social "leveller"', but their texts 'serve as a social critique' nonetheless.<sup>276</sup> Numerous commentators have, similarly, explored the trope of sexual exploitation of domestic servants in literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whilst social historians have recovered first-person testimonies and provided statistical analyses of this facet of late-Victorian and Edwardian life.<sup>277</sup> The close readings by socially-marginalised authors selected for this chapter, however, can be seen to address the master/servant relationship from a very different viewpoint, emphasising the potential of the domestic servant as a radical force for change instead of/as well as a victim of exploitation. Exploring the gap between the discourse and the reality, these close readings emphasise a power paradigm in which the master, whilst having a large degree of control over the servant's labour, is shown to have no control over the servant's individual agency or identity. The relationships in these readings emphasise the impenetrability of the 'hearts and minds' of servants by their employers, without which any financial leverage the employer may have over the servant is comparatively minor given the current skills shortage. The two authors analysed here suggest that the balance of power is one of mutual dependence rather than authority and deference, and emphasise that masters and mistresses need to awaken to the realities of a 'sellers' market'. Barrie's social critique goes further, suggesting

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<sup>276</sup> Nash, p. 18.

<sup>277</sup> For example, literary critical analyses of Samuel Richardson's, *Pamela* (1740) and George Moore's *Esther Waters* (1894). For social historical analysis see, for example: Leonore Davidoff, 'Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick', *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 1 (1979), 86–141; Gillis, pp. 142–73; and Eve M. Lynch, 'Out of Place: The Masquerade of Servitude in Victorian Literature', *Pacific Coast Philology* 31, no. 1 (1996) 88–106.

there are fundamental shortcomings in those from the master/mistress class, which place them at the mercy of a working class that is better adapted, through both ancestry and environmental conditioning, to the realities of modern existence.

**“I can always leave by giving a month’s notice. That’s where I get my pull”: Female working-class agency in William Pett Ridge’s *69 Birnam Road*<sup>278</sup>**

Through the character of Florrie, the Hartley’s maid-of-all-work in *69 Birnam Road*, Pett Ridge explores the gap between the dominant centre’s need to see the domestic servant in terms of subordination and loyalty, and the reality of Edwardian working-class agency. Pett Ridge’s representation of Florrie is unconventional for novels of the period, and the nuanced development of this working-class character challenges contemporary class discourses, problematising notions of environmental determinism. Florrie’s expression of agency in the novel also intersects with issues of gender. Pett Ridge demonstrates the potential for female working-class self-determination via this character and, as this is imagined outside the framework of the women’s movement, the novel’s exploration of resistance to Edwardian patriarchal systems is a valuable counterpoint to current feminist scholarship. Pett Ridge remains within a realist aesthetic in his exploration of agency, avoiding reliance on common narrative techniques of late-Victorian popular fiction. There are no *deus ex machina* plot developments, such as surprise inheritances, advantageous marriages, or the discovery of unsuspected aristocratic lineage, in this character’s ability to achieve her personal objectives. Despite its importance as a fictionalised record of Edwardian female working-class agency, Pett Ridge’s development of the character Florrie has been overlooked in scholarship to date, and justifies detailed analysis here.

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<sup>278</sup> William Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908)

## Working-class representation in Edwardian literature

It is important to first place this fictionalised account of a domestic servant within a wider context of working-class representation in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. Pett Ridge's novel was published at a time when influential authors were grappling with ideas of how best to depict characters from humble backgrounds.<sup>279</sup> Kevin Swafford argues that working-class characters are typically 'flattened' in texts of this period, providing 'general representations' which depict them as 'mere types' such as 'potentially dangerous ignoramuses or essentially good-hearted simpletons in need of charity and guidance'.<sup>280</sup> The reductive treatment of these characters (often attributing comic or eccentric traits), Swafford argues, reinforced hegemonic ideologies of class. P. J. Keating also states that, where working-class characters feature in Victorian novels, class-related implications of texts are often nullified through a 'process of avoidance', characterised by a 'refusal or inability to break away from the literary and social conventions governing the role that a working man could be allowed to play in a novel'.<sup>281</sup> Keating argues that this resulted in the presentation of working-class characters as stock types: the respectable, skilled artisan; the working-class intellectual (such as George Eliot's creations Felix Holt and Alton Locke); the object of pity; the debased (often defined by alcohol addiction or violent behaviour); the eccentric (characterised by idiosyncrasies such as unusual occupation or dialogue); and the criminal (often portrayed as a corrupter of children).<sup>282</sup> Wild notes that Victorian critics often *expected* authors to reduce working-class characters to stock types in this way. He quotes a late nineteenth century review of George Gissing's *Eve's Ransom* (1895) in the *Manchester Guardian* which queried: 'Is it really true, that the average clerk leads the consciously repressed life of Maurice Hilliard before his emancipation? In other words, is the case selected by Mr Gissing for presentation typical?'<sup>283</sup> A sense of realism in the novel is equated

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<sup>279</sup> See the discussion of Henry James's Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, Chapter 5, pp. 29-30.

<sup>280</sup> Swafford, p. 29.

<sup>281</sup> P. J. Keating, *The working classes in Victorian fiction*, p. 46.

<sup>282</sup> Keating, pp. 26-28.

<sup>283</sup> Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880 – 1939*, pp. 34-35.

with the provision of a generic portrayal of a stock type. A more rounded, individualised depiction of a working-class or lower middle-class character (this review suggests) was neither desirable nor encouraged.

Pett Ridge's representation of working-class Florrie in *69 Birnam Road* subverts these conventions in a number of important ways. Firstly Florrie features prominently throughout the narrative, and Pett Ridge's characterisation is fully-developed and nuanced. His achievement of a psychologically-convincing portrayal, I will argue, was central to the novel's social critique. By refusing to represent the working-class character in a reductive way, Pett Ridge is able to interrogate the 'servant problem' from both perspectives, through focalisations from two equally believable characters (mistress and servant).

Secondly, Pett Ridge challenges social attitudes towards domestic servants. An important aspect of his social critique is the way in which he problematises, what I will refer to as, the 'good servant'/'bad servant' binary. At the heart of the discourse of the 'servant problem' in this period were notions of the shortcomings/weaknesses of character/attitude of the available candidates. This created a simplistic binary around notions of the 'good servant' (associated with unquestioning obedience and loyalty) and the 'bad servant' (linked to independence of thinking, disobedience/laziness and lack of loyalty). Pett Ridge's fully-rounded development of the character Florrie complicates and ultimately dismantles these categorisations.

Another point of difference relates to the way in which the character of Florrie is employed from the perspective of novel form. Bruce Robbins has described the ways in which eighteenth and nineteenth-century authors employed servant characters to fulfil specific narrative functions, for example to advance plot, provide comic relief, or to contribute to atmosphere.<sup>284</sup> Pett Ridge rejects these narrative conventions however. Whilst

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<sup>284</sup> Robbins, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (1993).



several lines of Florrie's dialogue are comical, she is placed on an equal footing (from the perspective of narrative) with characters of higher social standing, in that her presence in the novel cannot be attributed solely to the typical narrative functions associated with servants.

A final observation is that, whilst Pett Ridge's representation of this working-class woman is framed within a realist aesthetic, there is no alignment, through simile or metaphor, with the natural world/animals (a widely-acknowledged aesthetic convention influenced by French Naturalism of this period).

In the following close reading I will analyse Pett Ridge's representation of this working-class character, focusing on the ways in which his fictionalisation of Florrie's ability to exercise agency challenges the attitudes underpinning the 'servant problem'. I will argue that Pett Ridge harnesses the ideological biases inherent in essentialist discourses to accentuate, through the character of Florrie, that positive outcomes can result from a working-class upbringing.

### **Exercising agency in *69 Birnam Road***

Florrie, the Hartley's maid-of-all-work, is first encountered on the doorstep of the suburban home, supervising a tradesman as he fits a brass plate which announces Ella Hartley (Florrie's employer) as a teacher of pianoforte and singing.

Florrie, it seemed clear, knew Ella was within hearing, for her replies to the earlier remarks [of the tradesman] were characterised by a propriety worthy of the highest commendation.<sup>285</sup>

Within earshot, Florrie communicates in the manner desired by her employer, but she then addresses the tradesman in more confidential terms:

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<sup>285</sup> Pett Ridge, *69 Birnam Road*, p. 21.

[The tradesman said] “You’ll wear out missie, long before that does. Come and have a squint at it for yourself.”

“Makes something more to keep clean,” remarked the maid, critically.

“Elbow grease and a nice bit of shammy leather.”

“Easy for you men to talk,” said Florrie. There’s one thing about it,” she lowered her voice, “I can always leave by giving a month’s notice. That’s where I get my pull.”<sup>286</sup>

Florrie subverts notions of the domestic servant as a powerless drudge or loyal retainer. She emphasises the ‘cash nexus’ of her relationship with her employers (the fixed payment she receives for cleaning, irrespective of workload) refuting ideas around the paternalistic nature of the master/servant relationship. Florrie is not in awe of her employer’s skills, and does not see herself as in any way sharing in the success of the family’s new enterprise. She views her future as self-determined, without reliance on an employer’s rewards for loyalty.

From the first appearance of this character, Pett Ridge goes to the heart of the ‘servant problem’ discourse by demonstrating a domestic servant appearing loyal and obedient to her employer, whilst holding an altogether different individual viewpoint. Florrie lowers her voice to prevent her lower middle-class employer overhearing the opinions she expresses to a man from her own working-class background. As discussed earlier, the ability of the employer to control ‘hearts and minds’ is a key element of the ‘servant problem’ discourse in this period. The technique adopted by Pett Ridge (of what can/cannot be heard and by whom), enables the author to problematise this key fault line in attitudes of the dominant centre towards domestic servants.

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<sup>286</sup> Pett Ridge, pp. 22-23.

In this extract the focalisation switches, with the maid Florrie as its pivot, moving from the indoor space occupied by the mistress, to the outdoor space occupied by the tradesman. Occupying the liminal space (the threshold of the home), the maid has control over two narratives: an authorised acceptance of her role within the household (vocalised audibly), and the voicing of personal agency (unheard by her employer). Pett Ridge's focalisation ensures that the *sotte voce* comment, on the domestic servant's ability to exercise agency within the current job market, is loud and clear within the narrative, even though the employer is unable to hear it. The close physical proximity between employer and employee (either side of a window) emphasises the fragility of the employer's notion of authority.

When the focalisation switches back to Ella (the employer), the excerpt continues as follows:

Ella in the dining-room addressed the last envelope, and began to detach the halfpenny stamps. Florrie, outside, raised her voice in order to pursue an advantage in the conversation; Ella moved to the window to give a word of caution, but stopping, reminded herself that she had decided to treat the girl tolerantly.

In tramcars which began or finished a journey in East Hill, young matrons often talked in shrill tones of difficulties, finishing sometimes with the remark: "A good enough girl in every respect, but nothing will induce her to get up at the proper time in the morning. I ring, I rap and I call, and I shout"<sup>287</sup>

Following on immediately from Florrie's expression of agency, Ella's decision not to exert authority is presented with irony. The difficulties of obtaining domestic help in this period, Pett Ridge suggests, have reversed traditional notions of authority and subordination.

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<sup>287</sup> Pett Ridge, pp. 23-24.

The 'young matrons' trying to manage suburban households clearly lack authority, and are themselves powerless in the face of domestic servant intransigence. Florrie's assertion that a domestic servant has 'pull' introduces ambiguity to the 'servant problem'. Are these maids simply idle? Or are they taking control over their labour within a 'cash nexus'? Importantly, Pett Ridge refuses to validate either of these narratives within the chapter, retaining a degree of objectivity uncharacteristic of popular fiction in this period.

As the novel progresses, Pett Ridge problematises the 'good servant'/'bad servant' binary, developing Florrie as a convincing character, whilst also creating an opportunity to challenge powerful class-based discourses. Florrie's voicing of her ability to leave employment at any time could perhaps have framed her as a 'bad servant' within this binary at the outset of the novel, but her expertise and contribution to the household refutes this notion. As the sole servant, Florrie works in close collaboration with Ella to run the household. This is shown in an excerpt in which the two women prepare for the arrival of dinner-guests:

The items which Ella forgot Florrie remembered, and when to Ella some desired article occurred that had escaped Florrie's mind, the maid reproached herself bitterly, declaring that her brain resembled a strainer. Two separate runs were made by the girl to East Hill, and on her mistress looking with doubt at the label of the bottle of the claret, Florrie expressed the opinion that wine was wine, and any slight difference in taste of quality could not be detected by any but those who gave their lives to the task. Ella laid the best cloth, arranged knives and glasses, set the bowl of narcissus and daffodils precisely at the centre; hoped the fish course would be a triumph; felt

perfect confidence in the cold joint; had no qualms in regard to the two dishes constituting what Florrie called “after”.<sup>288</sup>

Ella’s ambition to establish a lower middle-class household can only be achieved with the help of a skilled servant. Florrie’s culinary abilities are key, and the inexperienced mistress of the house defers to Florrie, taking confidence from her servant’s expertise. Pett Ridge emphasises the interdependence of the two women to deliver the event, with each remembering elements forgotten by the other. There is no sense of Ella as a ‘female paternalist’ in this well-balanced and effective partnership.<sup>289</sup> Ella’s lack of knowledge of elite households places Florrie (who has experience of higher social milieus) in a position of authority. Florrie knows that those attending the suburban dinner party will have little discernment of wine, and can therefore be served a cheaper alternative. The maid draws her employer’s attention to the correct etiquette on a number of occasions. In Chapter Four, Ella negotiates with her maid regarding plans for an evening entertainment for friends: ‘To suggestions made by Ella the maid replied in one cold formula: “It isn’t usual!” She said, too, on decision being finally taken, that it was a skimpy way of doing it’.<sup>290</sup> Ella is able to force her plans through, but Florrie is consulted, and is unafraid to criticise her employer’s decisions, based on her own experience.

The relationship between Florrie and her employer exhibits mutual trust and candour:

[Florrie] found her mistress playing with great vehemence on the second-hand pianoforte, in the breakfast-room, the overture to Tannhauser.

“If I was you, ma’am,” counselled the maid, “I should simply lay down and have a jolly good cry.”

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<sup>288</sup> Pett Ridge, pp. 33-34.

<sup>289</sup> As described earlier in the chapter, ‘female paternalist’ is a term coined by Julie Nash.

<sup>290</sup> Pett Ridge, p. 64.

“No,” she said, giving the last bars, “I may want to use that remedy later on!”<sup>291</sup>

Florrie’s close relationship with her employer enables her to recognise her distress. Even though the difference in their social positions is acknowledged, with Florrie addressing Ella as ‘ma’am’, the relationship between the women is such that the maid feels comfortable referring to her employer’s unhappiness, and suggesting a remedy. Ella makes no attempt to exert authority, choosing to confide in Florrie. In Chapter Seven, Ella receives bad news by post:

[Florrie] looked over her mistress’s shoulder and read aloud –

“Serious accident. Don’t worry. Fred.”

“I’ve got you ma’am,” said the girl, sympathetically; “you can’t tumble!”<sup>292</sup>

The maid knows that she will not be reprimanded for reading over her employer’s shoulder and is ready to catch her should she faint.

These demonstrations of the closeness between the two women, and Florrie’s contribution to the household’s ambition to ascend the social scale, when seen within the ‘good servant’/‘bad servant’ binary, could position Florrie within the categorisation of ‘good servant’. Pett Ridge refuses, however, to allow the character to be located so simplistically. At the end of Chapter Nine, Florrie asks to speak to Ella in private, after a dinner party:

Florrie announced that the great event being well and satisfactorily over, she wished now to give a month’s notice, and hoped her mistress would get suited at an early date.

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<sup>291</sup> Pett Ridge, p. 75.

<sup>292</sup> Pett Ridge, p. 131.

“Florrie, you don’t mean it? You can’t mean it! I shall want you here very much shortly. Why, why do you want to go?”

“Getting tired of myself,” explained the girl, “I want a change!”<sup>293</sup>

Importantly, Florrie has not been treated badly, which could justify her departure. She has demonstrated skill and expertise, and is crucial to the successful running of the home. Ella has seen her in terms of the ‘good servant’, and the maid has given every indication of feeling a sense of loyalty towards the family. Florrie has decided, however, to move to another post. The reason is simple. She is bored. In his ‘quietly political’ way, Pett Ridge challenges the paternalist paradigm between master and servant, in which the employee is at the mercy of the favour or caprice of the employer.<sup>294</sup> In *69 Birnam Road* the roles are reversed, and the employer is at the mercy of the favour or caprice of the domestic servant. This demonstration of Edwardian working-class agency is particularly effective in that the character of Florrie has been fully-developed over more than 120 pages. Florrie’s decision to exercise agency and leave the household is, therefore, completely understandable/believable within the narrative, based on access to the character’s personality and motivations, despite the employer’s inability to understand the maid’s actions. Pett Ridge’s social critique demonstrates, within a realist aesthetic, the impossibility of controlling a domestic servant’s ‘heart and mind’. Authority based on social difference, and notions of loyalty to family, are too flimsy in the early twentieth century, Pett Ridge suggests, to stand in the way of female working-class agency. Whilst Florrie’s earning power is, of course, limited, she is able to better her situation without a sense of disloyalty, even though her decision will have a negative impact on her current employer’s household. By creating a character, in this way, that cannot be located within the ‘good servant’/‘bad servant’ binary, Pett Ridge exposes the biases inherent in the ‘servant problem’ discourse. He emphasises the individuality and

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<sup>293</sup> Pett Ridge, p. 146.

<sup>294</sup> The term ‘quietly political’ in relation to Pett Ridge was coined by Jonathan Wild.

humanity of the servant whilst firing a warning shot across the bows of potential employers. Market forces are reshaping the master/servant paradigm and the ‘value’ of domestic servants must be redefined accordingly. The reality of working-class self-determination, however unwelcome, cannot be overlooked:

The attitude of Florrie during the weeks following the giving of notice could not have been improved. A slight access of dignity, it was true [...] She begged Ella to cheer up, modestly disclaiming any idea of counting herself the only pebble on the beach, but admitted that similar depression had ensued on the occasions of giving warning at other establishments [...] she promised to call round when she became well settled in a new place, to see how the fresh girl suited, and to talk with Ella over old times. [...] Florrie ran off to the four-wheeler, and could be seen as the cab drove away with a handkerchief to her eyes.<sup>295</sup>

The time spent at 69 Birnam Road is seen by Florrie as a period in her own life, over which she feels sentimental, and her promise to return positions her as a friend rather than an ex-employee. Importantly, she does not identify herself as a minor player in the narrative of her employers. Her personal journey has brought her to the suburban home and continues beyond it. Florrie is the author of her own narrative, this excerpt suggests. She recognises her value as an employee, and exercises her ability to direct her own career.

Later in the novel, when a new baby arrives at 69 Birnam Road, Florrie chooses to return as nursemaid, and takes pleasure in the ineptitude of the ‘new girl’s’ culinary skills.

[Ella] heard Florrie begin an uproarious burst of merriment in the kitchen; a tap at the dividing wall stopped this. [...]

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<sup>295</sup> Pett Ridge, pp. 148-149.



“Florrie!” She spoke sharply when the girl handed round the soup.

“Can’t help it ma’am. You’d laugh if you knew as much as I do.”<sup>296</sup>

The soup prepared by the ‘new girl’ is inedible, and Florrie finds the next course (burnt roast meat) so hilarious that she has to use the silver cover from the dish to hide her amusement from the family and their dinner guests. Florrie has returned to the household because she will enjoy looking after the baby, rather than because of a sense of loyalty to the Hartleys, and she has no sense of embarrassment or shame that the domestic staff of the household, in a collective sense, have failed to pass muster. She does not see herself as a reflection of ‘downstairs’ domestic help, nor as a cog within the socially-ambitious machine of the Hartley family.

### **Challenging gender roles in *69 Birnam Road***

As Florrie’s comment, “Easy for you men to talk” suggests in the scene described earlier, Florrie is aware of the gender-based inequalities of Edwardian life, and Pett Ridge’s narrative demonstrates this character’s sense of agency from the perspectives of both class and gender. Florrie is courted by a messenger from Fred Hartley’s office, who proposes marriage. An alliance with an aspiring white-collar worker could perhaps be seen as desirable for a working-class woman of the day. Florrie, however, confides her misgivings about marriage to Fred’s mother (a working-class woman) as follows:

“The point is that no one seems to realise what I’m giving up. Before this I could talk to any of the tradesmen who called, or to the policeman on point duty in Westover Road, or to the driver of a ‘bus or anybody; now I’ve got to behave. I mustn’t think of no one but him; I’ve got to write letters to him; I’ve got to remember when his

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<sup>296</sup> Pett Ridge, p . 271.

birthday is. I tell you straight, I'm beginning to wonder whether it's worth it!"<sup>297</sup>

Whilst Florrie cannot be said to be challenging notions of sexual freedom *per se*, her attitudes in relation to her interactions with men seem modern for 1908, and she rejects notions of marriage as a form of selfless devotion.

Towards the end of the novel, Florrie rejects the marriage proposal, opting to remain single and employed:

[W]hen the office messenger [...] came to the scullery door and demanded to know whether the engagement was to be considered a life sentence, proceeding to speak of a Miss Wills whose mother looked after a waiting room, and who was ready to accept immediate marriage [...] Florrie behaved with shocking inhumanity, urging the office messenger to confer his hand upon the lady, a recommendation to which the messenger never could find a better answer than the remark that he was getting jolly well sick and tired of jolly well playing the fool.<sup>298</sup>

The office messenger's threat to redirect his affections elsewhere fails to secure Florrie's commitment, and the loss of a potential husband holds no fear. It is clear that remaining single is preferable to her, as long as the work is sufficiently stimulating. She rejects, similarly, a job offer from the Hartley's lodger Miss Dickson saying, 'I'd sooner get spliced, and settle down in two rooms.'<sup>299</sup> She is delighted, however, that Fred Hartley's promotion will make her placement more interesting:

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<sup>297</sup> Pett Ridge, p. 205.

<sup>298</sup> Pett Ridge, p. 293.

<sup>299</sup> Pett Ridge, p. 357.

“I shall stay on now,” announced Florrie. “We ought to be able to make things hum a bit if we go the right way to work. Sixty-nine will begin to be lively. I’m not so particularly keen on getting married, providing I’m comfortable where I am.”<sup>300</sup>

Florrie rejects contemporary notions regarding the desirability of creating a home and family within marriage, if work can offer her more fun, excitement and independence.

### **Accentuating the positive: Essentialist discourses in *69 Birnam Road***

Florrie’s potential for self-determination, throughout the novel, is contrasted with the comparative lack of agency of two lower middle-class characters: Ella Hartley and Miss Dickson. In his representation of these three Edwardian women of similar ages, Pett Ridge leverages the ideological biases underpinning the discourse of environmental determinism to suggest that *positive* aspects of ‘character’ can arise from a working-class upbringing.

Within the novel’s plot, Ella’s brother Charlie hoodwinks Miss Dickson (a teacher who is the Hartley’s lodger) into lending him money. Charlie subsequently absconds, leaving Ella responsible for the repayment of his extensive debts. Whilst both these women are depicted as naïve, Florrie is shown to be a far better judge of character, particularly where men are concerned. In her opening scene Florrie suspects that the tradesman who is flirting with her is a married man:

[The tradesman said] “I swear I heard the cuckoo last night. Eleven times I ‘eard it.”

“You were getting home pretty late,” remarked Florrie. “What did your wife say?”<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Pett Ridge, pp. 252-253.

<sup>301</sup> Pett Ridge, p. 23.

The tradesman's flirting stops immediately. Florrie sees through artifice, commenting that the Jephson's marriage is 'a jolly sight too warm to last', which is shown to be the case when the couple later separate and divorce.<sup>302</sup> She also has a healthy scepticism regarding the motivations of others, including visitors to the Hartley home, which protects her employer as well as herself:

[I]t seemed [the guests] resented the direct piloting of the maid, being wishful for opportunities to look around the rooms, compiling there a mental inventory to be recalled at leisure.<sup>303</sup>

The maid intuits that these lower-middle class visitors relish opportunities to pry, and takes action to protect her employer from loss of privacy and criticism. Furthermore, Florrie's social status gives her access to gossip, enabling her to convey useful facts to Ella.<sup>304</sup> Similarly, the workings of the Hartley household are transparent to Florrie. Whilst the term 'streetwise', first noted in 1949, would be anachronistic in this instance, Florrie's ability to analyse relationships and motivations is clearly linked to notions of environmental determinism.<sup>305</sup> Florrie's working-class upbringing has prepared her more effectively for the potential pitfalls of modern life, Pett Ridge suggests, compared to the female lower-middle class characters in the novel.

In some ways Pett Ridge's representation of Florrie underpins the preconceptions inherent in class-based essentialist discourses. She is quick to recommend physical intervention to address problems the young women of the novel encounter. When a friend takes advantage of Miss Dickson's absence and steals her suitor, both Ella and Florrie offer advice to the tearful lodger:

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<sup>302</sup> Pett Ridge, p. 62.

<sup>303</sup> Pett Ridge, pp. 65-66.

<sup>304</sup> Pett Ridge, p. 83. Florrie appraises Ella of the marital difficulties of a neighbour. Pett Ridge, p. 316. Florrie passes on information received from a postman.

<sup>305</sup> Term entered the language in 1949. See OED [streetwise, adj.](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/streetwise_adj) : [Oxford English Dictionary \(oed.org\)](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/streetwise_adj)

“Perhaps it will all come right,” said Ella. “Wait and have patience.”

“I sh’d give her a biff in the eye,” counselled Florrie, “and get it over.”

[...]

[Ella advised] “Write him a sensible letter, and perhaps he’ll see that he’s made a mistake, and he’ll come back to you.”

“Can’t you push her face in for her?” urged the maid. “Make it look so that he’ll burst out laughing when he catches sight of it.”

Florrie’s strategies for dealing with the disloyal beau and his new love using physical force clearly reflect her working-class background, conforming to contemporary class-based discourses. Nevertheless, the representation of this character throughout the narrative is that of an empowered and resilient individual who achieves her objectives without the benefit of social position or economic advantage. This is in sharp contrast to characters such as Ella, Mrs Jephson and Miss Dickson, each of whom encounters emotional and financial challenges brought about by a male romantic partner, and whose passivity contributes to her slowness/inability to rectify the unfair treatment she experiences. Pett Ridge can, therefore, be seen to exploit essentialist discourses to privilege positive outcomes associated with exposure to working-class environments, over traits such as passivity (associated with contemporary notions of middle and upper-class femininity) which are known to have hampered self-determination in this period.

Pett Ridge’s representation of Florrie subverts contemporary conventions of working-class representation in nineteenth-century fiction. Robbins states: ‘In the Victorian novel and after, servants are often simply counters in a status game’.<sup>306</sup> By contrast, Pett Ridge’s imagining of this working-class character refuses to emphasise the ‘marginality and

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<sup>306</sup> Robbins, p. 113.

muteness' of servants in fiction of this period. Another convention identified by Robbins in earlier nineteenth-century novels is the tendency (particularly in sensation fiction) to foreground the domestic servant within the narrative, thereby creating a vehicle for the delivery of radical ideas. The following close reading demonstrates how J. M. Barrie employs this device, in an early twentieth-century text, to challenge social attitudes.

### **The servant as the better man: Essentialist discourses in J. M. Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton* (1902)<sup>307</sup>**

Barrie's depiction of the loyal butler in his 1902 play *The Admirable Crichton* leverages notions of environmental determinism to imply that a working-class upbringing results in a superior model of masculinity, in comparison to the cloistering effects of elite formative surroundings. The narrative also rejects hereditary determinism, overturning the discourse of the Victorian gentleman, by fracturing the link between nobility of birth and propensity for leadership.

#### **J. M. Barrie's social status**

At the time of his death on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1937, James Matthew Barrie was a baronet. He left £173,000 gross in his will (equivalent to approximately £6.8 million today). All rights to his plays were bequeathed to Lady Cynthia Asquith, who had been his secretary/personal assistant since 1916. The famous exception, of course, was *Peter Pan*, the rights for which had already been donated to Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children several years before.<sup>308</sup> Barrie's title, wealth and aristocratic social contacts, however, owed nothing to his birth, and owed everything to his extraordinarily successful writing career.

Barrie was born on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1860 in Kirriemuir, Angus. He was the third son, and ninth child, of David Barrie, a linen weaver, and his wife Margaret. Biographer Lisa Chaney

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<sup>307</sup> J. M. Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton* (1902), reproduced in *The Plays of J. M. Barrie* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), pp. 159-237.

<sup>308</sup> Janet Dunbar, *J. M. Barrie: Man Behind the Image* (London: Collins, 1970), p. 302. Conversion obtained through National Archives currency converter <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/>.

describes how the overcrowded four-room cottage into which Barrie was born also functioned as a workplace: 'The upstairs rooms alone were available for family use, because traditionally the weaver's loom virtually filled one of those downstairs, while the other was used to store yarn and the 'webs' of cloth.'<sup>309</sup> David Barrie was a devout Scottish Calvinist, belonging to one of its strictest sects, the Free Church.<sup>310</sup> Chaney also notes that many Angus weavers in this period supported the Chartist movement.<sup>311</sup> J. M. Barrie's life appears to have been shaped by these early religious and socio-political factors, influencing his attitude towards the attainment of wealth and the importance placed on education by his family. These influences might also explain, to some extent, the social conscience reflected in his texts. Chaney argues that 'Jamie had no great interest in success and money as ends in themselves'.<sup>312</sup> Indeed, later in Barrie's career, his secretary discovered numerous cheques which had been stuffed in a drawer and never banked.<sup>313</sup> When first offered a knighthood in 1909 Barrie 'gracefully declined', finally accepting a title in the Birthday Honours list of 1914.<sup>314</sup> Barrie used his meteoric success to assist other writers from humble backgrounds to surmount social obstacles, and he involved himself in many schemes designed to increase fairness.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Lisa Chaney, *Hide-and-peek with Angels: A Life of J. M. Barrie* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>310</sup> Chaney, p. 12.

<sup>311</sup> Chaney, p. 8.

<sup>312</sup> Chaney, p. 54

<sup>313</sup> Chaney, p. 327.

<sup>314</sup> Dunbar, p. 270 and p. 299.

<sup>315</sup> Chaney argues: '[Barrie] was capable of immense loyalty, and throughout his life was prepared to expend gargantuan efforts on behalf of his friends' See Chaney p. 68. Today Barrie would be described as a consummate networker. His biographers describe numerous methods by which we created opportunities for aspiring writers to meet figures from the literary world, in social settings, who could advance their careers. For further details on the cricket team formed by Barrie (the Allahakbarries) and annual tournaments organised by him, see: Chaney pp. 82-84; 97; 109; 125; 146-147; 165; 167; 171; 175; 193; 247 and 343. See also: Dunbar p. 70; 88; 99; 112; 123; 136 and 234. For Barrie's attendance of private member clubs and his proposal of socially-marginalised authors as members see: Chaney p. 83 (Savage Club and the Garrick); p. 118 (Reform Club); pp. 190-191 (Athaeneum). Barrie also adopted key roles in the support of literature, as an original member of the Authors' Club and Society of Authors, and as a committee member of the Royal Society of Literature. See Chaney p. 97 and p. 290. Whilst Barrie's work did not attract negative attention, he was active member of the Censorship Committee's dramatists club, working towards greater freedom of expression for playwrights. See Chaney chapter 19.

It was undoubtedly Barrie's educational achievements that opened the door to elite social circles. Barrie's older brother Alick (who qualified as a teacher and was later an educational inspector) took pains to place Barrie in the best educational settings available to the family. This helped Barrie to secure a place at Edinburgh University. Despite finding it difficult to engage enthusiastically with parts of the curriculum, Barrie graduated with a MA in April 1882, having taken exams in seven subjects including History, Mathematics, Moral Philosophy, Natural Philosophy and Greek.<sup>316</sup> Chaney notes that Edinburgh University's admission policies enabled those from humble backgrounds to study in this period, although the financial hardships for students of this type were often acute.<sup>317</sup> In common with other authors included in this study, Barrie began his writing career as a journalist, before progressing to novels and plays.

### **Critical reactions**

Barrie's reputation has undergone extraordinary reversals over time. R. D. S. Jack asserts that Barrie has 'fallen from a position above criticism to one below it'.<sup>318</sup> Barrie's work attracted enthusiastic praise during his lifetime. Marty Gould notes: 'George Bernard Shaw immediately recognized the importance of *The Admirable Crichton*, citing it in his claim that Barrie had relegated the nineteenth-century theatre to the dustbin'.<sup>319</sup> Isla Jack quotes a contemporary review in which the realism of Barrie's work is compared to Zola.<sup>320</sup> Max Beerbohm's 1902 review of *The Admirable Crichton* states: 'Barrie has often been accused of sentimentality. Yet here [...] there is a fatalism, a bitterness, a denial of an exit from the coils of life, which that self-confessed foe of sentimentality, GBS himself, never has

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<sup>316</sup> Chaney, p. 40.

<sup>317</sup> Chaney notes: 'Most of Jamie's colleagues at the university were not well off; some lived in great poverty, frequently leading to ill health. The boy with whom Jamie shared his lodgings in his first year died in the following one.' Chaney, p. 38.

<sup>318</sup> R. D. S. Jack, *The Road to Never Land: A Reassessment of J. M. Barrie's Dramatic Art* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1991), p. 6.

<sup>319</sup> Marty Gould, 'Emblems of Authority in The Admirable Crichton', *Modern Drama* 54 (2), (2011), 141-160 (p. 157).

<sup>320</sup> Isla Jack, 'J. M. Barrie, 'New Journalism and "Ndintpile Pont"', *Scottish Literary Journal* 26 (1) (1999), 62-76 (pp. 62-63).



achieved.<sup>321</sup> Despite such praise, however, R. D. S. Jack argues that Barrie's work has often been misunderstood, leading to underestimation/negative readings of his novels and plays.<sup>322</sup> Some early critical assessments of Barrie's work are, indeed, puzzling. J. H. Barron's review *The Admirable Crichton* from 1903, for example, states that 'Mr. Barrie refrains from politics'.<sup>323</sup> Similarly, in 1962 William McGraw stated of Barrie:

He deliberately avoided "idea" plays for many reasons, one of which was that he felt he could not write them [...] he wanted to avoid the type of social criticism that crept into the works of Pinero and Jones and made up the bulk of Galsworthy's plays.<sup>324</sup>

Given the overt nature of Barrie's social critique in *The Admirable Crichton*, these perspectives are difficult to reconcile with the central narrative of the play. Perhaps Barron suggests that Barrie does not involve himself in *party* politics, which would be accurate. *The Admirable Crichton* is, incontrovertibly, an 'idea' play however, with an overt social message.

Barrie's reputation came increasingly under attack in the decades after his death. In his 1991 monograph R. D. S. Jack argued: 'Modern critics who are sympathetic to his writing are few and tend to express their allegiance with a sense of embarrassment'.<sup>325</sup> He lamented that 'the most bitter attacks are delivered by fellow Scots' indicating that Barrie had 'lost national support as well'. Jack describes how fascination with Barrie's sexuality, particularly accusations of Oedipal and paedophilic tendencies, has overshadowed literary critical assessments of his work. He argued: '[T]he darkest interpretations of his nature gained enough credence to make the man more interesting than his work. These charges still direct

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<sup>321</sup> Chaney, p. 197.

<sup>322</sup> R. D. S. Jack, *The Road to Never Land*, p. 5.

<sup>323</sup> J. H. Barron, 'J. M. Barrie', *The English illustrated magazine*, May 1903, p. 207.

<sup>324</sup> William R. McGraw, 'James M. Barrie's Concept of Dramatic Action', *Modern Drama*, 5 (2), 1962, 133-141 (p. 133).

<sup>325</sup> R. D. S. Jack, *The Road to Never Land*, p. 5.

much modern criticism'.<sup>326</sup> More recently, however, the 'essentially radical' aspects of Barrie's work, from the perspectives of both form and social critique, have attracted scholarly attention.<sup>327</sup> Jack's monograph explores Barrie's innovations, in both prose and drama, in depth.<sup>328</sup> Similarly Ian McDonald has compared the socio-economic attitudes of Shaw and Barrie, concluding that Barrie had the more pessimistic view of human nature.<sup>329</sup> Andrew Nash argues that Barrie's work can be read profitably alongside that of D. H. Lawrence and Ford Maddox Ford, in his stylistic experimentation outside a realist aesthetic.<sup>330</sup> The following close reading, aims to add to the body of recent scholarship on Barrie's work by interrogating the social critique of his play *The Admirable Crichton*. Whilst valuable literary critical analyses of the play have been published in recent years (discussed below) this will be the first close reading to analyse, in depth, the ways in which the playwright engages with class-based discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism.

### **“Circumstances might alter cases”: Overturning social hierarchies in J. M. Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton* (1902)**

J. M. Barrie's four-act play has a very simple premise. A member of the aristocracy, Lord Loam, sees himself as a social reformer (despite his naïve and hypocritical treatment of his domestic servants). He sets out on a journey overseas with his three daughters (Mary, Catherine and Agatha), Ernest (his upper-class nephew who recently graduated from Oxford), Reverend Treherne, and two servants (Crichton his butler and Tweeny, a maid). The group is shipwrecked and needs to survive on a tropical island. As the aristocrats are unused

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<sup>326</sup> R. D. S. Jack, *The Road to Never Land*, p. 8.

<sup>327</sup> Chaney, p. 1.

<sup>328</sup> R. D. S. Jack, *The Road to Never Land*.

<sup>329</sup> Ian McDonald, 'Barrie and the New Dramatists' in Valentina Bold and Andrew Nash, eds., *Gateway to the Modern: Resituating J. M. Barrie*, (Tokyo: Occasional Papers of the Centre for Medieval English Studies, 2014) p. 13.

<sup>330</sup> Andrew Nash, 'Barrie, Sentimentality and Modernity' in Valentina Bold, and Andrew Nash, *Gateway to the Modern: Resituating J. M. Barrie*, (Tokyo: Occasional Papers of the Centre for Medieval English Studies, 2014).

to looking after themselves, they are reliant on Crichton who, as the only person capable (with the help of the vicar) of providing food, shelter and fire, eventually becomes the group's leader. Over a period of two years on the island the social hierarchy is reversed and gender constructs are overturned. Crichton develops a number of the negative characteristics associated with the aristocracy and, as the new 'alpha male', attracts the attention of the female members of the group. He is about to marry Lord Loam's daughter, Lady Mary, when a ship is spotted and the group is rescued. In the final act, back in London, the original social hierarchy has been re-established. Crichton is returned to domestic service whilst Lady Mary is betrothed to the aristocratic but dissolute Lord Brocklehurst.

