The language of class

Britain

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">upper class*</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">middle class*</td><td>upper middle class</td></tr>
<tr><td>lower middle class</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">lower class* → working class</td></tr>
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* See pages 10 and 11.

The phrase ‘lower class’ has almost disappeared and been replaced by the phrase ‘working class’.

United States

middle class
working class

Social divides are mentioned nonetheless:

- educational: educated / undereducated
- occupational: white collar, professional / blue collar
- geographical: Eastern / Southern and Western
- cosmopolitan / rural, provincial

→ What question does this division raise?

Class and work

The Protestant ethos of hard work

***Industry and Idleness* (1747)**

a series of twelve engravings by William Hogarth

Plate 1: two equal apprentices working for the same master



Plate 10: The idle apprentice has become a thief and a murderer.

His accomplices testify against him (king's evidence).

The former hard-working apprentice, now a successful businessman and an alderman, has to pass judgement on his former fellow apprentice.



Each engraving is accompanied by one or more biblical quotations.

From The House of Mirth, by Edith Wharton (1905)

"My goodness—you can't go on living here!" he exclaimed.

Lily smiled at his tone. "I am not sure that I can; but I have gone over my expenses very carefully, and I rather think I shall be able to manage it."

"Be able to manage it? That's not what I mean—it's no place for you!"

"It's what I mean; for I have been out of work for the last week."

"Out of work—out of work! What a way for you to talk! The idea of your having to work—it's preposterous."

Class and morals
Class and race

Hogarth's engraving makes visible the link between crime and law on the one hand and social class on the other.
In both the United States and the United Kingdom, ethnicity and social class intersect: at the same income level, people of different ethnicities form different social groups.
In turn, class becomes an 'ethnic' identity as visible (and audible) as skin colour: grooming, clothes, language (class accent)... are social class stigmata.

Misfits (2009)

ASBO (anti-social behaviour order)
community service
West African (?)
Caribbean (?)
Irish
the 'Croydon facelift'

