
DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation explores the various ways in which the lower middle class is represented in the Victorian period. Drawing on literary texts by Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and George Gissing and non-literary texts appearing in periodicals, comic newspapers, and music-hall songs I show how the lower middle class consisting of those members of British society working variously as Civil Service, commercial, and retail clerks, school teachers, and living in the suburbs of London and other large cities is represented as dangerous, laughable, and pitiable. Through readings of self-improvement books by Samuel Smiles, conduct and instruction manuals, and didactic literature I show how middle-class anxieties about its own position vis-à-vis the aristocracy and the working class drive middle-class elites and its representatives to represent the lower middle class as dangerous and thus in need of containment and surveillance. One of the constant fears of the middle class is that the lower middle class will develop a cultural and economic identity of its own and as a result will over shadow the middle class. Often times this middle-class anxiety is cloaked in moral concern. As the century progresses, the threat the lower middle class poses changes. Texts like The Suburbans by T. W. H. Crossland depict the lower middle class as a threat to both the cultural and the physical landscape of Great Britain.
I then show how the lower middle class poses a threat to the heteronormative order that both underwrites and is underwritten by the bourgeois order. The lower middle class enjoyment of female to male cross-dressing performers like Vesta Tilley highlights how the music hall develops into a place where lower-middle-class men and women can re-imagine their class, gender, and sexual identities. As such it becomes the locus of an emergent lower-middle-class cultural identity that is independent of middle class influence.

The dissertation also shows how Charles Dickens in *David Copperfield* offers up a solution to the socio-literary problem of the lower middle class by deploying the *Bildungsroman* to allow for the social mobility of some members of the lower middle class. Specifically, *David Copperfield* enters into the ongoing Victorian debate over the nature of the gentleman and proposes that the best way for young lower-middle-class men to rise to the rank of middle-class gentlemen is through authorship. Through a discussion of the shape of the literary field I show how and why this answer to the problem of the lower middle class becomes the accepted way for writers of fiction to represent the lower middle class. I show how Anthony Trollope in *The Three Clerks* and Shan Bullock in *Robert Thorne* take up this Dickensian template in their own novels about the lower middle class. The dissertation then turns to a discussion of how *Born in Exile* and *New Grub Street* by George Gissing and *The Diary of a Nobody* by George and Weedon Grossmith challenge the Dickensian template. All three novels are able to do so because of changes in the literary field that included the demise of the three volume novel, the rise of the newspaper novel, and the advent of the single volume novel. Gissing’s novels highlight the futility of using cultural means like authorship to rise in the
social hierarchy. In allowing the vulgar Jasper Milvain to succeed as a man of letters New Grub Street shows the literary profession not as the ennobling profession that David Copperfield does, but as no different than any other profession where it is the vulgar who succeed. Gissing’s novels represent the lower middle class as both dangerous and as pitiable. The Diary of a Nobody breaks with the Dickensian template by having its protagonist be content with his lower-middle-class status. Unlike Dickensian protagonists who struggle to escape their lower-middle-class origins, Charles Pooter expresses no desire to escape his lower-middle-class suburban home or leave his lower-middle-class friends. The Diary of a Nobody, while poking fun at the lower middle class does not represent the lower middle class as dangerous nor as pitiable but rather as figures who deserve some amount of recognition as legitimate cultural actors. It is this recognition that lies at the importance of how the lower middle class is represented. Recognition as legitimate cultural actors precedes recognition of the lower middle class’s right to engage in the political process.
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INTRODUCTION

“Peddlers,” and “Boats,” and “Wagons!” Oh! ye shades / Of Pope and Dryden, are we come to this?
--George Gordon, Lord Byron

So bemoaned Lord Byron over what he saw as the depths to which English poetry had been reduced by the works of William Wordsworth. By the end of the nineteenth century many of Byron’s late contemporaries would make similar complaints about the influence of the masses, specifically the Board School educated lower middle classes, had not just literature but on the whole of British culture. This dissertation shows how and why a range of Victorian cultural elites represented the lower middle class as laughable, dangerous, and pitiable. Despite their ubiquity in Victorian novels, music hall songs and sketches, comic newspapers, social reform literature, and a whole range of popular cultural texts there exists a real lack of modern scholarship concerned with the lower middle class. Despite our vast knowledge of the making of the English working class, the rise of the middle class, and the decline of the aristocracy during the nineteenth century, scholars of the Victorian period know comparatively little about the lower middle class. This dissertation attempts to begin to answer these questions.

What scholarly work does exist on the lower middle class is preliminary and in some cases unsatisfying. Some like Arno Mayer dismiss the lower middle class as
reactionary and lay at its door the responsibility for the rise of fascism. The essays in The
Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914 edited by Geoffrey Crossick provide a useful
introduction to the lower middle class though the essays suffer from the attempt to reduce
a dynamic class and range of cultural practices to a series of economic and demographic
data. The essays start with the presumption that class is wholly a function of economics.
As the work of Pierre Bourdieu and others have shown class and class identification is a
much more complex phenomenon. Class affiliation and identification no more about how
much one earns and how ones earns than it is about a whole range of practices—dress,
choice of leisure time activities, food choices, daily and seasonal rituals, choice of
companions, where one lives, and the underlying unconscious assumptions governing all
of the above—or what Bourdieu calls habitus.