Literary critical analyses of this text to date have highlighted Barrie's problematisation of social hierarchy, and have considered the extent to which the desert island setting facilitates the play's critique. R. D. S. Jack's arguments are particularly compelling. Noting Barrie's use of comedy as a technique for conveying social critique Jack argues that Barrie 'wished his audience to learn complex, difficult truths but expected them to do so with the brevity of performance while doubled up with laughter.'<sup>331</sup> A lightness of touch is typical of Barrie. In *The Admirable Crichton*, however, Barrie's delivery of social messages is particularly direct in Jack's view:

The main plot itself directly conveys a theme of some philosophical and political significance. This is a departure from Barrie's habit of using a superficially light surface text to attract attention for (or sometimes divert attention from) more subtle messages conveyed by subtler means.<sup>332</sup>

Barrie challenges early twentieth-century attitudes towards British social hierarchy through the central narrative of the play, in the actual reversal of status of the characters unfolding

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<sup>331</sup> R. D. S. Jack, *The Road to Never Land*, p. 248.

<sup>332</sup> R. D. S. Jack, *The Road to Never Land*, p. 107.

on stage, Jack argues, rather than approaching these ideas through subtextual or thematic methods alone. Critics have also analysed the play from the perspective of the Robinsonade, arguing that its desert island setting is integral to Barrie's exploration of alternative social orders.<sup>333</sup> Prasanna Devi states: 'Though the marginalized could not assume their dominant role on the mainland, they savoured the momentary power [whilst shipwrecked]'. Devi describes the island as a 'catalyst' for 'the socio-political roles of the major characters'.<sup>334</sup> Gould also discusses setting, arguing:

In the titular character's circular journey from London to island and back again, Crichton destabilizes – even deconstructs – normative metropolitan identities such as gender and class. Spatial movement in *The Admirable Crichton* exposes and exaggerates pre-existing domestic conflicts; the deserted island is pressed into service as the neutral ground that demonstrates the “naturalness” of “artificial” social roles and relationships. Transplanted back to England, the subjects of this social experiment are forced to re-adapt to the metropolitan environment, revealing in the process the inequalities and differences that are both inherent in and essential to contemporary English society.<sup>335</sup>

The 'neutral ground' provided by the island, in Gould's view, functions as a backdrop against which notions of social hierarchy can be problematised, exaggerated and reimagined, and in which the constructs imposed on society can be judged against criteria of reality/artificiality.

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<sup>333</sup> For additional literary critical discussions of the Robinsonade see: Patrick Gill, "'Stick to Facts": Author Figures and Textual Authority in Robinson Crusoe and the Twentieth-Century Robinsonade', *Avant* 12, no. 1 (2021), 1–8; Patrick Gill, 'Dystopian and Utopian Omission of Discourse in Three Modern Robinsonades: Lord of the Flies, Concrete Island, The Red Turtle. *Porównania*, 25(2), (2019) 145-156; Ian Kinane, ed., *Didactics and the modern Robinsonade* (Oxford: Liverpool University Press, 2019).

<sup>334</sup> Devi, P. Prasanna, 'ISLAND AS CATALYST IN THE REVERSAL OF ROLES IN JM BARRIE'S THE ADMIRABLE CRICHTON AND EUGENE O'NEILL'S THE EMPEROR JONES', *LITERARY ENDEAVOUR*: 164, p. 166.

<sup>335</sup> Gould, pp. 141-142.

Jack argues that the relocations of the characters are ‘not escapes from the real but movements from the Real to the Ideal’ which create allegorical opportunities for the exploration of alternative social structures.<sup>336</sup>

In analysing the nature of Barrie’s social critique, Jack argues: ‘Barrie strongly satirises a society based on inherited wealth, urging the case of the man of merit. Inevitably, however, his outlook as a mimetic artist has more in common with Adam Smith than Karl Marx’.<sup>337</sup> Jack highlights that Barrie’s reimagining of an ‘ideal’ society, whilst overturning notions of the bourgeois and the proletarian, does not align easily with Marxist or socialist models. This perhaps explains why the play has been largely overlooked to date in scholarship focused on early twentieth-century literatures of resistance. Jack notes, furthermore, that it is ‘extremely difficult to miss the fact that this play deals with Nature and social order, for it is announced regularly and stridently’.<sup>338</sup> Whilst critics have noted that Barrie’s social critique is shaped by ideas of ‘Nature and social order’, the specific aspects of the play’s engagement with notions of hereditary and environmental determinism have not, as yet, been analysed in any depth. The following close reading interrogates the play in relation to these key class-based discourses.

### **Stating the facts of hereditary determinism**

Barrie’s message regarding hereditary determinism is articulated with extraordinary directness in *The Admirable Crichton*. The reversal of the social hierarchy that forms the play’s narrative across the four acts shows that, once the trappings of personal wealth are removed, an individual’s potential to lead others has nothing whatsoever to do with inherited characteristics. The entire play can be seen as a rejection of the meta-narrative that class is determined by heredity. Barrie also, however, creates dialogue for the play’s central character

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<sup>336</sup> R. D. S. Jack, ‘Barrie’s Later Dramas: The Shakespearean Romances’ in Valentina Bold and Andrew Nash, eds., *Gateway to the Modern: Resituating J. M. Barrie*, (Tokyo: Occasional Papers of the Centre for Medieval English Studies, 2014) p. 41.

<sup>337</sup> R. D. S. Jack, *The Road to Never Land*, p. 247.

<sup>338</sup> R. D. S. Jack, *The Road to Never Land*, p. 107.

which expresses this rejection of hereditary determinism in incontrovertible terms. In Act One the following conversation takes place between Crichton and one of the daughters of Lord Loam:

CRICHTON: My lady, I am the son of a butler and a lady's maid – perhaps the happiest of all combinations, and to me the most beautiful thing in the world is a haughty, aristocratic English house, with every one kept in his place. [...]

CATHERINE: But father says if we were to return to nature –

CRICHTON: If we did, my lady, the first thing we should do would be to elect a head. Circumstances might alter cases; the same person might not be master; and the same persons might not be servants. I can't say as to that, nor should we have the deciding of it. Nature would decide for us.<sup>339</sup>

Crichton's view of social hierarchy is an unusual one for this period. It is essentially a conservative vision of society. He takes great pleasure in the idea of an Edwardian aristocratic home in which social status is rigid, policed, and clearly understood by all, despite the resulting inequalities. To Crichton, hierarchies are inevitable and integral to the structuring of human communities. Importantly, however, his view of society is not shaped by a pre-Darwinian Great Chain of Being notion of hierarchy, which would have reflected the more widely-held conservative social attitudes of the Victorian period. Nothing relating to social status, in Crichton's view, is preordained.

Equally, Crichton's view does not reflect political ideologies shaped by the emergence of socialism or the writings of Marx (which would have been discussed widely at the time the play was written). Crichton's assertion that 'the first thing we should do would

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<sup>339</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, pp. 181-182.

be to elect a head' depicts the character as sceptical, perhaps unsympathetic, towards these collectivist ideas. In the same scene Crichton states:

CRICHTON: [D]isdain is what we like from our superiors. Even so do we, the upper servants, disdain the lower servants, while they take it out of the odds and ends.<sup>340</sup>

Crichton, as a character in the drama, clearly does not give credence to a socialist vision, emphasising the creation of hierarchy as an inescapable human tendency.

It is important, however, to determine whether Barrie is employing his central character for satirical purposes, with the actual intention of *encouraging* support for a socially-radical agenda shaped by socialist/Marxist thought. Crichton's counter-intuitive support for a system which oppresses him, along with all those of his social class, could be read as an example of false consciousness. Three key elements, however, suggest that Barrie's vision is not a socialist or Marxist one. Whilst biographical materials highlight his Calvinist upbringing and philanthropy as indications of Barrie's social conscience, there is no suggestion that the author was an active member or interested observer of the emerging socialist organisations in this period. Secondly, in the ensuing acts of the play, the new society that develops on the island is not one in which equality of opportunity is explored or achieved. It represents, instead, the forming of a social hierarchy which in many ways mirrors that of Acts One and Four. Barrie perhaps suggests, therefore, that if British society was, similarly, overthrown with a fundamental redistribution of resources, the opportunity to move towards a more equitable form of society would be rejected. This essentially pessimistic assessment of the feasibility of collectivist political frameworks does not immediately suggest a Marxist/socialist agenda on the part of the author. Thirdly, the

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<sup>340</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 182.

dialogue spoken by Crichton makes direct reference to ‘Nature’ as the deciding factor in the organisation of societies.

A more compelling interpretation of the play’s social critique, therefore, is that *Barrie* is engaging with powerful class-based discourses of his day, rather than specific political perspectives. Crichton’s statement that ‘[c]ircumstances might alter cases’, and that social hierarchy would be determined by forces of nature, suggests in Act One that the butler’s view of society is shaped by a Spencerian notion of ‘survival of the fittest’. As the play progresses, however, *Barrie* reveals a nuanced depiction of how evolutionary ideas might play themselves out. Rather than resulting from shows of strength or physical force, the new hierarchy of the island is shaped by the individual abilities of its occupants to obtain resources and create from them the necessary requirements for survival. The determining factor in this new society is the nature of the environmental conditioning of the individuals. Having rejected, entirely, the notion of hereditary determinism, *Barrie* harnesses the preconceptions and widely-held biases inherent to *environmental* determinism to convey a more controversial idea: the notion that privileged childhoods and lifestyles are inferior to those of the socially-marginalised, when it comes to the development of ‘admirable’ character traits necessary for survival.

The way in which the overthrow of Lord Loam (hierarchical head in Act One) comes about is central to *Barrie*’s social critique. In Act Two, on arriving at the island, the group retains its existing social hierarchy at first. Crichton and Tweeny, assisted by Reverend Treherne, take on the tasks of creating shelter and providing food whilst the remaining members of group expect to be waited upon. Crichton still refers to the daughters of Lord Loam as ‘my lady’, and attends on the family when summoned.<sup>341</sup> *Barrie*’s stage directions, however (which are extensive in the published version of the play) accentuate Crichton’s

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<sup>341</sup> *Barrie, The Admirable Crichton*, p. 186.



masculinity. He starts the scene ‘hacking and hewing the bamboo’ and is described as follows:<sup>342</sup>

In a red shirt, with the ends of his sailor’s breeches thrust into his wading-boots, he looks a man of the moment [...] His features are not distinguished, but he has a strong jaw and green eyes, in which a yellow light burns that we have not seen before. His dark hair, hitherto so decorously sleek, has been ruffled this way and that by wind and weather, as if they were part of the cataclysm and wanted to help his chance. His muscles must be soft and flabby still, but though they shriek aloud for him to desist, he rains lusty blows with his axe, like one who has come upon the open for the first time in his life, and likes it. He is as yet far from being an expert woodsman – mark the blood on his hands at places where he has hit them instead of the tree; but note also that he does not waste time in bandaging them – he rubs them in the earth and goes on. His face is still of the discreet pallor that befits a butler, and he carries the smaller logs as if they were a salver; not in a day or month will he shake off the badge of servitude, but without knowing it he has begun.<sup>343</sup>

Barrie’s writing style in stage directions throughout the play is characterised by the satirical, comedic tone seen here. Over-exaggeration has been employed for the purposes of humour, and Barrie’s depiction of a jungle hero echoes the adventure stories targeted at Victorian schoolboys at the height of British imperial expansion. Crichton is described as undergoing a process of transition which is a reversion to a more deeply-rooted identity, after a temporary adjustment to an unnatural habitat. Crichton’s servitude, which was the dominant aspect of

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<sup>342</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 183.

<sup>343</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, pp. 183-184.

his character in the opening act, is described by Barrie as only ever having been external. Like a badge, deference to his employers is simply a label that can, in time, be easily removed. The ‘discreet pallor’ of the butler’s skin and his ‘soft and flabby’ muscles are temporary reflections of his previous working environment. The true ‘nature’ emerging on the island is of masculinity which borders on the animalistic. His physical strength, evidenced by the ‘lusty blows’ he is able to inflict with his axe, is combined with a stoicism in the face of injury. The yellow glint in his green eyes suggests the presence of a top-of-the-food-chain dangerous predator, whose presence is in synergy with the island’s geography and climate. Even the ‘wind and weather’ appear complicit in establishing Crichton as the ‘man for the moment’ – the ‘fittest’ (best adapted) to life on the island. Barrie’s parodying of the adventure story aesthetic creates humour whilst also challenging notions of masculinity. The character traits of bravery and stoicism, associated with a Victorian gentleman, are transposed onto a character from a humble background (the son of a butler and a lady’s maid). Crichton sheds widely-held assumptions regarding the inferiority of a domestic servant by demonstrating his ability to harness positive attributes associated with the archetypal working-class man. These characteristics, developed during formative years, simply remain latent, the play suggests, and can be called upon whenever necessary. As Crichton asserts from the outset: ‘Circumstances might alter cases’.<sup>344</sup>

It is not through physical force, however, that Crichton eventually becomes the head of the island’s hierarchy. Crichton introduces the rule ‘No work – no dinner’, and when Lady Mary challenges him he answers:

CRICHTON: My lady, I disbelieved in equality at home because it was against nature, and for that same reason I as utterly disbelieve in it on an island.

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<sup>344</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 182.

LADY MARY: I apologise.

CRICHTON: There must always, my lady, be one to command and others to obey.

LADY MARY: [*Satisfied*] One to command, others to obey. Yes.

[*Then suddenly she realises that there may be a dire meaning in his confident words.*]

Crichton!<sup>345</sup>

Crichton denies the possibility of equality within society, as ownership of resources determines hierarchy. Back in London, as on the island, this central determining factor still applies. There will not be equality among the survivors of the shipwreck, as it is Crichton (rather than Lord Loam or the highly-educated Ernest) who is best able to obtain resources, now that the factor of inherited wealth no longer applies.

In contrast to Crichton, Lord Loam's age and infirmity hamper his ability to retain his position at the top of the hierarchy. Being accustomed to the employment of domestic servants throughout his life, Lord Loam has no ability to care for himself:

LORD LOAM: I tried for hours to make a fire. The authors say that when wrecked on an island you can obtain a light by rubbing two sticks together.

[*With feeling.*]

The liars!<sup>346</sup>

Lord Loam's theoretical notions of survival, gained from literature, cannot be converted into useful practical skills. Ernest is similarly helpless, despite his university career. He is

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<sup>345</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, pp. 188-189.

<sup>346</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, pp. 192-193.

depicted as idle, greedy, arrogant and a consummate liar. Making himself comfortable, Ernest is seen to chivy Crichton without intending to contribute himself saying, 'We mustn't waste time. To work, to work'.<sup>347</sup> He expects to direct the labour of others on his behalf without contributing to the efforts necessary for the group's survival. He greedily tries to acquire the scant possessions available on the island by unfair means. When Crichton, out of loyalty, says to Lord Loam, 'My lord, anything you would care to take is yours', Lady Mary refuses to take any of Crichton's possessions. Ernest, however, says, 'If I could have your socks, Crichton ...'.<sup>348</sup> He is also eager, at first, to deprive Lord Loam of his boots:

ERNEST: You are actually wearing boots, uncle. It's very unsafe, you know, in this climate.

LORD LOAM: Is it?

ERNEST: We have all abandoned them you observe. The blood, the arteries you know.

LORD LOAM: I hadn't a notion.

*[He holds out his feet, and ERNEST kneels.]*

ERNEST: O Lord, yes.

*[In another moment those boots will be his.]*

LADY MARY: [Quickly] Father, he is trying to get your boots from you. [...]

ERNEST: *[Rising haughtily, a proud spirit misunderstood]*. I only wanted the loan of them.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 191.

<sup>348</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 199.

<sup>349</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, pp. 191-192.

Ernest is happy to deprive the oldest and frailest member of the group of his possessions, in contrast to Crichton's loyalty and generosity in the same situation. Lord Loam later offers Ernest the boots:

LORD LOAM [Genially] Take them my boy.

*[With a rapidity we had not thought him capable of, Ernest becomes the wearer of the boots.]*

And now I dare say you want to know why I give them to you Ernest?

ERNEST: *[Moving up and down in them deliciously]*. Not at all. The great thing is, "I've got 'em, I've got 'em."

LORD LOAM: My reason is that, as head of our little party, you, Ernest, shall be our hunter, you shall clear the forests of those savage beasts that make them so dangerous. [...]

ERNEST: This is my answer. *[He kicks off the boots]*.<sup>350</sup>

The characteristics associated with a 'gentleman' of Ernest's class – generosity, loyalty, self-sacrifice and bravery – are shown to be absent in Ernest and abundant in Crichton, challenging the assumptions of the discourse of the 'gentleman' (analysed in greater detail in the following chapters).

Despite Crichton's suitability as the head of the new island hierarchy, this new paradigm is, of course, resisted initially by members of the group. Crichton does not actively overthrow Lord Loam:

CRICHTON: My lord, I implore you – I am not desirous of being head. Do you have a try at it, my lord.

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<sup>350</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 194.

LORD LOAM: [*Outraged*]. A try at it!

CRICHTON: [*Eagerly*]. It may be that you will prove to be the best man.

LORD LOAM: May be! My children, come.

[*They disappear proudly but gingerly up those splintered rocks*].<sup>351</sup>

Crichton observes to Treherne that the party is downwind of the cooking pot, saying ‘nature is already taking the matter into her own hands’.<sup>352</sup> As darkness falls, the family ‘steal nearer to the pot until they are squatted round it, with their hands out to the blaze’.<sup>353</sup> The dependence of the upper class characters of the play on those below them in the social hierarchy (Crichton and Treherne) is clear and, by the end of Act Two, societal positions have been redefined.

Barrie engages once more with the notion of environmental determinism in Act Three. Having been accepted by the group as its leader, Crichton is shown to have adopted a number of negative characteristics associated with noble birth/privilege. Crichton is now referred to as the Gov. and Lord Loam, who is ‘enjoying life heartily as handy-man about the happy home’, declares that Crichton is a master he is proud to serve. Treherne voices concerns, however, that Crichton is ‘becoming a bit magnificent in his ideas’.<sup>354</sup> Of all the characters, Treherne (who appears to represent the middle class) has been neither elevated nor demoted in the new social hierarchy, continuing to occupy its central stratum. Crichton now wears a ‘brilliant robe’ and locks himself away in his workroom, where he is waited upon by Tweeny and the daughters of Lord Loam<sup>355</sup>. A contraption enables Crichton to display placards providing instructions to the other islanders without speaking to them

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<sup>351</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 199.

<sup>352</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 199.

<sup>353</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 200.

<sup>354</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 205.

<sup>355</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 205.

directly. Island life has brought about improvements in the personality traits of a number of the characters. Two years after the shipwreck, Ernest is now a ‘wiry, athletic figure’ contributing to the day-to-day running of the island.<sup>356</sup> Lady Mary has also been able to cast off the restrictions of class and gender. She resembles a ‘splendid boy’ and ‘carries bow and arrows and a blow pipe, and over her shoulder is a fat buck’.<sup>357</sup> Their environment, in particular the need to carry out tasks necessary for survival, has impacted positively upon these characters. By contrast, whilst Crichton’s elevation has won him the prize of Lady Mary’s hand in marriage, his new position at the top of the hierarchy has caused him to withdraw from the group, and has resulted in self-aggrandisement and a sense of entitlement. Once again, Barrie challenges ideas that class is determined by heredity. The characters (irrespective of their social status) are shown to be capable of significant individual change – both positive and negative. Barrie appears to argue that ownership of resources affects the way in which character develops. These developments in personality are linked inextricably to the demands placed on the individual by the environment. The need to contribute physical effort enhances, whilst ownership of resources has the potential to diminish positive characteristics.

Return from the island brings about a reversion to type in all the upper-class characters. Treherne is little changed by his time on the island, but both Crichton and Tweeny have lost their dedication to domestic service. Grace A. Lamacchia analyses the seventeen different endings Barrie wrote for the play.<sup>358</sup> Whilst Crichton returns to his role as butler initially, a greater degree of self-determination on the part of this character however, is common to each of these. In some cases Crichton and Tweeny leave Lord Loam’s service to run a public house as man and wife.

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<sup>356</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 204.

<sup>357</sup> Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, p. 208.

<sup>358</sup> Grace A. Lamacchia, ‘Textual Variations for Act IV of *The Admirable Crichton*’, *Modern Drama*, vol. 12, no. 4, (2013) 408–418.

Given the overt nature of Barrie's social critique in *The Admirable Crichton*, and the simple premise of its plot, a detailed analysis of the play introduces an unexpected degree of depth and complexity from the perspective of class-based analysis. Aspects of Marxist-thinking appear to influence the play at various stages, but the overriding impression appears to be an examination of humanity's interaction with its environment, and the ways in which resources/economic circumstances shape social structures and individual characteristics. In engaging with discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism in his play, Barrie goes to the heart of inequality in Edwardian Britain, interrogating the mechanisms providing justification for unfairness of treatment and opportunity for those disadvantaged by their economic 'circumstances'.

In the close readings of both *69 Birnam Road* and *The Admirable Crichton*, the ambiguous position of the domestic servant (from the perspective of a Marxist theoretical framework) has contributed to their absence from the canon of early-twentieth century literatures of resistance. The ambiguous social status of their authors has also, perhaps, led to underestimation of the social critique of these texts. Whilst both authors came from humble backgrounds, and only overcame the disadvantages of their economic circumstances due to their own literary success in later life, these texts have not previously been considered as deeply significant expressions of resistance. The ways in which they challenge the dominant centre (overtly in the case of Barrie, and 'quietly' from the perspective of Pett Ridge) through their engagement with class-based discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism should, however, be considered alongside existing scholarship, for a more complete and nuanced understanding of ways in which early-twentieth century literature challenged social inequalities.



## CHAPTER 3

### RESISTING, CHALLENGING AND REJECTING THE DISCOURSE OF PUBLIC-SCHOOL ‘CHARACTER’

This chapter focuses on the late-Victorian and Edwardian metanarrative that social class was determined by an individual’s educational experiences and occupation/profession. This involves a detailed analysis of the factors which contributed to the discourse of public school ‘character’, with the intention of understanding the means by which this discourse gained and retained their potency.

Victorian notions of ‘the gentleman’ created significant barriers to career and social advancement during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, by associating financial circumstances with positive traits such as probity and aptitude for leadership. Within this discourse it was asserted that men born into privilege had inherent superior facets of ‘character’ and behaviour resulting from their lineage, and experiences as children and young adults. Such traits were considered to be either absent or under-developed (within this discourse) in those from more humble backgrounds (irrespective of individual merit, achievement, or the attainment of wealth in later life). With the blurring of social boundaries during the late-Victorian period, the discourses of hereditary and environmental determinism gained in potency due to the linking of educational background to earlier Victorian notions of the ‘gentleman’, within the discourse of public school ‘character’. This chapter traces the evolution of the discourse, examining the social, historical, political, cultural and scientific factors that underpinned the assumptions on which the discourse of public school ‘character’ was predicated. This creates a foundation for analysis of how H. G. Wells and Jerome K. Jerome problematised and resisted the discourse of public school ‘character’, challenging contemporary attitudes and proposing (through metaphor, satire and other rhetorical devices)

negative character traits as inherent amongst those born into privilege, whilst emphasising undervalued positive characteristics of individuals at the social margins.

### **‘In spite of our ignorance’: Public school ‘character’ as a barrier to social mobility<sup>359</sup>**

As what I now write will certainly never be read till I am dead, I may dare to say what no one now does dare to say in print, - though some of us may whisper it occasionally into our friends’ ears. There are places in life which can hardly be well filled except by ‘Gentlemen’ [...] The gates of one class should be open to the other; but neither to one class or to the other can good be done by declaring that there are no gates, no barrier, no difference.

Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (1883)<sup>360</sup>

This quotation from Anthony Trollope’s autobiography (published posthumously) exemplifies a major obstacle to social mobility during the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras. Whilst widening access to elementary education was supported in broad terms, advancement of individuals from humble backgrounds into positions of power and influence was, in the opinion of many establishment figures, neither practical nor desirable. Trollope’s justification for discouraging social mobility is framed within contemporary notions of the ‘gentleman’.

Earlier Victorian notions of the ‘gentleman’ (based primarily on ‘noble birth’) began to lose their potency towards the end of the nineteenth century, and differentiation of social class relied increasingly on educational background. Robin Gilmour argues, ‘By the last quarter of the nineteenth century it was almost universally accepted that a traditional liberal

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<sup>359</sup> Anthony Trollope, ‘Public Schools’, *Fortnightly Review*, 2 October 1865, pp. 476-487.

<sup>360</sup> Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (New York: Harper, 1883).

education at a reputable public school should qualify a man as a gentleman, whatever his father's origins or occupation'.<sup>361</sup> Whilst an individual might be stigmatised during his time in public school (if his position in society was lower than his peers), his prospects and social standing in later life were assured. J. R. de S. Honey argues that the newer of these two 'contrasting sets of specifications of the "gentleman"' raises the possibility of 'production of "character"', suggesting an acceptance in the public imagination that (in addition to attainment through inheritance) character traits of the 'gentleman' could be developed, in individuals who were not of noble birth, under certain circumstances.<sup>362</sup> In addition to the potential intellectual advantages of an extended and uninterrupted education, it was widely believed that the public school experience itself provided unique rites of passage, which imbued young men with strengths of character that could not develop under other circumstances or in alternative educational settings. This powerful discourse of 'character', encapsulated notions of moral and intellectual superiority, and provided significant social and economic advantages for those educated in public schools, in addition to providing a degree of reflected glory in which those educated in proprietary boarding schools could bask.

The discourse of 'character', as J. A. Mangan describes, was of course no more than 'value-judgements disguised as statements of fact' and therefore could not guarantee intelligence or probity.<sup>363</sup> Nevertheless, Anthony Trollope, writing in 1865, noted of ex-public schoolboys like himself, 'we are feared or loved, as may be, but always respected – even though it is in spite of our ignorance'.<sup>364</sup> Their superiority was assumed, irrespective of merit. John M. Quail comments that 'where recruitment of potential managers [in late nineteenth century commerce] was deliberate and impersonal, it favoured the public

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<sup>361</sup> Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 8.

<sup>362</sup> J. R. De S. Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe: The Development of the Public School in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Millington, 1977), p. 225.

<sup>363</sup> J. A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 6.

<sup>364</sup> Trollope, 'Public Schools'.

schoolboy despite some puzzling counter-indications of his aptitude and commitment'.<sup>365</sup> Even in circumstances where well-paid positions were not filled by personal contacts, the educational history of a potential manager outweighed the experience and proven dedication of those who might otherwise have been promoted from within. The discourse of public school 'character' therefore created an obstacle, for those without access to an expensive education, that appeared impossible to overcome through individual effort and talent. So whilst the powerful discourse arising from Samuel Smiles's concept of self-help asserted that anyone might succeed in a meritocratic Britain, it was an equally powerful discourse around the unique character traits forged (largely on the playing field) of the public school, which dictated the criteria against which the merit of individuals came to be judged.<sup>366</sup> This chapter will argue that both Wells and Jerome sought to problematise and resist this discourse of public-school 'character' in their novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fictional representations of schools, and the individuals shaped by them, in the novels of both authors, provide valuable forums for the negotiation and redefinition of class positions.

Jonathan Rose, Sascha Auerbach, Matthew Daniel Eddy, P. W. Musgrave and others have described how the Elementary Education Act of 1870 created new opportunities for social mobility.<sup>367</sup> Authors from working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds can be seen to have benefitted to some degree from these reforms. The social critiques in the

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<sup>365</sup> John M. Quail, 'From Personal Patronage to Public School Privilege: Social closure in the recruitment of managers in the United Kingdom from the late nineteenth century to 1930' in Alan Kidd and David Nicholls, eds., *The Making of the British Middle Class?: Studies of Regional and Cultural Diversity since the Eighteenth Century* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), pp. 169-185 (p. 173).

<sup>366</sup> Smiles, *Self Help; with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* (1866).

<sup>367</sup> Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2010). Sascha Auerbach, "'A Right Sort of Man": Gender, Class Identity, and Social Reform in Late-Victorian Britain', *The Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2010), 64-93. Matthew Daniel Eddy, 'The politics of cognition: liberalism and the evolutionary origins of Victorian education', *BJHS* 50(4) (2017), 677-699. P. W. Musgrave, *Society and Education in England since 1800* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1968) pp. 31, 32, 40 and 44. Musgrave notes that in the period from the introduction of the Elementary Education Act in 1870 to the year 1880 the number of schools provided by the voluntary (denominational) sector rose from 8,000 to 14,000 (supplying elementary education for two million children (an increase from 1.2 million). Over the same period, state provision introduced more than 3,000 elementary schools, for around 750,000 children.

following close readings, however, engage largely with issues around inequality of access to secondary education as a barrier to progression in the workplace, and challenge assumptions of inherent superiority of the educationally-privileged. Drawing on close readings from *Kipps* (1905) by Wells, and *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) by Jerome, I will argue that both authors present the ‘character’ of public-school Old Boys as a sham, and challenge the relevance of the public school for the nation’s economic future, thereby questioning the validity of this central justification for preferential recruitment and promotion in the late-Victorian and Edwardian workplace.<sup>368</sup> Sub-textually, and through the use of comedic strategies, these authors challenge the authority, probity and capabilities of those in power, whilst revealing meritocracy to be a myth in the face of class bias in institutions, the professions and in public life.

### **Notions of public school ‘character’: evolution and influences**

To describe the discourse of public school ‘character’ in terms of a process of evolution is accurate in that it articulates a sense of development of ideas over time, from early Victorian notions of Christian (gentle)manliness to a more combative athleticism of the late Victorian period, with its subtext of Social Darwinism. It would be misleading, however, to see this as a process in which earlier ideas are replaced by new. J. A. Mangan and James Walvin argue that the discourse of public school ‘character’ is not a ‘simple, single coherent concept’ of elite manliness, but a ‘portmanteau term which embraced a variety of overlapping ideologies regionally interpreted, which changed over time and which, at specific moments, appear to be discrete, even conflicting, in emphasis’.<sup>369</sup> This definition describes effectively the non-linear and contradictory progression of this class-based rhetoric. In the period 1880 to 1910, the discourse of public-school ‘character’ can be best described as a ‘perfect storm’. Expediency, the need for adolescent social control, pressing commercial imperatives,

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<sup>368</sup> Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat (to say nothing of the dog)* (1889). H. G. Wells, *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* (1905).

<sup>369</sup> J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 3.

educational protectionism, and (largely exaggerated) fears arising from social reform, combined to create a powerful and flexible discourse which was adapted for a range of purposes.

Arising from a need to curb the excesses of Regency aristocratic boyhood, the discourse of public school 'character' entrained chivalric, literary, scientific, theological, militaristic, psychological and political elements. Mangan and Peter Parker, among others, have argued that this discourse reached its peak in the years approaching the First World War, providing a vital aid to enlistment of volunteers, before finally breaking under the pressure of total war.<sup>370</sup> To understand how Wells and Jerome challenged this discourse it is necessary to break down public school 'character' into its component parts, through analysis of key factors in its evolution, to clarify its underlying 'rubric'.

### **Early nineteenth-century beginnings**

It is ironic that a discourse which appears to have its roots in the desire for social control of the aristocracy, became such a powerful mechanism for social control of the lower-middle and working classes. During the Regency period, insubordination and violence erupted frequently in public schools, leading to their association with declining moral standards among the aristocracy.<sup>371</sup> Actual incidents of revolt, combined with wide condemnation, particularly from the Evangelical lobby, necessitated the imposition of greater discipline.<sup>372</sup> Jenny Holt explains that, in the period between the Industrial Revolution and the mid-nineteenth century, society's inability to control the schoolboy was seen as particularly troubling, as the stage of development we would now call adolescence assumed particular importance, both 'symbolically and practically' for the nation's 'rapidly industrializing

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<sup>370</sup> Peter Parker, *The Old Lie: The Great War and the Public School Ethos* (London: Constable, 1987).

<sup>371</sup> For further information on public school violence in this period see Jenny Holt, *Public School Literature, Civic Education and Politics of Male Adolescence* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2008). Jeffrey Richards notes that public schools came to be associated in this period with 'values of a dissolute aristocracy, whose world was one of hard drinking, ruinous gambling, horse racing, blood sports and prize-fighting', *Happiest Days: the public schools in English fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008) p. 9.

<sup>372</sup> Holt records that Winchester experienced schoolboy rebellions in 1774, 1793, and 1818.

culture'. Juvenile development, Holt argues, 'gained a new value as a metaphor for wider social progress and political reform'.<sup>373</sup> A well-managed school population signified a well-managed nation. Holt argues: 'Calls for school reform coincided with campaigns to improve conditions for juveniles in prison, and some commentators (particularly Evangelicals) developed a tendency to use the same language to discuss the two issues'.<sup>374</sup> The problems of discipline in public schools became part of a wider moral panic around juvenile crime.<sup>375</sup>

### **Thomas Arnold's focus on Christian values**

Influential in redefining the reputation of public schools was Thomas Arnold's Christianising mission at Rugby School from 1828 to 1841. Arnold is known to have referred to public schools as 'the very seats and nurseries of vice'.<sup>376</sup> In Honey's view, Arnold saw boyhood as 'essentially sinful', and had no confidence in the public school's ability to 'ensure the triumph of virtue'.<sup>377</sup> Honey argues that Arnold's post at Rugby 'presented an opportunity to try out, in a practical form, views about the nature of society in general and about the means whereby it was to be Christianised'.<sup>378</sup> Pedagogy was secondary to Arnold's ability to experiment with moral improvement of those within the school, for the benefit of the world beyond its gates.

In addition to refocusing the school in terms of religious observance, Arnold introduced internal hierarchies among pupils, such as the prefect system, to enable boys to be self-governing without constant supervision by masters.<sup>379</sup> Older pupils were enabled to hold 'statesman-like positions' of authority over younger boys through the monitor or

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<sup>373</sup> Holt, p. 58.

<sup>374</sup> Holt, p. 50.

<sup>375</sup> Holt associates these concerns with the 1816 *Report of the Committee for Investigating the Causes and Alarming Increase of Juvenile Delinquency in the Metropolis*, arguing that 'youth itself, rather than the environment of the individual delinquent' came under suspicion. For further background, refer to discussions later in this chapter on Recapitulation Theory.

<sup>376</sup> Arnold quoted in Holt, p. 50.

<sup>377</sup> Honey, p. 23.

<sup>378</sup> Honey, p. 3.

<sup>379</sup> For further information on Thomas Arnold's reforms at Rugby School see J. R. De S. Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe* (1977) and Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The ideal of Christian manliness in Victorian literature and religious thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

‘fagging’ system.<sup>380</sup> In Norman Vance’s view, Arnold aimed to inculcate the qualities he deemed necessary in those of higher social standing, such as ‘moderation, self-restraint, cool judgement and sturdy self-reliance’ at Rugby School.<sup>381</sup> Honey argues that Arnold’s ‘fire’ was trained on ‘the whole upper class, in fact “the whole class of gentlemen” [who] had failed to do their duty to the poor’.<sup>382</sup> Arnold’s was an attempt to make young men born into privilege more cognisant of their responsibilities to wider society.

This refocusing, from inward-looking individual gratification (of the Regency public school) to an outward-looking sense of responsibility for the less fortunate, I would argue, is a key factor in the evolution of the discourse of public school ‘character’. Arnold’s concentration on self-control and service is reflective of (and evolved to underpin) earlier Great Chain of Being notions of social hierarchy. Later in the century, when Darwinian theories undermined traditional social structures, and when Marxist and socialist ideas accentuated dialectical oppositions within society, the discourse of public school ‘character’ became a standard bearer for earlier hierarchical justifications for social inequality.

Practices such as the prefect system and ‘fagging’, promoted Arnold’s rhetoric of moral and social superiority of the public school boy, whilst providing practical experience of exercising power over others, preparing boys for positions of leadership in adult life. By linking admirable personal qualities with responsibilities for protection and leadership in his pupils, Arnold’s vision of the ideal upper-class citizen promoted its subject as desirable in the wider workplace, and provided a justification for its superiority, whilst obviating the necessity for the subject to experience guilt for his inequality of status in relation to others.

This does not suggest that Arnold’s Christianising mission had the objective of cementing a sense of superiority among his pupils. Indeed, Mangan states that Arnold was not responsible for the more competitive and aggressive developments in thinking that

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<sup>380</sup> Holt, p. 79.

<sup>381</sup> Vance, p. 74.

<sup>382</sup> Honey, p. 3.



shaped the discourse of ‘character’ later in the century.<sup>383</sup> Mangan argues that Arnold ‘mollified’ a growing middle-class, restoring the ‘soiled and tattered reputation of the public school by means of powerful and effective impression management’.<sup>384</sup> Within a relatively short period, Mangan argues, Arnold had ‘flogged, expelled and harangued’ the public school into a new public image.<sup>385</sup> From Arnold’s reforms, however, there arose a new moral justification for social superiority (based on Christian service and sacrifice) that replaced a maligned and discredited (and therefore less potent) justification for the social hierarchy (based on aristocratic birth).

These idealised conceptions of upper-class masculinity were disseminated beyond Rugby School. Arnold’s school sermons were made available to a wider public in published form.<sup>386</sup> Importantly, at Rugby School, Arnold’s discourse (developed to encourage idealised values) was superimposed onto a more problematic reality.

### **Charles Kingsley, Thomas Hughes and notions of ‘muscular Christianity’**

Arnold’s direct influence was relatively limited, however, in comparison to the reification of his Christianising mission (from around the mid-nineteenth century onwards) in the writings of acolytes such as A. P. Stanley, Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes.<sup>387</sup> Honey argues that Stanley’s effusive biography of Arnold (influenced by his ‘hero-worship’ of his ex-headmaster) is coloured by the ‘special position’ the author was able to establish during his time as Arnold’s pupil, which protected him from the ‘rough-and-tumble of school life’.<sup>388</sup> As early as 1844, I would argue, Arnold’s teachings became detached from their context (exhorting schoolboys to act more responsibly and to observe the scriptures) and were repositioned in the printed word as reflective of a reality, rather than an ideal. Through

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<sup>383</sup> Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, p. 16.

<sup>384</sup> Mangan, p. 15.

<sup>385</sup> For further discussion of Arnold’s legacy see Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, p. 15.