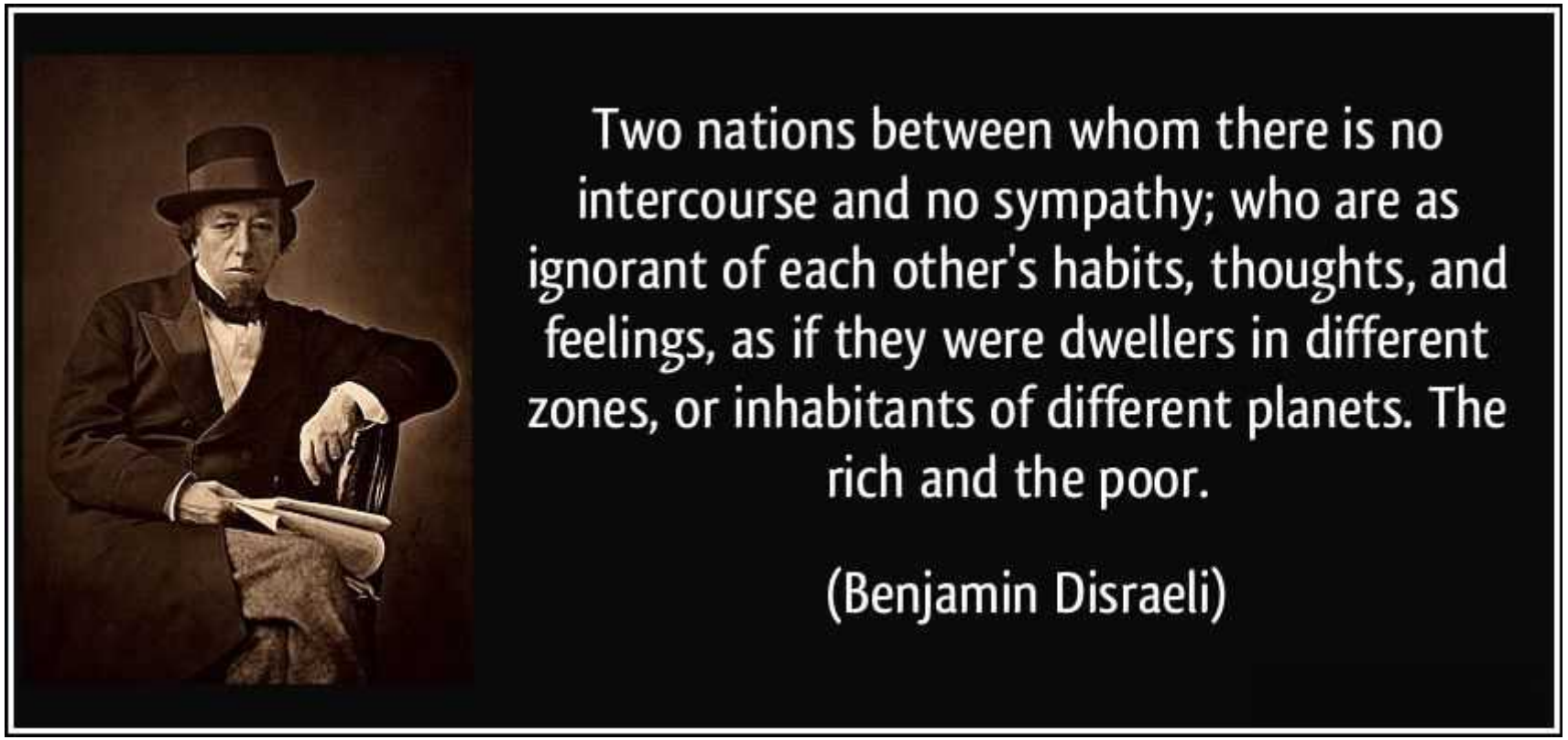


Heavy-handed portrayal of lower-class people is a time-honoured ploy of broad comedy.



Kate Moss and comedian Matt Lucas portraying British working-class teenage mothers.

Social class in Britain: the class-ridden society



Sibyl, or The Two Nations (1845)

The twofold nature of British ruling classes

Aristocracy

The House of Lords and monarchy were abolished in 1649 and restored in 1660.

→ Social class still has an official and legal definition: the distinction between commoners and peers

→ A large part of the land, and therefore of wealth made from farming, still belongs to the landed gentry and is passed down from generation to generation.

Bourgeoisie

The growth of the manufacturing sector since approximately the seventeenth century allowed another class to rise and gain a prominent social role alongside the aristocracy: industrialists, merchants and bankers.

The phrase ‘middle class’ appeared in 1745.

(The comparative forms ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ indicate that only two social classes were originally identified.)

For the reasons mentioned above, the phrase ‘upper class’ connotes hereditary nobility and does not usually include even quite rich people who are not part of the nobility.

Class, language and geography

Typically, there is more linguistic diversity at the bottom of the British social ladder than at its top.

Thus, local accents are also class accents.

In times when young upper-class children were educated by servants, schools (public schools in the case of boys) played a key role in homogenising the accent of the British, and more particularly the English, élite.

In George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1913), a phoneticist teaches a London flower-selling girl (Eliza Doolittle) to speak 'proper' English so that she can move up the social ladder.

The play inspired a musical, *My Fair Lady* (1956), which formed the basis for a 1964 film of the same title.

The second half of the twentieth century

1. Bridging the social divide

Between 1945 and 1951, Clement Attlee's Labour government established social protections based on the Beveridge report (1942):

The National Health Service (NHS) was created to provide healthcare 'from the cradle to the grave'. It is not an insurance scheme but a public service.

Benefits were created for unemployment, sickness, maternity, as well as retirement pensions.

Education was reformed twice:
The tripartite system of secondary education was started in 1945.
The selection that it involved led to its replacement by the comprehensive system in the 1970s.

2. The limits of social democracy

Comprehensive schools did not replace selective schools (grammar schools) but were created alongside them.

As a result, comprehensive schools are not comprehensive in fact since they do not receive pupils educated in other sorts of secondary schools.

Many parents try to avoid sending their children to comprehensive schools to improve their chances in life.

Culturally, subjective class identification has remained strong and sometimes overrides the reality of people's living standards.