More recent work on the lower middle class by historian Peter Bailey has begun
to explore these aspects of class identification yet still suffers from an understandable
lack of vocabulary and theoretical frames with which to place the lower middle class in
perspective. Bailey’s studies on the music hall and the leisure practices of the working
class and the lower middle class provide perhaps the best insight into how the lower
middle lived and how they viewed themselves as a class. Yet in approaching the lower
middle class from a historian’s perspective Bailey’s work relies too heavily on
demographic materials and suffers from a lack of nuance when reading cultural texts,
generally ignoring the role literary works play in the ongoing representation of the lower
middle class. The implicit goal of Bailey’s early work, and that of many others writing on
the lower middle class, is to uncover what really happened and to say definitively that
this is how the lower middle class lived. As a result, literary and non-literary texts are chosen for their perceived ability to reflect accurately what really happened. Bailey often times fails to understand that these creative texts are what really happened, in other words, they are the phenomenon in and of themselves. They influenced and often engendered the very historical events historians set out to study. Creative texts are not just superstructure but are an important component of the base. They have the power to structure the way in which we view and think about the material. In Bailey’s later work on the music hall there is an increasing nuanced reading of how creative texts, the situations, and locales that give rise to them create a reality that real men and women use to understand and construct their own lives around. In his introduction to the special edition of the *Journal of British Studies* devoted to the lower middle class, Bailey succinctly argues that the music hall represents a powerful locus from which an authentic lower middle class culture spill forth. However, in focusing almost exclusively on the music hall and the culture that surrounds it, Bailey’s account remains can arguably be one dimensional.

This dissertation combines traditional literary readings of works by Charles Dickens, George Gissing, Anthony Trollope, and others with readings of music-hall songs, literary sketches, non-fictional accounts of the lower middle class found in magazines and other periodicals, and visual representations in order to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the lower middle class and the problem they posed to their Victorian contemporaries. This is not to say that it comes any closer to a definitive account of what really happened. Rather, it shows how literary texts participate in
ongoing debates about who and what the lower middle class were and what role, if any, they should play in the cultural, economic, and political life of Britain. In participating in these debates literary and sub-literary texts provide compelling answers to the socio-literary problem of the lower middle class and provide the Victorian with powerful lens through which to view the lower middle class. How and why the lower middle class is represented in literary and non-literary, creative and non-creative texts directly and indirectly deal with the question of the legitimacy or non-legitimacy of the lower middle class as cultural actors shapes their participation in the economic and political spheres. As such, these representations are vital to understanding the political and social dynamics of the Victorian era. In it, we can see how groups are either granted or denied cultural and thus political agency. Key to gaining any semblance of political agency is the gaining of cultural legitimacy: the right to be recognized as a group and thus as human. It is through cultural means that groups and individuals go from non-beings to beings with political rights and responsibilities. As Karl Marx observes, those that “cannot represent themselves must be represented” by someone else and often with fatal consequences. In many respects, the question of the cultural legitimacy of the lower middle class remains unanswered to this day.

Robin Gilmour’s work provides a useful model for looking at how literary texts engage with questions about class. Gilmour shows how texts by Dickens, Eliot, Trollope, and others actively participate in the Victorian debate about the nature of the gentleman. Yet, in focusing on how the middle class worked through economic and cultural means to re-define the gentleman as someone who works, someone possessed of great character as
opposed to great wealth, and as someone made not born, Gilmour’s work largely ignores the question of the lower middle class. In doing so, work like Gilmour’s reifies existing understanding of Victorian social structures. It does so by recognizing only three categories of social actors, the working class, the middle class, and the aristocracy. Yet as a careful reading of Victorian literary and non-literary texts shows, there are vast numbers of people who do not fit into any of these categories. The lower middle class was just one such group of people. As their numbers swelled with the increasing bureaucraticization of Great Britain’s economy and Empire the question of the lower middle class becomes increasingly vexing to social critics, politicians, and men of letters. While the working poor have Henry Mayhew and James Greenwood to represent them (no matter how flawed such representations are), the lower middle class had no such chroniclers. The lower middle class have Charles Dickens, Albert Smith, Anthony Trollope, George Gissing, and the forgotten lyricists of the music hall as chroniclers.