<sup>386</sup> Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, p. 24.

<sup>387</sup> Honey addresses this topic in Chapter 1 of *Tom Brown’s Universe*.

<sup>388</sup> Honey, p. 24.

Stanley's effusive but unrealistic portrayal of Arnold, and through Thomas Hughes's later immortalisation of Arnold in his best-selling novel *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857), the relationship between the discourse and its derivation evolved.<sup>389</sup> In this move from the delivery of educational moral guidance, to the enshrinement of these ideas in a form which is simultaneously completely fictional and also partially factual, the discourse gained credibility and traction. The idealised qualities that Arnold was hoping to inculcate became widely misinterpreted as *actual* characteristics that were believed to have been imparted.

The authors Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes were influential in these changing notions of masculinity. Charles Kingsley saw in the redefinition of Christian values for boyhood the opportunity to work towards a fairer society. Vance notes Kingsley's sympathies with Chartism, explaining that, as a founder-member of the Christian socialist movement, Kingsley began to express ideas of manly Christianity in his novels.<sup>390</sup> Vance summarises Kingsley's conception of 'muscular Christianity' as the view that:

Physical strength, courage and health are attractive, valuable and useful in themselves and in the eyes of God [...] Man, endowed with strength and natural affections and the capacity to explore and understand the natural and moral order, should put all these gifts to work in the service of his brother man and of God, as patriot or social reformer or crusading doctor.<sup>391</sup>

In its focus on service to others, and its assumption of intellectual and moral superiority, Kingsley's 'muscular Christianity' encompasses Arnoldian conceptions of idealised boyhood, whilst associating these intellectual and moral attributes with physical ones.

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<sup>389</sup> Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days* (London: Macmillan, 1857).

<sup>390</sup> Vance, pp. 80-81.

<sup>391</sup> Vance, p. 105.

Furthermore, the ex-Rugby schoolboy and author Thomas Hughes, expressed these notions in his popular novel *Tom Brown's School Days* and its sequel *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861).<sup>392</sup> Holt argues:

[Hughes] was deeply conscious of the fact that society needed a new formulation of elite adolescence which was more acceptable to people who had been brought up outside the aggressively masculine, combative environment of the public school. He therefore attempted to integrate the ideas of reformers with more traditional perspectives on male adolescence.<sup>393</sup>

At this period, I will argue, the discourse of 'muscular Christianity' aimed to bring about social improvement by advocating desirable attitudes and behaviours that boys and young men should emulate. Hughes's *Tom Brown* novels, however, blurred fact and fiction, as they placed fictional characters in an actual educational setting, overseen by a recent headmaster of the real-life Rugby School. Whilst Tom and his school friends are clearly fictional, the aspects of public-school life described in the novel, such as fagging and bullying, could be considered accurate. The veracity (and brutality) of these aspects adds credence to the notion that Tom is a 'real' student, and that the rites of passage he experiences, and the moral values he develops, are not only feasible, but factual. It is in this period that the discourse of public school 'character' began to replace, in the public imagination, the more nuanced reality.

A noteworthy addition to the idealised 'character' of the public schoolboy which has its roots in 'muscular Christianity' of this period, is that of the 'fighting adolescent body'

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<sup>392</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days* and *Tom Brown at Oxford* (London: Macmillan, 1861). For further discussion on the influence of *Tom Brown's School Days*, see 'Chapter 2: The making of a muscular Christian' in Jeffrey Richards, *Happiest Days: the public schools in English fiction*, and 'Chapter 2: An Education for Active Citizenship' in Jenny Holt, *Public School Literature, Civic Education and the Politics of Male Adolescence*. For biographies and further discussion of Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes see Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit*.

<sup>393</sup> Holt, p. 82.

which Holt attributes to *Tom Brown's School Days*.<sup>394</sup> She argues: '[T]here were political reasons for Hughes to condemn competition but not fighting *per se*. Economic competition, the realm of the vulgar *nouveaux riches* was perceived to be causing havoc in the empire'.<sup>395</sup> Holt argues that, whilst physical aggression was justified to uphold Christian principles within Tom Brown's frame of reference, it was considered ungentlemanly to vie with others for financial gain. The following close readings demonstrate how the reluctance of Old Boys to compete, and their desire to never 'try too hard', is satirised and redefined by Jerome in terms of complacency and laziness, and in the case of Wells is presented as untrustworthiness resulting from the desire to achieve wealth without investing effort.

### **The chivalric revival, classical notions of masculinity and the rise of athleticism**

As the nineteenth-century progressed, personality traits associated with 'muscular Christianity' fused with earlier notions of idealised masculinity.<sup>396</sup> In particular, qualities such as courage, stoicism, adherence to Christian moral values, selflessness, and loyalty to one's peers, resonated with chivalric values undergoing a wider cultural revival in the Victorian period.<sup>397</sup> Vance argues that, whilst the 'earnest and energetic' Victorian middle class had viewed chivalry traditionally as a 'diversion and idle dream' of a feckless aristocracy, the 'updated chivalry' represented by Prince Albert, did much to reframe ideals of knightliness within a bourgeois cultural context.<sup>398</sup> This reimagining of chivalric values

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<sup>394</sup> Holt, p. 74.

<sup>395</sup> Holt, p. 75.

<sup>396</sup> Vance argues that by the 1850s notions of the Victorian gentleman and the medieval knight had 'fused in the public imagination into a conventional moral ideal applicable to all classes of society' (Norman Vance, *Sinews of the Spirit*, p. 17.) For more on the cultural influences of the Victorian chivalric revival see Inga Bryden, 'All Dressed Up: Revivalism and the Fashion for Arthur in Victorian Culture', *Arthuriana*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2011), 28-41.

<sup>397</sup> Jeffrey Richards makes reference to the twelve traditional virtues of the knight outlined by Alain Chartier in *Le Breviare des Nobles* (1422-1426) as those associated with the Romantic revival. These include: 'nobility, loyalty, honour, righteousness, prowess, love, courtesy, diligence, cleanliness, generosity, sobriety and perseverance' (Jeffrey Richards, "'Passing the love of women": manly love and Victorian Society' in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds, *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987], p. 98).

<sup>398</sup> Vance, pp. 20-21.

satisfied those with an ideological investment in the notion of ‘muscular Christianity’, and appealed to middle-class parents.<sup>399</sup>



**Figure 5: Sir Edwin Landseer’s *Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at the Bal Costumé of 12 May 1842 (1842-1846)*<sup>400</sup>**

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<sup>399</sup> Mangan notes how chivalric ideals were evoked by numerous organisations aiming to address social problems of the late-nineteenth century, including Christian missions, sports clubs, and groups for boys such as the Scouts and Boy’s Brigade (J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, ‘Introduction’ in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds, *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987], p. 5).

<sup>400</sup> Sir Edwin Landseer: *Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at the Bal Costumé of 12 May 1842 (1842-1846)*, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/404540/queen-victoria-and-prince-albert-at-the-bal-costume-of-12-may-1842> [accessed 7 December 2018]. Landseer’s double portrait depicts Albert and Victoria as fourteenth-century monarch Edward III and his wife Queen Philippa of Hainault. At the event (the first of three costume balls hosted by the royal couple) all members of the royal household were expected to wear medieval dress.

Similarly, idealised notions of masculinity were disseminated in the ancient Greek and Roman texts which dominated the largely classical public school curriculum of this period.<sup>401</sup> The values discussed in these school texts, such as Spartan stoicism, and ideas of discipline inspired by the Roman army, provided headmasters such as G. E. L. Cotton (Marlborough College, 1852 - 1858) with the opportunity to merge knowledge from the classroom, sermons from the lectern, and ambitions from the sports field, to create a compelling discourse of superiority linked to a boy's behaviour and development during adolescence.<sup>402</sup>

In the final decades of the nineteenth century the discourse of public school 'character' gained still greater potency by merging these classical and chivalric notions of physical strength, with the developing rhetoric of athleticism.<sup>403</sup> Much has been written about the influence of the public-school games cult on attitudes towards war, colonialism and the administration of Empire.<sup>404</sup> I add to this body of scholarship the argument that the rise of

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<sup>401</sup> Richards notes that upper-middle class life in Victorian England resembled Ancient Greek and Medieval societies in that it 'revolved around all male institutions'. He argues that nineteenth-century public schools epitomised 'Greco-Medieval value systems' (Jeffrey Richards, "Passing the love of women": manly love and Victorian Society', p. 100). Richards also discusses the impact of classical Greek texts on attitudes towards friendships and homosexual relationships between boys in the public-school setting during the Victorian period (p. 112).

<sup>402</sup> Mangan argues that Cotton 'gave the Graeco-Renaissance concept of "the whole man" a Christian emphasis', associating physical attributes with evidence of God's work. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, p. 27.

<sup>403</sup> Vance notes that the rhetoric of organised sport and national success in battle pre-dated this period, referencing the remark often attributed (inaccurately it is thought) to the Duke of Wellington, that 'the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of Eton'. Vance states that 'connections between sporting and military manliness were already well-established' by the beginning of the nineteenth century, p. 13. Mangan dates the rise of the public school games cult to the increasing concentration on organised sports in final decades of the nineteenth century, Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, p. 22.

<sup>404</sup> A seminal text is J. A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (2008). For further information on public school rhetoric and the First World War see Peter Parker, *The Old Lie: The Great War and the Public School Ethos* (1987). For further discussion of the influence of public-school education on colonial attitudes and notions of Empire see James Walvin, 'Symbols of moral superiority: slavery, sport and the changing world order, 1800-1950' in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds, *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987). To expand on the wider legacy of public-school rhetoric across Edwardian society see Robert H. McDonald, *Sons of the Empire: The Frontier and the Boy Scout Movement 1890-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993). Henry Newbolt's poem *Vitai Lampada*, which repeats the phrase "Play up, play up, and play the game!" encapsulated and popularised the notions of public school 'character' for a wider audience, merging success on the sports field with armed conflict.

athleticism also created barriers to career advancement for those educated outside the public school, as notions of physical prowess enabled the perceived intellectual, psychological and moral superiority of the Old Boy to be reimagined along deeply competitive lines. The rhetoric of public school 'character', when recast within a framework of survival and triumph over others, gained greater potential for marginalisation and the protection of Conservative interests.

In the decades leading up to the Great War, the discourse of public school 'character' evolved from a 'classless' ideal of Christian manliness, based on an individual's moral choices and behaviour (and therefore achievable for anyone of strong Christian beliefs), to a systematised process in which 'character' was developed through specific physical and emotional 'ordeals' relating to the public school setting (only available to a minority). Public school education (specifically the experience of boarding) was believed to provide unique rites of passage which facilitated highly-effective maturation into manhood. This inferred that boys who did not undergo the specific physical and mental tests provided by boarding school would remain in a comparative state of intellectual, psychological and moral immaturity, which made them inadequately prepared (and therefore less desirable) for positions of responsibility than those who were public-school educated. In effect, the discourse had the effect of excluding the majority, whilst safeguarding the interests of the minority, in the late-Victorian and Edwardian workplace.

Athleticism was influential in the evolution of the discourse of public-school 'character' in that it provided an outlet for the expression of hardening class positions in the final decades of the nineteenth century. It granted social acceptance for the articulation, verbally and in writing, of attitudes that would previously have been considered 'unsporting'. Reflecting its problematic nature, the ideology of athleticism (which fused the public schoolboy's stoicism in the face of the hardships of boarding, with his physical robustness on the sports field) had a number of inherent contradictions. Firstly, it created a

vener of community spirit to disguise a deep self-interest. J. A. Mangan identifies in public schools of the period ‘an implicit, if not explicit, crude Darwinism encapsulated in simplistic aphorisms: life is conflict, strength comes through struggle and success is the prerogative of the strong’.<sup>405</sup> Sublimation of individual ambition for the success of the team was the stated objective, but the unstated goal was clearly individual superiority over weaker opponents. Success as a sports ‘blood’ placed a boy at the top of the school’s internal hierarchy, whilst physical weakness or psychological sensitivity consigned boys to its lowest positions.<sup>406</sup> Despite notions of team spirit, the focus on physical prowess generated new hierarchies and highlighted divisions. It did not level the playing-field.<sup>407</sup> Honey notes that masters did not, however, invoke ‘ungodly’ Darwinian notions of natural selection when explaining the rationale behind the increasing amounts of the timetable devoted to organised (and later compulsory) sporting activities.<sup>408</sup> Earlier notions of ‘muscular Christianity’ enabled a boy’s self-interest, and his need to survive in the wider world, to be cloaked within a rhetoric of service to the school, his peers, his family, and his nation. Indeed, Mangan notes that headmasters ‘filled newspaper pieces, magazine articles and prize-day speeches with pieties, platitudes and pomposities’ on the importance of ‘fair play’ and selfless devotion to the team.<sup>409</sup> Conscious efforts were made by schoolmasters to deflect notions of self-interest under the guise of loyalty.

Secondly, the games cult appears counter-intuitive in regard to parental care. Even though parents were aware of the conditions and harsh discipline within public schools, there was still a willingness for sons to experience inadequate nutrition, poor living conditions,

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<sup>405</sup> J. A. Mangan, ‘Social Darwinism and Upper-Class Education in Late Victorian and Edwardian England’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* Vol. 27, Nos. 1–2 (2010), 78–97, p. 85.

<sup>406</sup> Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, pp. 171–182

<sup>407</sup> Gideon Dishon argues ‘the level playing field in sports is primarily an aesthetic value rather than a moral one’. Gideon Dishon, ‘Games of character: team sports, games, and character development in Victorian public schools, 1850–1900’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 53:4, [2017], p. 376).

<sup>408</sup> Honey, p. 222.

<sup>409</sup> Mangan, ‘Social Darwinism and Upper-Class Education in Late Victorian and Edwardian England’, p. 79.



corporal punishment and bullying, for their own good.<sup>410</sup> Mangan argues that the neglect suffered by public school boys in the first half of the nineteenth century was a ‘product of adult indifference’, but, after 1850, it was the ‘product of adult calculation’.<sup>411</sup> Processes such as flogging, fagging and the prefect system were seen to have positive impacts on character development (despite notable abuses of these practices publicised in the national press), and the physical and mental testing of boys can be seen as a deliberate policy within the public school, rather than the consequence of lack of supervision or the actions of individual pupils.<sup>412</sup> Athleticism and the privations of boarding-school life fulfilled a desire for a tangible form of social differentiation. For public school Old Boys, the sense that privileges had been hard won could be expected to lead, in my opinion, to the internalisation of a sense of superiority which would shape the cross-class interactions in the workplace that feature in the social critiques of the six Men from Nowhere analysed in this thesis.

Thirdly, the rhetoric of athleticism functioned to strengthen validation of public schooling. Dishon explains:

Character development was no longer expected to occur naturally, within the realms of students’ leisure time. Instead, team sports aimed to ensure proper character development by offering those

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<sup>410</sup> Honey associates the notion of English ‘stiff upper lip’ with this facet of late-nineteenth-century public school rhetoric, arguing that concerns regarding homosexuality contributed to the deliberate encouragement of control over feelings among public-schoolboys, p. 192. Honey notes that established middle-class and upper-class parents were already accustomed to placing children in the care of nannies and other staff. Sending adolescent sons away to school limited their contact with female domestic servants, reducing the risk of ‘promiscuous sexual experience’, p.207. For further information on the physical and emotional hardships experienced by pupils of nineteenth-century public schools see Honey, pp. 211-217.

<sup>411</sup> Mangan, ‘Social Darwinism and Upper-Class Education in Late Victorian and Edwardian England’, p. 84. An important balancing argument to this is provided by Jenny Holt. Holt asserts that, in the early nineteenth-century, female writers including Maria Edgeworth and Harriet Martineau had a ‘feminist agenda’ which opposed the ‘anti-domestic ideology’ of boarding schools. Early school stories by these writers explore the tensions inherent in the separation of boys from their family surroundings, contributing to a feminisation of fictional schoolboys in the work of some mid-century male writers of children’s literature.

<sup>412</sup> For further information on corporal punishment in nineteenth-century public schools see Honey, pp. 196-203; J. A. Mangan, ‘Bullies, Beatings, Battles and Bruises: “Great Days and Jolly Days” at One Mid-Victorian Public School, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27:1-2 (2010), 30-59.

activities which educators deemed worthwhile, and which they could influence and supervise.<sup>413</sup>

The move towards organised sporting activities gave schools an active role in the deliberate and visible development of ‘character’ among their pupils. Whilst ‘muscular Christianity’ had been somewhat ethereal, athleticism provided a material manifestation of ‘character’ which could be grasped easily and admired widely.<sup>414</sup> It also helped schools to attract funding for sporting facilities, and to recruit new pupils.<sup>415</sup> Positioning the rhetoric of ‘character’ within the framework of physical prowess therefore gave greater tangibility to the perceived benefits of boarding schools in the public imagination, whilst also offering valuable commercial opportunities for the schools themselves.

In the period from the early-nineteenth century to the outbreak of the First World War, the discourse of public school character had, therefore, evolved from an idealised notion, of how boys ought to behave, to a fictionalised account of public school life in which these character traits were assumed to have been imparted. The overlaying of idealised notions of manhood (from chivalry and classical antiquity) expanded upon this mythology, whilst success on the sports field supplied visibility and ‘proof’ for claims of superiority. Having undergone this process of evolution, the discourse of public-school ‘character’ became a particularly potent, but highly-flexible form of social control over pupils, and engendered a lifelong sense of belonging and loyalty among many Old Boys, which was exploited for purposes of individual and national expediency.<sup>416</sup>

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<sup>413</sup> Dishon, p. 370.

<sup>414</sup> Honey notes that 27,000 spectators paid to watch the Eton-Harrow cricket matches at Lords in 1872 and 1873, demonstrating the high profile and popularity of school sports for the wider public, p. 115. Mangan also describes how French educationalists Demogeot and Mantucci, and the German expert Ludwig Weise, praised the approach to organised sporting activity of English public schools, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, p. 130.

<sup>415</sup> For further information on the systemisation of public school sports, and the commercial opportunities it presented see J. A. Mangan, ‘Chapter 4: Compulsion, conformity and allegiance’ in *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, pp. 68-96.

<sup>416</sup> There are numerous sources discussing the ways in which public schools engendered life-long loyalty among their alumni. Jeffrey Richards discusses Cyril Connolly’s ‘theory of permanent

I will now argue, however, that this discourse was given greater potency in this period by scientific and political factors (specifically class-motivated exploitation of scientific theories, and protectionist obstructions of educational reform through parliamentary process) which underpinned claims of superiority. These factors enabled the discourse to undermine the potential for greater social mobility arising from expanded access to elementary education amongst the working-classes.

## **Scientific and political factors underpinning the discourse of public school character**

The character-building claims of public schools, particularly those relating to athleticism, were predicated on the assumption that specific kinds of physical activity strengthened an individual's moral code.<sup>417</sup> Roberta J. Park notes: 'It was widely held that mind was the seat of the 'will' and that 'will' performed a decisive role in the formation of character'.<sup>418</sup> The scientific through-line that Park traces demonstrates how the ability of the mind to control movement of the body's muscles was assumed (by supporters of athleticism) to have a reciprocal consequence, namely the ability of specific repetitive movements of the body to impact upon the mind (and therefore on an individual's 'will', thereby building 'character'). Park's through-line begins with late-eighteenth century discoveries relating to the nervous

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adolescence', which asserts that the public school experiences of Old Boys were 'so intense as to dominate their lives and arrest their development', resulting in a reluctance to sever ties ("Passing the love of women": manly love and Victorian Society', p. 105). P. J. Rich's monograph *Elixir of Empire: English Public Schools, Ritualism, Freemasonry and Imperialism* (Washington D.C: Westphalia Press, 2014) provides an extensive study of the 'rituals, 'totems and talismans' of public schools and their perpetuation by alumni in colonial settings. Referring to the theories of Antonio Gramsci, Rich describes items such as school ties, crests and songs in terms of 'cultural hegemony'. Rich also notes the presence of masonic lodges at public schools in this period, analysing the importance of freemasonry as a form of lifelong allegiance of the Old Boy to his alma mater, and the means by which alumni could assist the career progression of others from a similar social background.

<sup>417</sup> Holt notes 'obsession with sports and fitness, however, was not just founded in imperialist ambition; it also came from a fear of degeneration'. Accepting that 'evolutionary "superiority" could not be taken for granted', contemporary thinking was influenced, Holt argues, by the fear that 'Nature would choose socially undesirable individuals (for example, the working classes)', p. 170.

<sup>418</sup> Roberta J. Park, 'Biological thought, athletics and the formation of a "man of character": 1830-1900' in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds, *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 7-34 (p. 9).

system by Luigi Galvani, which established that the movements of the body were conveyed between the brain and the muscles by electrical impulses. These theories were expanded upon by George Combe and William A. Alcott, during the 1830s, leading to the assumption of a reciprocal relationship between certain types of motion and the engaging of individual 'will'. Employing individual 'will', to move the body in certain ways through specific repetitive physical actions, it was assumed, would result in the reciprocal strengthening of an individual's 'will'/self-control. If the mind controlled the muscles, the movement of muscles could impact, it was assumed, on the mind. Muscle power, in effect, became interchangeable with will power, creating an association between physical prowess and notions of moral fortitude. These ideas were overlaid, in the writings of Alcott and John Jeffries, with a religious belief in the link between body and mind/soul. This framing of the physical within the metaphysical, in turn, suggested that empirical proof was, in fact, unnecessary. Jeffries, for example, described this link as 'one of those invisible and mysterious relations, which the Maker has been pleased to conceal from the utmost effort of investigation'.<sup>419</sup> Park argues that, whilst the complexity of a human being's development (within a network of social, cultural, ideological and religious influences) made it impossible for nineteenth century scientific knowledge to prove links between physical prowess and other individual personality traits, supporters of the rhetoric of athleticism merged numerous theories and assumed an empirical basis for linking these ideas, despite the absence of proof.<sup>420</sup>

With the rise of the games culture of the 1870s and 1880s, the successful athlete was assumed to be the individual who had best mastered self-control, making him a worthy role model. Dishon argues:

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<sup>419</sup> Park, pp. 7-34.

<sup>420</sup> Park, p. 13. This process of 'associationism' with regard to theories of child development is also discussed by Eddy in 'The politics of cognition: liberalism and the evolutionary origins of Victorian education', pp. 677-699.

As sports are deemed a space for acquiring and displaying moral qualities, winning on the court was assumed to retrospectively prove the moral worth of competitors. [...] Winning had become proof of moral excellence, retrospectively justifying the means used to achieve it.<sup>421</sup>

Mythologised in school stories of the period, the sports field, in addition to the chapel, became a space in which moral probity was assumed to be developed and achieved.<sup>422</sup>

Furthermore, the claims of public school ‘character’ were underpinned by recapitulation theories. Drawing on tenets of Social Darwinism, and explored through the work of Thomas Huxley and William Jay Youmans during the 1880s, recapitulation theories were extrapolated through G. Stanley Hall’s sociological text *Adolescence* (1904), providing an influential basis for notions of ‘character’. The concept outlined by recapitulation theory is that children develop, through play, from a savage or barbaric stage in early childhood, through various civilising phases as they grow, with the aim of reaching full maturity as a responsible and functional member of society.<sup>423</sup> This theory provided a corner-stone for development of youth organisations such as the Young Men’s Christian Association and the Boy Scouts, in addition to influencing educationalists.

At the heart of recapitulation theory is the assumption that the play through which children develop must be of a certain type if it is to result in the development of a responsible citizen. This theoretical framework placed the working-class youth in an inferior position in

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<sup>421</sup> Dishon, p. 376.

<sup>422</sup> For further analysis of the influence of school stories on the discourse of ‘character’ see Holt, *Public School Literature, Civic Education and Politics of Male Adolescence* (2008); P. W. Musgrave, *From Brown to Bunter* (1985); Jeffrey Richards, *Happiest Days: the public schools in English fiction* (2008); and Isabel Quigley, *The Heirs of Tom Brown: The English School Story* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982)

<sup>423</sup> For a more detailed definition of recapitulation theory see Benjamin G. Rader, ‘The recapitulation theory of play: motor behaviour, moral reflexes and manly attitudes in urban America, 1880-1920’ in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds, *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) pp. 123-134 (pp. 123-134).

two important ways. Firstly, as organised public-school sporting activity was seen as the best possible form of developmental play, those without access to facilities for games, and without time to devote to play of this type, were regarded as having inferior and incomplete moral, as well as physical, development, in comparison to those with access to intensive organised games.<sup>424</sup> Close readings in this thesis will demonstrate how some fictional representations of clerks (typically first-generation white collar workers educated in government or church-financed educational settings such as Board schools) engaged with these notions of incomplete psychological development.

Secondly, this metaphorical ‘moving of goalposts’ in relation to adolescent development rendered as irrelevant other equally valid processes of maturation that fell outside the arena of organised sports (for example, military service, working from an early age, or financial responsibility for younger siblings) which could have been experienced by those from less wealthy backgrounds.<sup>425</sup> So whilst it lacked a robust empirical basis, recapitulation theory provided a supposedly compelling scientific argument for the assumed moral immaturity and physical weakness of those educated outside the public school, or those without exposure to recently-formed youth organisations supplying a diluted form of public-school ‘character-building’, such as the Boy’s Brigade and the Boy Scouts.<sup>426</sup> Impacts

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<sup>424</sup> The degree to which notions of public school athleticism filtered down to other educational settings has been the subject of debate. Colm Kerrigan’s article “Missing Men” and missing evidence’, *Soccer and Society* 10, no. 6 (2009), 897–902, argues against the impact of athleticism as an ideological factor in elementary schools. By contrast, Colm Fintan Hickey’s article “‘A Potent and Pervasive Ideology’: Athleticism and the English Elementary School’ (*The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 28:13, [2011], 1852-1890) argues that ‘the ideology which originated in the Victorian public school spread firstly to “Oxbridge” and then to grammar schools before being adopted increasingly by elementary schools after the Cross Commission of 1888’. For the discussions in this thesis, the key point is that those with responsibility for the establishment of recruitment criteria, and those in a position to determine career progression within commercial and industrial settings during the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, were often, themselves, alumni of public schools, with direct exposure to the rhetoric of athleticism.

<sup>425</sup> For further information on military service as an alternative ‘rite of passage’ in this period see Donald J. Mrozek, ‘The habit of victory: the American military and the cult of manliness’ in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds, *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) pp. 220-241.

<sup>426</sup> Holt also discusses the relevance of the national efficiency movement in relation to the discourse of athleticism and fears relating to growing military strength in Germany, pp. 158-160.

of poverty on physical development were therefore framed within a discourse of moral and psychological inadequacy, whilst the benefits of a public school education provided an exemplar for superiority. In addition to impacting on the career opportunities of boys from working-class and lower-middle class backgrounds, this discourse also had significant implications, of course, in terms of gender and race.<sup>427</sup> The fact that educational theorists and policy makers were typically public-school educated in this period, perhaps explains the fact that recapitulation theory continued to gain acceptance, without significant challenge, during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, reaching its peak, Mangan argues, in the 1920s.

The ideology of athleticism was not, however, without its critics. A lively debate took place during the 1880s around the neglect of academic study in public schools as a result of the games cult. It is clear that authors such as Jerome and Wells were aware of the discourse of athleticism and the resulting debates.<sup>428</sup> Holt notes that Eden Philpotts's *The Human Boy* (1899), which sparked interest in adolescent development at the turn of the century, was first published as short articles in Jerome's periodical *The Idler*. Wells's interest in Social Darwinism has also been the subject of a significant body of scholarship. The ways in which both authors engage with ideas such as athleticism/intellectualism, physical weakness, hypochondria and character development will be discussed in detail in the close readings later in this chapter.

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<sup>427</sup> Rader argues that recapitulation theory continued to be used as an 'argument against competitive sport for girls until past the middle of the twentieth century'. Rader, p. 129. Holt discusses the impact of recapitulation theory on notions of criminality: 'The imputation of innate, inevitable and irremediable criminality was, of course, strengthened by recapitulation theories, which said that young people partook of the same moral immaturity as was supposedly exhibited by so-called 'primitive' peoples'. Holt, p. 116. Holt notes that G. Stanley Hall discusses female development in a separate chapter in *Adolescence*, and discussions of child-development in working-class environments are relegated to a section entitled 'Juvenile Faults, Immoralities and Crimes'.

<sup>428</sup> For further information on the debate around anti-intellectualism see Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, pp. 7, 94 and 101-110. Mangan notes that Punch was a fervent critic of the games cult, and includes examples of satirical cartoons on this topic, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, pp. 90 and 91.

In addition to being underpinned by scientific theories, the discourse of public school ‘character’ gained significant traction through nineteenth-century parliamentary process. Whilst it provided a compelling mythology, it is my opinion that the discourse of public school ‘character’ was enabled to become a serious obstacle to social mobility within the late-Victorian and Edwardian workplace largely as a result of measures aimed at reforming educational provision. During the 1860s and 1870s, rhetoric around the intellectual, physical, moral and psychological superiority of the public-school educated ‘gentleman’ was adopted and exploited within a national framework for educational reform, specifically in relation to the Clarendon Commission (1861-1864) and resulting Public Schools Act (1868).

Whilst important competitors for international trade, such as Germany and the USA, continued to apply a unified approach to educational policy, in England and Wales the process adopted for educational reform divided educational settings along class lines. Throughout the Clarendon Commission’s extended process of investigation, debate and legislation regarding the nation’s top nine public schools, important assumptions regarding the superiority of public-school education remained unchallenged. Failure to challenge the veracity of the claims underpinning the rhetoric of public school ‘character’ during these high profile discussions, reframed inaccurate assumptions of superiority of those educated in such settings, as commonly-accepted and unequivocal knowledge.

When England’s major public schools were placed under intense scrutiny by the Clarendon Commission, and faced unwelcome reform, supporters aiming to preserve tradition drew heavily on the discourse of ‘character’ and the creation of the ‘gentleman’ to justify the existence and autonomy of these institutions. Debate at the highest level caused notions of intellectual, psychological, physical and moral superiority of those educated in public school settings to evolve from the abstract to the concrete in the public imagination. Importantly, the debate did not question whether boys educated in these settings were superior. The discussions (predominantly between men who were themselves public-school-



educated) accepted superiority as a matter of fact, and asked how best to preserve this point of difference for the good of the nation. So whilst the 1870 Education Act opened certain doors for the working classes through access to primary education, protectionist rhetoric relating to the nation's top public schools succeeded in slamming doors against ambitious lower-middle class and first-generation working-class white collar workers hoping to exploit newly-acquired intellectual skills. Arguably, it was as a result of the parliamentary process of educational reform that the discourse of public school superiority became a hegemonic norm, through (if not consent) then through the comparative absence of contradiction during public debate.

Lastly, the entrenched positions adopted by the supporters of public schools during the Clarendon Commission and its debates in both Houses, exacerbated class-related obstacles to social mobility by creating practical barriers to entry to secondary and higher education, as well as making it more difficult for those from other educational settings to gain access to certain professions and careers. Particularly in relation to the classical curriculum, and the withdrawal of opportunities for local boys to study at the nation's top public schools, the outcomes of the Public Schools Act 1868 created additional practical obstructions for those without wealth or influence. Considerable pressure was applied in this period to reform the predominantly classical curriculum of the public schools (calling for increased concentration on mathematics, and compulsory education in science and modern languages) to improve the nation's competitive position in international trade. Colin Shrosbree argues, however, that those resisting change and loss of autonomy of public schools were successful in delaying curriculum reform, retaining a majority focus on classics, and thereby safeguarding the exclusivity of pupils. Shrosbree comments:

What a good classical education did was to confer or confirm the status of a man as an English gentleman. The requirement for a classical qualification made it virtually impossible for a poor but able

man to achieve entry to this elite by natural ability and through private study.<sup>429</sup>

By dictating the criteria against which intellectual ability would be judged, public schools were able to safeguard their commercial interests, assist the success of their alumni in adult life, and prevent the blurring of class divisions through social mobility. As mentioned earlier, the percentage of young people in England and Wales receiving education in the classics was less than 1.9% of the overall school population.

John M. Quail states:

Entry to the upper ranks of the civil service and to Oxbridge was barred by entrance exams geared to the syllabus of public schools, especially classics. The civil service in particular was alleged to have reduced the age limit at which the upper grade exams could be taken to make it almost impossible for lower grade clerks to compete through private study.<sup>430</sup>

Decisions to design entrance criteria around subjects that were only available to a small minority of candidates represents an institutionalisation of class bias. Shrosbree describes three key economic factors which restricted access to a classical education. Firstly, of course, a classics education was not available in the majority of educational settings. Secondly, proficiency in classics required an extended period of continuous and concentrated education. For many families, the insecurity of a parent's financial position made this level of expenditure unachievable. Thirdly, a classical background had no practical application within the workplace, beyond its desirability as a signifier of 'character'. It provided little tangible occupational benefit for boys without private incomes, who were reliant on

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<sup>429</sup> Shrosbree, p. 59.

<sup>430</sup> Quail, pp. 174-175.

succeeding in ‘trade’ or the professions.<sup>431</sup> Whilst science, mathematics and modern languages were more widely available in educational settings outside the nation’s top public and proprietary schools, the successful attempts of public schools to delay curriculum reform, and retain their focus on classics, whilst relegating and sometimes denigrating alternative subjects, provided practical obstacles to entry in well-paid occupations. These actual barriers were exacerbated by the preconceived bias against Board-school educated candidates or autodidacts in the minds of employers, resulting from the rhetoric of public school ‘character’.

It is accepted widely that, in acting against the nation’s interests, the protectionist actions of public schools during this period, and the faith placed (perhaps unwisely) in the ‘Old Boy’, by professions and institutions, contributed to a decline in England’s competitiveness in comparison with other countries, notably Germany and the USA.<sup>432</sup> As the following close readings will demonstrate, authors such as Wells and Jerome (whose disrupted educational backgrounds outside public school settings placed them at a disadvantage) challenged assumptions of public-school superiority and highlighted these obstacles to social mobility. Both authors challenged the wisdom of rejecting curriculum reform, and employed a variety of sub-textual techniques to avoid alienating their (largely middle-class) readership when expressing more controversial criticisms of educational inequality.

In the period analysed by this study, class positions were hardening, educational reform had increased opportunity for elementary education but protected the exclusivity of England’s most expensively-educated individuals, and notions of superiority of the public school Old Boy had evolved from discourse into hegemonic norm. In addition, within the

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<sup>431</sup> Shrosbree, p. 59.

<sup>432</sup> Mangan also notes that the rhetoric of athleticism was the focus of an aggressive pamphlet by schoolmaster J. R. Simpson, just five years after the end of the Great War, in a wider backlash against jingoism, condemning excessive interest in games in schools (Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, p. 1).

lifetimes of these authors, those operating public schools had succeeded in achieving a historic ‘land-grab’, appropriating the nation’s most prestigious schools (funded on bequests and public money for the benefit of the local poor and sons of yeoman), securing them exclusively for those with the ability to pay. The representations of educational settings and their outputs by authors such as Wells and Jerome critique educational inequity of this period, challenging claims of superiority based on public school ‘character’ and problematising the Smilesean discourse of self-help.

### **Challenging the discourse of public school ‘character’ in H. G. Wells’s *Kipps* (1905)<sup>433</sup>**

In *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* Wells critiques the discourse of the ‘gentleman’ in both its earlier Victorian incarnation (through the character of Chester Coote) and its emerging iteration, reflecting notions of public school ‘character’ which are explored through the minor characters of Young Walshingham and Masterman. Through Young Walshingham, Wells fractures links between public-school experience and ethical adult behaviour that had been enshrined in Muscular Christianity and popularised in Victorian school-based fiction for children and young adults. He challenges complacent reliance on public school ‘character’ and warns that misuse of education could accelerate the regression of humankind at a time when inculcation of ethical values in future generations was essential, to prevent the catastrophic impact of aggressive competition (associated with biological evolution of the human species). Furthermore, through the tragic character Masterman, Wells presents a pessimistic allegory of the nation, problematising contemporary discourses around widening educational opportunity. Resisting the Smilesean discourse of ‘self-help’, Wells presents Britain as an ailing and failing meritocracy. He confronts readers with contemporary institutionalised class bias which, through nepotism and outdated educational policies,

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<sup>433</sup> H. G. Wells, *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* (London: Penguin, 2005)

prevented the creation of a true intellectual elite, believed by Wells to be essential for the future of civilisation. Throughout the novel, Wells problematises attitudes towards different types of knowledge, and their respective ‘values’ in a rapidly-changing world.

### **Wells’s engagement with education and society**

In 1921 Wells described the history of humankind as being a ‘race between education and catastrophe’.<sup>434</sup> Coined in the aftermath of the First World War, this statement articulates the urgency that Wells placed on effective education of individuals of all nations to avoid annihilation of civilisation in future global conflicts.<sup>435</sup> At a personal level, education had enabled Wells to escape the apprenticeship in retail organised for him by his family.<sup>436</sup> His first career outside the draper’s shop, and his earliest published works were focused specifically on the educational environment.<sup>437</sup> In 1937 he reminisced about his early career saying:

[A]s a needy adventurer I taught as non-resident master in a private school, invigilated at London University examinations, raided the diploma examinations of the College of Preceptors for the money

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<sup>434</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (New York: MacMillan, 1921).

<sup>435</sup> This view has been widely discussed among Wells scholars. For a recent exploration of this argument read: Jeffrey Di Leo, ‘Catastrophic Education: Saving the World with H. G. Wells’, *The Comparatist*, Volume 41 (2017), 153-176. For other recent interpretations read: Sema Ege, ‘The Acclaimed Outsiders: Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells’, *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi*, Vol 52, Issue 2 (2017), 1-21 (p.2); Piers J. Hale, ‘Of Mice and Men: Evolution and the Socialist Utopia: William Morris, H.G. Wells, and George Bernard Shaw’, *Journal of the History of Biology*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2010), 17-66 (pp. 27-28); John S. Partington, ‘The Pen as Sword: George Orwell, H.G. Wells and Journalistic Parricide’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2004), 45-56 (p. 47). For earlier interpretations based on similar arguments refer to Edward Mead Earle, ‘H. G. Wells, British Patriot in Search of a World State’, *World Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1950), 181-208 (pp. 182-183); Willis B. Glover, ‘Religious Orientations of H. G. Wells: A Case Study in Scientific Humanism’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (1972), 117-135 (pp. 121-123).