3. Ending the Keynesian consensus

During the 1974-1979 period of Labour government, the Conservative Party moved away from the compromise of the post-war period, returning to classical rightwing politics:

- monetarism (the idea that the state should intervene as little as possible in the economy, therefore its economic role should be as restricted as possible to the management of money)
- neoclassical economics
- influence of the Chicago school of economics, Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek

Margaret Thatcher, who spearheaded these ideas, was elected leader of the Conservative Party in 1975.

The Conservative Party won the general elections of 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992. Thatcher was prime minister from 1979 to 1990.

"There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." Margaret Thatcher, 1987

America: from social rubbish heap to classless Eden?

‘British colonists promoted a dual agenda: one involved reducing poverty back in England, and the other called for transporting the idle and unproductive to the New World.

‘After settlement, colonial outposts exploited their unfree laborers (indentured servants, slaves, and children) and saw such expendable classes as human waste.

‘The poor, the waste, did not disappear, and by the early eighteenth century they were seen as a permanent breed. […]

‘Long before they were today’s “trailer trash” and “rednecks,” they were called “lubbers” and “rubbish” and “clay-eaters” and “crackers”. […]

‘Before it became that fabled “City upon a Hill,” America was in the eyes of sixteenth-century adventurers a foul, weedy wilderness—a “sinke hole” suited to ill-bred commoners […] a place into which they could export their own marginalized people.’

Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash*, 2016

This image of America coexisted with, and was finally superseded by, one in which it is an exceptional country contrasting from the monarchies and fixed aristocracies of the Old World by classlessness and social mobility.

This image is celebrated by Charles Murray in *Coming Apart* (2012), where it is encapsulated by a 1963 Gallup poll in which half respondents described themselves as working class and the other half as middle class.

These responses illustrate how a cultural representation of the American nation excludes meaningful references to social class from language.

America and aristocracy

‘[...] I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. [...] There is also an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class. The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society.’

Thomas Jefferson, co-author of the American Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States, in a letter to John Adams, 28 October 1813

Was Jefferson’s vision of society democratic or aristocratic?



America's elite universities: a warped democracy?

The highest-ranking American universities use descent ("legacy status") as a criterion to select their students.

According to a study by Jessica M. Wang and Brian P. Yu (2017)

29% of first-year students at Harvard are children of alumni.

According to a study by Michael Hurwitz (2011) an applicant's chance of being admitted in a top-ranking university is higher by 45 percentage points if their parents are alumni.

Race and class in the United States

Although slavery was abolished by the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution (1865) and racial segregation by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, skin colour still plays a role in distinguishing between people which is sometimes more powerful than economic factors.

For instance, the maternal mortality rate of black women is three to four times higher than that of white women.

Black, college-educated mothers who give birth in local hospitals are more likely to suffer severe complications of pregnancy or childbirth than white women who never graduated from high school.

People with similar occupations and incomes but different ethnicities are often described as different social classes.

'Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people […]; then next to them – not above, just away from – were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged.'

Flannery O'Connor, 'Revelation', 1965

Race, class and geography in the United States

According to Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi (later president of the Confederacy)

in the antebellum United States:

	North	South
social classes	rich / poor	white / black

‘No white man, in a slaveholding community, is the menial servant of anyone.’

This representation of Southern society, though widespread, was pure myth-making: inequality and class hierarchy between white Southerners were extreme; the divide between the slaveholding, landgrabbing elite and landless ‘poor white trash’ was a defining feature of this agrarian economy.

Poor white Americans, especially Southern ones, have often been described as racists, their skin colour the only social privilege available to them: *at least* they're not black.

'Then you made your way through the first suburb, *proletarian and proudly white* Oak Woods, a dinky, arrogant neighborhood with a preponderance of American flags waving in the wind.'

Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (emphasis added)

However, some historians contend that this antagonism between racial groups at the bottom of the social ladder, has actually been encouraged, if not fomented, by elites:

'[Segregation was enforced to] completely separate poor whites and blacks […] so that […] people will not have a chance to get together, to talk and to see their commonalities […] to prevent any kind of alliances and cut fellow feeling.' (Mara Keire, history lecturer, on the BBC Radio 4 show *In Our Time* of June 15, 2017)

'Throughout Southern history race is used to trump class […] you emphasise racial divisions in order to prevent people with a common unity, a common set of interests, coming together on class lines.' (Lawrence Goldman, history professor, *ibid.*)

Social class and geography: the suburbs

‘“Try to own a suburban home,” said an advertisement by the British Freehold Land Company in the 1920s, “it will make you a better citizen and help your family. The suburbs have fresh air, sunlight, roomy houses, green lawns and social advantages.” It perfectly summarises the ideal behind suburbia, which is where most people in Britain live today.

‘The huge suburban expansion of British cities between the wars accommodated population growth and enabled people to buy homes at low prices. London doubled in area over those two decades and increased its population by 1.2 million people. Speculators built semi-detached houses for sale at between £400 and £500 which were close, as another advertisement put it, to “tiny hills and hollows … pools of water, brambly wildernesses, where in spring nightingales sing and the air is sweet with the smell of violets, primroses and hawthorn”.’

Rowan Moore, *The Observer*, Sunday 10 July, 2016

In the United States, after the second world war, rather than rehabilitate decaying inner cities, developers chose to build new satellite towns made of single-family houses, emphasising clean air, modern conveniences and security.



Levittown on Long Island, New York

The company Levitt & Sons built seven suburbs, comprising 140,000 housing units.

The suburbs ambiguously celebrated upward social mobility resulting in a classless society, while enforcing strict class and racial segregation:

- Developers such as Levitt & Sons did not sell houses to blacks and purchase contracts forbade buyers to resell to blacks (see *Suburbicon*).
- Zoning laws and other regulations kept blue-collar workers away.

→ 'White flight': the American middle class 'flew' to the suburbs, leaving crumbling inner cities to blacks, hispanics and recent immigrants. For example, in New York, the Bronx, formerly an Italian and Irish borough, became an African American one.

→ Poor whites were often left with few housing options other than trailer parks.

Gentrification

Starting in the 1990s, some young professionals, bored with suburbia, chose to live in working-class inner cities, attracted by their ‘vibrancy,’ ‘character’ or ‘authenticity,’ and sense of community.

Local authorities have often welcomed this new demographic, who pay more taxes because they are better-off, and fund the rehabilitation of run-down neighbourhoods.

However, by driving up housing prices, gentrifiers tend to price out the very people who made the neighbourhoods attractive.

In addition, unlike working-class residents, they often leave after a few years, typically when they create a family.

The twofold Protestant legacy of class perception in America

The Protestant work ethic dovetails with the themes of the American dream, the self-made man, the land of opportunity: the myth of a country without determinism, where the free individual enjoys limitless possibilities to (re)invent himself, to cross class boundaries.

The Calvinistic belief in the theology of grace denies human agency and interprets social rank as a sign of (non-)election:

'*She had seen* from the first that the child belonged with the old woman. *She could tell* by the way they sat – kind of vacant and white-trashy, as if they would sit there until Doomsday if nobody called and told them to get up.'

Flannery O'Connor, 'Revelation', 1965 (emphasis added)

Cinderellas for the nineteenth century

From rags to riches: fictional representations of upward social mobility

Celebrating meritocratic societies or rewriting medieval morality plays and fairy tales?