<sup>436</sup> Two biographies of H. G. Wells provide excellent descriptions of the author’s early life and struggles to avoid work in the drapery trade. These include Simon H. James, *Maps of utopia* (2012) and Michael Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: another kind of life* (2012). Wells also dealt with this aspect of his early career in his autobiography. See *Experiment in Autobiography: Volume 1* for Wells’s own perspective.

<sup>437</sup> For further information on Wells’s early experiences as a school teacher, at Holt Academy, near Wrexham, see Chapter 4, ‘In the Wilderness: 1887-1899’ in Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: another kind of life*. Simon H. James notes that Wells’s first published works were textbooks entitled *Honours Physiography*, (written with the biologist Richard Gregory), and *A Textbook of Biology* (both books were published in 1893). See Simon H. James, ‘A Prophet Looking Backwards: H. G. Wells’s Curriculum for the Future’, *English* vol. 57 no. 218 (2008), 107-124 (p. 113).

prizes offered, and, in the most commercial spirit, crammed candidates for the science examinations of the university.<sup>438</sup>

As both an avid receiver and provider of education, Wells's own life was transformed by his experiences in school and higher-education settings. It has been agreed widely, however, that Wells saw his role as an educator in broader terms. Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie argue that Wells believed 'the last hope [for civilisation] lay in what had been the first of his occupations', the role of teacher.<sup>439</sup> The overarching imperative for his work (both fiction and non-fiction) was to educate the wider population.<sup>440</sup> Linda Dryden and others have argued that Wells's determination to educate and entertain through his work led to the souring of relationships with fellow authors, such as Joseph Conrad and Henry James, whose foregrounding of form and style over message attracted Wells's criticism.<sup>441</sup>

After the First World War Wells wrote: 'This is a world where folly and hate can bawl sanity out of hearing. Only the determination of schoolmasters and teachers can hope to change that'.<sup>442</sup> The threat to civilisation, in Wells's view was, in part, the biological evolution of the human species. His fascination with Darwinian theories was influenced by Thomas Henry Huxley, under whom he studied biology at the Normal School of Science,

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<sup>438</sup> H. G. Wells, 'Address to British Association of Educational Science, September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1937', published in *Nature* September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1966.

<sup>439</sup> Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, *The Time Traveller: The Life of H. G. Wells* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), pp. 317-318.

<sup>440</sup> Wells's determination to educate through his work was widely acknowledged during his lifetime. His contemporary Stanley Royal Ashby, for example, argued in 1920, 'he is not content merely to portray this wasting of life – he burns to correct it'. Ashby goes on to say that Wells's novel *Joan and Peter* 'serves only as a thread upon which Mr Wells strings his essays on English education'. See Stanley Royal Ashby, 'The Intellectual Position of H. G. Wells', *Texas Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1920), 67-79 (p. 70 and p. 76). This tendency in Wells's work continues to interest scholars. See: Jeffrey Di Leo, 'Catastrophic Education: Saving the World with H. G. Wells'; John S. Partington, 'H. G. Wells: A Political Life', *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2008), 517-576; Emma Planinc, 'Catching Up with Wells: The Political Theory of H. G. Wells's Science Fiction', *Political Theory*, Vol. 45.5 (2017), 637-658 (p. 641 and p. 651).

<sup>441</sup> For further information read Linda Dryden, "'The Difference Between Us": Conrad, Wells and the English Novel', *Studies in the Novel*, volume 45, no. 2 (2013), 218-223.

<sup>442</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Undying Fire: A Contemporary Novel* (London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne: Cassell, 1919).

South Kensington (now Imperial College) in 1884.<sup>443</sup> In his scientific romances, Wells explored various scenarios for the biological evolution of the human species.<sup>444</sup> These fears for humankind were articulated by Wells, in 1896, in his essay ‘Human Evolution: An Artificial Process’:

In civilised man we have (1) an inherited factor, the natural man, who is the product of natural selection, the culminating ape, and the type of animal more obstinately unchangeable than any other living creature; and (2) an acquired factor, the artificial man, the highly plastic creature of tradition, suggestion, and reasoned thought. In the artificial man we have all that makes the comforts and securities of civilisation a possibility.<sup>445</sup>

Wells argues that, without intervention, civilisation could regress due to the impulse for aggressive competition inherent in humankind.<sup>446</sup> The means by which to avoid this fate is the cultivation of ‘artificial man’, for whom cultural influences (imparted through education) can override natural impulses, for the common good. For Wells, the inherent tendency of individuals to secure resources for themselves through guile or violence, threatened the continuation and betterment of civilisation. Di Leo argues that Wells had no faith in

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<sup>443</sup> For more biographical information relating to Wells’s teacher-training scholarship and experiences as a student at the Normal School of Science, refer to Chapter 3, ‘Student: 1884-1887’, Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life*.

<sup>444</sup> Some explorations of the influence of Darwinian theories on Wells’s scientific romances include: Gerry Canavan, ‘Extinction, Extermination and the Ecological Optimism of H. G. Wells’ in *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014); Hume, ‘Eat or Be Eaten: H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*’, pp. 35-51; Patrick A. McCarthy, ‘*Heart of Darkness* and the Early Novels of H. G. Wells: Evolution, Anarchy, Entropy’ in *H. G. Wells* ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2005), pp. 193-216; Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the future: H. G. Wells, science fiction, and prophecy* (Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995); and W. Warren Wagar, ‘H. G. Wells and the Scientific Imagination’ in *H. G. Wells* ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2005), pp. 1-9.

<sup>445</sup> H. G. Wells, ‘Human Evolution, An Artificial Process’ (1896) reprinted in *Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction by H. G. Wells*, ed. by Robert Philmus and David Hughes (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>446</sup> Wells’s interest in eugenics has attracted much attention. For recent scholarship on this topic read Danahay, ‘Wells, Galton and Biopower: Breeding Human Animals’ (2012) pp. 468-479; and Piers J. Hale, ‘Of Mice and Men: Evolution and the Socialist Utopia. William Morris, H.G. Wells, and George Bernard Shaw’.

traditional institutions to redress this risk of regression, stating: ‘Wells is highly critical of the Church’s role in and negative influence on our social, political, and intellectual development. In his view, religion must be replaced by education’.<sup>447</sup> Similarly, Di Leo argues that Wells believed the political process could only be viable if voters were educated effectively.

Understandably, Di Leo argues that ‘[f]ew thinkers in the twentieth-century were more outspoken and public advocates for education than H. G. Wells’.<sup>448</sup> By the same token, Wells was, throughout his lifetime, one of the most vociferous critics of educational policy. In *Kipps*, Wells critiques the shortcomings and potential dangers of early-twentieth century educational provision, and the discourses surrounding it. Through deliberate fictional constructs, he links two important aspects of the education of the elite (the discourse of public school ‘character’ and the cult of athleticism) with the risk of exploitation of the less powerful in society, and the wider regression of humankind.

#### **Young Walshingham: Critiquing aggressive self-interest of the ‘gentleman’ in *Kipps***

Through Young Walshingham, a relatively minor character in *Kipps*, Wells explores the potential for exploitation, of the less powerful members of society, by those with opportunity and inclination for aggressive individualism. He undermines the contemporary discourse of public school ‘character’ through Young Walshingham, challenging the complacent assumptions relating to ‘Oxbridge Men’ that underpinned anti-meritocratic recruitment practices in Edwardian commerce and public life. Through a narrative involving the embezzlement of Kipps’s fortune by Young Walshingham, Wells warns readers of the dangers of placing the ‘wrong’ individuals in positions of power, based on the sole criteria of their educational privilege.<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Di Leo, p.164.

<sup>448</sup> Di Leo, p. 159.

<sup>449</sup> For an extensive study of ‘Oxbridge Men’ see Paul R. Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men: British Masculinity and the Undergraduate Experience, 1850 – 1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).



Young Walshingham, the brother of Kipps's fiancée Helen, is a confident, ambitious and charismatic man, about to embark on a career. One of Mrs. Walshingham's 'Twin Jewels', he is over-indulged and flattered by acquaintances of his sister, and by his mother. Mrs. Walshingham believes that her two expensively-educated children, 'so quick, so artistic ... so full of ideas', are more deserving of life chances than others, needing opportunities 'as other people need air'.<sup>450</sup> Described as 'a slender dark young man with a pale face and fluctuating resemblances to the young Napoleon', Young Walshingham has the personal charm, gifts of communication, and educational background to be accepted by society, overcoming the setbacks of his father's ignominious bankruptcy and early death.<sup>451</sup> His role in the education of Kipps involves how to buy 'theatrical weeklies', 'cigarettes with gold tips and shilling cigars' as well as how to order 'hock for lunch and sparkling Moselle for dinner', how to calculate fares for hansom cabs, and how to keep silent in public places in order to look like 'a thoughtful man instead of talking like a fool and giving yourself away'.<sup>452</sup> Kipps looks up to Young Walshingham as a fag might admire an older boy at boarding school. So when Young Walshingham proves himself undeserving of life's opportunities, it is an almost archetypal disillusionment for Kipps, fulfilling a convention of the *Bildungsroman*.

Entrusted with Kipps's financial affairs, Young Walshingham '[s]peckylated every penny – lorst it all' and then absconded to the Continent to avoid the repercussions.<sup>453</sup> Young Walshingham is presented by Wells as having personality traits in opposition to those associated with boarding school/university education, fracturing links between educational privilege and ethical behaviour enshrined in the discourse of public school 'character'. Within this discourse, a public schoolboy might be expected to emulate the qualities of a Christian knight: 'nobility, loyalty, honour, righteousness, prowess, love, courtesy, diligence,

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<sup>450</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 163.

<sup>451</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 52.

<sup>452</sup> Wells, *Kipps* p. 190.

<sup>453</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 311.

cleanliness, generosity, sobriety and perseverance'.<sup>454</sup> Young Walshingham's actions, however, are ignoble, disloyal, dishonourable, illegal and immoral. He lacks the probity, sense of duty and personal strengths that were associated with educational privilege in this period, and which provided the justification for preferential recruitment of 'Oxbridge Men' into positions of power and influence.

It could be argued that, in Young Walshingham, Wells creates an archetypal boarding school 'bounder', discernible in characters such as Steerforth in *David Copperfield* and Flashman in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Wells's presentation of Young Walshingham, however, is more nuanced, and is framed in terms of ideology. Young Walshingham is a 'bold thinker and an epigrammatic speaker' who has been introduced to the philosophies of Nietzsche, and thinks that 'in all probability' he is the Non-Moral Overman referred to by the philosopher.<sup>455</sup> In noting his resemblance to Napoleon, Chester Coote casts the young man as one of the figures from history that Nietzsche himself identified as a model for his concept of the Overman. By associating Young Walshingham with Nietzschean ideas, Wells goes beyond the archetypal, and creates a basis from which to problematise notions of social superiority enshrined in the discourse of public school 'character'.

Young Walshingham's fascination with Nietzsche reflects the increasingly competitive attitudes in public schools at the *fin de siècle* for which, as J. A. Mangan has stated, the cult of athleticism provided ethical justification.<sup>456</sup> Mangan identifies 'an implicit, if not explicit, crude Darwinism encapsulated in [...] prerogative of the strong'.<sup>457</sup> Through Young Walshingham's identification with the Non-Moral Overman, Wells reframes the 'Oxbridge Man'/public-school Old Boy as a figure with the potential for godless,

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<sup>454</sup> Richards, p. 98.

<sup>455</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 157.

<sup>456</sup> J. A. Mangan, 'Social Darwinism and Upper-Class Education in Late Victorian and Edwardian England', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* Vol. 27, Nos. 1–2 (2010), 78–97.

<sup>457</sup> Mangan, 'Social Darwinism and Upper-Class Education in Late Victorian and Edwardian England', p. 85.

irresponsible self-interest, highlighting the potential for ruthless exploitation of others by men of Young Walshingham's class and educational background.

In addition Wells emphasises that, as a result of their economic privilege, powerful individuals have the potential to accelerate the regression of civilisation. Young Walshingham's expendable income is spent on activities and commodities that would not have contributed to the moral or cultural development of 'artificial man': tobacco, alcohol, fine dining, popular theatre and a disdain for self-improvement. Furthermore, Young Walshingham's expensive education has provided him with access to ideas which, if misappropriated, could encourage the inherent aggressive individualism of 'natural man'.

In this way, Wells moves beyond the archetype of boarding-school bounder in his creation of Young Walshingham. The actions taken by this fictional character in exploiting a weaker member of society (which might otherwise be seen as the moral transgression of an individual) are located within an international ideological framework, illustrating the potential for systemic regression of civilisation as a whole, as a result of uncontrolled aggressive individualism. Therefore, whilst Wells's presentation of the exploitation of Kipps by Young Walshingham problematises the discourse of public school 'character', it might also be seen to demonstrate Wells's engagement with the wider imperative of civilisation's 'race between education and catastrophe' articulated by the author in his later work. Wells infers that the public-school education believed widely in this period to safeguard Britain and its Empire from the catastrophe of aggressive self-interest is, in fact, creating the perfect environment in which the self-destructive impulses of 'natural man' can be nurtured among the ruling classes, against the interest of the nation, and of civilisation as a whole.

As duty to others is a keystone in the discourse of public school 'character', providing the central justification for economic and educational inequality, the notion of privilege without responsibility could be expected to shake the foundations upon which the late-nineteenth century social order was built. Without these justifications, inequality has no

moral defence. Wells's resistance of the discourse of public school 'character' might therefore be interpreted as an important method by which he highlights inequities of a broader early twentieth-century moral and political landscape through his social critique. Young Walsingham's notion of transcendence over the masses, inspired by theories of Nietzsche, is revealed by Wells to be a conduit for the regression of civilisation, capable of reversing recent social reforms.

In a later essay, Wells articulated his dissatisfaction with the education of the ruling classes directly. In his essay 'The Labour Unrest' he stated:

[The schoolmaster] pours into our country every year a fresh supply of gentlemanly cricketing youths, gapingly unprepared—unless they have picked up a broad generalisation or so from some surreptitious Socialist pamphlet—for the immense issues they must control, and that are altogether uncontrollable if they fail to control them. The universities do scarcely more for our young men. All this has to be altered, and altered vigorously and soon, if our country is to accomplish its destinies.<sup>458</sup>

Wells references directly the discourse of public school 'character', within which success on the sports field masks a naïve lack of awareness and practical ineptitude. He also emphasises that the socially-marginalised individual, however well-meaning or capable, is unable of bringing about change, as power has been placed solely (and unwisely) in the hands of these 'gapingly unprepared' public schoolboys. Whilst Wells's 1905 novel *Kipps* predates this essay by almost a decade, his attitudes towards the undeserved privileges of the expensively-educated ruling classes are already clear. Through the use of fictionalised constructs in *Kipps*, Wells challenges and undermines the notions of public school 'character'. In fact

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<sup>458</sup> H. G. Wells, 'The Labour Unrest' in *Social Forces in England and America* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1914), 50-93 (p. 92).

Wells's implied criticism of elite education in this text might be considered more damning than the direct critique in the 1914 essay. Young Walshingham undoubtedly fits the description of naive and inept, but Wells makes a sharper attack on men of Young Walshingham's class. By employing a Darwinian framework of 'survival of the fittest' to challenge the discourse of public school 'character' in this novel, Wells warns that educational privilege is a breeding ground for the greed and moral bankruptcy of individuals later placed in positions of power and trust.

### **Critiquing educational inequity and nepotism through the character of Masterman**

There is, of course, a dichotomy in Wells's notions of an educational elite.<sup>459</sup> Whilst he warns of the dangers of placing expensively-educated individuals without moral probity in positions of power, Wells advocates elsewhere in his work that the nation should be *governed* by an intellectual elite.<sup>460</sup> As early as 1920, Ashby identified that Wells had 'evolved a brand [of socialism] all his own', which had 'little faith in direction by the mass'.<sup>461</sup> Wells advocated the need for individual self-actualisation without supporting entirely the notion of collectivism associated with Fabianism, socialism or communism.<sup>462</sup> Wells was an ardent supporter of meritocratic educational policies and unbiased recruitment into positions of responsibility in business and public life, as the only mechanisms by which to identify those capable of forming an effective intellectual elite. Piers J. Hale argues that Wells saw individualism as 'the source of the variation that was so necessary to any evolution', believing that:

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<sup>459</sup> Wells appears to have been both repelled and fascinated by Young Walshingham, considering and then rejecting the idea of writing a novel following the fortunes of this character on the Continent after absconding. Similarly, Philip Coupland discusses Wells's simultaneous attraction towards, and rejection of, Mussolini in 'H. G. Wells's "Liberal Fascism"'.  
<sup>460</sup> Wells describes an intellectual elite, referred to as Samurai, in *A Modern Utopia* (1905)  
<sup>461</sup> Ashby, p. 73. In his introduction to the 2005 Penguin Classics edition of *Kipps*, David Lodge argues, 'Wells's 'socialism' was not at heart democratic, but meritocratic – even, in some respects, autocratic'.  
<sup>462</sup> For discussions of Wells's complex political affiliations throughout his lifetime read Philip Coupland, 'H. G. Wells's "Liberal Fascism"', Jane Lydon, 'H. G. Wells and a shared humanity', and John Partington 'H. G. Wells: A Political Life', *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2008), 517-576.

Only once a minimum standard of living, of environment, and of education had levelled the playing-field, so to speak, would it be possible to tell who had the aptitude, the character, and indeed the innate biological qualities to apply themselves and make a success of their lives.<sup>463</sup>

In *Kipps*, Wells uses the fictional construct of the character Masterman to highlight anti-meritocratic practices, and to reject the institutionalised class bias of his historical moment. He suggests that complacent placement of faith in the public-school 'Old Boy' is preventing those with intelligence and talent from reaching their full potential. He contrasts the educational and career opportunities of the public schoolboy with those of individuals denied such life-chances as a result of their social class. Whilst Masterman is able to receive a form of higher education, he lacks the kudos and connections associated with boarding school and Oxbridge education, and his achievements are insufficient to break through the 'glass ceilings' he encounters. His access to higher education, in fact, exacerbates his marginality, frustrating his ability to realise an alternative role.

Kipps is introduced to Masterman by mutual friend, Sid Pornick. Sid tells Kipps that Masterman studied for three years at the Royal College of Science in South Kensington (the institution at which Wells himself studied biology under T. H Huxley).<sup>464</sup> Despite qualifying as a chemist, working as a dentist, and succeeding as the author of an academic book (entitled *Elementary Physiography*), Masterman's educational ambitions have been thwarted.<sup>465</sup> Sid is in awe of Masterman's brilliant mind and facility for auto-didacticism, saying to Kipps, 'I seen 'im often reading German and French. Taught 'imself.' Masterman's education clearly surpasses Sid's rudimentary grasp of science. Sid does not realise, for example, that

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<sup>463</sup> Hale, 'Of Mice and Men: Evolution and the Socialist Utopia', p. 43.

<sup>464</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 224.

<sup>465</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 224.

*Elementary Physiography* will not be followed by a sequel entitled *Advanced Physiography*.<sup>466</sup>

Wells voices, through Masterman, frustration regarding the standing of science in comparison to classics, and the lack of opportunities available for those outside the Oxbridge coterie. Masterman's poverty is obvious from his empty pipe and hearth, and his 'frowsy' furniture reflects the physical shabbiness and neglect of Masterman himself.<sup>467</sup> His teeth are 'blackened ruins' and his 'thin-wristed hand', 'angular knees' and consumptive cough indicate a man approaching a tragically-early death.<sup>468</sup> It is an obvious metaphor to see Masterman's terminal illness as a symbol for British society. He argues:

Society is one body, and it is either well or ill. That's the law. This society we live in is ill. It's a fractious, feverish invalid, gouty, greedy, ill-nourished. You can't have a happy left leg with neuralgia, or a happy throat with a broken leg.<sup>469</sup>

His vision of a diseased body politic contrasts sharply with the privileging of the individual, inherent in the Nietzschean notions of the Non-Moral Overman represented by Young Walshingham.

Wells critiques these ideological differences within the framework of education. Having been born into a working-class family, and 'forced into a factory like a rabbit into a chloroformed box' at the age of thirteen, Masterman resents the early curtailment of his education, conceptualising his experiences in terms of physical attack on his body.<sup>470</sup> Working long hours and studying 'half the night' he escaped the factory, but Masterman emphasises that this is a 'poor man's success', unlike the automatic progression experienced

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<sup>466</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 224.

<sup>467</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 227.

<sup>468</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, pp. 227 – 228.

<sup>469</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 230.

<sup>470</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 234.

by those above him in the social hierarchy.<sup>471</sup> He tells Kipps, ‘Some of us get out by luck, some by cunning, and crawl on to the grass, exhausted and crippled, to die’.<sup>472</sup> He denies the existence of meritocracy. In Masterman’s worldview there is no permanent structure by which individuals can climb out of poverty, and the effort of escape shatters body and spirit. Masterman comments:

Unless you can crawl or pander or rob you must stay in the stew you are born in. And those rich beasts above claw and clutch as though they had nothing! They grudge us our schools, they grudge us a gleam of light and air, they cheat us, and then seek to forget us.<sup>473</sup>

Sycophancy or crime are a poor man’s only chances of financial advancement in a world where meritocracy is a myth. Along with Young Walshingham, Masterman symbolises Social Darwinism, contradicting notions of the protection of the weak by the strong enshrined within notions of the ‘gentleman’. Masterman presents the rich as bestial, redefining meritocracy in terms of ‘Nature, red in tooth and claw’. The provision of elementary schooling is reluctant, and the attitude of the rich to the poor is characterised by dishonesty and neglect, rather than *noblesse oblige*.

Contradicting Smilesean notion of ‘self-help’, Masterman argues that social inequality continues to provide a barrier to progression for those with intelligence but without financial means. He argues: ‘These Skunks shut up all the university scholarships at nineteen for fear of men like me. And then –do nothing .... We’re wasted for nothing’.<sup>474</sup> He infers that the superior intelligence of men such as himself poses a threat to the public-school Old Boys in positions of power, and that the opportunities for academic progression are withheld deliberately to contain this threat. It is suggested that, by depriving the nation of its

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<sup>471</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 234.

<sup>472</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 234.

<sup>473</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 232.

<sup>474</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 234.



finest minds, and allowing second-rate intelligences to predominate in positions of power, the nation's potential (like Masterman's potential) is wasted. Masterman laments: 'By the time I'd learnt something the doors were locked. I thought knowledge would do it –I did think that! I've fought for knowledge as other men fight for bread. I've starved for knowledge.'<sup>475</sup> The pathos of this scene and Kipps's 'startled horror' as Masterman coughs and spits a 'gout of blood', represent a stylistic move by Wells towards a social realist aesthetic which is notable within this otherwise light-hearted exploration of social mores.<sup>476</sup>

Wells creates through Masterman a deliberate and pessimistic critique of social mobility by engaging with inequality of education and opportunity at this point in history. David Lodge argues that the character of Masterman is based on George Gissing, 'whom Wells regarded as a good friend, and whose death in December 1903 had upset him very much'.<sup>477</sup> An alternative explanation is that, as the fictional Masterman shares Wells's educational background at South Kensington, there could be an autobiographical connection. The obvious allegorical significance of the character's illness, however, suggests that Masterman is a composite figure representing the wider body of educated individuals attempting to carve out careers without the social advantages available to 'Oxbridge Men'.

Wells's active involvement in (and criticism of) educational policy was lifelong.<sup>478</sup> In the period after the publication of *Kipps*, he was deeply critical of the role of teaching in inciting the jingoism of World War One.<sup>479</sup> Similarly, Patrick Parrinder argues that, at the end of his writing career, conversant with the atrocities of the Second World War, Wells lost faith in the ability of education to safeguard the human species from its own worst

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<sup>475</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 234.

<sup>476</sup> Wells, *Kipps*, p. 233.

<sup>477</sup> Lodge, Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Kipps* (2005). Lodge adds that 'in a clumsy effort to disguise' this fact, Wells named the character after radical politician C.F.G. Masterman. After initial displeasure at this decision, Masterman later became a 'good friend and supporter' of Wells, and his text on political reform, *The Condition of England* (1909) is known to have been influenced by *Kipps*.

<sup>478</sup> For details read Simon H. James, 'H. G. Wells's Curriculum for the Future', p. 122.

<sup>479</sup> For more information read Ken Osborne, "'One Great Epic Unfolding": H. G. Wells and the Interwar Debate on the Teaching of History', *Historical Studies in Education* 26.2 (2014), 1-29.

excesses.<sup>480</sup> During the Edwardian period, however, with the publication of *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul*, Wells used fictional constructs and allegorical characters to problematise and resist contemporary discourses relating to public school ‘character’ and Social Darwinism that posed a risk, in his view, to the future of civilisation. In common with Wells’s scientific romances, *Kipps* proved prophetic.

### **Approaches to social critique in *Kipps***

By critiquing the assumed and ‘actual’ values of different types of knowledge at the beginning of the twentieth century, Wells rejects the assumption that the only forms of education capable of preparing an individual for a position of power or leadership in commercial or public life are those accessible solely to the ruling classes. Wells employs conventions of the *Bildungsroman* and creates minor characters as vehicles by which to demonstrate the outputs of various educational settings, across all levels of society, criticising late-Victorian and Edwardian educational policy and provision. He supports the privileging of science-trained intellectuals, who are cheated (in his fictional construct) of the opportunity to bring about positive social change, by a jealous and embattled ruling class. Simultaneously he mocks and invalidates the perceived value of the two types of knowledge most highly valued in this period. The social etiquette associated with the Victorian ‘gentleman’ (as represented by Chester Coote) is ridiculed, and the potential for aggressive self-interest of Oxbridge men is presented as dangerous and unchecked. In this way Wells challenges the discourse which positioned public school ‘character’ as the prerequisite for positions of influence in this period, and substitutes his own notion of the ‘rightful’ intellectual elite, which he describes elsewhere as Samurai.<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction and Prophecy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), pp. 62-64.

<sup>481</sup> Wells describes an intellectual elite, referred to as Samurai, in *A Modern Utopia* (1905).

Raymond Williams argues that the creation of characters as vehicles expressing specific ideological perspectives is a long-established authorial practice. Stating that fictional characters are frequently based on ‘known social types’, Williams argues:

The ‘persons’ are ‘created’ to show that people are ‘like this’ and their relations ‘like this’. The method can range from crude reproduction of an (ideological) model to intent embodiment of a convinced model.<sup>482</sup>

A character is attributed with social attitudes and moral values of a segment of society, rather than the rounded traits and complexities of an individual. The shared understanding of these categorisations (among author and readers) acts as a form of ‘shorthand’, enabling the reader’s experience of the text to work on multiple levels. The character fulfils an individual role in the text’s narrative trajectory, but signifies, simultaneously, the collective experience and behaviours of a specific segment of society. Alex Woloch argues that this authorial intent is particularly pronounced in relation to the way that minor characters are represented in the realist novel, saying, ‘In [its] inclusiveness, the realist novel never ceases to make allegorical (or functional) use of subordinate characters, but it does ferociously problematize such allegory’.<sup>483</sup> Minor characters convey hidden moral or political meanings but, in the nineteenth-century novel, interpretation of this embedded ideology is rarely straightforward. Whilst *Kipps* was published in the first decade of the twentieth century, it is clear that Wells has conceived the characters in his text to carry ideological freight in this way.

Critics argue that, whilst the interpretation of such ideological content may be ambiguous in the realist novel, the presence of a hidden meaning of some description (however contentious) is, nonetheless, obvious to the reader. Murray Smith contends:

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<sup>482</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 209.

<sup>483</sup> Woloch p. 25. Woloch’s theories of ‘character space’ and ‘character system’ analyse the ways in which these minor characters, referred to as the ‘proletariat of the novel’, are represented, by both their presence and absence.

When we engage with a narrative representation—especially a fictional narrative—we are disposed to finding meaningful connections to a degree that we are not in ordinary life, just because we know that a narrative work is an artifact, a product of purposeful design. We seek to maximize the meaningful inferences and connections that we can make, in a way that would be pathological if applied routinely to our interpretation of the actions of actual persons.<sup>484</sup>

The reader anticipates that minor characters will embody attitudes relating to the author's worldview, cognisant of the deliberate creation of characters as constructs. This is in contrast with the 'partial or accidental' knowledge of individuals obtained through real-life interactions, in which there is no 'grand author or designer'.<sup>485</sup> Wells would have been aware, therefore, that his readers were attuned to seeking 'moral lessons' in his texts.

Wells's exploration of these ideologically-loaded characters is characteristic for the *Bildungsroman* form. Woloch comments:

[T]he hero's progress [in a *Bildungsroman*] is facilitated through a series of interactions with delimited minor characters. Each encounter has a particular psychological function within the interior development of the young protagonist, as minor characters stand for particular states of mind, or psychological modes, that the protagonist interacts with and transcends'.<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> Murray Smith, 'On the Twofoldness of Character', *New Literary History*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2011), 277-294, (p. 289).

<sup>485</sup> Smith, p. 289.

<sup>486</sup> Woloch, p. 33. Woloch's close reading in relation to this theory is *Great Expectations*. Arthur Kipps's narrative trajectory, of course, shares many similarities with Dickens's protagonist.

The conventions of the form imply that a transition needs to be made from the unformed and incomplete individual introduced at the beginning of the *Bildungsroman*, to the fully-formed, complete citizen of society as its completion. The psychological growth of the character is achieved, typically, through interactions with minor characters in the narrative. In the case of *Kipps*, the moral lessons to which the protagonist is exposed imply that this process of maturation involves developing the ability to distinguish between valuable forms of knowledge and those that are without value. Wells's narrative trajectory leads the reader from the hegemonic norm (the assumption that the etiquette of a Victorian 'gentleman' or the academic achievements of Oxbridge man are of value) to a perceived position of maturity which is, in fact, oppositional to the dominant centre. Wells also designs characters deliberately to associate blighted life chances and barriers to social mobility, with inequitable educational provision governed by economic inequality, creating a call to action for social change.<sup>487</sup> Wells's adoption of the *Bildungsroman* form therefore enables him to associate notions of mature citizenship with the need to challenge received wisdom with regard to public school 'character', and places the responsibility for remedying unfairness on the cognisant reader.

John Bayley explains that ideological positions expressed in this way, through characterisation, are particularly compelling:

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<sup>487</sup> A number of theorists have focused on the tendency of authors to employ characterisation as a means by which to explore social systems and inequalities. Alex Woloch has argued, for example, that 'Real life is full of uneven matches, but fictional representation can uniquely amplify such disparities within the narrative form itself' (p. 15). His theory of 'asymmetric character-systems' argues that power relationships are expressed through an author's manipulation of characters and their privileging or silencing. Sara Ahmed has analysed the nature of 'wilfulness' of characters within narratives, in which attempts by individual characters to disrupt societal norms are positioned as problems requiring resolution or eradication by the community as a whole. Sara Ahmed, 'Willful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character', *New Literary History*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2011) 231-253. Elizabeth Fowler's monograph *Literary Character*, proposes the theory of 'social persons' as a means by which to interpret characterisation in early modern texts through an exploration of different modes of social status. Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2003). Deirdre Shauna Lynch has traced how transitions in social hierarchy from the early modern period to eighteenth-century industrialisation have been represented in literary texts through characterisation. Deirdre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

The most fundamental thing about characters in fiction is that by a complex process of rapport between the author and ourselves we know what to think of them [...] In such cases refusal to agree is equivalent to turning one's back upon the author: a simple inappropriateness of response.<sup>488</sup>

An aspect of the reader's reaction to the characters is the tendency to accept (rather than reject) the author's ontology and the values espoused.<sup>489</sup> By positioning specific characters (such as Arthur Kipps and Masterman) as moral custodians in an immoral world in *Kipps*, Wells indicates clearly the worldview he wishes readers to support. In addition, by utilising these characters to demonstrate the cause and effect of poor educational provision and bias on social mobility (rather than addressing the reader directly) Wells 'sugars the pill' of an otherwise polemical text.

Furthermore, Suzanne Keen contends:

The potential outcomes of reading fictional character extend beyond character identification and imitation. They convey warnings about hazards represented by deceptive, manipulative, or malign characters. They invite safe role-playing imagining of actions that would be hazardous in real life. They permit rehearsal of potential future emotional states and experiences.<sup>490</sup>

By surrounding Arthur Kipps with minor characters keen to exploit his naivety (such as Chester Coote, Young Walshingham, Helen and Mrs. Walshingham) Wells emphasises the

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<sup>488</sup> John Bayley, 'Character and Consciousness', *New Literary History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Changing Views of Character (1974) 225-235 (pp. 226-227).

<sup>489</sup> More recently, scholars exploring temperamental character theory, such as Suzanne Keen, have emphasised the tendency of readers to interpret texts 'against the grain' of the author's intentions, reflecting their personal experiences and cultural contexts. For more information see Suzanne Keen, 'Readers' Temperaments and Fictional Character', *New Literary History*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2011), 295-314.

<sup>490</sup> Keen, p. 305.

potential pitfalls to the reader of failing to learn the moral lessons he embeds in the narrative trajectory of the central character. A division is created between the author/reader and the source of danger, and the figure chosen to represent the segment of society placing the reader at peril is the one that commanded (in early twentieth-century Britain) the greatest degree of trust – the man perceived to possess public school ‘character’. Novels of this period might be expected to create characters embodying ideological freight in order to underpin hegemonic norms, encouraging readers to live their lives according to moral or religious tenets. Wells, however, encourages readers to support an ideological position which problematises, challenges, and ultimately rejects a hegemonic stance, placing himself (and therefore his readers) in opposition to a ruling class/conservative position.

Hans Robert Jauss’s system of five receptional modes, provides a theoretical framework within which Wells’s social critique can be analysed in greater depth.<sup>491</sup> In his paper ‘Levels of Identification of Hero and Audience’ Jauss builds upon Aristotle’s *Poetics*, describing Associative, Admiring, Sympathetic, Cathartic and Ironic modes by which a reader might be seen to identify with the hero of a narrative. Jauss’s definition of ‘cathartic identification’, in particular, appears to describe the intended impact on the reader of Wells’s techniques of characterisation. Jauss explains:

By "cathartic identification" we mean the aesthetic disposition described by Aristotle in which the spectator is lifted out of the real interests and affective entanglements of his usual world and placed in the position of the suffering or hard-pressed hero in order to undergo, by way of tragic emotional upheaval or comic release, an inner liberation.<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, ‘Levels of Identification of Hero and Audience’, *New Literary History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Changing Views of Character (1974), 283-317.

<sup>492</sup> Jauss, p. 310.

Arthur Kipps's crippling social anxieties, and his exploitation by those he seeks to impress, co-opt the reader as supporter of this 'hard-pressed hero'. When the protagonist finds contentment at the end of the novel, the catharsis of Kipps's victory over his oppressors is shared by the reader.

Jauss also describes the 'sympathetic' mode of identification, stating:

By "sympathetic identification" we mean an aesthetic which is capable of breaking down the distance of admiration as well as the self-satisfaction of sentimentality and which can create solidarity leading to action and emulation [...] what had once been a model, but is now worn out or no longer attainable or a mere cliché, is then confronted with the new norm of an imperfect, more nearly everyday hero in whom the spectator or reader can recognize the possible range of his own actions, and can thus be provided with practical insight by way of moral identification [...] a 'middling hero' whom the spectator can regard as his own sort.<sup>493</sup>

Jauss describes a mode of reception in which readers do not admire attributes superior to their own, or feel sympathy for hardships greater than their own, but recognise aspects of their lives and attitudes in the protagonist, enabling them to see their own experiences mirrored in the text. In social critique, Jauss argues, this powerful technique is capable of creating 'solidarity leading to action and emulation'. Therefore, from the perspective of reception theory, Wells is leveraging multiple modes of identification (through his representation of his lower-middle class protagonist), thereby encouraging support of his views among readers and conveying a 'call to action' for social change. Simultaneously,

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<sup>493</sup> Jauss, p. 307-309.



Wells dismantles the mystique of public school ‘character’ exposing it as a sham, and rallies support for his own theories on education, agitating for a truly meritocratic system.

## **Exploding the myth of public school ‘character’ in Jerome K.**

### ***Jerome’s Three Men in a Boat***

Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three Men in a Boat*, serialised in *Home Chimes* (in monthly instalments between September 1888 and June 1889) also resists notions of idealised ruling-class masculinity and the ‘natural’ superiority of public-school ‘character’. It was conceived as a travel narrative to discuss the history of the river Thames. The popularity of the humorous interludes, however, led the author and publisher to accentuate its comedic potential.<sup>494</sup> First-person anecdotes presented by the narrator, referred to as ‘J’, have contributed to the lasting popularity of the novelised version of *Three Men in a Boat* (first published in 1889).

Despite its enduring appeal, the critical reception of *Three Men in a Boat* at the time of publication was mixed, and Jerome’s social status was, itself, a factor. Financial setbacks during Jerome’s childhood meant that he received ‘a bare four years of education’.<sup>495</sup> His formal education began in 1868 at the age of nine, at a proprietary school. His progress was unspectacular (despite Jerome’s embellishment of the truth in his memoirs), and biographer Carolyn Oulton notes that he was placed fifteenth in his class, having taken Scripture History, Latin, Greek, English Language, French, German, History and Geography. His education was then disrupted due to a house move made necessary by his father’s ill health and lack of employment. He returned to school in January 1871, possibly with financial help from his older, married, sister Paulina.<sup>496</sup> The death of his father in that year necessitated the discontinuation of his studies however. He began work with the London and North-Western Railway as a clerk, at the age of fourteen, on a salary of ten shillings a week.

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<sup>494</sup> For further information on this change of emphasis see Oulton, pp. 71 – 73.

<sup>495</sup> Oulton, p. 31.

<sup>496</sup> Oulton, p. 34.

Oulton notes that, in later life, Jerome was ‘mocked in the press for supposedly lacking the tone associated with middle-class schooling’.<sup>497</sup> Jerome notes in his autobiography that *Punch* magazine referred to him as ‘Arry K. ‘Arry’.<sup>498</sup> The term ‘Arry’ or ‘Arriet’, in the late nineteenth century, was a derogatory form of address similar to today’s term ‘chav’. The implied dropped ‘aitches’ evoke the Cockney accent associated with working-class Londoners (although Jerome was, in fact, born in Walsall, West Midlands). Even when Jerome was a successful novelist and playwright, his humble background continued to attract censure. Describing characters in Jerome’s play ‘New Lamps for Old’, critic A. B. Walkley commented: ‘These little Jeremiads betray a Muse too prone to flirtation with our old friend ‘Arry’.<sup>499</sup> The juxtaposition of classical imagery, in the evocation of Greek Muses, and Walkley’s use of the derogatory term ‘Arry in this review of the play, have clear class-related connotations.

### **Interpreting the social positioning of the ‘Three Men’**

Recent scholarship argues that the literary significance of Jerome’s text has been underestimated in the past. William J. Scheick argues that ‘the belief that Jerome initially planned to write a straightforward travel guide to the Thames has reinforced the impression that whatever has been achieved in the finished work was more the result of accident than of design.’<sup>500</sup> Scheick argues however that the satire has a ‘clever organizing frame, a structuring scaffold’, and that ‘reluctance to consider closely Jerome’s technique [...] owes something to a general suspicion that humorous works inherently tend to be slight, [lacking] the weighty significance found in more serious undertakings’.<sup>501</sup> Lynne Hapgood supports the view that the comedic nature of the text has led to underestimation of its social critique, stating that ‘Jerome’s book was an insouciant snub to authority, to deference, to class

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<sup>497</sup> Oulton, p. 31.

<sup>498</sup> Jerome, *My Life and Times*, p. 52.

<sup>499</sup> A. B. Walkley, quoted in Oulton, *Below the Fairy City: A Life of Jerome K. Jerome*, p. 85.

<sup>500</sup> William J. Scheick, ‘Going to Find Stanley: Imperial Narratives, Shilling Shockers, and Three Men in a Boat’, *ELT* 50:4 (2007), 403-414, (pp. 403-404).

<sup>501</sup> Scheick, pp. 405-406.

boundaries and to sacrosanct notions of taste and culture.’<sup>502</sup> Hapgood challenges the quintessential Englishness of Jerome’s text (widely categorised as ‘middlebrow’), overturning its perceived quietism, and argues that *Three Men in a Boat* celebrated the joys of egalitarianism at a time when society was shaken by fears of class conflict’.<sup>503</sup> The text evoked ‘the establishment’s second worst nightmare’, Hapgood asserts, stating that whilst the worst nightmare was ‘the rise of the masses in riots’, the second greatest fear was that the masses would ‘debase, trivialise and fail to appreciate the gifts of their masters’.<sup>504</sup> Hapgood’s observation that Jerome rejects assumed positive character traits of those of higher social standing, thereby destabilising social attitudes, has particular relevance for the discussions which follow.

Interpreting the social critique of this text is complicated by the social ambiguity of the three central characters. Michael Bender states: ‘Coming from a very humble background, Jerome appointed himself the champion of their cause and attacks a number of Victorian sacred cows.’<sup>505</sup> In Bender’s view, Jerome represents the ‘three men’ as aspirational first-generation white collar workers (men of Jerome’s own social standing) and uses this as a platform upon which to support their points of view. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the reader is led, deliberately by Jerome, to believe the text is autobiographical. The three main characters are presented as ‘real’ people, with the narrator being Jerome himself, and the other two characters George (based on George Wingrave), and Harris (based on Carl Hentschel) inspired by two of Jerome’s closest friends. Jerome wrote in his preface to the first novelised edition:

The chief beauty of this book lies not so much in its literary style, or  
in the extent and usefulness of the information it conveys, as in its

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<sup>502</sup> Hapgood, p. 20.

<sup>503</sup> Hapgood, pp. 18-19.

<sup>504</sup> Hapgood, p. 20.

<sup>505</sup> Michael Bender, ‘Angry Voices on the River Bank: A reinterpretation of two aquatic classics’, *The Mariner’s Mirror*, 101:2 (2015), 156-167 (p. 158).

simple truthfulness. Its pages form the record of events that really happened ...George and Harris and Montmorency are not poetic ideals, but things of flesh and blood – especially George, who weighs about twelve stone.<sup>506</sup>

Jerome admits, however, that elements of the Preface are deliberately misleading. In his autobiography, Jerome stated: ‘There wasn’t any dog. I didn’t possess a dog in those days. Neither did George. Nor did Harris ... Montmorency I evolved out of my inner consciousness’.<sup>507</sup> Jerome’s self-deprecating air in the novel’s Preface suggests that all he has to offer the reader in return for his/her purchase of the book is his ‘simple truthfulness’ in relating what ‘really happened’ on this journey. This claim does not, of course, hold water.

An important examination of the changes made to the text, to prepare it for publication in novel form, reveals that Jerome altered the perceived social standing of his narrator in his wording of the novel’s Preface. Wild notes a ‘small but significant textual amendment that was made between the serialised and single volume versions of the tale’.<sup>508</sup> In the opening paragraph of the serialised version of *Three Men in a Boat*, Wild observes, the narrator J makes a ‘self-conscious grammatical slip’ and then apologises. The text reads: ‘It is very odd, but good grammar always sounds so stiff and strange to me. I suppose it is having been brought up in our family that is the cause of this’.<sup>509</sup> Jerome clearly positions J as a character from a humble background, with an incomplete grasp of grammar, in this initial version. Wild observes, however, that the opening paragraph of the novelised version was altered by Jerome to eradicate this grammatical slip and apology. Wild argues that, via these edits, Jerome avoids the impression that his characters are “‘cockney” clerks aping

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<sup>506</sup> Jerome, Preface to *Three Men in a Boat* (1889)

<sup>507</sup> Jerome, *My Life and Times*, p. 75.

<sup>508</sup> Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880 – 1939*, p. 68.

<sup>509</sup> Jerome quoted in Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, p. 68.

their betters' and provides his audience with characters and events which 'reflected social aspirations'.<sup>510</sup>

The subtle manipulations of 'social typing' observed by Wild are an important indication of Jerome's technique for social commentary. Jerome capitalises upon the liminality of his own social position, and the blurring of social boundaries in this period with regard to an emerging 'clerk class' of first-generation white collar workers. Jerome does not anchor the social positioning of the characters definitively in his text and, by leaving this open to individual interpretation, he is able to deliver biting satire with less risk of alienating readers. His preface to the novel links the three central characters to the emerging 'clerk class', by stating that this is an autobiographical account, and by employing some elements of slang dialogue. As the following close readings reveal, however, Jerome provides subtle clues, throughout the novel, that the 'three men' are in fact members of the comfortable middle class, rather than individuals aspiring to transcend working-class roots. This is achieved by the inclusion of hints (which would today be seen as social signifiers) embedded in the comedic anecdotes. Mapped across the novel as a whole, Jerome's social critique is clearly critical of a particular kind of *privileged* rather than proletarian masculinity. Ambiguity around the social standing of the 'three men' provides camouflage for a searing criticism of the weaknesses of character associated with men born into privilege. By masking his social critique, Jerome is able to create characters capable of carrying significant ideological freight, whilst shielding his reputation and commercial success from damaging reactions of readers and critics. Importantly, the negative traits he associates with the three central characters are opposites of those associated with public school 'character'.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the assumed social superiority of the ex-public schoolboy in this period was predicated upon a number of specific desirable personality traits

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<sup>510</sup> Wild p. 67.

believed to be developed in individuals through their experiences at boarding school. These traits can be grouped under four headings:

- Leadership qualities: nobility; self-reliance; loyalty to one's peers and country; ability/desire to protect those weaker than oneself; cool judgement.
- Intellectual superiority: mental acuity; classical education.
- Moral superiority: moderation/sobriety; moral probity/honour; sense of fairness/fair play; sacrifice/selflessness; cleanliness; self-restraint.
- Physical superiority: strength; health; courage/heroism; stoicism; diligence; perseverance.

As the following close readings reveal, Jerome engages with these traits of public school 'character', deriving humour from the ways in which the three central characters fall short of such ideals. The 'three men' demonstrate flawed leadership qualities, intellectual inferiority, moral failings and physical shortcomings. By expressing his scepticism regarding the feasibility of public school 'character', and by providing their farcical counterpoint, Jerome demythologises and defuses the potency of the discourse.

### **Complicating social typing in the morality tale of Stivvings**

Early in the novel, an anecdote involving Stivvings (presented as an ex-schoolfriend of J) introduces ambiguity regarding the social standing of the 'three men':

There was a boy at our school, we used to call him Sandford and Merton.<sup>511</sup> His real name was Stivvings. He was the most extraordinary lad I ever came across. I believe he really liked study. He used to get into awful rows for sitting up in bed and reading

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<sup>511</sup> *The History of Sandford and Merton* by Thomas Day (1783-89) was a popular book for children in which the author promoted ideals of parenting and child development inspired by Rousseau. The book would have been associated with the moral training of children and perhaps Jerome suggests that his school-friends labelled Stivvings a 'goody-goody'.

Greek; and as for French irregular verbs there was simply no keeping him away from them. He was full of weird and unnatural notions about being a credit to his parents and an honour to the school; and he yearned to win prizes and be a clever man, and had all those sorts of weak-minded ideas. I never knew such a strange creature, yet harmless, mind you, as the babe unborn.<sup>512</sup>

The anecdote evokes a late-Victorian public or proprietary school, as the curricula of Board schools of this period would have been unlikely to include Greek or French. The narratorial voice adopts language and phrasing associated with nineteenth-century stories for boys set in public schools, with terms such as ‘awful rows’ and ‘harmless ... as the babe unborn’, conveying the notion that this is a reminiscence from the schooldays of J (purported, in the novelised version of *Three Men in a Boat*, to be Jerome himself). As it is likely that Stivvings’s dedication to study would have got him into ‘awful rows’ with his schoolmates rather than domestic servants or parents, it is reasonable to assume that those criticising him, whilst he was reading Greek in bed, were schoolboys sharing a dormitory with him, indicating that the setting Jerome presents is a boarding school. Jerome establishes a sense of complicity with his reader, placing the knowledge-hungry Stivvings on the opposite side of an ideological divide to himself and the reader (who is assumed to share experience of this educational setting and to frown upon such dedication to academic study). The narrator continues:

Well, that boy used to get ill about twice a week ... If there was any known disease going within ten miles of him, he had it, and had it badly ... [Stivvings] would lie there and sob, because they wouldn’t

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<sup>512</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 29.

let him do Latin exercises, and took his German grammar away from him.

And we other boys, who would have sacrificed ten terms of our school-life for the sake of being ill for a day, and had no desire whatever to give our parents any excuse for being stuck-up about us, couldn't catch so much as a stiff neck. We fooled about in draughts, and it did no good, and freshened us up; and we took things to make us sick, and they made us fat, and gave us an appetite.<sup>513</sup>

With the phrase 'we other boys' Jerome positions J and his schoolmates as the majority view, in contrast to Stivvings' minority 'weird', 'unnatural' and 'weak-minded' attitudes. He creates a scenario in which the narrator, an ex-public schoolboy, colludes with other ex-public-schoolboys among his readership. He draws upon attitudes associated with the discourse of public school 'character', in that (as discussed earlier in this chapter) it was considered boastful to stand out among one's peers (in an academic sense). He also echoes attitudes associated with the athleticism cult of the period. Success as a result of experience and family background, rather than individual effort, was key to the discourse.

By colluding with readers to condone these qualities as the 'natural' responses of the majority of schoolboys, Jerome associates this social group with lack of enthusiasm for learning, laziness and lack of ambition. As the anecdote makes it perfectly believable that schoolboys could have these character traits, Jerome creates a psychologically convincing, and therefore compelling, picture of privileged youth. As these are, clearly, not working-class schoolboys, this anecdote therefore has the power to call into question the feasibility of public school 'character' where personal experience may suggest a less idealised reality. If the perceived collusion between author and reader is removed from this scenario, it is

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<sup>513</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 29.



possible to see within this anecdote a barbed criticism. Jerome suggests that the majority of those in receipt of expensive educations squander the opportunities available to them. Being prevented from taking part in the educational life of the school causes Stivvings great distress, but the other schoolboys go to extraordinary lengths to avoid the educational opportunities that Stivvings craves. ‘J’ describes how they ‘fooled about in draughts’, hoping to catch colds, and ‘took things’ with the aims of making themselves vomit, with the intention of being considered too ill to study.<sup>514</sup> By willingly endangering their own health and comfort to try to avoid learning, they waste their educational privileges, and Jerome suggests that less fortunate individuals would make better use of these opportunities, if they were able to access them.

Evidence for this argument can be seen in the paragraphs introducing the Stivvings anecdote, in which the narrator muses:

It seems to be the rule of this world. Each person has what he doesn’t want, and other people have what he does want ... Poor people who can hardly keep themselves have eight hearty children. Rich old couples, with no one to leave their money to, die childless.<sup>515</sup>

The anecdote could therefore be read as a morality tale conveying a sub-textual polemic, rather than as simply a mildly-amusing reminiscence. As the moral of the story is that opportunities are unevenly distributed, and that the ‘wrong’ people often receive ‘blessings’ that would be better bestowed to others, at the heart of Jerome’s tale (framed within a public-school setting) is the argument that educational privilege is wasted on the ‘wrong’ people.

There are similarities here with Wells’s social critique in *Kipps*. Both authors assert that the essential mechanisms for a meritocratic society (such as education) are inequitable, creating a situation in which individuals of talent are denied opportunity, and those of limited

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<sup>514</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 29.

<sup>515</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 28.

potential, who are born into privilege, are promoted beyond their abilities. If we accept the author's claim that the text is autobiographical, Jerome is 'embroidering' his scanty educational background in this anecdote. This could be to gain acceptance amongst established middle-class readers, or perhaps a form of social reinvention.<sup>516</sup> My view, however, is that Jerome elevates the social standing of the 'three men' deliberately throughout the novel to provide opportunities to satirise the ineptitude of individuals from a position in the social hierarchy higher than his own. Ambiguity of social status of these characters makes multiple interpretations of his social critique possible, ensuring that his barbed commentary is clearly present, but can be disavowed if necessary to protect the author's commercial and reputational interests.

### **Flawed leadership qualities**

Having established a framework for his social critique, Jerome provides numerous anecdotes deriving comedy from the misguided arrogance of the 'three men', particularly in relation to their leadership abilities. The three men expect to superintend the labour of others, whilst being incapable of completing the tasks themselves. These tendencies are demonstrated from the outset of the narrative, as the 'three men' pack their luggage. J reports:

I rather pride myself on my packing [...] I impressed the fact upon George and Harris, and told them that they had better leave the whole matter entirely to me [...] They fell into the suggestion with a readiness that had something uncanny about it. George put on a pipe and spread himself over the easy chair, and Harris cocked his legs on the table and lit a cigar.

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<sup>516</sup> Biographers suggest that Jerome was quite happy to reinvent his identity. Connolly and Oulton, for example, note that, in 1880, Jerome changed his middle name (Clapp) to the more impressive sounding Klapka. Later stories suggesting that the name was given to Jerome at birth, in honour of a visiting Hungarian general, were untrue. The story does not appear to have been originated by Jerome himself, but the change of name nevertheless suggests a willingness to self-mythologise.

This was hardly what I intended. What I had meant, of course, was that I should boss the job, and that Harris and George should potter about under my directions [...] I want to get up and superintend, and walk around with my hands in my pockets and tell him what to do.<sup>517</sup>

J assumes that he is a natural leader, capable of directing the labour of others, parodying the natural leadership qualities associated with public school 'character'. J believes those carrying out the work would be unable to achieve the task without his technical knowhow and supervision. His involvement is merely to correct the methods of others and, with his hands in his pockets, he does not intend to 'get his hands dirty' supplying his own labour.

J completes the packing unaided, but forgets to include his boots and has to repack. Then he cannot remember packing his toothbrush and has to 'turn every mortal thing out' of the case.<sup>518</sup> The repacking continues until late in the evening, revealing J's ineptitude, but despite his obvious lack of skill, he still assumes himself to be the natural leader for tasks of this type. When Harris and George begin to pack the food hampers, J continues to assume superiority over them both, stating: 'They began in a light-hearted spirit, evidently intending to show me how to do it. I made no comment, I only waited. When George is hanged, Harris will be the worst packer in this world'.<sup>519</sup> George and Harris are equally inept, squashing tomatoes and smashing pies by placing heavier items on top of them, and clumsily stepping on butter and stumbling over the dog. J continues in a supervisory capacity, but enjoys withholding advice and encouragement: 'I didn't say anything, but I came over and sat on the edge of the table, and watched them. It irritated them more than anything I could have said'.<sup>520</sup> Despite recent proof of his own shortcomings, J sees their poor performance as

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<sup>517</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, pp. 19 - 20.

<sup>518</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 20.

<sup>519</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, pp. 20 - 21.

<sup>520</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 21.

justification for his own sense of superiority, whilst lacking the self-awareness to recognise that he is equally inept.

At the heart of this anecdote (and of numerous others in the text) is the notion that the three central characters lack practical ability, and are over-reliant on the skills of working-class minor characters.<sup>521</sup> Importantly, this absence of practical ability is coupled with arrogance, complacency and lack of self-awareness which prevent the three men from developing the skills they lack. In a number of instances, Jerome presents working-class characters as having superior knowledge and dexterity (despite the assumptions of natural leadership ability among characters of higher social status in the text). J relates, for example, an anecdote of his Uncle Podger's attempts to hang a picture. Despite demanding the assistance of the entire family, including the 'girl and the charwoman', Uncle Podger is disastrously unsuccessful:

With the first blow, he would smash his thumb, and drop the hammer, with a yell, on somebody's toes [...] And then he would have another try, and, at the second blow, the nail would go clean through the plaster, and half the hammer after it, and Uncle Podger be precipitated against the wall with force nearly sufficient to flatten his nose.

Then we had to find the rule and string again and a new hole was made; and about midnight, the picture would be very crooked and insecure, the wall for yards round looking as if it had been smoothed

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<sup>521</sup> An obvious example, of course, is Harris's misguided attempt (Chapter 6) to lead visitors through the Hampton Court maze, which results in the entire party becoming lost. An 'old keeper' is the only one capable of rescuing the group. Harris does not have the self-awareness to appreciate his lack of 'natural' ability in exploring unfamiliar territory and his weakness as a map-reader, but people respond to his confidence and follow him.

down with a rake, and everybody dead beat and wretched – except Uncle Podger.

“There you are” he would say, stepping heavily off the chair on to the charwoman’s corns, and surveying the mess he had made with evident pride. “Why some people would have had a man in to do a little thing like that”.<sup>522</sup>

The task of hanging the picture is a minor one that could have been accomplished effectively, easily, tidily, cheaply and unaided by a working-class tradesman. Yet Uncle Podger lacks the self-awareness to understand his inferiority (in terms of practical ability and manual dexterity) in comparison to the ‘man’ he should have employed. Whilst Uncle Podger is clearly a comic character, Jerome questions via this anecdote the criteria against which individuals are judged. A flip-side of ‘natural’ leadership qualities, Jerome suggests, is the absence of important practical skills and knowledge, and he highlights that the importance of these skills is underestimated in individuals from more humble backgrounds.

This counter-discourse recurs throughout Jerome’s novel.<sup>523</sup> Other examples include the anecdote in which the ‘three men’ are rescued by a group of ‘Arrys and ‘Arriets, who have a superior knowledge of the river (Chapter 9). This group of working-class characters are clearly delineated from the ‘three men’. They recognise J as a ‘gentleman’, addressing him as ‘sir’, and their dialogue is clearly different to that of J, George and Harris, reflecting Cockney roots.<sup>524</sup> When J asks the way to Wallingford Lock, they answer, “Lor’ love you,

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<sup>522</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, pp. 14 - 15. The presence of two domestic servants in this household positions Uncle Podger in a social station above that of the emerging ‘clerk class’. Born a generation before ‘J’, Uncle Podger is already a member of the servant-keeping class and the narrator’s position as a working-class boy on an upward trajectory is problematised.

<sup>523</sup> For example, Harris is unable to scramble eggs (Chapter 11), Harris and J cannot peel potatoes (Chapter 14), and they struggle with the tasks of opening a tin of pineapple (Chapter 12), erecting the tent (Chapter 2) and fitting the boat cover (Chapter 10). These sentiments also resonate with ideas explored by Wells, for example, the helplessness of the Eloi in *The Time Machine* (1895) and J.M. Barrie’s *The Admirable Crichton* (1902), discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>524</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, pp. 47-48.

sir, that's been done away with for over a year. [...] Blow me tight if 'ere ain't a gentleman been looking for Wallingford Lock, Bill!" The pains taken by Jerome to draw distinctions between the two groups adds weight to the argument that the three central characters are of a higher social class than the novel's Preface suggests. In Chapter 17, the help of a washerwoman is essential after their disastrous attempts to wash their clothes in the river:

The washerwoman at Streatley said she felt she owed it to herself to charge us three times the usual prices for that wash. She said it had not been like washing, it had been more in the nature of excavating.

We paid the bill without a murmur.<sup>525</sup>

In each instance, there is the implication that these are expensively-educated young men who, up to this point, have had assistance with practical everyday aspects of life. As a result they lack useful knowledge, and cannot look after themselves without domestic help.

### **Intellectual inferiority**

Jerome also challenges the assumptions of intellectual superiority of those who have been expensively-educated. In an anecdote from Chapter 8, for example, two students (recently returned from Germany) retaliate against the pretentious posturing and patronising attitudes of J's clique at a soirée. Capitalising on their language skills, the students stage a prank in which J and his friends are fooled into thinking that a tragic song performed in German by Herr Slossenn Boschen was 'the funniest song that had ever been written'. J reports:

I don't understand German myself. I learned it at school but forgot every word of it two years after I had left, and have felt much better ever since. Still I didn't want the people there to know I didn't know it, so I hit upon what I thought to be rather a good idea. I kept my eye on the two young students, and followed them. When they

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<sup>525</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 89.

tittered, I tittered; when they roared, I roared; and I also threw in a little snigger all by myself.<sup>526</sup>

The students sneak away, leaving J and his friends to face the furious performer, and to exit ignominiously: ‘We asked the servant for our hats and coats in whispers, and opened the door for ourselves, and slipped out, and got round the corner quickly, avoiding each other as much as possible’.<sup>527</sup> As with the anecdotes already discussed, J’s behaviour is amusing and believable in the circumstances, and he is punished for his arrogance. The sub-text, however, presents this group of privileged young people as lacking intellectual ability, despite their educational privilege. Despite having had the opportunity to learn modern languages, not available as part of the Board school curriculum, J paid insufficient attention, or was not sufficiently intelligent, to master the subject. Jerome suggests that exposure to educational privilege in the past cannot be assumed to have a lasting impact on an individual’s capabilities. Superficial indications of cultural attainments can mask a lack of actual intellectual ability amongst those with educational privilege.<sup>528</sup>

### **Moral shortcomings**

Jerome depicts all ‘three men’ as lacking the individual moral standards attributed to those with public school ‘character’. All three characters are depicted as lazy. J’s line ‘I like work: it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours’ has become a well-known quotation from the text.<sup>529</sup> J also comments: ‘George goes to sleep at a bank from ten to four each day, except Saturdays, when they wake him up and put him outside at two’.<sup>530</sup> George shows no aptitude and enthusiasm for the role, and his recruitment and job-security appear to stem from social contacts or nepotism, rather than merit or ability. As Michael Heller and Bernadette

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<sup>526</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 40.

<sup>527</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, pp. 41 - 42.

<sup>528</sup> Other examples include inability to read a barometer (Chapter 5), Uncle Podger and his family being unable to carry out basic mathematical calculations (Chapter 3) and George mistaking the time of day (Chapter 11).

<sup>529</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 79.

<sup>530</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 9.

Kamleitner have noted, positions for bank clerks were often training grounds for young men with public school and/or university backgrounds.<sup>531</sup> Recruitment was often via family connections and bank clerks were often fast-tracked into senior management roles. The characters could hail from either the established middle class (privileged young men in training for later leadership roles), or they could be members of the emerging ‘clerk class’ of first-generation white collar workers. George’s laziness suggests he belongs to the former group.

Harris is characterised by his greed and liking for alcohol: ‘Harris always does know a place round the corner here, where you can get something brilliant in the drinking line’ and he is depicted as drunk on several occasions.<sup>532</sup> Harris’s appetite is also voracious. George complains that if Harris’s appetite is increased by swimming before breakfast then he should not bathe at all, because ‘there would be quite enough hard work in towing sufficient food for Harris up against stream as it was’.<sup>533</sup> There are references to criminality: ‘George has a cousin, who is usually described in the charge-sheet as a medical student’.<sup>534</sup> The fact that his cousin’s family is sufficiently prosperous to finance medical training suggests a similar elevated social standing for George. His cousin’s appearance on a charge sheet indicates, however, that expensive education has not resulted in high moral standards. George, himself, suggests assaulting a policeman and spending a night in the cells when no accommodation can be found at Henley (Chapter 14). In addition, J advocates stealing a boat in Oxford if you ‘can take some one else’s without any possible danger of being found out’.<sup>535</sup> Desperate for somewhere to sleep in Henley, the characters asked a boy whether he knew of ‘any lonely house, whose occupants were few and feeble (old ladies or paralysed gentlemen preferred)

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<sup>531</sup> Michael Heller and Bernadette Kamleitner. “Salaries and Promotion Opportunities in the English Banking Industry, 1890–1936: A Rejoinder.” *Business History* 56 (2014): 270–286.

<sup>532</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 10. Harris appears drunk at the end of Chapter 14, and partakes of a ‘plain breakfast with “no dainties” to ease his hangover. George and J also display a liking for whisky (Chapter 2).

<sup>533</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 16.

<sup>534</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 6.

<sup>535</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 97.



who could be easily frightened into giving up their beds for the night'.<sup>536</sup> These anecdotes provide an amusing repudiation of the qualities enshrined in the discourse of public school 'character'. These are privileged young men acting badly, rather than working-class men with 'natural' criminal tendencies.

### **Undermining the athleticism cult**

Finally, Jerome's characters fall short of the physical attributes mythologised by the athleticism cult of this period. The 'three men' display personality traits of physical weakness, disinclination to engage in sports, a lack of stoicism, and hypochondria which are a deliberate counterpoint to the idealised traits of physical prowess, resilience, and robustness of health that underpin the facets of public school 'character' expressed through the discourse of athleticism.

For example, Jerome challenges the notion that physical trials are essential to develop 'character' (a key facet of the cult of athleticism). Rather than seeking out opportunities to prove themselves physically, the 'three men' make consistent efforts to avoid sporting activity and physical discomfort, and Jerome encourages the reader to see this reaction as the 'normal', universal one. J notes that 'people always make gigantic arrangements for bathing when they are going anywhere near the water, but they don't bathe much when they are there'.<sup>537</sup> The natural response to physical discomfort, suggests Jerome, is to try to avoid it, and stoicism in the face of these conditions is neither character-building nor admirable. Harris, J and George exhibit a lack of stoicism throughout the text, favouring easy solutions to problems, giving up in the face of adversity, and falling short of the standards of heroic behaviour associated with public school 'character'. The 'three men', for example, lack the resilience to embark on journeys of exploration, suffering from seasickness, and being unsuited to sleeping under canvas. J describes how a full week is needed on a sea trip before

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<sup>536</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 63.

<sup>537</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 28.

you can ‘begin to walk about again, and take solid food’.<sup>538</sup> J was unable to sleep on board, as ‘some part of the boat which seemed to have grown up in the night [...] kept digging into [his] spine’.<sup>539</sup> The inability of the characters to give up the comforts of their homes, and to adapt to the new sleeping arrangements necessitated by the journey, shows them to be unsuited to the pioneering activities that made the ex-public-schoolboy a potential champion of Empire.

The three central characters are also presented as having no stamina or perseverance. During a protracted search for overnight accommodation:

Harris sat down on the hamper and said he would go no further. He said it seemed a quiet spot, and he would like to die there. He requested George and me to kiss his mother for him and to tell all his relations that he forgave them and died happy.<sup>540</sup>

In a parody of nineteenth-century accounts of exploration, a long stroll around a Berkshire village is enough to convince Harris that he can no longer endure. Their holiday also ends earlier than planned. Despite their determination not to ‘give in to the weather in a climate like ours’, as heavy rain sets in, ‘three figures, followed by a shamed looking dog, might have been seen creeping stealthily from the boat-house at the ‘Swan’ towards the railway station’.<sup>541</sup> They abandoned the boat ‘and all it contained’ two days early in favour of a hot supper and an evening’s entertainment at the Alhambra. They are exhausted by the privations of exploration after just ten days of ‘living, more or less, on nothing but cold meat, cake, and bread and jam’, and abandon the adventure in favour of the ‘odour of Burgundy, and the smell of French sauces, and the sight of clean napkins and long loaves’.<sup>542</sup> Both William J. Scheick and David Ibitsen have interpreted *Three Men in a Boat* as a parody of contemporary

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<sup>538</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 12.

<sup>539</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 95.

<sup>540</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 114.

<sup>541</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>542</sup> Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 184.

popular narratives of exploration, linked to national discourses of Empire.<sup>543</sup> The text can also be seen to challenge the discourse of public school ‘character’, which associated the ability to withstand physical hardship (forged in the public school) with the future of Britain’s colonising mission in this period. The evocative appeal to the senses of smell, taste and touch provides a counterpoint to the rhetoric of Empire, proposing an alternative vision as being equally desirable: the pleasures of home defuse the eagerness for, and justify the rejection of, exploration overseas. At a time when popular fiction has been seen to perpetuate notions underpinning and justifying colonial activities, I would argue that Jerome’s is a dissenting voice.

Across the novel as a whole, Jerome’s motivation, like that of Wells, is undoubtedly polemical as well as comical. The behaviours of his three central characters encourage readers to place their support behind Jerome’s worldview, which is in opposition to hegemonic norms. A process of ridicule and mild reproof shepherds the reader into an altered understanding of how society should operate, whilst an iconoclastic puncturing of pomposity challenges and rejects the discourse of public school ‘character’ by presenting it as an idealist vision surpassed by a more convincing reality. The narrative encourages identification with the ‘all too human’ failings of the three central characters, by allowing personal experience and association with the characters to provide a more compelling picture of the motivations and frailties of individuals. The brilliance of Jerome’s social critique is that it defuses a powerful discourse by exposing the flimsiness of the foundations upon which it has been built.

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<sup>543</sup> See Scheick, ‘Going to Find Stanley: Imperial Narratives, Shilling Shockers, and Three Men in a Boat’, pp. 403-414 and David Ibitson, ‘Jerome K. Jerome, Masculinity and the Parody of Urban Escape: “Sunday-School Stops”’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*. 2018, Vol. 61 Issue 1, pp. 98-117.

## CHAPTER 4

# CHALLENGING RULING-CLASS AUTHORITY IN NARRATIVES OF THE LATE-VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN WORKPLACE

This chapter will focus on the ways in which notions of the ‘gentleman’ and the discourse of public school ‘character’ underpinned anti-meritocratic practices in recruitment, employment and career advancement in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. I will argue that the authors George Grossmith and Frank Swinnerton challenge these aspects of class-based bias in their fictionalisations of workplace settings and employer/employee relationships, and articulate an important counter-discourse.

As Jonathan Wild and others have stated, literary representations of first-generation white collar workers (the emerging ‘clerk class’) were deeply contested and ideologically motivated in this period. Representations of clerks, such as that of Leonard Bast in E. M. Forster’s *Howard’s End* (1910), often characterise first-generation white collar workers in terms of slavish imitation and social pretensions, implying a desire to emulate their social superiors.<sup>544</sup> Wild interprets Forster’s representation of Bast (a clerk destroyed by his desire to emulate the intellectual elite) as a form of ‘cultural protectionism’, stating that for Forster, and other writers from privileged backgrounds in this period, it was necessary to ‘confirm the difference between “them and us”’.<sup>545</sup> Wild continues:

Had Bast’s character offered more reason to protect, nurture and in this way to redeem him, his erasure from a novel with humanitarian values would have proved difficult to justify. The key to disarming

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<sup>544</sup> E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (London: Edward Arnold, 1910). For a close reading of this text see Wild, Chapter 6 ‘The Friends and Patrons of Leonard Bast: Liberal Anxiety and the Edwardian Clerk’ in *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880 – 1939*, pp. 101-122.

<sup>545</sup> Wild, p. 114

the clerk's potential for redemption was to prove his lack of worth and thus alienate him from the putative readership.<sup>546</sup>

Even members of the liberal intelligentsia in this period, Wild argues, were 'unable to countenance the growth of a cultured lower middle class'.<sup>547</sup> Whilst promoting empathy for those without educational privilege, Forster's ideologically-loaded representation of Bast also provides a justification for maintaining social divisions.

These social differences relied upon, and were articulated in terms of, the discourse of public school 'character'. Forster's representation differentiates Bast from the liberal intelligentsia (for example the Schlegels) by suggesting that he lacks the personality traits that would make assimilation of high culture feasible. The investment of effort by his social 'superiors' is therefore pointless and damaging. Forster suggests that the Schlegels's choice of protégé was unwise, making the outcome of Bast's rapid social elevation a tragic inevitability, brought about by ill-advised philanthropy. So whilst the text acknowledges the presence of class-based bias, it simultaneously exonerates those in a position to bring about social change.

In addition to highlighting Bast's inadequate education and awareness of the commercial world, Forster depicts the clerk in terms of incomplete maturation and emotional growth. Bast is the antithesis of public school 'character', lacking traits such as physical and emotional maturity and stoicism associated with educational privilege within the discourse.

In this chapter I will analyse how George Grossmith and Frank Swinnerton resist and reject the discourse of public school 'character', challenging notions of psychological weakness, incomplete maturation and 'littleness' attributed to first-generation white collar workers. These socially-marginalised authors describe forms of resistance and working-class/lower-middle class agency that have, to date, received little scholarly attention.

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<sup>546</sup> Wild, p. 116.

<sup>547</sup> Wild, p. 114.

Examples of collective resistance by workers in this period, through the rise of trade unionism, have been the focus of extensive scholarship, and texts such as Robert Tressell's *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (written 1910, published 1914) have been examined within this social and historical context.<sup>548</sup> This chapter will focus, however, on *individual* rejections of ruling class authority in non-unionised settings, by lower-middle class workers, which have been largely overlooked. I will demonstrate that interrogating representations of employer/employee relationships in these workplace settings can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how literature was utilised in this period to critique, resist and reject hegemonic attitudes and systemic inequalities.

Importantly, this chapter will analyse the employer/employee paradigm 'from below', and will argue that these narratives describe an important period of transition within the business landscape of this period. The transition between paternalistic and bureaucratic power relationships in the workplace at the turn of the century has been documented by historians such as Michael Heller.<sup>549</sup> This chapter will add to this body of work by arguing that these texts by socially-marginalised authors chronicle this transitional process, at a time when the notion of bureaucratisation of corporations was yet to be generally understood and fully articulated. The authors in this study criticised societally-sanctioned, paternalistic exploitation of first-generation white collar workers (both male and female) and depicted alternative, more equitable, methods of business management which anticipated changes within the workplace that emerged from the post-WWI period onwards.

As an overarching theme, I will argue that reversing the traditional trajectory for analysis of class in literary texts is particularly revealing in these narratives of the workplace. Figures such as Leonard Bast have become synonymous with the lower-middle class of this period in the public imagination. I will argue, however, that such representations are simply

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<sup>548</sup> Robert Tressell (Noonan), *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (London: Grant Richards, 1914)

<sup>549</sup> Michael Heller, *London Clerical Workers, 1880-1914: Development of the Labour Market* (London and Brookfield: Pickering & Chatto, 2011).

a reflection of the anxieties of the dominant ‘centre’. As such, these representations of the late-Victorian and Edwardian white-collar worker ‘from above’ are obscuring a more nuanced understanding of class-based interactions and tensions that can only be gained by analysing narratives of the workplace from the ‘bottom up’. This chapter will therefore address four overarching questions:

- How does each author represent the workplace, and the employer/employee paradigm at its heart?
- How does each writer problematise, resist and reject the discourse of public school ‘character’ by engaging with a counter-discourse?
- How do the definitions of success imagined for first-generation white collar workers by authors writing ‘from above’ (such as Forster’s representation of Bast) differ from those by socially-marginalised writers depicting members of their own social group?
- How do these authors challenge, resist and reject social attitudes of the dominant centre?

I will begin by summarising key aspects of social, historical and economic context.

## **The rise of the ‘clerk class’ in late-Victorian and Edwardian society**

The number of men employed in white-collar occupations increased rapidly during this period, from 130,000 in 1861 to 739,000 in 1911. In addition, whilst around 2,000 women were working in white-collar roles in 1861, approximately 157,000 women had obtained employment in roles such as telephonists, typists or low-status clerks by 1911. This represented an increase in white-collar roles from 0.8% of the total workforce in 1851 to 4% by 1901.<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>550</sup> Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), p. 2. For further statistics on the growth of white-collar occupations see Geoffrey A. Spurr, ‘The London YMCA: A Haven of Masculine Self-Improvement and Socialization for the Late-Victorian and Edwardian Clerk’, *Canadian Journal of History*, XXXVII (August 2002), 276-301 (p. 277); Jose Harris, *Private Lives Public*

Any study of office workers, however, must take into account the wide diversity of social status and income among those classified broadly as clerks. Clerks employed by banks and insurance companies, described as ‘the aristocracy of the clerical profession’, received higher salaries overall, followed closely by clerks in national and local administration.<sup>551</sup> David Lockwood notes that almost 50% of insurance and banking clerks, and well over a third of civil-service clerks had incomes above the £160 income tax threshold in 1909.<sup>552</sup> Of those in less-lucrative commercial roles, the lowest paid were typically railway clerks, of whom only 10% had annual salaries in excess of £160, leaving them ‘precariously on the edge of the abyss’.<sup>553</sup>

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*Spirit: A Social History of Britain 1870-1914* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), pp. 127 and 129; and Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, pp. 52-56. For analysis of this rise by category of employment see Geoffrey Crossick, ‘The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain: A Discussion’ in Geoffrey Crossick, ed., *The Lower Middle Class in Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1978). For the family background/social status of first generation white-collar workers in this period, and for theories regarding the emergence of the ‘clerk class’ see David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, pp. 106-117. Excellent analysis of the rise of white collar employment in London and the South East can be found in Michael Heller, *London Clerical Workers, 1880-1914*. A wide body of scholarship can be drawn upon regarding employment of women in this period, including Lee Holcombe, *Victorian ladies at work: middle-class working women in England and Wales, 1850-1914* (Newton Abbot : David and Charles, 1973); Josie M. Abbott, *The Angel in the Office: The Life and Work of the Office Secretary in Victorian/Edwardian Times* (2009); Peter Bailey, ‘White Collars, Gray Lives? The Lower Middle Class Revisited’, *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3, Masculinity and the Lower Middle Class (1999), 273-290 (p. 283); Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, ‘“Not the Ordinary Victorian Charity”: The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women Archive’, *History Workshop Journal*, 49 (2000), 220-230; Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, pp. 122-123; and Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, pp. 56-65. For theories regarding the increase in employment of women see James C. Albisetti, ‘Philanthropy for the middle class: vocational education for girls and young women in mid-Victorian Europe’, *History of Education*, 41:3 (2012), 287-301 (pp. 300-301). For information specific to employment of women in London and the South East see Heller, *London Clerical Workers*. For employment of women in teaching and caring professions see D. A. Coppock, ‘Respectability as a prerequisite of moral character: the social and occupational mobility of pupil teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’, *History of Education*, 26/2 (1997), 165-86, and Vanessa Heggie, ‘Health Visiting and District Nursing in Victorian Manchester; divergent and convergent vocations’, *Women's History Review*, 20:3, (2011), 403-422.