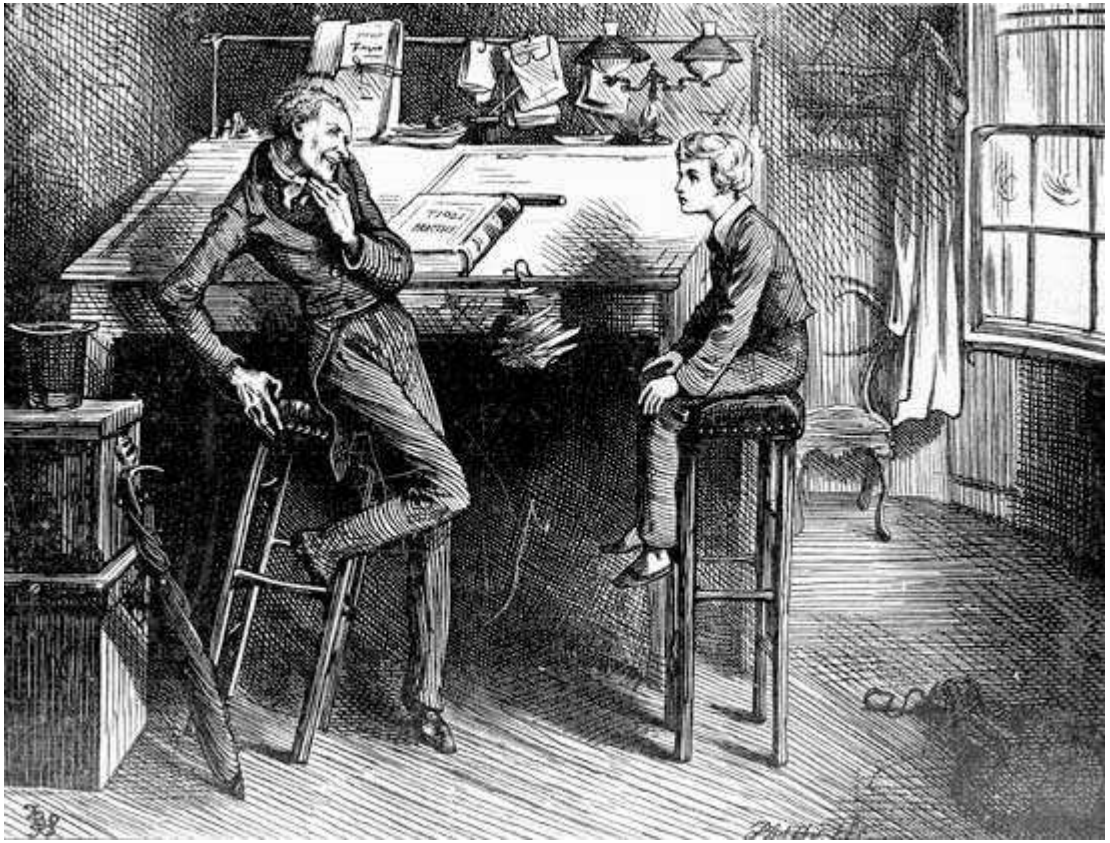
An English Cinderella:
Oliver Twist or The Parish-Boy's Progress
by Charles Dickens
published 1837-1839

1) Oliver Twist starts life as an orphan in a workhouse.





2) Eventually, Oliver is adopted by a respectable, well-off family.



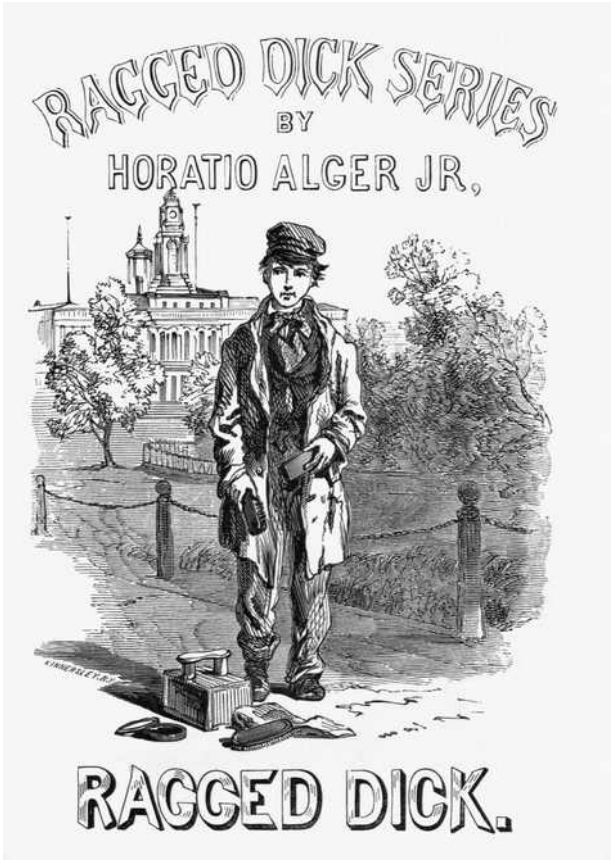
Uriah Heep and David Copperfield (Fred Barnard)
One of the main villains in *David Copperfield*, Uriah Heep is an ambitious, dishonest hypocrite.
His schemes eventually land him in prison.
The contrast between him and David produces an ambivalent image of social mobility.