<sup>551</sup> Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, p. 16.

<sup>552</sup> Lockwood, *The Black-Coated Worker*, pp. 42-43. For detailed analysis of income and career opportunities of bank clerks in this period see Michael Heller and B. Kamleitner. ‘Salaries and Promotion Opportunities in the English Banking Industry, 1890–1936: A Rejoinder’, *Business History*, 56 (2014), 270–286; Michael Heller, ‘Work, income and stability: The late Victorian and Edwardian London male clerk revisited’, *Business History*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (May 2008), 253–271; and Ingrid Jeacle, ‘“The bank clerk in Victorian society: the case of Hoare and Company”’, *Journal of Management History*, Vol. 16 Issue: 3 (2010), 312-326.

<sup>553</sup> Lockwood, *The Black-Coated Worker*, pp. 43. For information on the financial situation of railway clerks see Peter Scott and James Trevor Walker, pp. 564–588; and Heller, *London Clerical Workers, 1880-1914*, pp. 37-38.



There has been considerable debate in recent years regarding the financial circumstances and career advancement prospects of clerks in this period. Earlier scholarship, including influential studies by David Lockwood, *The Black-coated Worker* (first published in 1958), Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks* (1976), and Geoffrey Crossick and others in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain* (1978), argued that circumstances worsened for clerks in the final decades of the nineteenth century. More recently, some historians have argued that such scholarship misrepresents the circumstances of this social group.<sup>554</sup> Heller, for example, attributes earlier pessimistic assessments to the source material drawn upon by scholars, such as publications by trade unions and letters of complaint, which had specific ideological agendas. For the purposes of this chapter, however, the most important contextual factors relate to individual, rather than general circumstances, including the extent to which an employee's social class (and combination of class and gender) could impact negatively on his or her career opportunities.

### **'Glass ceilings'**<sup>555</sup>

In *The English Constitution* (1867) Walter Bagehot described English society as a 'system of removable inequalities, where many people are inferior to and worse off than others, but in which each may in theory hope to be on a level with the highest below the throne'.<sup>556</sup> This theoretical possibility for social mobility through employment involved multiple barriers, however, both apparent and unacknowledged. As Jose Harris maintains, educational reform had the effect 'not of dismantling the class system, but of loosening its bonds for selected

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<sup>554</sup> For arguments against the prevailing earlier consensus (that conditions for clerks worsened) see: Michael Heller, *London Clerical Workers, 1880-1914*; Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 2 No. 4 (1989), 357-388; and Peter Bailey, pp. 273-290.

<sup>555</sup> The phrase 'glass ceiling' is thought to date from 1978, and has been attributed to Marilyn Loden and separately to Marianne Schriber and Katherine Lawrence. French feminist and author George Sand, however, used a similar phrase (*une voûte de cristal impenetrable*) in her play *Gabriel*, as early as 1839. The phrase is defined by the U.S. Federal Glass Ceiling Commission as "the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements."

<sup>556</sup> Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1867).

individuals'.<sup>557</sup> Historians have identified significant systemic barriers to recruitment and promotion for those without public-school education in the late nineteenth-century workplace, relating to nepotism, the need to self-finance periods of initial training, and entry examinations for specific roles tailored to those in receipt of a classical education.<sup>558</sup> Further class-related barriers to career progression, however, were underpinned by the discourse of 'character', which provided an informal yardstick against which the suitability of individual candidates for recruitment and promotion could be measured.

As Richard N. Price observes, an 'increasingly rigid social stratification' within businesses in the late-nineteenth century resulted in higher managerial positions tending to be filled by those with university or public-school backgrounds'.<sup>559</sup> Whilst this might appear to indicate meritocratic practices, John M. Quail argues that candidates with elite educational backgrounds were preferred 'despite some puzzling counter-indications of [their] aptitude and commitment'.<sup>560</sup> For example, Quail quotes one contemporary writer who recommended

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<sup>557</sup> Harris, p. 9.

<sup>558</sup> For scholarly discussions regarding nepotism in the late-Victorian and Edwardian workplace see: Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, pp. 11-12; Lockwood, *The Black-Coated Worker*, pp. 20-22 and p. 35; and Quail, pp. 172-173. R. G. Wilson notes that 'in the absence of an educational qualification for managerial work, the career and reputation of the [candidate's] father could and often would' be used during recruitment. See R. G. Wilson, 'Office workers, business elites and the disappearance of the "ladder of success" in Edwardian Glasgow', *Scottish Economic & Social History*, Vol. 19.1 (1999), 55-75. Jeacle argues that the preference shown to those from privileged backgrounds when recruiting bank clerks arose from the fear of embezzlement and the resulting potential for scandal in a sector in which respectability was paramount. She also notes that new recruits had to supply considerable security bonds 'to safeguard the bank against future losses'. For further information on the need to self-finance periods of initial training, and abuses of the apprenticeship system by employers, see: Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, pp. 13-14; Lockwood, p. 26; and Michael J. Childs, *Labour's apprentices: working-class lads in late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Hambledon, 1992). A number of historians have discussed inequality of opportunity relating to entrance examinations of the period, such as those for the civil service, which demanded proficiency in subjects such as Latin and Greek, not available to the general population. See, for example, Gillian Sutherland, 'Examinations and the construction of a professional identity: a case study of England 1800-1950', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, Vol. 8 Issue 1 (2001) 51-64. Quail argues: 'The civil service in particular was alleged to have reduced the age limit at which the upper grade exams could be taken to make it almost impossible for lower grade clerks to compete through private study'. See Quail, pp. 174-175. Anderson also notes that the long working hours of most clerks limited their opportunities for study via evening classes. See Anderson, p. 99. For quantitative research into social mobility in this period see James Foreman-Peck and Julia Smith, 'Business and Social Mobility into the British Elite 1870-1914', *The Journal of European Economic History*, Vol. 33 (3) (2004), 485-518.

<sup>559</sup> Price in Crossick, p. 105. G.L. Anderson argues that this 'cut-off of entry into the employer class also placed many clerks in a marginal position'. Anderson in Crossick, p. 129.

<sup>560</sup> Quail, p. 172.

that senior roles in the Civil Service and industry should be filled by those representing the ‘spirit of the public schools’, specifically the ‘unclever boys whom other boys respected and followed and liked’, on the basis that ‘management of men’ was more important than ‘technical proficiency’.<sup>561</sup> Quail argues that, in many cases, this approach to recruitment benefitted neither employee nor employer. Contemporary sources record low levels of interest and commitment for commercial careers among many public school candidates. Quail also gives examples of employers recruiting candidates with disappointing levels of academic achievement, gained in privileged educational settings, in preference to board-school educated candidates of apparent higher calibre and suitability, with proven technical proficiency.<sup>562</sup> Quail argues that ‘[t]he gentrification of British management was a form of institutionalization of pre-existing uncompetitive practices in business’ during this period. He associates this culture of ‘systematic uncompetitiveness’ (and business tactics such as ‘market sharing, collusion and exclusion’) with weaknesses in the UK economy as late as the 1950s.<sup>563</sup>

Access to the public-school experience has, therefore, been identified clearly as a factor in preferential recruitment and advancement of those from privileged backgrounds in this period. Perhaps more importantly, assumptions inherent in the discourse of public school ‘character’ had a simultaneous detrimental effect on those from humble backgrounds by attributing certain negative characteristics to socially-marginalised individuals without justification. When combined with inequitable employment practices, these reductive attitudes impacted upon first-generation white collar workers by articulating class-based differences in damaging ways. In his studies of retail clerks, for example, Christopher Hosgood argues that the living-in system prevalent in this period emasculated male

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<sup>561</sup> Quail, p. 178.

<sup>562</sup> Quail, p. 179-180.

<sup>563</sup> Quail, p. 184-185. For further scholarship on social mobility in this period see R. G. Wilson, ‘Office workers, business elites and the disappearance of the "ladder of success" in Edwardian Glasgow’, *Scottish Economic & Social History*, Vol. 19.1 (1999), 55-75. For quantitative research see Foreman-Peck and Smith, pp. 485-518.

employees, robbing them of their ability to establish their own households, and increased the vulnerability and dependence of female employees. Hosgood argues:

Adulthood was not required of assistants because their employers benevolently assumed parental responsibilities. [...] While employers adopted scientific management practices, they aggressively maintained the façade of old-school benevolence. The consequences of this paternalistic sleight of hand were profound for vulnerable shop assistants.<sup>564</sup>

Living-in, Hosgood argues, created an employer/employee relationship which robbed shop-workers of independence and sense of self, framed within a discourse of full (versus incomplete) maturation to adulthood, indicating a desire for social control coupled with commercial expediency. Hosgood notes: 'At a time when 88 per cent of adult males had the vote, the NAUSAWC claimed in 1907 that 95 per cent of male shop assistants were disenfranchised.'<sup>565</sup> Shopworkers were denied the wider role of citizenship and, I would argue, the discourse of public school 'character' provided spurious justification for the exclusion of this social group.

Existing scholarship has already argued that notions of incomplete maturation shaped representations of lower-middle class characters in literature of this period. Peter Bailey identifies, for example, a 'parodic discourse of littleness' impacting on representations of late-Victorian and Edwardian office clerks 'whose feminized tropes rendered the clerk as socially insignificant as the sequestered Victorian woman'.<sup>566</sup> He argues: 'Conventional manliness could not be sustained in the unheroic, manual occupations of clerk and shopworker that obliged a demeanor more appropriate to the female sex who shared the

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<sup>564</sup> Christopher P. Hosgood, "'Mercantile Monasteries': Shops, Shop Assistants, and Shop Life in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3, Masculinity and the Lower Middle Class (Jul., 1999), pp. 322-352

<sup>565</sup> Hosgood, p. 340.

<sup>566</sup> Bailey, 273-290.

workplace'. Without the dignity of labour associated with manual work, Bailey argues, the clerk in literature of the period (as exemplified by Charles Pooter, in *The Diary of a Nobody*) was 'pilloried' as 'ineffectual, pretentious and banal'.<sup>567</sup>

The powerlessness or 'littleness' of fictional first-generation white collar workers appears to be a typical characteristic of the trope. I will argue, however, that the Men from Nowhere also critiqued the social inequalities to which their characters were exposed. As the close readings will demonstrate, these authors problematised and rejected the discourse of public school 'character', highlighting the inequitable business practices that prejudiced the life chances of their protagonists. By doing so they exposed the potential for exploitation of their fictional lower-middle class characters, and proposed more equitable paradigms for the workplaces of the future. Furthermore, these close readings demonstrate the potential of such figures to destabilise, reinvigorate and reform the workplace.

## **Disrupting notions of ruling-class authority in George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody***

George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* was first published in *Punch* in serialised form between May 1888 and May 1889, and released later as a novel (with important additional material) in 1892.<sup>568</sup> Having remained in print for almost 130 years, the text has proved influential in British culture. Important establishment figures such as Hilaire Belloc, Lord Hewart (a Lord Chief Justice), Lord Rosebery (prime minister during the 1890s), Sir John Betjeman and Evelyn Waugh declared their fondness for the book.<sup>569</sup> *Diary* has also been dramatised on numerous occasions for stage, radio and television, and Kate Flint has examined the text's importance as a predecessor of television situation comedy and

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<sup>567</sup> Bailey, p. 273.

<sup>568</sup> George and Weedon Grossmith, 'The Diary of a Nobody', serialised in *Punch*, May 1888 to May 1889. George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1892).

<sup>569</sup> For further information on the success and legacy of *The Diary of a Nobody* see Joseph, pp. 171-172 and Wade, pp. 127 and 131.

the stage plays of Alan Ayckbourn.<sup>570</sup> Most importantly, its central figure, Charles Pooter, has come to symbolise a particular kind of inept lower-middle class aspiration. The words ‘Pooter’ and ‘Pooterish’ have entered the English language, describing persons or situations characterised by ‘parochial self-importance, over-fastidiousness, or lack of imagination’.<sup>571</sup> These terms are used typically to evoke the ‘littleness’, described earlier, associated with suburban lower-middle class life.

The fictional author of the diary, Charles Pooter, is a loyal employee of a London stockbroking firm. In the first chapter of the text, Pooter and his wife Carrie have just moved into a rented house, “The Laurels”, Brickfield Terrace, Holloway. Despite Pooter’s pride in his new home, its proximity to the railway (close enough for the vibration from passing trains to crack the garden wall), and its unfashionable location, situate Pooter as socially-marginalised, lacking the financial security of the established middle class.<sup>572</sup> The frequent problems experienced with the property are indicative of the poor quality of construction associated with the later waves of Victorian suburban property development.<sup>573</sup> Having situated Pooter socially from the outset, the Grossmiths employ the form of a diary, and unreliable first person narration, to record his daily life, his unsuccessful attempts to gain the respect of others, his relationship with his wife, employer and friends, and his concerns regarding the exploits of his son Lupin.

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<sup>570</sup> Kate Flint, ‘Introduction’ to George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (Oxford: OUP, 1995). Flint also notes that the Oxford English Dictionary credits *The Diary of a Nobody* with over twenty neologisms.

<sup>571</sup> OED <https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/147780?redirectedFrom=pooterish#eid>

<sup>572</sup> George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>573</sup> Pooter is represented as a ‘New Suburbanite’, associated with the migration of lower-middle class families to the suburbs in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, during which the commercial imperatives of cheapness and speed led to a deterioration in standards of construction and infrastructure. For more information from the viewpoint of social history see S. Martin Gaskell, ‘Housing and the lower middle class, 1870 to 1914, in Crossick, *The Lower Middle Class in Britain*, pp. 159 – 183. For literary critical engagement with the ‘New Suburbanite’ see Baker Whelan, ‘Chapter 8: The Death of the Suburban Ideal and the Rise of the “New” Suburban, 1880- 1914’, pp. 140 - 158. Also see Lynne Hapgood, ‘“The New Suburbanites” and Contested Class Identities in the London Suburbs, 1880 – 1910’, in Roger Webster, ed., *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), pp. 31 – 50.

Despite its cultural importance, *Diary* has received comparatively little scholarly attention to date.<sup>574</sup> In the literary criticism that exists, the nature of George Grossmith's satire is contested. Flint, for example, describes *Diary* as 'a celebration and a gentle critique' of late-Victorian suburban life.<sup>575</sup> This view is supported by biographer Stephen Wade, who argues that Grossmith celebrates a 'certain quintessential Englishness, the version bound by the four walls of home and the little dramas and pleasures of the routine, circumscribed life'.<sup>576</sup> By contrast, Lynne Hapgood contests that the humour for readers arises from the 'certain knowledge that Pooter is different from, and less than, themselves'. Hapgood argues the text assuaged 'class insecurities of its period, and empowered those who felt threatened by suburban growth and class change'.<sup>577</sup> Similarly, A. James Hammerton argues that, in George Grossmith's satire, 'elite identity was reinforced by scorning the aspirant'.<sup>578</sup> He contends that *Diary* 'heightened the identification of the lower-middle class with the absurd and pompous'.<sup>579</sup> He describes the representation of Pooter and his profession in terms of 'effete and degraded manliness'.

In the following close reading I will argue that none of these perspectives addresses the text's satirical content fully. Whilst the representation of Charles Pooter combines mockery with affection, and demonstrates the richness of lower-middle class culture (as Flint and Wade state) I would argue that (particularly in relation to the full-length version of *Diary*) the critique of Pooter's employer, Mr Perkupp, is a direct challenge to establishment complacency, rather than a reinforcement of class assumptions associated with the dominant

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<sup>574</sup> Biographer Stephen Wade states he can 'only express amazement that critical discussion of the *Diary* has been so peripheral', p. 132, and argues that the book has proved difficult for academics to categorise, p. 113.

<sup>575</sup> Flint, 'Introduction' to *The Diary of a Nobody*, p. viii.

<sup>576</sup> Wade, p. 94.

<sup>577</sup> Hapgood, *Margins of Desire*, p. 190.

<sup>578</sup> A. James Hammerton, 'Pooterism or Partnership? Marriage and Masculine Identity in the Lower Middle Class, 1870-1920', *Journal of British Studies* 38, no. 3 (July 1999), 293-94 (p. 292).

<sup>579</sup> A. James Hammerton, 'The perils of Mrs Pooter: satire, modernity and motherhood in the lower middle class in England, 1870-1920', *Women's History Review*, 8:2, (1999), 261-276 (p. 262 and p. 263). For additional literary critical analysis see R. B. Henkle, 'From Pooter to Pinter: Domestic Comedy and Vulnerability', *Critical Quarterly*, 16.2 (June 1974), 2174-2189. Also Peter Morton, 'Pootering About', *History Today*, Vol. 55 Issue 10 (Oct 2005), 28-29.

centre. The text therefore can be considered an example of literary resistance, rather than an attempt to assuage the fears of a ruling elite. Furthermore, I will argue that, whilst the reader is invited to laugh at Pooter's social aspirations, the full-length version of *Diary* makes it clear that he belongs to a 'dying breed'. Grossmith implies that employers have a limited time to enjoy the loyalty and respect of employees such as Pooter before a new generation of white-collar workers (exemplified by Pooter's son Lupin) refuses to accept their authority. Grossmith satirises a ruling class unable to avoid the inevitable erosion of its power and influence from 'below', by an encroaching, educated, lower-middle class. The Grossmiths fictionalise a fault-line at the centre of late-Victorian and Edwardian commercial life, about which the established middle class had every reason to be concerned.

### **George Grossmith: A Society Clown**

George Grossmith (widely recognised as the primary author of *The Diary of a Nobody*, alongside his brother Weedon, the text's illustrator) entitled his autobiography *A Society Clown* (1888), reflecting his success in securing the support of the aristocracy and royalty of his day.<sup>580</sup> His popularity as a performer (as a key player in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and an entertainer at private society parties) afforded him access to the higher echelons, where he made personal acquaintances and secured patronage.<sup>581</sup> Both Tony Joseph and Stephen Wade chronicle these social successes. Joseph records, for example, that Grossmith entertained Queen Victoria at Balmoral on November 12<sup>th</sup> 1890, and throughout his long career performed on numerous occasions for the future Kings Edward VII and George V, as a member of the D'Oyly Carte opera company and as a performer for private parties hosted by the royal households.<sup>582</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests fondness for Grossmith in such circles. Wade relates that, on one occasion, Princess Alexandra used her influence to prevent

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<sup>580</sup> George Grossmith, *A Society Clown* (1888)

<sup>581</sup> Grossmith was described as a 'patter man', delivering comic songs and playing the piano. He rose to fame largely through his association with Gilbert and Sullivan's Savoy operas, in which he was the first to perform a number of major comic roles.

<sup>582</sup> Joseph, pp. 116-117, 132-133 and 135-136.



fellow guests ignoring Grossmith's performance at a private party.<sup>583</sup> Members of the royal family provided a doctor when George was taken ill in 1885, and George V and Queen Mary were among those sending letters of condolence when Grossmith died in 1912.<sup>584</sup> Members of the aristocracy, including Lord Edward Spencer Churchill and Baroness Burdett Coutts were also guests at the wedding of Grossmith's daughter Sylvia in 1900.<sup>585</sup>

Grossmith's social status was more ambiguous, however, than his apparent acceptance into these circles suggests. George and Weedon Grossmith, like their father (a court reporter) had the potential for income, but could only continue to survive if they worked continually, in professions characterised by precarity.<sup>586</sup> Lacking inherited wealth and educational privilege, both brothers experienced financial pressures. Weedon, for example, spent periods of time without any income, whilst George was forced to embark on a gruelling nationwide tour in 1890 (aged 43) to meet his financial commitments.<sup>587</sup> George Grossmith's social status, characterised by both precarity and celebrity, was ambiguous in that he was simultaneously included in, and excluded from, aristocratic circles. The title of Grossmith's biography, *A Society Clown*, hints at this dichotomy.

It is important to clarify that the following close reading focuses on the book-length version of *The Diary of a Nobody* rather than on the shorter, serialised version of the text published earlier in *Punch*. I will argue that new material introduced for the novel alters

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<sup>583</sup> Wade explains, 'He was singing for the guests at the home of the Duchess of St Albans in March 1875 when the experience of trying to sing and play in the midst of a horrendous noise of people's loud conversations and laughter overcame him. His dilemma was observed by no less a person than Alexandra, Princess of Wales, who had married the future Edward VII twelve years earlier [...] Alexandra walked to George and sat down to listen, plainly hinting that everyone else present should do likewise'. *A Victorian Somebody*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>584</sup> Wade, p. 72. Joseph, p. 196.

<sup>585</sup> George was a friend of Frank Burnand (editor of *Punch* 1880 to 1906), and was encouraged by him to write for the magazine. Grossmith's *Very Trying* sketches ('pastiche of court dramas') preceded *Diary*, published in *Punch* in 1884. See Wade, pp. 98 - 99. Like Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, the book-length version of *Diary* was published by Bristol-based J. W. Arrowsmith.

<sup>586</sup> For more information on George and Weedon Grossmith's father, see Chapter 1: 'A House of Entertainment', in Wade, pp. 1-34. For George's educational background see Joseph, pp. 25-29. For additional detail on Weedon's career see Wade, p. 96 and Joseph, p. 153.

<sup>587</sup> For Weedon's financial difficulties see Joseph, p. 161. For an example of George's working schedule see Joseph, pp. 134-138.

fundamentally the outcomes of Lupin Pooter's resistance of ruling class authority. The *Punch* serialisation concludes with the ignominious defeat of this character, and his reabsorption into the hierarchy of the firm, as a relatively powerless figure under the control of the authority figure Mr. Perkupp. The novel, however, depicts an altogether different outcome for Lupin, concluding with the recognition of his entrepreneurial qualities and a financially-advantageous marriage. Whilst, Grossmith clearly critiques paternalistic management approaches in the *Punch* serialisation, in the novel he suggests that social and economic change is both inevitable and imminent.

### **What price Perkupp now? Resisting ruling class authority in George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody***

It is through fictionalised interactions between Pooter and his employer, Mr. Perkupp, that George Grossmith satirises the inequity of late-Victorian and Edwardian workplaces and business practices. Pooter's attitude to Mr. Perkupp is one of unquestioning admiration and respect, combined with genuine affection. He retains an unimportant letter from Perkupp as a keepsake, suggesting a sentimental attachment to the employer he describes as 'a good man', his 'good master' and a 'noble gentleman', and comments that Perkupp's 'manners and his way of speaking seem to almost thrill one with respect'.<sup>588</sup> Pooter is affronted when Lupin insults Perkupp, and attempts to leave the room with 'silent dignity' to express his disapproval.<sup>589</sup>

Pooter's respect for his employer is demonstrated by his readiness to approach Perkupp for advice. In matters of polite society, such as the correct manner by which to respond to an invitation from the Lord Mayor's office, it is feasible that Pooter should insist 'of course, Mr. Perkupp knows best'.<sup>590</sup> Pooter also, however, 'mustered up courage' to speak to Perkupp for advice regarding his son Lupin.<sup>591</sup> It is not clear whether Perkupp is

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<sup>588</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 57, p. 98 and pp. 116-117.

<sup>589</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 77. The gesture is ruined when he catches his foot in the mat.

<sup>590</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 24.

<sup>591</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 91.

himself a father, which might have explained Pooter's decision to approach him for parenting advice. By deferring to Perkupp as a more knowledgeable patriarch than himself, however, Pooter appears to reflect the power relationship Hosgood described in his study of retail clerks, in which 'Adulthood was not required of assistants because their employers benevolently assumed parental responsibilities'.<sup>592</sup> Pooter surrenders agency to his employer voluntarily.

Pooter does not question Perkupp's position as a social superior at any time in the novel, and is keen to impress him both inside and outside the workplace. Pooter advises Carrie on which dress to wear to the Mansion House ball, to make a favourable impression on Perkupp, should he attend.<sup>593</sup> In addition, buoyed by pride in their new home, Pooter and Carrie invite Perkupp to a family celebration believing their new surroundings to be 'grand enough' for someone of Perkupp's social standing.<sup>594</sup> Perkupp arrives late, however, and refuses to 'come right into the room', shunning the relaxed merry-making. When Pooter apologises for the 'foolery' of his guests, Perkupp comments, 'Oh, it seems amusing'. Pooter notes, however, 'I could see he was not much amused.'<sup>595</sup> Pooter's embarrassment at the lack of food and untidiness of his home at this late hour demonstrates a deep need for Perkupp's approval. Pooter deems the party a failure as a result of Perkupp's rapid departure, despite the obvious enjoyment of the other guests.<sup>596</sup> That night he suffers nightmares in which 'a lot of low people came without invitation, and kept chaffing and throwing things at Mr. Perkupp, till at last I was obliged to hide him in the box-room (which we had just discovered), with a bath-towel over him'.<sup>597</sup>

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<sup>592</sup> Hosgood, p. 340.

<sup>593</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 101.

<sup>594</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 57.

<sup>595</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 62.

<sup>596</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, pp. 60-62.

<sup>597</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 63.

Despite his position as a social inferior and employee, Pooter feels a need to protect Perkupp. This subconscious compulsion also manifests itself in his waking life. Pooter receives a personal letter from Gilbert E. Gillam O. Crowbillon, a disgruntled ex-client, which criticises Perkupp's firm for its lack of 'intelligence'. Rather than passing the letter to Perkupp, he conveys the contents to him in a 'modified form' to protect his employer's feelings. As Pooter's son has been dismissed recently by Perkupp, at this stage of the novel, a degree of resentment towards his employer would have been understandable, rather than concern and a desire to protect an individual with greater power.<sup>598</sup> This impulse to protect appears to spring from a genuine affection for his employer. On receiving a letter late in the evening he trembles as he opens it 'fearing it was some bad news about Mr. Perkupp', suggesting concern for his well-being.<sup>599</sup>

This provides an important insight into the imbalance of power within their relationship. Perkupp's power lies in his ability to sanction Pooter's success and happiness both formally (as an authority figure capable of promoting him to a better-paid role) and informally (by demonstrating or withholding approval). Pooter is clearly eager to climb the social ladder and succeed in his employment, but his actions are motivated by more than sycophancy. Pooter pledges loyalty and respect to a man he considers to be a friend, and for whom he has genuine affection. By casting Pooter in the role of unreliable narrator, Grossmith is able to satirise Perkupp's exploitation of his position of power. Pooter's first person account reveals that his affection for Perkupp is not reciprocated, and Perkupp actively manipulates his employee to reinforce his authority, as we shall see. Pooter's inability to understand the 'actual' paradigm of the relationship heightens the irony, and increases the text's comedic impact.

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<sup>598</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 120.

<sup>599</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 133.

In addition to amusing the reader, Grossmith depicts Perkupp's treatment of Pooter as inconsiderate and occasionally cruel. By contrast, the unreliable narrator is a blameless character, who offers unquestioning loyalty and affection. Wayne C. Booth argues that unreliable narration can be employed by authors to control sympathy for characters and their circumstances:

So long as what the character thinks and feels can be taken directly as a reliable clue about the circumstances he faces, the reader can experience those circumstances with him even more strongly because of his moral isolation. Such isolation can be used to create an almost unbearably poignant sense of the hero or heroine's helplessness in a chaotic, friendless world.<sup>600</sup>

By removing the 'support that a reliable narrator or observer would lend' Grossmith presents the unreliable narrator, Pooter, as an 'isolated, unaided consciousness'. The employment of this technique emphasises Pooter's social marginalisation, encouraging a sympathetic response from readers to the character's powerlessness.

By framing the moral centre of the narrative in this way Grossmith is also able to convey criticism of Perkupp's behaviour through satire and irony. Perkupp's treatment of Pooter is unfair and his imposition of power over his employee is gratuitous, as Pooter never challenges his employer's authority. Importantly, such behaviour is unworthy of a 'gentleman'. Grossmith engages with the discourse of public school 'character' in order to emphasise that those individuals considered best able to lead others, due to their social backgrounds, can fail to live up to the standards of behaviour expected of them. The ambiguity of unreliable narration enables Grossmith to make pointed social comment

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<sup>600</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 274.

without appearing to criticise openly and, therefore, risk alienating those of Perkupp's class to his personal commercial detriment.

Whilst Perkupp appears to behave honourably, Pooter's unreliable narration provides an ironical alternative interpretation. Perkupp is quick to snub Pooter's friendship and hospitality. He also reinforces their social differences. When invited to the family party, for example, Perkupp stresses in his reply that 'he was dining in Kensington, but if he could get away, he would come up to Holloway for an hour'.<sup>601</sup> He contrasts the fashionable west end of London with Pooter's unfashionable suburb, and positions the visit as a favour rather than a gesture of friendship. Perkupp's domination of Pooter is particularly clear in Chapter 14, when he decides to promote Pooter into a role which is due to be vacated on the retirement of an older clerk. Pooter has given more than twenty years of loyal service to the firm, during which he has only been absent for one day due to illness.<sup>602</sup> His working week includes part-day on Saturday and he routinely works longer hours when necessary.<sup>603</sup> There is every reason to expect that Pooter is deserving of promotion. Pooter's guileless and unreliable account of his interactions with his employer when he receives promotion, however, reveals that Perkupp is taking deliberate steps to reinforce his position of power over Pooter, and to discourage future challenges to his authority.

The promotion is announced to Pooter on January 1:

It had just struck half-past one, and I was on the point of leaving the office to have my dinner, when I received a message that Mr. Perkupp desired to see me at once. I must confess that my heart commenced to beat and I had most serious misgivings.

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<sup>601</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 57.

<sup>602</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 116. He was 'poisoned by some lobster'.

<sup>603</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*. Pooter notes '[T]wo of our principals at the office were absent through illness, and I did not get home till seven', p. 7. Pooter notes 'Kept a little later at the office', p. 107.

Mr. Perkupp was in his room writing, and he said: "Take a seat, Mr.

Pooter, I shall not be a moment."

I replied: "No, thank you sir; I'll stand."

I watched the clock on the mantelpiece, and I was waiting quite twenty minutes, but it seemed hours. Mr. Perkupp at last got up himself.

I said: "I hope there is nothing wrong, sir?"

He replied: "Oh dear, no! Quite the reverse, I hope." What a weight off my mind! My breath seemed to come back again in an instant.<sup>604</sup>

Whilst Pooter does not appear to deem Perkupp's treatment inconsiderate or unfair, the encounter depicts deliberate imposition of authority of employer over employee. Pooter is called, perhaps deliberately, at the time when he would otherwise be taking a break from work to relax and eat. The message is conveyed by a third person rather than by Perkupp himself, and he is summoned 'at once' when it becomes obvious that the meeting is not urgent, and a time could have been set for later that afternoon. Pooter's assumption is that he has transgressed and faces disciplinary action. He is then kept in suspense for twenty minutes while Perkupp writes. If Perkupp had work that needed urgent attention, he could easily have asked Pooter to return later that afternoon. His decision to keep Pooter waiting for such an extended amount of time therefore seems a deliberate reinforcement of his power, rather than genuine necessity.

It is not feasible that Perkupp could forget that an employee is standing in his office, but there is a sense that, if Pooter had not asked him a question, Perkupp would have simply walked out of the office without acknowledging his presence. Perkupp states that he has an appointment at two, and the time would be at least 1.50pm when he stands up from his desk,

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<sup>604</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, pp. 84-86.

so it can be assumed that he intends to leave his office without explaining the reason for summoning Pooter.<sup>605</sup> Perkupp briefly announces the intention to promote Pooter when Mr. Buckling retires, but gives him no indication as to when this will occur, or the increase in his salary, saying that Pooter ‘shall hear more tomorrow’.<sup>606</sup> He then leaves the room rapidly, denying Pooter the opportunity to ask any further questions.

Then begins a protracted period during which Perkupp withholds the information regarding the salary increase which is so important to Pooter. He tells Pooter that he will hear more tomorrow (January 2<sup>nd</sup>). Pooter writes in his diary entry for that day:

I was in a great state of suspense all day at the office. I did not like to worry Mr. Perkupp; but as he did not send for me, and mentioned yesterday that he would see me again to-day, I thought it better, perhaps, to go to him. I knocked at his door, and on entering, Mr. Perkupp said: “Oh, it’s you, Mr. Pooter; do you want to see me?” I said: “No sir, I thought you wanted to see me!” “Oh”, he replied, “I remember. Well I am very busy to-day; I will see you tomorrow.”<sup>607</sup>

Pooter’s promotion is either so inconsequential to Perkupp that he has genuinely forgotten about it, or he is deliberately withholding information which, he must realise, is of extreme importance to his employee. In either scenario, Pooter’s affection and respect for Perkupp is shown to be misplaced. Pooter is kept in suspense the following day, writing in his January 3<sup>rd</sup> diary entry: ‘Still in a state of anxiety and excitement, which was not alleviated by ascertaining that Mr. Perkupp sent word he should not be at the office to-day.’<sup>608</sup> On January 4<sup>th</sup> Perkupp sends for Pooter and tells him that his new position will be as one of the senior

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<sup>605</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 84.

<sup>606</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 84.

<sup>607</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 85.

<sup>608</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 85.



clerks, but still does not give him details of his salary increase.<sup>609</sup> Eventually, on January 5<sup>th</sup> Pooter receives details of his new salary.<sup>610</sup>

Through his depiction of Perkupp's inconsiderate treatment of Pooter on January 1<sup>st</sup> and the delays in revealing his salary increase, I would argue, Grossmith is satirising common-place impositions/abuses of authority by bosses in the late-Victorian workplace. As described above, I would argue that Perkupp is not merely depicted as a hard-working businessman. The unreliable narration suggests he is determined to remind Pooter of his inferior position and lack of power. Perhaps it could be considered that Perkupp is simply doing what is necessary to maintain discipline within the workplace. The junior clerk Pitt, for example, appears to need discipline. However Pooter's subservience and loyalty have never been in doubt, in nearly twenty-one years of service to the firm, and such heavy-handed techniques for the imposition of authority are unwarranted. These interactions, in fact, are reminiscent of the way in which an older boy might have asserted his power over a fag within the contemporary context of a boarding school. As Pooter sees Perkupp as a friend and mentor, Pooter's unreciprocated affection and Perkupp's unnecessary unkindness are poignant. Grossmith suggests, I would argue, that the modern office may no longer have the overt meanness of Scrooge and Marley, but that late-Victorian commerce remains a place in which power over employees continues to be applied without concern for fairness, and with the opportunity for exploitation. The loyalty of employees like Pooter remains unappreciated and grudgingly rewarded.

Whilst the unreliable narration demonstrates Perkupp's failure to act in a 'gentlemanly' manner, Pooter does not question his employer's wisdom or probity at any time in the novel. When Perkupp finds a position for Lupin in the stockbroking firm of Job Cleanands and Co., Pooter urges Lupin to take the post, despite his son's misgivings that

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<sup>609</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 85.

<sup>610</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 86.

Cleanands is an ‘advertising firm’ (suggesting that it has to promote its services, and lacks the longevity and reputation to win new clients through personal recommendation).<sup>611</sup> When the firm fails, and its proprietor absconds, Pooter does not recriminate Perkupp for placing Lupin in an unsuitable ‘berth’. In addition, in Chapter 21, Perkupp acts in a duplicitous manner, pushing Pooter to write to a disgruntled ex-client. Under the cover of Pooter’s letter, Perkupp can implore the ex-client to bring his custom back, without losing face. Pooter is made aware that Perkupp is not acting with transparency. When Pooter asks Perkupp if he would like to see the letter before it is sent, Perkupp replies: “Oh no! I had better not. I am supposed to know nothing about it’.<sup>612</sup> Pooter has no qualms regarding Perkupp’s behaviour, however, regarding him as a ‘noble gentleman’. Trusting his judgement entirely, Pooter takes great pains over the letter, writing sixteen pages. Unreliable narration of these events implies that, whilst Perkupp’s actions fall short of those expected of a ‘gentleman’, Pooter’s actions are ‘gentlemanly’ throughout.

### **Lupin’s resistance of ruling class authority**

By contrast, Pooter’s son Lupin has no respect for Perkupp and has a low regard for his business acumen. Whilst Pooter refers to his employer respectfully on every occasion as Mr. Perkupp, Lupin refers to him by surname alone. He insults him openly, calling him ‘that inflated, sloping-head of a Perkupp’ and ‘that inflated fool of a Perkupp’.<sup>613</sup> He is scathing regarding Perkupp’s company, referring to it as a ‘stagnant stick-in-the-mud firm’.<sup>614</sup> When he is offered a new position, at Gylterson and Sons, Lupin crows:

“What price Perkupp now? You take my tip, Guv – ‘off’ with Perkupp and freeze on to Gylterson, the firm of the future! Perkupp’s

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<sup>611</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 54.

<sup>612</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, pp. 116-118.

<sup>613</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 77 and p. 118.

<sup>614</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 118.

firm? The stagnant dummies have been standing still for years, and are now moving back.”<sup>615</sup>

Lupin mocks the firm’s conservatism and inability to adapt to changing market conditions. At this point in the novel the reader has been made aware that Perkupp’s firm is experiencing some financial challenges. In an earlier encounter, Perkupp told Pooter: ‘Mr. Crowbillon is our most valued client [...] we cannot afford very well to lose him, especially in these times, which are not the brightest’.<sup>616</sup> Crowbillon’s letter to Pooter has also made it clear that Perkupp’s firm lacks the dynamism necessary to meet the needs of its clients. Crowbillon writes:

Your son, in the course of five minutes’ conversation, displayed more intelligence than your firm has done during the last five years.<sup>617</sup>

Lupin is not, therefore, just an example of undirected youthful rebellion, such as the junior clerk Pitt. He represents, I would argue, a lower-working class force within the late-Victorian workplace with the potential to unseat those at the dominant centre by employing ‘intelligence’ and audacity to achieve greater material gain for others. Success in financial terms Grossmith implies, has the potential to propel this group of individuals up the social hierarchy without the traditional advantages of nepotism or elite education. Grossmith suggests that the traditional forms of protection afforded to the ruling classes could be swept away by individuals such as Lupin, in a commercial world in which demand for financial gain is overriding notions of social position.

For this new generation of white-collar worker, the paternalistic employer/employee paradigm represented by Perkupp and Pooter no longer has traction. Whilst Pooter is reliant on the random largesse of an all-powerful figure of authority to reward his labour, Lupin

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<sup>615</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 120.

<sup>616</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 117.

<sup>617</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 119.

succeeds due to his willingness to challenge accepted commercial practice, his candour, and his entrepreneurial audacity, which escalates his monetary worth in the eyes of those in positions of power. Grossmith also depicts Lupin developing useful social contacts among the young and upwardly-mobile nouveau riche, based on shared interests (such as amateur dramatics). This provides an alternative framework for social mobility, outside the established middle-class social hierarchy constructed around ancestry and/or shared educational background. Within the new paradigm, represented by Lupin's employment by Gylterson and Sons, Lupin's remuneration reflects his ability to increase the wealth of others. He rapidly secures a starting salary of £200 (a figure that Pooter has worked almost twenty-one years to attain).

Whilst Grossmith implies that Lupin has the requisite personality traits for the commercial world of the future, he appears to advocate a 'middle road' as the more desirable outcome. Carrie Pooter comments on the similarity between her son Lupin and the character Mr. Hardfur Huttle, and in this abrasive American businessman, I would argue, Grossmith represents the undesirable outcomes that will result if the brash and mercenary impulses of individuals such as Lupin are allowed to predominate. Carrie and Pooter are fellow guests at a dinner party when Huttle's impolite criticism of the assembled guests depicts him as a boorish bully. He says to Pooter, for example:

“The happy medium means respectability, and respectability means insipidness. Does it not, Mr. Pooter?”

I was so taken aback by being personally appealed to, that I could only bow apologetically, and say I feared I was incompetent to offer an opinion. Carrie was about to say something; but she was interrupted, for which I was rather pleased, for she is not clever at

argument, and one has to be extra clever to discuss a subject with Mr. Huttle.<sup>618</sup>

When Huttle refers insensitively to Pooter's 'littleness', the truth of his statement is confirmed by Pooter's subservient response, prompting Carrie to intervene in his defence.

At the end of the evening Pooter comments:

Mr. Huttle was, of course, an older and more influential man; but he was like Lupin, and it made me think how dangerous Lupin would be if he were older and more influential. [...] Lupin, like Mr. Huttle, has original and sometimes wonderful ideas; but it is those ideas that are so dangerous. They make men extremely rich or extremely poor. They make or break men.<sup>619</sup>

I would argue, therefore, that Grossmith suggests that change is inevitable in the late-Victorian workplace, due to the unfair treatment of loyal employees such as Pooter and the rejection of traditional paternalistic management approaches by the next generation of staff. At the same time, he implies that individuals such as Lupin, and the brash American Huttle, should be prevented from harming society with 'ideas that are so dangerous' that they will drive even greater financial inequality. The desirable 'middle road' presented by Grossmith is one in which Pooter himself, representative of the unappreciated and grudgingly rewarded majority of lower-middle class employees, receives his just rewards.

This explains, I would argue, the almost Dickensian final chapter in which Pooter, who has secured some new custom for Perkupp's firm through an American friend of Huttle, is rewarded when Perkupp purchases the freehold of Pooter's home and gifts it to him. In contrast to earlier interactions between employer and employee, Perkupp appears to express genuine affection and appreciation saying: 'My faithful servant, I will not dwell on the

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<sup>618</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 113.

<sup>619</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 115.

important service you have done our firm. You can never be sufficiently thanked'. He then refers to Pooter as 'the most honest and most worthy man it has been my lot to meet'.<sup>620</sup> There is the sense that Perkupp reciprocates Pooter's affection and regard at last. So whilst Grossmith exploits the comic potential of lower-middle class aspiration through Pooter, he simultaneously creates a modern Everyman, and advocates that this largely-overlooked strata of society should be better appreciated and rewarded.

Further evidence to support this interpretation comes from Pooter's report of a dream he has immediately prior to receiving Perkupp's gift:

I kept dreaming of Mr. Perkupp and Mr. Huttle. The latter was in a lovely palace with a crown on. Mr. Perkupp was waiting in the room. Mr. Huttle kept taking off his crown and handing it to me and calling me "President".

He appeared to take no notice of Mr. Perkupp, and I kept asking Mr. Huttle to give this crown to my worthy master. Mr. Huttle kept saying: "No, this is the White House of Washington, and you must keep your crown, Mr. President."<sup>621</sup>

Grossmith advocates, I would argue, the elevation of men such as Pooter, in preference to traditional ruling-class figures, in recognition of their importance in a more equitable society. He envisages a time when American financial interests in the City could make this a reality.

In *The Diary of a Nobody*, therefore, Grossmith critiques unfair treatment and under-appreciation of those defined by lower middle-class 'littleness', revealing the subtle but evident misuses of power in the workplace. He warns that the current paradigm cannot hold, given the energy and intelligence of the next generation of white-collar workers from

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<sup>620</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, p. 133.

<sup>621</sup> Grossmith, *Diary*, pp. 113-134.

marginalised backgrounds and the changing business landscape. Finally, I would argue, his rather fairy-tale ending for the novel suggests that all employers need to find themselves capable of a Scrooge-like transformation if they are to avoid irrevocable loss of their status as a result of more mercenary commercial influences, represented by Lupin and Huttle. *Diary* is, therefore, overtly a comic novel, satirising lower middle-class pretensions, but is sub-textually a satire of ruling class complacency, holding its finger against the pulse of late-Victorian commerce.

## **Late-Victorian and Edwardian employer/employee relationships in context**

Whilst Grossmith's is a comedic representation without claims of accuracy, his depiction of employer/employee relationships has foundations in fact. The presence of paternalistic relationships between employers and clerks in the nineteenth century is well-documented.<sup>622</sup>

Anderson states:

The relationship was a strongly paternal one in which, while clerks served loyally, employers were expected to provide protection and security. Naturally, given the employers' social and economic power and their clerks' relative weakness, the relationship was weighted heavily in favour of the former'.<sup>623</sup>

Hosgood has discussed similar inequalities in relation to retail clerks, describing the necessity of requesting permission from an employer to marry as the 'ultimate example of paternalistic manipulation'.<sup>624</sup>

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<sup>622</sup> For paternalistic management approaches in the retail sector see Hosgood, 'Mercantile Monasteries', and for the financial sector see Jeacle, 'The bank clerk in Victorian society: the case of Hoare and Company'.

<sup>623</sup> Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, p. 30.

<sup>624</sup> Hosgood, 'Mercantile Monasteries', p. 337.

In the early and mid-nineteenth century, in particular, employees had much to gain from paternalistic management. Anderson comments that, ‘The closer [a clerk] was to his employer, the greater a clerk’s status’.<sup>625</sup> In this period, to work as a clerk was considered a form of commercial apprenticeship, expected to culminate in the launch of the clerk’s own business. Proximity to an employer was seen as essential to learn relevant skills. Furthermore, Lockwood states that ‘working conditions - functions, qualifications, remuneration, promotion, pensions – [were] determined by the personal relations of employers and clerks’.<sup>626</sup> In the absence of impersonal frameworks for reward or career development, paternalistic employer/employee relationships provided a conduit for advancement and financial security based on favour.

As Lockwood notes, however, paternalistic management allowed for exploitation of first-generation white collar workers:

The relationship between clerk and employer was [...] strongly characterised by the exhibition of mutual trust in the form of unwritten, tacit expectations of conduct. In many cases it took the form of a “gentleman’s agreement”. Needless to say, this relationship was often exploited by the employer and great expectations frequently came to nothing. Nevertheless, the clerical notion of gentlemanly behaviour, at least in its lower-middle class admixture with “respectability”, acted as a powerful social control over any intransigence or insurrection on the part of the clerk.<sup>627</sup>

Seen in this light, Pooter’s responses to Perkupp’s unfair treatment might be considered systemic. Rather than being indicative of ‘littleness’ or weakness of ‘character’, Pooter’s

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<sup>625</sup> Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, p.20.

<sup>626</sup> Lockwood, *The Black-Coated Worker*, p. 141.

<sup>627</sup> Lockwood, p. 29.



actions can be seen in terms of acceptance of the inevitable inequalities of his position and of conformance to the cultural norms of his environment.

Historians note erosion of paternalistic management approaches, however, as the nineteenth century progressed. Citing an expansion in the number of routine clerks, increasing scale of offices, decline in the mid-Victorian entrepreneurial class, and fewer routes for upward mobility, Anderson argues that, in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, whilst most clerks ‘continued in their loyal support of employers, they now received few of the traditional rewards – partnership or chances of economic independence’.<sup>628</sup> Heller argues that, particularly in the financial sector, employers had much to lose as a result. He states: ‘With the loosening of bonds between master and servant it was increasingly feared that clerical loyalty could not be guaranteed. Stories in the press of embezzlement by clerks in this period were common’.<sup>629</sup> Heller describes how some larger British organisations began, at this time, to secure the loyalty and honesty of employees with the ‘emergence of company pensions, provident funds, canteens and sports and social facilities, and most importantly career structures’.<sup>630</sup> The decades of this study saw the emergence of bureaucratic organisational structures within commerce, as evidenced in scholarship by social and economic historians, and in theories of Max Weber dating from this period.<sup>631</sup>

Within this context, authors such as Grossmith and Swinnerton provide an opportunity to interrogate, ‘from below’, the imposition of power within the workplace and the seismic shifts in employer/employee relationships during this period of transition. Grossmith, for example, satirises the potential for unfair treatment of employees within a paternalistic paradigm. He also creates a character (Lupin) who rejects the culture of

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<sup>628</sup> Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>629</sup> Heller, *London Clerical Workers*, p. 44.

<sup>630</sup> Heller, *London Clerical Workers*, p. 42.

<sup>631</sup> For Max Weber’s theoretical interpretations of workplace relationships see Max Weber, *Economy and Society: A New Translation*, ed. by Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2019), Chapter 3: Types of Rule, pp. 338 – 448.

‘commercial noblesse oblige’, providing a fictionalised account of tensions and changing social attitudes within the late-Victorian workplace. I argue, therefore, that Grossmith does not, as Hapgood suggests, seek to assuage the fears of those who felt threatened by social change. In such a scenario, Lupin might have been represented as one of a new, disloyal, generation of clerk, and would have been punished for his weakness of character. In the full length version of *Diary*, however, Lupin is rewarded, for both a lack of loyalty to Perkupp and for his entrepreneurial spirit. In short, Grossmith simultaneously foreshadows social change and resists authority of the dominant centre.

Importantly, Grossmith’s representations of Pooter and Lupin provide an important counterpoint for better known depictions of characters from this social class, such as Forster’s representation of Leonard Bast. R. G. Wilson points out, ‘complex hierarchies culminating in executive or professional managerial positions were just coming into being’ in the early twentieth century.<sup>632</sup> It would be anachronistic, therefore, to suggest that Grossmith foreshadows the bureaucratic management approaches which began to replace paternal employer/employee relationships. Grossmith engages, however, with generational change and its impact on the workplace, and articulates a counter-discourse which resists and rejects the assumptions underpinning the discourse of public school ‘character’. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the discourse of ‘character’ imposed notions of psychological weakness or incomplete maturation on those from humble backgrounds. By contrast, the counter-discourse evident in representations of first-generation white collar workers by Grossmith and others in this period, resists negative attitudes inherent to the discourse of ‘character’ by foregrounding positive attributes of entrepreneurial flair, energy and determination which resonate with the earlier Smilesean discourse of self-help. Drawing on mid-nineteenth century notions of social progression, this counter-discourse identifies

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<sup>632</sup> Wilson, p. 58.

important positive personality traits which are absent in the discourse of public school ‘character’, such as individual ambition, initiative and innovation.

Grossmith’s interpretation of how lower-middle class characters might define success is in stark contrast to Forster’s depiction of Leonard Bast. Whilst Bast is destroyed by his slavish imitations of middle-class lifestyles, the figure of Lupin rises rapidly by exhibiting qualities that are absent in those around him. Those with public school ‘character’, as represented by Perkupp, lack the traits of entrepreneurialism, dynamism and willingness to accept risk which result from Lupin’s social background, and are essential to business as the new century approaches. Whilst Forster’s representation might reassure those fearful of an educated lower middle class, Grossmith’s warns that barriers to advancement for this section of society have already been breached and the passivity of characters such as Pooter and Bast can no longer be assumed.<sup>633</sup>

### **Rejecting ruling class authority in Frank Swinnerton’s *The Young Idea* (1910)<sup>634</sup>**

The Smilesean counter-discourse of self-determination evident in *The Diary of a Nobody* is explored with even greater candour in the early novels of Frank Swinnerton. Whilst Grossmith critiques ruling class authority in comic diary form, Swinnerton employs social realism to challenge the discourse of public school ‘character’ in his 1910 novel, *The Young Idea*. In common with Grossmith, Swinnerton articulates his rejection of ruling class authority along generational lines. The idealistic young clerk Eric Galbraith debates issues of culture and politics with cynical author Mr. Mavultey, engaging in a battle to define the emerging, educated, lower-middle class. Galbraith’s vision for lower-middle class self-determination, which is ambiguous and vague initially, crystallises as the novel progresses.

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<sup>633</sup> Grossmith’s depiction of Lupin has foundation in fact. George Newnes, whose meteoric rise from clerk to wealthy publisher resulted in a peerage, openly encouraged clerks to use ‘pushfulness’ to avoid the ‘groove’ of office stagnation and achieve success. G. Newnes, *£300 a Year Business Positions. Where they are and how to get them*, (London: George Newnes, 1912), p.51.

<sup>634</sup> Frank A. Swinnerton, *The Young Idea* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1910)

Galbraith then articulates a counter-discourse which rejects the ‘fogeyism’ of ruling class authority, and promotes characteristics of energy, acceptance of risk and entrepreneurialism that are absent in the discourse of public school ‘character’. Appearing to echo earlier Smilesean notions of self-help, the ‘young idea’ expressed by Galbraith, which forms the book’s title, rejects the social essentialism of the discourse of ‘character’, resists ruling class authority, and promulgates a counter-discourse based on clarity of thought, determination to question received wisdom, and the need to overhaul establishment institutions.

### **Frank Swinnerton: Back room bookman**

Before embarking on a close reading of *The Young Idea*, it is important to note that Grossmith and Swinnerton were of different generations. In 1892 (when *Diary* was published in book form) Grossmith was 45, whilst Swinnerton was just eight years old. Swinnerton’s extraordinarily long career extended from his early novels of the Edwardian period, through the larger part of the twentieth century, to his biography of Arnold Bennett, published in 1978. Despite the longevity of his career, and his influential role in literary publishing throughout this period, Swinnerton’s novels have received very little literary critical attention.<sup>635</sup> The following close reading appears to be the first comprehensive literary critical engagement with the text. Irene Campbell comments that ‘his contribution to the book world is placed within the background of literary output and trends in the twentieth century’.<sup>636</sup> Swinnerton, in his autobiography, comments similarly: ‘I have always tried to gravitate to the back seat’.<sup>637</sup> There are compelling arguments, however, for foregrounding his work in this study.

Firstly, the economic circumstances of Swinnerton’s early life place him firmly in the category of first-generation white collar worker/author which is of primary importance

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<sup>635</sup> Wild sees critical neglect of ‘clerkly writers’ such as Swinnerton as part of a larger academic underappreciation of middlebrow realist literature from the early twentieth century. Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880-1939*, p. 169.

<sup>636</sup> Irene Campbell, ‘Frank Swinnerton: The Life and Works of a Bookman’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 1992), abstract.

<sup>637</sup> Swinnerton, *Frank Swinnerton: An Autobiography*, p. 137.

for this chapter. Swinnerton describes his social standing as liminal in his autobiography: ‘My two grandfathers were both master-craftsmen [...] My father was a copper plate engraver; my mother before her marriage was a designer [...] all these people regarded themselves as being altogether outside class’.<sup>638</sup>

Swinnerton’s account of his early years typifies the financial precarity associated with lower-middle class life during this period. He comments: ‘Copper-plate engraving, which in older days was prosperous [...] fell away before the advance of new and cheaper styles of printing. [...] When [my father] made a few shillings we feasted; when, as was often the case, he made nothing, we starved.’<sup>639</sup> Describing a nomadic existence in a series of poor quality and sometimes vermin-infested houses across London, his autobiography is preoccupied with the financial realities of life. He states his exact levels of income at various stages of his career, for example, and recalls the precise sums required of the family for rent during his childhood. He also makes no attempt to hide his family’s problems with debt and frequent evictions.

His formal education, disrupted by the family’s financial difficulties, is described by Campbell as ‘haphazard, erratic, eccentric and incomplete’.<sup>640</sup> Swinnerton attended school on just one day a week ‘at the worst time’, in his early teens.<sup>641</sup> His formal education ended at the age of fourteen when, stung by his father’s remarks, he entered employment. His upbringing was characterised, however, by access to cultural capital.<sup>642</sup> His father’s autodidacticism resulted in knowledge of Latin, and Swinnerton and his older brother were introduced to literature and the arts.

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<sup>638</sup> Swinnerton, *Frank Swinnerton: An Autobiography*, p. 19.

<sup>639</sup> Swinnerton, *Frank Swinnerton: An Autobiography*, p. 32.

<sup>640</sup> Campbell, p. 5.

<sup>641</sup> Swinnerton, *Frank Swinnerton: An Autobiography*, p. 53.

<sup>642</sup> For theoretical basis for cultural capital see Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (London, Sage, 1977).

Swinnerton's early experiences of employment provide another compelling argument for foregrounding his work in this chapter. Swinnerton worked for a number of years as a clerk, in different office settings, gradually gaining the opportunity to move from administrative support into publishing. His experiences ranged from the genial encouragement of his first role at a newspaper office, on a salary of six shillings a week, to 'despotic rule' in the office of publisher J. M. Dent.<sup>643</sup> Another experience, as clerk in a shipping firm, was described by Swinnerton as being like a 'prisoner under guard'.<sup>644</sup> These direct experiences of the commercial 'coalface' in the exact period covered by this thesis, make Swinnerton an important figure for study.

Lastly, the subject matter of *The Young Idea* recommends it for further analysis within this chapter. The novel follows the fortunes of two lower-middle class households occupying the same London apartment block, Culverin Mansions. Siblings Bertram, Hilda and Gladys Verren (aged twenty-four, twenty-two and eighteen respectively) occupy flat number 18. Their parents having died, Bertram and Hilda support the household working as clerks, whilst youngest sibling Gladys, an aspiring author, manages the home. Their neighbours are Eric Galbraith (also a young clerk) and his invalid mother. The narrative follows the home lives of the young people, but also provides a detailed insight into the workplaces of Hilda and Eric, and their relationships with employers and co-workers. Swinnerton employs the early-twentieth century office as the locus for individual tests of moral integrity for Hilda and Eric. Hilda is forced to decide whether to accept a proposal of marriage from a man whom she dislikes and fears (a partner in her firm) to safeguard the financial security of herself and her younger sister. Eric has to draw on his innovative ideas to avoid stagnation in his poorly-paid role as a clerk, and places his financial security at risk

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<sup>643</sup> Swinnerton, *Frank Swinnerton: An Autobiography*, p. 58 and pp. 89–96.

<sup>644</sup> Swinnerton, *Frank Swinnerton: An Autobiography*, p. 80.

in order to embark on a career shaped by self-determination rather than the favour and caprice of his employer.

Perhaps as a result of his background and work experiences, Swinnerton's representations of first-generation white collar workers are sympathetic and nuanced. In later life, working as a literary critic and publisher, he was critical of 'flattened' depictions of this social group by other authors. Discussing Gissing's novels, Swinnerton wrote:

Of clerks, and of the ordinary wage-earning member of the lower middle class, he seems to have made practically no use in his novels, and where they appear [...] they are generally so eccentric as to give the books no value as social studies'.<sup>645</sup>

Swinnerton also criticised Forster's characterisation of Bast, commenting:

[M]y knowledge of clerks is very extensive, and I have never met one who would be overwhelmed by decent behaviour on the part of an undergraduate, or one to whom such decent behaviour would seem less than his due.<sup>646</sup>

Swinnerton deems the fawning gratitude of Bast unrealistic, rejecting this as a feasible response to patronisation by the intelligentsia of the day.<sup>647</sup> In his autobiography Swinnerton expanded upon his negative reactions to such representations of the lower middle class:

Early poverty "cramps one's style" at a crucial hour of development. The poor child of refined and sensitive parents suffers so many agonies of humiliation, as well as so many distresses of deprivation,

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<sup>645</sup> Frank Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study* (London: Martin Secker, 1912), p.49. Wild notes that Gissing's representations of lower-middle class characters also led to numerous letters of complaint from clerks in the *Daily Chronicle* during 1898, criticising the author's inaccuracy. Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880-1939*, p. 34.

<sup>646</sup> Frank Swinnerton, *The Georgian Literary Scene* (London: J. M Dent, 1938), p. 294.

<sup>647</sup> It should be noted that *The Young Idea* and *Howard's End* were published within months of one another in 1910, meaning that neither text can be said to have influenced the other directly.

that he is marked for life. Nobody who has not starved, who has not known what it is hopelessly to walk the streets of a great city with empty pockets and an empty belly, can realise how such suffering poisons the mind. The modern poets who unctuously record their indignation at proletarian wrongs have never been poor. If they had been, they would write differently.<sup>648</sup>

Swinnerton suggests that only those with direct experience of social marginalisation are in a position to depict with veracity the lives of characters from humble backgrounds. Equally, he is critical of authors from the dominant centre who lament the indignities of lower-class lives from 'above'. His aim, he stated, was to depict a class which he knew to be 'above all others decent, well-behaved, and self-respecting'. In attempting to provide a social record of such lives in *The Young Idea*, Swinnerton provides representations of first-generation white collar workers which refuse to gloss over the very real financial difficulties experienced by this social group, but also demonstrates strengths of character which are worthy of respect, and are of tangible value for the social and economic success of the nation. In doing so Swinnerton articulates, through fiction, a counter-discourse which consigns notions of public school 'character' to the workplace of the past.

### **The Vice of Contentment and 'Common Sense': Rejection of the discourse of public school 'character' in *The Young Idea***

The narrative of *The Young Idea* is driven by the attempts of the central lower middle-class characters to overcome the obstacles they face as a result of economic disadvantage. In certain respects, however, Swinnerton's techniques for exploring these issues are unconventional for social realist literature of this period. Firstly, he engages directly with the financial difficulties of the lives of his characters, but each is capable of overcoming obstacles without charitable acts from social superiors, or authorial *deus ex machina*

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<sup>648</sup> Swinnerton, *Frank Swinnerton: An Autobiography*, p.54.



interventions such as unexpected inheritances. Secondly, his ideas for reform are not articulated within a socialist framework. The characters define themselves clearly as lower-middle class and his view of the future is one of individual self-determination not collective redistribution of wealth. Thirdly he engages with a class-oriented counter-discourse. Eric Galbraith articulates a view of the future based on generational redesign of society through the overthrowing of the 'old order' and rejection of hegemony. At the heart of this vision is the counter-discourse of Smilesean self-determination described earlier (the 'young idea') which challenges the discourse of public school 'character' (the 'old order').

### **Representations of economic disadvantage in *The Young Idea***

The preoccupation with financial realities, mentioned earlier in relation to Swinnerton's autobiography, is also apparent in his novel. The Verrens 'had a small flat in Maida Vale, and managed to live upon the combined earnings of Bertram and Hilda, which amounted to three-pounds-five-shillings per week.'<sup>649</sup> Economic disadvantage is foregrounded, in real terms, from the outset of the novel and, as the narrative progresses, the precarity of each character, hinted at by the phrase 'managed to live', creates the dramatic tension for the novel. The Verren family's financial situation is also conveyed through a description of their rented Maida Vale accommodation:

This street bears the astounding name of Culverin Terrace, and its only claim to glory is the fact that ninety-six flats are grouped together under the inclusive title of Culverin Mansions. The flats are small, unpretentious, and fairly cheap, because the rents are as low as fifteen shillings a week [...] the men who rent them have very little pride of possession. The residents look upon them as sleeping-places rather than homes [...] all the time knowing that they are separated from their fellow-residents by only a match-boarding

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<sup>649</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 9.

partition. But many people are forced to live thus in districts of London, within sound of their neighbours, whose pianos tinkle, whose voices they can hear in moments of excitement, whose secrets are common.<sup>650</sup>

Swinnerton depicts a suburban space which defies the notions of cosy complacency and separation from the wider community associated with the established middle-class suburb in this period. His ironical tone juxtaposes the architectural pretensions of the developers, when naming the street, with over-crowded reality. It is a transitory space, lacking a sense of communal stability. Rapid, low-cost construction has created an environment without privacy or a sense of belonging. The characters inhabiting Culverin Mansions, Swinnerton suggests, are themselves occupying a precarious liminal space.

The most intractable problems caused by economic disadvantage however, relate to the interdependency forced upon individuals due to shortage of income. The central characters are trapped within their circumstances, by their inability to achieve financial independence and/or the need to support family members. The youngest Verren, Gladys, is forced to compromise her literary ambitions to write popular short fiction. The eldest Verren, Bertram, is trapped similarly in his role as a clerk by his financial commitments to his sisters. Early in the novel he plunges the family into financial crisis by resigning his steady job to become a professional musician. His unthinking decision, made without consulting his sisters, has major repercussions for Hilda, who now needs to assume sole financial responsibility for herself and Gladys.

Hilda sobbed no more, but she lay wondering whether her old childish acceptance of everything good and beautiful, and ignorance of everything which was by nature evil had not come to an end with

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<sup>650</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p 15-16.

her new intuition of things that were impure, whether in greater or less degree. Very gradually the old knowledge of love and happy life, which she saw still fresh and strong in her sister, was slipping from her; and her hands were powerless to check its departure. It may have been only a vague and formless fear, but it was all the more terrifying for that reason, and when she dared to look into the future the prospect opened was always dark and terrible.<sup>651</sup>

Hilda's realisation that she must provide for Gladys and herself is represented by Swinnerton as a loss of innocence. The finely-balanced economic stasis of two incomes has been destroyed by Bertram's decision, and Swinnerton expresses the economic downturn in temporal and moral terms. The reader is given access to Hilda's thought processes as she realises that her inability to meet her commitments through employment will force her to seek economic protection through an unwelcome marriage. Aspects of romantic freedom, personal fulfilment, purity, freshness and strength which Hilda associates with sexual innocence are receding from her, to be replaced by a 'dark and terrible' future.

The young clerk in the second household, Eric Galbraith, is forced to support his mother on a low salary, denying him the opportunity to establish a family of his own.

Marriage? He could not marry while his mother lived. Domestically as well as economically that was out of the question; his mother could not live apart from him. [...] He could not dare to consider the idea of marriage and a long engagement ... Well, it was all right: there was no question of marriage. There never was. He wondered how Baggle had managed – oh, he knew well enough. A poky suburban flat, and pretentious poverty; one little Baggle in due

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<sup>651</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, pp. 39-40.

course; and a hopeless, objectless wrestling with a small salary and mean doings, and the snobbery of the poor.<sup>652</sup>

The interior monologue once more gives the reader an understanding of the obstacles presented by the character's low income. Expressing inner confusion and frustration, through self-reassurances, changes of direction and contradictions, the text depicts Galbraith working through the dilemma in his head in real time. In both instances, by drawing the reader into the thoughts of the character, Swinnerton conveys the human impacts of economic disadvantage for this section of society, portraying the moral landscape of Hilda and Galbraith, and delineating their problems as the result of external circumstances, rather than weaknesses of character. Galbraith therefore provides an important counterpoint to literary depictions of clerks during this period in which incomplete maturation or 'littleness' is represented as the result of physical or mental weakness, indicating the absence of 'character'.

### **The Edwardian workplace as a locus for social critique**

For both Hilda and Galbraith, the Edwardian workplace becomes the locus for tests of individual integrity, as the problems arising from their economic circumstances imperil the characters and force difficult decisions upon them. Hilda is receiving unwelcome attention from a partner at her firm, Percy Temperton, who secured his place in the firm through nepotism/social connections.

He leant there, watching her as she worked, regarding the rich colour of her hair, the curves of her neck and bosom, the whiteness of her hands. [...] On Saturday Hilda had met Temperton on the stairs, and he had deliberately caught her arm as she passed, and looked at her with his half-closed eyes, searchingly and – there had been

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<sup>652</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 171

something in his expression which had frightened her. He had so much power in the business [...] She did not think him an honourable man; his behaviour at the office was sometimes cruel and vengeful. She had heard from one of the men clerks that Temperton was bad to offend, and she did not trust him.<sup>653</sup>

Temperton's behaviour towards Hilda can be categorised as sexual coercion in the workplace, under the auspices of courtship. The change in Hilda's financial situation forces her to consider the possibility of accepting Temperton's unwelcome proposal of marriage. Her indecision is misinterpreted by Temperton, and his sexual aggression towards her escalates as the novel progresses.

[S]he saw that he was now between herself and the door. [...] Before she could step back he had caught her in his arms: she was almost helpless. Gasping, she struggled for breath and for the power to press back his dark face, now horribly near. All the powerlessness of a dreamer was upon her. 'You understand,' he panted. Hilda made desperate efforts to free herself, struggling until the blood seemed to rise chokingly in her throat. 'I'm not going to let you go until you promise.' [...]

Then she gave a sharp cry of joy, for she could hear Gertrude coming up the stairs with her usual quick step. [...]

'Damnation,' Temperton said, and released her.<sup>654</sup>

This scene, once again, takes place at work, and Temperton coerces Hilda when he finds her alone in the office.

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<sup>653</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, pp. 49-51.

<sup>654</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p.106.

Hilda's helplessness can be interpreted as both actual/physical and socially constructed. Shani D'Cruze states that 'violence or its possibility was an ongoing component in nineteenth-century working women's lives' and notes that 'violence (or its threat) was an important strategy in maintaining or asserting differentials across power relations [in the workplace], particularly gender relations'.<sup>655</sup> Within this historical and cultural context, Temperton's assumptions of sexual access to female employees, and Hilda's helplessness, can be seen as indicative of fundamental inequalities and ambiguities around gender identity in the workplace in this period. D'Cruze makes the following observation, based on her analysis of actual cases of violence against women in the workplace during this period:

[P]atterns of workplace authority were overlaid, sometimes in very specific and immediate form, by familial models of authority which emphasised the superiority of older adult males [...] Cases involving violence and sexuality demonstrate instances where women's responses to coercion or aggression are hampered or muted because of the puzzlement this produced [...] there was very little basis on which women could shape their working identities around a rhetoric of rights and contract.<sup>656</sup>

D'Cruze describes a familial paradigm within the workplace in which notions of subordination to a patriarchal figure, within the home, overlap with responses to older males, in positions of authority in the workplace. The difficulties in this period of defining the female clerk's identity compounded her vulnerability to exploitation, through lack of clarity (on both sides) regarding acceptable behaviour between the senior staff member and the employee within a paternalistic workplace paradigm.

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<sup>655</sup> Shani D'Cruze, *Crimes of outrage: Sex, violence and Victorian working women* (London: UCL Press, 1998), p.20. For further information on female clerks see: Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work*, and Carolyn Malone, *Women's Bodies and Dangerous Trades in England, 1880-1914* (Rochester NY: Royal Historical Society, 2003).

<sup>656</sup> D'Cruze, p. 96.

My contention is that Swinnerton's narrative, by fictionalising the interactions between an employer and employee in an incidence of sexual coercion, aims to demonstrate the harmful results of paternalistic workplace cultures. He problematises traditional notions of employee loyalty and commercial noblesse oblige. He also challenges the notion that 'character' and respectability are the natural result of financial advantage and superior social station among men in positions of responsibility. It is the lower-middle class characters, Hilda and Galbraith, that are shown to have moral integrity in the narrative, not the financially-established and well-travelled middle-class character Temperton. Comparing Galbraith with Temperton, Hilda believes: 'Galbraith with his brusqueness, his sudden reserves, and his occasional embarrassing shyness, was, in essentials, a gentleman. Even upon his actions as they concerned herself alone, Temperton hardly stood that test.'<sup>657</sup> Whilst Galbraith may lack the self-confidence of a social superior, he does not exhibit the incomplete maturation or 'littleness' of personality associated with conventional fictional representations of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century clerks. His moral integrity positions him as a 'gentleman', irrespective of the lowliness of his job role and lack of financial security.

Hilda's situation with the company is made increasingly untenable by Temperton's behaviour. After the scene described above, in which Hilda tells Temperton she intends to resign, Hilda is given a pay-rise by the head of the firm, Mr. Bowley, to forty-five shillings a week (when a girl of her education would typically receive only twenty-five shillings).<sup>658</sup> It is implied that Temperton has recommended the pay-rise, and he assumes that this will secure Hilda's sexual compliance. At their next meeting, angry and frustrated at Hilda's refusal to marry him, Temperton 'caught her arm and flung her from him so that she was thrown against a chair.'<sup>659</sup> He screams abuse at her and smashes a chair, causing her to run

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<sup>657</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 90.

<sup>658</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 140.

<sup>659</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, pp. 240 -241.

to the office of Mr. Bowley, where she resigns. Bowley is elderly and is clearly a paternal figure. When Hilda refuses to give a reason for her resignation he invites her to his home to meet his wife and discuss her decision. Possibly because of the overlapping of familial roles with those of the workplace that D’Cruze describes, Hilda appears too ashamed to tell Bowley about Temperton’s sexual aggression. To do so would perhaps destroy Bowley’s respect for her, and incur his disappointment. The relationship between employer and employee defines the workplace incident in purely personal terms, preventing either character from responding to Temperton’s sexual harassment in terms of ‘rights and contract’. Hilda acts with integrity, but faces an uncertain future as she applies for employment at the end of the novel: ‘She had not much hope of getting that situation: they said that preference would be given to somebody who understood German’.<sup>660</sup> Swinnerton once again engages with the financial realities of his characters which included, in this period, competition for employment from well-educated German clerks.

Swinnerton depicts the Edwardian workplace as a space in which paternalistic management practices create systemic inequalities and opportunities for exploitation. It is perhaps understandable, therefore, that the location he chooses for the final rejection and expulsion of Temperton is the lower-middle class domestic space rather than the office. Temperton arrives at Hilda’s home, and it is implied that he would have carried out a serious sexual assault if Hilda had been alone. She is with her sister Gladys, however, and Galbraith follows Temperton into the room. Temperton attempts, unsuccessfully, to blacken Hilda’s reputation to Galbraith, but has nothing with which to counter the combined determination of the three characters in this lower-middle class bastion.

The odds were heavy; he had not reckoned upon being met with anything stronger than Hilda’s protests [...] He had come to conquer; his brain was neither quick nor subtle enough to invent any process

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<sup>660</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 309.



when in anger [...] he was used only to attacking, which is easier and more showy. Defence came ill to him.<sup>661</sup>

Temperton's social superiority has no potency in this environment. He is depicted as animalistic, reacting to stimulus without intellectual power. Accustomed to the dominant, aggressor's role he is unable to regain control or dignity when placed in this weakened position. His departure is ignominious, fumbling with the door catch as Galbraith adopts the moral high-ground saying, 'You've simply made an ass of yourself. I'm truly sorry for you, because I'm an ass myself, at times'.<sup>662</sup>

If, as D'Cruze describes, the identity of the working woman was ambiguous in this period, Swinnerton's depiction of exploitation of female employees in *The Young Idea* brings clarity. The reader is 'in the room' as the potential for exploitation inherent in the employer/employee paradigm unfolds. The social realist aesthetic, whilst occasionally seeming to echo elements of Victorian melodrama in its representation of the sexual aggressor, establishes the boundaries between sexual coercion and 'courting'. By refusing to play out these contested interactions between characters 'behind closed doors', the novel places the behaviour of each character before the reader for scrutiny, removing ambiguity regarding the innocence or guilt of each party. The resulting moral judgement challenges the presumption of gentlemanly conduct at the heart of the discourse of public school 'character', severing the links between financial privilege and individual probity that the discourse enshrines.

### **Critiquing the Edwardian glass ceiling in *The Young Idea***

Swinnerton critiques the discourse of public school 'character' still further in his novel by fictionalising the 'glass ceiling' of the Edwardian workplace, and demonstrating the potential

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<sup>661</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 254

<sup>662</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 255.

of his lower-middle class character Eric Galbraith to break through this barrier. The authorial voice intervenes to describe the obstacles Galbraith faces:

Galbraith was one of those young men who may be described as ‘on the verge’, because they have some natural ability, and an environment calculated to emasculate them in the shortest time.<sup>663</sup>

From the outset of the novel Swinnerton fictionalises tensions within the workplace, suggesting that change (either negative or positive) is imminent and inescapable for first-generation white collar workers such as Galbraith, whose inherent talents are wasted due to inequality of opportunity. Having established that it is the work environment which emasculates Galbraith, rather than any inherent weaknesses of personality, Swinnerton then depicts Galbraith as ‘possessing the not unusually mixed attributes of the buccaneer and the prig’, with ‘warm blood and fresh vision’ and ‘an air of wisdom for the rest of the world’.<sup>664</sup> The lower-middle class clerk, as imagined by Swinnerton, has a strong moral compass combined with bravado, dynamism and a ‘street smart’ insight into the realities of life.

Swinnerton is equally direct in his representation of senior personnel from Galbraith’s office. The proprietor, Mr. Dexter, ‘was a man still young at forty-six, cold and inflexible’ who had achieved his position through ‘sheer will’.<sup>665</sup> He is described, however, as ‘entirely lacking in enthusiasm or courage, and – this freedom being essential to the successful business-man – in originality.’<sup>666</sup> As these descriptions of low-paid clerk and proprietor follow one another on consecutive pages, the comparisons are impossible to avoid. Galbraith is positioned as the individual best suited to success in this environment, despite his low status and remuneration. The authorial voice claims privileged insight and

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<sup>663</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 58.

<sup>664</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>665</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 59.

<sup>666</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 60.

authority within the commercial world of the novel, and thereby defines the personality traits essential for success in business as those inherent to Galbraith, and absent in Dexter.