Ragged Dick and his clones: American Cinderellas

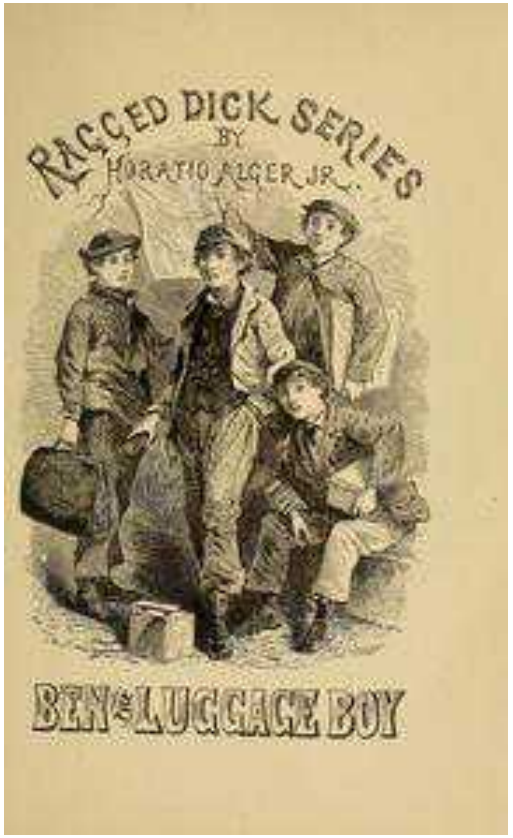
Ragged Dick or Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks

by Horatio Alger Jr, published 1867-1868

Unlike Oliver Twist's magical social uplift, Dick's success is the rational result of his moral virtues. Ragged Dick was the template for a formulaic series. The same illustration is used for several novels.