Reporting to Dexter is a manager, Mr. Mond, described as ‘more jovial in manner, but equally set and determined, and more cunning in practice’. Mond is represented as a lower-middle class clerk of an older generation. He is unable to understand the ‘profound thoughts of Shakespeare, Marcus Aurelius, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Mr. Jerome and Dr. Martineau’ that feature on Mr. Dexter’s office calendar.<sup>667</sup> Galbraith also considers his written work ‘ungrammatical’.<sup>668</sup> He has the ‘clean-cut mouth of the unsentimental businessman’ and, together with Dexter, Mond uses his seniority, obduracy and guile to prevent the career elevation of junior clerks.<sup>669</sup>

Galbraith is ‘allowed everything but individual expansion’ in his working life, and his financial responsibility for his mother renders him fearful of taking risks to break through the Dexter & Co. glass ceiling.<sup>670</sup>

[H]e was in danger of becoming nothing but a clerk by sheer enforced conformity to rule. [...] He wanted work that he should find difficult; and he got routine labour that demanded only care. It was the sort of muffled tragedy of a clerk’s life that was beginning to show its influence upon him; and while he was feeling its first effects of enfeeblement, and an unexpressed longing to follow the strong lead of somebody else, he had not yet reached that point of sudden clarification at which he would realise that the commonest drudgery may leave a man his self-respect.<sup>671</sup>

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<sup>667</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 60.

<sup>668</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 178.

<sup>669</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 50.

<sup>670</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 63.

<sup>671</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 64.

Galbraith is 'on the verge'. He must either accept the lack of self-determination imposed by his social position, and learn to find self-respect within it, or he must transcend the difficulties placed upon him by his financial commitments to achieve self-actualisation. These obstacles of lower-middle class life are compared with those of the working man:

[Galbraith] had been attracted strongly to a newly-married clerk in the firm, who obviously and eternally could be nothing different all his life from what he was now. In that hardly-formed recognition he had seen the bowed secret figure of degradation following him at a distance, inscrutable and horrible. He applied the particular case to the clerk-life of London, where need dictated surrender more surely than it did in any strike of labourers. They were, at least, organised; the clerk, having no protection, and standing alone, went to the wall, the grand adventure of life crushed and bruised before ever it had grown of a size to be seen...<sup>672</sup>

Galbraith represents an impatient and angry generation of lower-middle class employees, for whom white-collar occupations represent social control and the death of ambition due to economic disadvantage and anti-meritocratic workplace practices. Aspiration for Swinnerton's young clerks does not involve mimicry of middle-class lifestyles or access to culture, as imagined by Forster. Equally, there is no sense of gratitude (as might be expected by liberal reformers) for basic education, accommodation and escape from hunger. Galbraith and Hilda express desire for equality of opportunity within a meritocratic society, in which fair treatment regarding remuneration and career advancement can deliver financial independence. Just seventeen years after Grossmith's satirical creation of Lupin Pooter (softened by the ambiguities of unreliable narration), Swinnerton's representations of ambitious young clerks can be seen to challenge the inequality of opportunity of his

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<sup>672</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 64

historical moment openly and vehemently. His representations of characters from this social group reject the discourse of public school 'character' which provided spurious justification for elitist workplace practices. Instead, he articulates a counter-discourse, through which he redefines the commercial world, and identifies weaknesses within the nation's economic fabric caused by these inequalities of opportunity. The narrative suggests that the ruling classes lack the personality traits necessary to repair Britain's damaged reputation as a global power. Success of the nation can only be achieved through the removal of the obstacles to career progression placed before those without elite educational backgrounds.

### **The Vice of Contentment**

As the novel progresses Galbraith moves towards a clearer understanding of his social and political philosophy. Galbraith uses the term 'vice of contentment' to describe the current situation, and associates it with his mother's generation:

[H]is mother represented very well the old order against which he had set his face, that in her unquestioning acceptance of everything she stood definitely for the old ways of life, the old ideas and manners...<sup>673</sup>

Echoing the generational differences of Lupin and his father, Galbraith criticises his parent's passivity. For Galbraith, however, this reluctance to challenge hegemony is insidious.

Galbraith argues:

Contentment is an evil thing. It saps one's moral courage. Half the miseries of the world are due to the contentment of the majority – the unthinkingness [...] most people don't mind just jogging along as miserable as driven cattle, doing their day's work, and hoping they'll be better after a good night's rest. [...] They cling to a thing

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<sup>673</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 160.

they call common sense, which is the most be-fuddled thing I've met.<sup>674</sup>

Failure to resist the hegemonic centre leads ultimately to erosion of agency Galbraith argues, and he attributes the political quietism of the older generation to their reluctance to challenge 'common sense'. This notion of 'common sense' is described more fully when Galbraith argues with Mr. Mavultey, an author. When Mavultey advocates a socially-essentialist approach to creating fiction for a mass readership he justifies his 'dumbing down' of literature saying that it is 'common sense' that 'the public' does not want anything better. Galbraith counters this argument saying that common sense is 'only the sum of a man's newspaper reading'.<sup>675</sup> It would be anachronistic to suggest that Swinnerton engages here with the notion of discourse. My contention, however, is that Galbraith rejects adherence to hegemonic norms based on notions of class difference that are promoted as 'common sense', through the media and other means, by a dominant centre seeking to subordinate the socially-marginalised. Later in the novel Galbraith crystallises these views:

'Common sense is still a great power in the journalistic world. Go wherever you like, all over the place – and particularly in magazines, you find it shouting.'

'I hope,' said Mr. Mavultey, 'I hope it will continue to hold sway unchallenged. The law has been described as "glorified common sense" by some master of letters.'

'I should think that an excellent definition,' Galbraith said, drily.

'Since the law is one of the most fogleified of all our institutions. I

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<sup>674</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 162.

<sup>675</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 153.

wonder how much more quickly and justly men might deal with their affairs if we revolutionised the spirit of the law and politics.’<sup>676</sup>

Hilda paraphrases Galbraith saying, ‘By common sense he means the stupid hopeless way people have of judging things by their prejudices ... instead of trying to understand them’.<sup>677</sup>

These notions, whilst pre-dating the theories of Michel Foucault by more than half a century, appear to grapple with similar systems of thought.<sup>678</sup>

### **The Young Idea**

The solution for social reform proposed by Galbraith (the ‘young idea’ of the title) blends mid-Victorian notions of Smilesean self-improvement with anti-establishment attitudes more frequently associated with the mid-twentieth century, as articulated in texts by ‘Angry Young Men’ such as John Osborne and Alan Sillitoe.<sup>679</sup>

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<sup>676</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, pp. 277-278.

<sup>677</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 281.

<sup>678</sup> For theories of discourse see *Michel Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1974)

<sup>679</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Self Help; with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* (1866)

**Samuel Smiles, *Self Help***

‘The spirit of self help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual; and, exhibited in the lives of many, it constitutes the true source of national vigour and strength.’

‘National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness’

**Eric Galbraith, *The Young Idea***

“I’d let every young man have his chance ... give him an opportunity of working out his own salvation.” (p. 275)

“[Y]ou interview half a dozen young men at the present time. What do you find? [...] energy, high aim, reasonable ideas of politics and morality.” (p. 278)

The sentiments expressed by Galbraith echo the heroic tone of Smiles’s text. The young clerk advocates meritocratic self-determination, and sees social reform resulting from the combined individual achievements of a new generation. The traits of ‘individual industry’ and ‘energy’, focused upon in both texts, are at variance with the traditional attributes associated with the discourse of public school ‘character’. Interestingly, both the discourse and counter-discourse lay claim to ‘uprightness’/‘morality’, with each assuming the moral high-ground. Both Smiles and Swinnerton reject the notion that the nation’s future is safe in the hands of a social elite. Smiles argues:

An easy and luxurious existence does not train men to effort or encounter with difficulty; nor does it awaken that consciousness of power which is necessary for energetic and effective action in life. Indeed, so far from poverty being a misfortune, it may, by vigorous self-help, be converted even into a blessing, rousing a man to that



struggle with the world in which [...] the right-minded and true-hearted find strength, confidence, and triumph.<sup>680</sup>

Those from humble backgrounds, Smiles states, can develop vital character traits as a result of their economic disadvantages which are unavailable to those born into financial privilege. Swinnerton's clerk is more pragmatic however, acknowledging the obstacles overlooked by Smiles's idealism. Galbraith states: 'If I had my way I'd destroy this rotten dependence on individuals [...] I wouldn't saddle [young men] with frivolous responsibilities towards woman, or earning enough for others. A young man ought to be free from dragging ties ...'<sup>681</sup> Galbraith rails against the interdependency of those with limited incomes. Having given way to this thought, he is struck instantly by a 'ghastly flash of light' in which he acknowledges his disloyalty to his mother. He turns his discontent outwards, apportioning blame to the institutions and individuals of the 'old order' with sentiments which find resonance with anti-establishment attitudes of the mid-twentieth century.

Galbraith argues:

Old men will tell you youth is hasty, that a thing seems easy to the young which is full of difficulties [...] Don't you see it's all a doddering muddle of their own? They make the difficulties [...] they're held back by their fears and their conventions [...] Old men are like lawyers. They consider precedent, or their own prejudice, until it becomes an obsession. They babble about this being constitutional, and that being revolutionary.<sup>682</sup>

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<sup>680</sup> Smiles, *Self Help*, p. 23.

<sup>681</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 275.

<sup>682</sup> Swinnerton, *The Young Idea*, pp. 165–166.

Galbraith problematises tradition, convention, and lack of innovation born of closedmindedness. He uses the term ‘fogeism’ to describe this aspect of British society.<sup>683</sup> Definition of the term ‘fogeism’ clarifies the ways in which ‘the young idea’ represents generational, political and cultural reform:

OED definition: *depreciative* (originally *Scottish*). In earlier use: an old man, *esp.* one with antiquated ideas or attitudes. Later (often, but not necessarily, with reference to an older person): a person with very old-fashioned or conservative values and attitudes.

Swinerton overlays this with an additional ethical element. Galbraith states: “Duty is fogeyism’s name for the dictates of an obsolete morality.”<sup>684</sup> Establishment approaches and values are rejected on the grounds of ethical irrelevance, in addition to their lack of innovation.

Galbraith’s faith in ‘the young idea’, combined with his business acumen and originality, result in him breaking through the Edwardian ‘glass ceiling’. Galbraith develops an innovative scheme for improving efficiency and reducing costs at the office. Mond at first ‘demolished [Galbraith’s] castle’. Having ‘clucked his tongue at some of the figures’, the manager ‘dismissed it in a few unreflecting prejudiced minutes’.<sup>685</sup> Galbraith decides to approach the proprietor direct, however. Dexter considers the scheme ‘revolutionary and absurd’, but when Galbraith says he is willing to resign if the scheme is rejected, Dexter reconsiders it. After an hour of argument, Dexter decides to back the scheme. Despite the obvious stylistic differences between the two texts, Galbraith’s is a similar victory to that of Lupin Pooter. Each character presents his employer with a conduit to financial success which is only possible by employing the individual personality traits and insights of the employee.

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<sup>683</sup> OED definition of ‘fogy’ <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/72425#eid3923112> OED definition of ‘fogeism’ <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/72428?redirectedFrom=fogeism#eid>

<sup>684</sup> Swinerton, *The Young Idea*, p. 278.

<sup>685</sup> Swinerton, *The Young Idea*, p.176.

The success of each character is not reliant on longevity of employment/loyalty of the employee, or the largesse of the employer (the contemporary route for increased remuneration). It represents self-actualisation for the employee, as well as self-determination within the employer/employee relationship.

### **Challenging contemporary representations of the first-generation white collar worker**

In his important examination of the clerk in literature, Wild argues that authors such as Forster ‘believed in the logic of a permanent intellectual caste system’ in which ‘blinking out’ the clerk figure, or casting him into a ‘void’ was a ‘strategy for disarming a potential threat’ of the emerging, educated, lower middle class.<sup>686</sup> With the creation of characters such as Leonard Bast, the clerk figure was no longer silenced in fiction but, in gaining a voice, these first-generation white collar workers gained ideological potency. Alongside the better known depictions, such as Forster’s, which perpetuate the discourse of ‘character’, it is essential to now consider representations of first-generation white collar workers by Grossmith, Galbraith and others, which provide an important counterpoint. These representations, which critique the late-Victorian and Edwardian workplace ‘from below’ reveal a fascinating counter-discourse which resists the anti-meritocratic practices and economic inequalities of this historical moment. Operating entirely outside a framework of working-class activism, these texts provide a vitally important, but less widely examined, rejection of elitism, and an otherwise overlooked record of societal change, expressed through popular fiction.

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<sup>686</sup> Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880-1939*, p. 116.

## CONCLUSION

The texts analysed in this thesis have been underestimated, and in some cases overlooked, as literatures of resistance of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. The comic nature of some of the texts has undoubtedly been a contributory factor. Lynne Hapgood argues that *Three Men in a Boat's* categorisation as a comic novel has hampered appreciation of its 'radical opposition to the late nineteenth-century cultural milieu', masking the power of the text to challenge and disrupt social attitudes.<sup>687</sup> Another factor is that the social critique in these texts is expressed, largely, through indirect means, utilising allegory, satire, and strategic characterisation and narrative development. The literary critical tools available, traditionally, for class-based analysis of social critique, are somewhat problematical where texts by socially-marginalised writers are concerned. This is particularly pronounced where authors have had to mask or encode direct criticism of their social 'superiors' in order to avoid alienation of their readers, and where the worldviews of the authors do not align, ideologically or politically, with Marxist-inspired theoretical frameworks.

The alternative analytical approach developed for this thesis, and applied to these texts, reveals the ways in which they resist, challenge and reject potentially-damaging social attitudes of the dominant centre. As it is likely that these issues of theoretical framework have provided an obstacle to satisfactory analysis of their social critique in the past, the availability of new literary critical tools has the potential to encourage more extensive investigation of texts by socially-marginalised writers in the future. Whilst this analytical approach has been developed specifically for the study of these six authors, the same methods can be applied equally successfully to social critique in texts by other British authors within a similar historical context. If a similar approach to the detailed examination of class-based discourses in other social, historical, political and economic contexts is

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<sup>687</sup> Hapgood, *Margins of Desire*, p. 19.

entered into, this approach could also be adapted to gain new insights into social critique in texts from other periods.

Application of the class-discourse based approach in this thesis has revealed crucial differences in the literary representation of working and lower-middle class characters, communities and cultures in these texts. Each of the texts studied provides a literary perspective from which to examine ‘history from below’.<sup>688</sup> In addition, they make a major contribution to much-needed research on the way in which *individual* resistance of the dominant centre was imagined and represented in this period, as a vital counterpoint to more widely-understood forms of collective resistance. Furthermore, detailed analysis of texts by the Men from Nowhere reveals attitudes existing at ‘grass roots’ level in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods which have been considered, traditionally, to have emerged at a later period in history. Important facets of the employer/employee paradigm are illuminated, and developments in class-based interactions in the domestic and commercial spheres are foreshadowed.

Specific aspects of social tension emerging from close readings of these texts have, traditionally, been associated with British life of the interwar period, with respect to the ‘servant problem’, whilst insights into the changing structures of businesses reflect approaches to entrepreneurialism typical of the post-WW2 period. The insight into employer/employee relationships in the workplace demonstrated in *The Diary of a Nobody*, for example, explores the tensions between American entrepreneurial business methods and British recruitment/career development structures (governed by personal contacts, nepotism and the ‘old school tie’). Grossmith writes against the grain, highlighting the dangers of anti-meritocratic practices and complacency in the financial sector, in a period when faith in

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<sup>688</sup> A number of historians have been credited with pioneering ‘history from the bottom up’ or ‘history from below’, including David Montgomery, Alfred Young, and Howard Zinn. Here the source referred to is that of E. P. Thompson.

public school 'character', and discourses of British superiority in matters of industry and commerce, tended to remain unquestioned.

Frank Swinnerton, writing in 1910, also depicts British business in a period of transition. Paternalistic employer/employee relationships are challenged and rejected in *The Young Idea*, and Galbraith's promotion into an entrepreneurial role (which today would be characterised as marketing/business development) provides a fictional account of bureaucratisation in British offices when such theories were still in their infancy. Particularly important is the ideological throughline which links the Edwardian proto-Angry Young Man in this early-twentieth-century novel to his much better-known post-WW2 counterparts.

Similarly, in *69 Birnam Road*, Pett Ridge presents a form of Edwardian female agency which would be associated, traditionally, with the interwar period, whilst the character's attitudes towards sexual emancipation appear to foreshadow those of the late 1960s. Importantly, this representation of agency is not situated within the more widely-studied women's movements of the period. Florrie is neither a suffragette nor a New Woman, and her individual form of Edwardian female-working-class agency provides an important counterpoint to scholarly understanding of collective resistance of patriarchy in this period.

All three of these narratives foreground ways in which the potential and agency of working-class and lower-middle-class individuals are underestimated. Barrie, similarly, warns against complacency in dealing with employees, challenging traditional notions of power over servants by highlighting the inability of the master/mistress to manage everyday life without their domestic help. Crichton became a twentieth-century archetype. The figure of the all-knowing butler manipulating an inept employer was to be immortalised by P. G. Wodehouse, more than a decade after Barrie's play.<sup>689</sup> However, the real importance of *The*

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<sup>689</sup> The character Jeeves first appeared in print in 1915, as butler to the financially-privileged Bertie Wooster.

*Admirable Crichton* as a literature of resistance is the way in which it challenges the eugenic ideas which would dominate the first half of the twentieth century.

Of all the texts studied here, *Three Men in a Boat* is perhaps the one in which social typing has been the most difficult to decode. The ambiguity regarding the social standing of the ‘three men’ at the time of publication (which I have argued is a deliberate technique by Jerome to convey criticism of his social ‘superiors’ without repercussions) has gained greater specificity over time. J, George and Harris have become merged with the Bertie Wooster archetype in twentieth-century adaptations, reflecting the elevated social standing hinted at by Jerome for these characters.<sup>690</sup> In both *Three Men in a Boat* and *Kipps*, this thesis has demonstrated that the social critique is more barbed than the lightness of touch of Jerome and Wells suggests. Analysing these texts alongside the powerful class-based discourses of their historical moment reveals that their criticism of the dominant centre is more antagonistic than it appears, as it is focused precisely on the systems and attitudes which underpinned inequality of treatment and opportunity on economic grounds.

In addition to enriching ‘history from below’ and highlighting antecedents for changes in social attitudes, these texts contribute to literary critical scholarship through their innovations in form, specifically their rhetorical strategies and the techniques by which these oppositional sentiments are conveyed. It is customary to look towards modernist forms for innovation during the 1880 to 1910 period, rather than to texts which remained within a realist aesthetic. Once it is acknowledged that these texts are underestimated literatures of resistance, however, it is necessary to also observe that they depart from the rhetorical path taken by other socially-aware authors of this and earlier periods. Each text demonstrates a response to social, economic, political and cultural developments of their historical moment, and a determination to innovate in order to find new relevance. Taken in combination, the

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<sup>690</sup> For example the 1975 BBC adaptation by Tom Stoppard, directed by Stephen Frears and starring Tim Curry, Michael Palin and Stephen Moore.

social critiques in these texts by the Men from Nowhere experiment with alternative techniques by which notions of inequality can be conveyed, moving from direct attempts to raise awareness of the plight of the poor, towards more sophisticated and complex forms of expression.

Earlier nineteenth-century socially-aware authors, such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, and politically-engaged authors of the fin de siècle, such as Margaret Harkness, can be seen to emphasise the need for social reform by creating fictionalised representations of the poor, with the objective of inspiring feelings of pity and benevolence through greater awareness of the realities of poverty.<sup>691</sup> Raymond Williams, for example, argues: ‘The structure of feeling from which *Mary Barton* begins is, then, a combination of sympathetic observation and of a largely successful attempt at imaginative identification.’<sup>692</sup> Careful descriptions of working-class settings raise awareness of, and encourage sympathy for, the plight of the poor. The social critiques of the Men from Nowhere, however, use representations of characters from humble backgrounds entirely differently. These narratives aim to expose inequality in action in everyday life, highlighting unconscious class-based bias and problematising the assumptions regarding social difference that are enshrined in powerful discourses of their historical moment. There are rare examples of representations of working-class and lower-middle class characters aimed at evoking sympathy in these texts (for example the character of Masterman in Wells’s *Kipps*, and the street children in Pett Ridge’s *69 Birnam Road*). Overwhelmingly in these close readings, however, the characters from humble backgrounds demonstrate and emphasise working-class and lower-middle class agency, and underscore the potential of such individuals to experience personal growth and social mobility. Specific texts also raise awareness of the potential of these sectors of society to destabilise long-held notions of hierarchy, and to undermine the security of the established

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<sup>691</sup> Examples of texts include: Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), *Hard Times* (1854) and *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857); Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853) and *North and South* (1854-1855); and Margaret Harkness, *A City Girl* (1887), *Out of Work* (1888).

<sup>692</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 88.



middle class. Rather than emphasising the reliance of the poor on the benevolence of the rich, the *Men from Nowhere* emphasise the reliance of the rich on the good will of their domestic servants and other employees. The *Men from Nowhere* refuse to reassure the established middle classes and upper echelons of their ability to retain control over their 'social inferiors' through financial advantage and traditional subservience. In contrast, the social critiques in these texts urge those with financial privilege to see the reality, and indeed precarity, of their position in a rapidly changing social fabric, in which those considered helpless are increasingly in a position to wield *individual* power. The poor are not always to be pitied, these novels suggest, and the comfortable middle and upper classes ignore, at their peril, the ways in which the balance of power is changing in master/servant and employer/employee relationships, in a rapidly evolving world, in both the public and private spheres.

Given the commercial realities of the late-Victorian and Edwardian publishing sector, confronting their potential readerships with unpopular truths would have risked alienating those individuals capable of purchasing their creative outputs and safeguarding their financial security. Writing in 1890, Walter Besant stated that 'he who works for pay must respect the prejudices of his customers'. A writer must decide 'shall he restrict his pencil or shall he restrict his purse'.<sup>693</sup> Even a university-educated writer from a privileged background, such as Besant, could not risk public disapprobation. These six authors can, therefore, be seen to experiment with alternative approaches in their social critique. The encoding/masking of these messages demands that the reader engages more deeply and indirectly with the ideas of resistance that are being explored, involving the reader in the process of finding meaning. In addition, this approach moves beyond the traditional forms of socially-aware novel writing, towards new forms by which to convey the 'reality' of working-class and lower-middle class life. In this sense, the innovations in their techniques

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<sup>693</sup> Walter Besant, 'Candour in English Fiction', *New Review*, II, January 1890, pp. 6-9.

for conveying social critique have a parallel in other fields of the arts during this period, in which there was a similar desire to develop new methods by which to convey ‘reality’.

### **Invisibility and legibility of the working class**

Innovations in form in these texts were not driven solely by the need to soften the barbs of the social critique for commercial purposes. They were also driven by a dichotomy of legibility of the working classes during this period, and the desire to find more effective ways of conveying the realities of social inequality at a time when other individuals and organisations were separating these issues from the remit of fiction writing.

In the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, the poor became both less visible and more widely scrutinised. Stedman Jones notes that ‘as the boom years were succeeded by the uncertainties of the Great Depression, [the problem of the ‘residuum’] appeared to pose itself with greater and greater urgency’.<sup>694</sup> This increase in concern coincided with a reduction in direct contact between the classes, particularly in the capital. Stedman Jones notes that, as the majority of London’s aristocracy derived their income as rentiers, or from positions in banking and commerce, they had fewer ‘direct economic links’ with the working classes (with the exception of their domestic staff) compared to, for example, industrialists.<sup>695</sup> This economic separation between classes accentuated trends, identified earlier in the nineteenth century, towards the geographical distancing of communities along economic lines.<sup>696</sup> As concern regarding the working classes increased, there was a growing desire to make these communities, particularly those inhabiting slum dwellings, legible.

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<sup>694</sup> Stedman Jones, p. 16.

<sup>695</sup> Stedman Jones, pp. 239-240.

<sup>696</sup> Steven Marcus discusses Engels’s remarks on the ‘informal ghettoization of the working classes’ and quotes John Stuart Mill’s statement that: ‘One of the effects of civilization [...] is, that the spectacle, and even the very idea of pain, is kept more and more out of sight of those classes who enjoy in their fullness the benefits of civilization’. Steven Marcus, ‘Reading the Illegible’ in H. J Dyos and Michael Wolff, eds., *The Victorian City: Images and Realities Volume 2: Images and Realities* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 257-276, (pp. 261–262). For more information on the move to the suburbs see: H. Y. Dyos and D. A. Reeder, ‘Slums and Suburbs’ in H. J Dyos and Michael Wolff, eds., *The Victorian City: Images and Realities Volume 2: Images and Realities*, pp. 359-386; and Baker Whelan, *Class, Culture and Suburban Anxieties in the Victorian Era*.

Stedman Jones comments that ‘this absence of direct economic links between the rich and the poor [...] largely explains the particular importance of charitable activity in London both as a mode of interpreting the behaviour of the poor and as a means of attempting to control them.’<sup>697</sup> Furthermore, Asa Briggs argues that ‘with the separation of work-place and home, the growth of single-class living areas and the decline in what later urban sociologists were to call primary or “face-to-face” relationships, statistics as a mode of enquiry easily comes into its own.’<sup>698</sup> Alternative ways of scrutinising the working classes and the problems of poverty were developing across these decades, with intensive intervention in these communities by philanthropists, government officials, policy makers and the media.

Social history from 1880 to 1910 is shaped, fundamentally, by the various parties involved in philanthropic interventions into working class communities, as well as by the social surveys, reports, and the Royal Commission carried out to collect data on poverty.<sup>699</sup> It has been well-documented, however, that social surveys carried significant ideological freight. Briggs states:

From the outset the facts were collected because many of the social statisticians were anxious not merely to present information but to propound a message, sometimes a gospel. Even when they were employed by the government as inspectors or servants of commissioners, they were seldom merely agents of the state.<sup>700</sup>

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<sup>697</sup> Stedman Jones, pp. 239-240.

<sup>698</sup> Asa Briggs, ‘The Human Aggregate’ in H. J Dyos and Michael Wolff, eds., *The Victorian City: Images and Realities Volume 1: Past and Present/Numbers of People* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 83-104, (p. 88).

<sup>699</sup> Key investigations into poverty in this period include: William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London: Salvation Army, 1890); Joseph Rowntree, *Poverty, A Study of Town Life* (1901); and Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1902). Also influential were the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress (1905-1909) and Beatrice Webb’s *Minority Report to the Royal Commission* (1909).

<sup>700</sup> Briggs, p. 84.

The objectivity of those gathering information, and carrying out government interventions into the lives of the poor, tended to be undermined by a sense of moral, evangelical, and/or paternalistic mission. Gary Day argues that social surveys often impacted negatively on discourses of class. Discussing William Booth's survey, Day states:

This assimilation of London to the African continent was a new element in the representation of poverty. Previously, the poor had been presented as colourful street types, or as the undifferentiated "hands" of industrial fictions. [...] The identification of the poor with the inhabitants of Africa [...] reinforced the view of the poor as "savages" or "barbarians" [...] when, in fact, it was that very "civilisation" which had created the poverty that so shocked contemporaries.<sup>701</sup>

Kevin Swafford expands upon attitudes of the dominant centre in the following terms:

[I]n order to maintain the determined structures of power and class, along with the attendant illusion of cultural superiority, the West (symbolic of the ruling classes) must misapprehend its negative other, the East (emblematic of the working class), as a matter of ideological necessity, otherwise the imaginary or illusory structures and distinctions of class begin to weaken.<sup>702</sup>

Despite the outward intention of improving circumstances for the poor, social surveys such as Booth's employed a fundamentally conservative rhetoric which had the outcome of supporting the project to maintain notions of the superiority of a white, privileged, section of British society. The extended metaphor Booth draws between the slums of the East End and Africa has damaging implications for discourses of both race and class. In addition to

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<sup>701</sup> Day, pp. 144-145.

<sup>702</sup> Swafford, p. 28.

the working classes of London being associated with notions of savagery and brutality attributed erroneously to African peoples, the outcomes of British poverty and overcrowding (such as crime, ill health and drunkenness) are superimposed, similarly, upon the discourse of race without foundation or logic.

In addition to philanthropic and political interventions into working-class life, this period is associated with an intensification of cultural engagements with these communities, involving both reportage and fiction.<sup>703</sup> Irrespective of the ideological or commercial motivations of those individuals and organisations scrutinising and interpreting working-class communities, the intensity of interest and the proliferation of materials contributed to a bombardment of, often conflicting, representations of the working classes, all of which sought to convey the ‘reality’ of these communities and spaces.

Furthermore, it is at this point in history, in Britain, that the study of sociology emerged as an academic discipline, with scrutiny of the working classes as a key pillar. A. H. Halsey traces the history of sociology in Britain back to the seventeenth century, and discusses key figures in its subsequent development, such as Adam Smith, Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill, in addition to the social researchers already discussed, such as Booth and Rowntree.<sup>704</sup> The first decade of the twentieth century saw the establishment of its first formal structures however. The Sociological Society was established in 1903, with H. G. Wells as one of its founder members.<sup>705</sup> Furthermore the London School of Economics established the first chair in sociology in Britain in 1907, with the appointment of L. T. Hobhouse. Halsey provides a fascinating insight into the early debates in the field of

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<sup>703</sup> Useful sources include the following chapters: Swafford, ‘Chapter Two: Cultural Paternalism in the East End of London’, pp. 19-41, and ‘Chapter Four: Translating the Slums: The Coding of Class in Arthur Morrison’s “A Child of the Jago”’, pp. 65-93. For Morrison, also see E. Cubitt, *Arthur Morrison, the Jago, and the Realist Representation of Place* (London: University College London, 2016). For journalism of the slums refer to the career and work of W. T. Stead, in particular *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883), and ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’ a series of articles on child prostitution published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1885).

<sup>704</sup> A. H. Halsey, *A History of Sociology in Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

<sup>705</sup> Halsey, p. 22

sociology, stating that socially-conscious literature vied for validation as a major contributor to this field in its formative years, in addition to the claims of science.<sup>706</sup> Wells lectured at the LSE in 1906 on ‘The So-Called Science of Sociology’, arguing that there could be no progress without the bringing together of art and science, and advocating ‘a literary sociology’. The field was ultimately directed away from literary precedents, however.

Throughout the period 1880-1910, the Men from Nowhere would have witnessed the intensification of scrutiny of poverty, seen the creation of philanthropic, political and governmental interventions and, in the case of Wells, been influential in the creation of a new field of academic study focused on the scientific analysis of social issues. The traditional role of class-based social critique through literature had been overtaken by new ideas and structures which aimed to offer greater insight into the ‘reality’ of the working classes. The Men from Nowhere saw this as both a challenge (in that the range of commentators on working-class life had proliferated rapidly), and as an invitation to experiment (to counter, perhaps, misleading or ideologically-loaded representations). In this respect, their reactions to their rapidly-evolving historical moment mirror other fields within the arts in which the ability to represent reality had been challenged in similar ways.

### **Innovations in form, in search of new depictions of reality**

In his discussions on the emergence of impressionist art, E. H. Gombrich describes how the emergence of photography impacted upon aspects of fine art:

There was no need for painting to perform a task which a mechanical device could perform better and more cheaply. [...] The painter was a man who could defeat the transitory nature of things and preserve the aspect of any object for posterity. [...] Photography in the nineteenth century was about to take over this function of pictorial

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<sup>706</sup> Halsey p. 22.

art. [...] So it came about that artists were increasingly compelled to explore regions where photography could not follow them.<sup>707</sup>

With the arrival of photography, one of the tasks of art, the rendering of likenesses, was no longer solely the role of the painter. Gombrich argues, however, that this provided Impressionist artists with ‘a new freedom and a new power’ which ‘must have been truly exhilarating’.<sup>708</sup>

The Men from Nowhere, I believe, experienced a similar challenge and release from traditional imperatives. Where artists of the late nineteenth-century were no longer compelled to render an exact likeness for a portrait or landscape, these authors no longer needed to create realistic representations of poverty in order to raise awareness of the negative impacts of capitalism. Gombrich argues that ‘to transfer the actual visual experience of the painter to the beholder, was the true aim of the Impressionists’.<sup>709</sup> Similarly, the true aim of the Men from Nowhere was to transfer their own worldviews to those of their ‘beholders’ by ‘winning hearts and minds’.<sup>710</sup>

In both cases, the need to convey the realities of the modern world more effectively demanded innovations in form. Discussing impressionism, Gombrich argues:

The artist gives the beholder increasingly ‘more to do’, he draws him into the magic circle of creation and allows him to experience something of the thrill of “making” which had once been the privilege of the artist. It is the turning point which leads to those visual conundrums of twentieth-century art that challenge our

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<sup>707</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1988), pp. 416-417.

<sup>708</sup> Gombrich, p. 416.

<sup>709</sup> Gombrich, p. 416.

<sup>710</sup> This term refers to a situation of conflict in which one side achieves supremacy over the other by appealing to the intelligence and emotions of those from whom it aims to gain support, rather than by applying force. It is attributed to numerous figures, including Hubert Lyautey, a French general who employed the term to describe attempts to quell rebellion during the Tonkin campaign in 1895.

ingenuity and make us search our own minds for the unexpressed and inarticulate.<sup>711</sup>

This explanation of an art movement which encouraged the ‘beholder’ to search for meaning (rather than presenting instantly-recognisable likenesses) resonates with the techniques employed by the Men from Nowhere to awaken late-Victorian and Edwardian society to the inequities arising from capitalist society and rapid colonial expansion. Experimentation does not render these texts inaccessible, but the techniques employed appear to encourage readers to question assumptions (and arrive at altered understandings) about the worlds they inhabit, and the ways in which power is distributed and imposed.

A detailed interrogation of potential synergies between innovation in fine art and the social critique of socially-marginalised authors is not within the scope of this thesis. It does, however, present an interesting hypothesis for a future multidisciplinary study. This exploration of the rhetorical strategies of the Men from Nowhere does, however, accentuate the importance of examining representations of class in late-Victorian and Edwardian writing by socially-marginalised authors more thoroughly and broadly. Overwhelmingly, cultural understandings of the British social machine, gained to date, have been dominated by commentaries ‘from above’, and shaped (theoretically) by a focus on notions of collective resistance. By analysing the oppositional voices of authors trapped within the machinery of the British class system, however, a broader access to literary forms of resistance, imagined from the perspective of the *individual*, can be gained, providing a vital counterpoint to existing scholarship.

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<sup>711</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and illusion: a study in the psychology of pictorial representation* (London: Phaidon, 2002), p. 169.



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PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.

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## A RARE CHANCE!

Huntsman. "Hi! STOP 'EM, SIR! THEY'RE ON AN OLD 'UN!"  
 Hard-riding Gent (who is very seldom able to afford a "day out"). "ALL THE BETTER, OLD CHAP—ALL THE BETTER."  
 (Sotto voce, as he disappears over fence). "DIDN'T PAY TWO GUINEAS TO WALK!"

## A NOVEL EDUCATION.

"One of the latest of the new academic studies instituted in the United States is 'a course of modern fiction.' . . . The modern fiction class in Yale University numbers no fewer than 258 members."—*Daily Telegraph*.

THE tutor of St. Mary's, Cambridge, was sitting in his rooms after Hall interviewing a succession of undergraduates.

"Sit down, please, Mr. JONES," he said to the last comer; "I wish to speak to you very seriously on the subject of your work. The College is not at all satisfied with your progress this term. For instance, Professor KILYARD tells me that your attendance at his lectures has been most irregular."

"Well, Sir," said JONES, fumbling with the tassel of his cap, "I didn't think they were important—"

"Not important? How do you expect to be able to get up difficult authors like CROCKETT and MACLAREN unless you've attended a course of lectures on Scotch dialect? Do you know the meaning of 'havers,' 'gabby,' or 'yammering'? I thought not. Then your last paper on 'Elementary Besantics' was very weak. Have you really been giving your energies to your work, or have you been frittering away your time over other books?"

JONES looked guilty, but said nothing.

"Ah," resumed the Don, "I see how it is. You've been wasting your time over light literature—HOMER and VIRGIL, and trash of that sort. But you really must resist temptations of that kind if you wish to do creditably in the Tripos. Good evening."

JONES departed, to be succeeded by another undergraduate.

"I sent for you, Mr. SMITH," said the Tutor, "because—though your work on the older writers is pretty good—your acquaintance with modern realism is quite insufficient. You will attend the course of anatomy lectures at the hospital, please. You can't study your 'keynotes' intelligently without them."

A third student made his appearance in the doorway.

"Mr. ROBINSON, I'm sorry to say that your work is unsatisfactory. On looking at your MUDIE list, I find that you've only taken out ten novels in the last month. In order to see whether you can

be permitted to take the Tripos this year, I'm going to give you a few questions, the answers to which must be brought me before Saturday. You will find pen and ink on that table. Kindly take down the following questions, as I dictate them."

The tutor cleared his throat, and began:

"Question one. Explain 'P.W.D. accounts,' 'a G.T.,' 'G.B.T. shin-bones.' Trace the bearing of the history of MOWGLI on the Darwinian theory."

"Question two. The truth shall make us free. Give context, and comment on this statement. Conjugate, in accordance with the library catalogue, *The Woman who*—, noting which of the tenses are irregular."

"Question three. 'There were two Tribbys' (*Tribby*, Part VIII.). Explain this statement. What had Mr. WHISTLER to do with it?"

"Question four. Give the formulae for the employment of (a) the Mad Bull; (b) the Runaway Horse; (c) the Secret Marriage. What would you suggest as the modern equivalents of these?"

"Question five. Rewrite the story of *Jack and Jill*—(a) in Wessex dialect; (b) as a 'Keynote'; (c) as a 'Dolly Dialogue.'"

"That will do for the present," concluded the tutor. And, as his pupil left the room, he seated himself at the writing-table and began Chapter XXIX. of his "Prolegomena to *Three Men in a Boat*."

BY OUR OWN SCHOOLBOY.

Q. Translate "*Tertium quid*."

A. It means a third sovereign.

NOTES ON THE BUSBY BICENTENARY.—According to his biography given in the *Times* on the occasion of Dr. BUSBY'S bicentenary, that eminent public schoolmaster, who held his headmastership of Westminster under Monarchy and Commonwealth, mastership of the celebrated *Vicar of Bray*, seems to have been a precursor of the celebrated *Vicar of Bray* of In memory of their great headmaster the Westminster Boys' Corps of Volunteers will always wear "the Busby."

Image of Punch article 'A Novel Education' courtesy of UEA Archives & Special Collections.