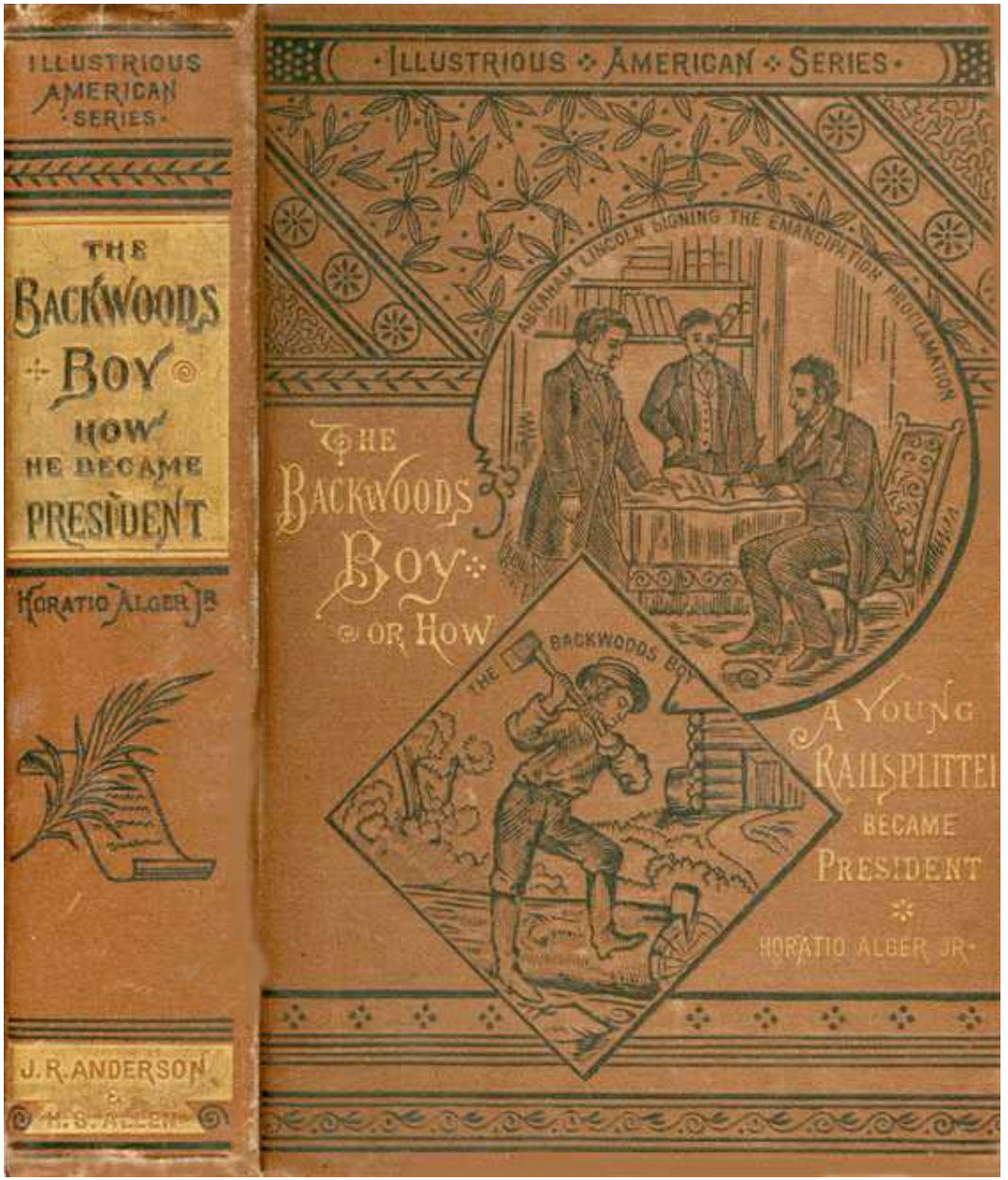


Alger runs through the typology of menial jobs done by destitute children in nineteenth-century America. Each appears with the attribute of his calling but they all look the same.



The title of Alger's biography of Abraham Lincoln reads exactly like that of one of his novels, blurring the distinction between imagination and reality.
→ Whether fictional or biographical, his writing serves a twofold aim:

- wish fulfilment: indulging the author's and the public's desire for justice.
- education, moral improvement: strengthening faith in:
  - a) moral virtues
  - b) American republicanism



‘Do you think I could have made up something so marvelous myself?

Never, never!

America outdoes all its writers […].’

(Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*)

* Uncannily, this self-referential metaliterary comment from a wryly disenchanted narrator reads as if it could have been taken from Alger’s biography of Lincoln.

→ America appears as a country:

- where the line between fact and fiction is blurred;
- where reality is more imaginative than imagination itself;
- where fiction is dethroned because reality is a superior form of fiction;
- with a manifest destiny: not just a real(istic) country but a place where a providential plan is made real. Part of that plan which it is America’s role to enact is upward social mobility.

* Alger writes about a railsplitter who works his way up to the White House.

/ Oates describes the gaudy, sickening advertising signs that line a suburban road, replacing the natural environment with a man-made, commercial one.

The nature and the tone of the comment appear out of joint with its object.

→ Oates parodies the earnest style of nineteenth-century improving fiction praising the American miracle to write about the American ‘anti-miracle’.

Tragic and tragicomic visions of social class at the turn of the twentieth century

Whereas Jane Austen had treated the social ambitions of the English middle class as a comedy of manners...

While Dickens and Alger wrote about lower-class characters and their journey up the social ladder as moral fairy tales...

at the turn of the twentieth century Edith Wharton focused on the opposite end of the social spectrum and took a pessimistic view of its prospects.

- In *The House of Mirth* (1905), a young woman loses her position in the New York upper class because of her financial difficulty.

  The plot of this story of social downfall revives the medieval theme of the wheel of fortune.

- In *The Custom of the Country* (1913), a young middle-class midwestern woman relentlessly pursues her endless quest for social climbing, never satisfied with the situation she has achieved, and mindlessly destroying the lives of everyone around her in the process.

Nineteenth-century evolutionist theories on social class: 'social Darwinism'

Herbert Spencer
Progress: Its Law and Cause (1857)
The Social Organism (1860)

Spencer's theories of social evolution were devised before the publication of Darwin's biological theory of evolution. Spencer's ideas on evolution were thus derived from Lamarck, not Darwin.
→ classical liberalism (*laissez-faire* economics)

Francis Galton
→ eugenics

'[...] the average middle-class person is brought up to believe that the working classes are ignorant, lazy, drunken, boorish, and dishonest [...]' (see extract from *The Road to Wigan Pier* by Orwell)

* Social Darwinist discourse permeated visions of the working classes for decades:

lower intellectual ability, laziness, alcoholism, incomplete civilisation were typical Social Darwinist explanations for social inferiority.

* 'Lazy' and 'dishonest' echo Hogarth's engravings but the stakes are markedly different:

- Hogarth's outlook is moral and individualising (his apprentices are like two lab rats), suggesting that success or failure is up to the individual.
- / Social Darwinism is deterministic.

Cross-class erotics

Tragic impossibility or political redemption?

In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), Lily Bart's downward social mobility condemns her because no upper-class man can marry beneath him if he wants to retain the respect of his social class.

At the other end of the twentieth century (2000), in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, an affair with an illiterate janitor proves the undoing of academic Coleman Silk. The novel reflects bitterly on the paradoxes and hypocrisy of a society which claims to have turned upside down the values of Wharton's America.

In her biography of Edward Carpenter (1844-1929), the English intellectual with an upper-middle-class background, Sheila Rowbotham writes:

"Men of Carpenter's class and background were necessarily affected by the guilt which pervaded sexual desire and the body. Unable to synchronise lust with ideals, both homosexual and heterosexual men turned to the lower classes for forbidden sex, partly because the codes of correct behaviour did not hold with outsiders. Casual cross-class encounters were part of the underground culture of the nineteenth century. Many of these would be overtly commercial transactions and they always carried complex nuances of power."

However, cross-class erotics was also seen by some, including Carpenter, as opening up utopian possibilities of reforming class-ridden Britain:

In D.H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (published 1928), the eponymous character is physically and emotionally estranged from her husband, who was wounded in the Great War. She has an intense sexual affair with a gamekeeper, which brings her an epiphany.

In E.M. Forster's novel *Maurice* (inspired by Carpenter's life, originally written 1913-1914, final revision 1960), the eponymous character has a relationship with a fellow university student, Clive, who finally marries a woman.

Maurice seeks a medical cure to his homosexuality, to no avail.

Later, he meets a gamekeeper with whom he finally forms a sincere and stable couple.

Reverting the stigma: reclaiming class identity, glamorising lower-class stigma

‘Excessive womanliness’: white trash glamour girls

‘It takes a lot of money to look this cheap’



Dolly Parton explained that her look represented poor rural white girls’ desire to look like magazine models:

‘We could see the pictures of the models in the newspapers that lined the walls of our house and the occasional glimpse we could get at a magazine. We wanted to look like them. They didn’t look at all like they had to work in the fields. They didn’t look like they had to take a spit bath in a dishpan. They didn’t look as if men and boys could just put their hands on them any time they felt like it, and with any degree of roughness they chose. The way they looked, if a man wanted to touch them, he’d better be damn nice to them.’

‘Trash’, by Brett Anderson,
from the Suede album *Coming Up* (1996)

Maybe maybe it’s the clothes we wear
The tasteless bracelets and the dye in our hair
Maybe it’s our kookiness
Or maybe maybe it’s our nowhere towns
Our nothing places and our cellophane sounds
Maybe it’s our looseness
But we’re trash you and me
We’re the litter on the breeze
We’re the lovers on the streets
Just trash me and you
It’s in everything we do
It’s in everything we do

Maybe maybe it’s the things we say,
The words we’ve heard and the music we play,
Maybe it’s our cheapness,
Or maybe, maybe it’s the times we’ve had,
The lazy days and the crazes and the fads,
Maybe it’s our sweetness,
But we’re trash, you and me,
We’re the litter on the breeze,
We’re the lovers on the street,
Just trash, me and you,
It’s in everything we do,
It’s in everything we do

Dirty White Trash, by Tim Noble and Sue Webster (1998)