To start, who were the lower middle class? Where did they live? What did they do for work and in their leisure time? Where did they come from? And how did they relate to the other classes? To answer all of these questions would require a study on the scale of E. P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class. This study does not attempt to do anything on that scale. Studies on such a scale require far too much generalization. The lower middle class were Civil Service and commercial clerks. They were school teachers and shop assistants. They were milliners. They were dressmakers. They kept small shops in the city or in the suburbs. They were journalists. They were governesses. They were traveling salesmen. They were railway and warehouse men.
They were a variety of things. They lived in cheap lodgings in the near East End. They lived in Holloway. They lived in Islington. They lived in Hackney. They lived in the southern and northern suburbs of London and other large towns: Bayswater, Bedford Park, Clapham, Ealing, Surbition, Tooting, and a multitude of nameless places. They lived in semi-detached villas. They lived in free-standing cottages. They took the tram, the omnibus, and the subway to work in London. They walked to save a few pence. They were the black suited and bowler hated hordes that have re-surfaced in today’s Tory party campaign against “government waste.” They went to the music hall. The stayed home and had modest “at homes.” They went for walks in suburban parks on their half-holiday. The spent their summer holidays at the seaside. They purchased furniture on credit. They went to Hampton Court. They were distressingly domestic. They were vulgar imitators of the aristocratic fast young man about town. They were arch-conservatives and ardent nationalists. They were the bedrock of the British Empire. They were the enervated worms eating away at the core of Britain’s apple. They were and remain the group upon which the middle class, the working class, and the aristocracy project their anxieties. They were and to a large degree still are the one group that artists, politicians, and scholars still feel comfortable demonizing. To this day “suburban” remains short hand for lower middle class and an insult.  

One thing that emerges from this laundry list of the who and what the middle class were and are is that there is a vast range of behaviors and careers. This dynamicism poses very real problems to scholars whose aim is to show what really happened. This multiplicity of ways of being lies at the core of why the lower middle class was typed as
dangerous by many of their Victorian contemporaries. Unlike the working class or the middle class or the aristocracy it is not easy to point to a fixed set of attributes that define the lower middle class (no matter how arbitrary and imaginary such attributes are). As individuals, the lives of the lower middle class are often characterized by a shifting array of jobs and careers. They often arose out of the working class or were the sons and daughters of downwardly mobile members of the middle class and country gentry. Like David Copperfield, they often did not start and end their lives in the same economic or social class. They were not born into a family of lawyers or of Oxbridge dons or of respectable clergy (though they were often the sons and daughters of curates and other minor clergy). They drifted from job to job. This mobility troubled their contemporaries who, in a hyper dynamic age, strove to find a place for everyone and everything. This fluidity helps explain the lower middle class’s marginality. They were neither working class nor middle class. They were expected to dress and behave according to middle-class standards, yet they often did not have the economic means to do so. Thus, they were often ill-clothed and poorly housed. The work they did was not physical, yet one cannot say it was intellectual either. As clerks, they often merely copied a set of figures from one ledger to another or copied letters in fair hand. They did not make policies. No one at their office or shop or school would dream of asking them what should be done. If there was a problem in England, one did not go to the lower middle class to find the answer. More often than not the problem was the lower middle class.

They were vulgar in their tastes. Their taste for light amusements and literature that could be read on the train or the tram was, according to their many and varied critics,
ruining literature, music, and the theater. Again, according to their many and varied
critics, their demand for cheap housing outside of the crowded and squalid confines of
the cities was ruining hundreds of acres of pristine English countryside. Their rows of
cheaply built semi-detached villas, free libraries, Board Schools, pubs, and department
stores were despoiling the cultural and physical landscape of Britain. They were, it was
said, completely devoid of anything that resembled an original or authentic culture.

Yet, they had their defenders. In music hall songs and sketches, in novels, and in
newspaper and magazine sketches there is a celebration of what it means to be lower
middle class. In newspapers like Tit-Bits one finds among the contests to rename drapers’
assistants from “counter jumpers” to something else (either more or less insulting) a
celebration of the domestic suburban lower-middle-class way of being. In the novels of
George Gissing and the Grossmiths one finds, if not a whole scale celebration, then at
least a real element of understanding and subtle pride. Yet, in all of these accounts one
does not find life as it really was, rather one finds a representation of what life might be
or ought to be like. That is, one finds an amalgamation of the real and the imagined. To
call it an amalgamation is not to discredit it for as I show throughout, this amalgamation
of the real and the imagined exerts a powerful influence on how people relate to others
and how they see themselves as individuals and as members of a particular class or
group. It provides a powerful lens through which very real people came to understand
very real phenomena and in doing so becomes a very real phenomenon itself. Literary
and non-literary representations do not passively reflect the real, rather they actively
create the real by conditioning the way we see and think about the material conditions of
our lives. The Victorian lower middle class were as much the products of the collective and individual imaginations of the contemporaries as they were the products of Board Schools, the suburbs, and the rise of the office and the large department store. What follows is a chronicling of the literary and non-literary representations that helped to fire and color Victorian imaginations regarding the lower middle class.

Chapter One starts by showing the various ways in which the lower middle class is portrayed as dangerous. The root of this move by a range of cultural elites and their representatives to type the lower middle class as dangerous is class anxiety. The middle class, in particular, through its periodicals and ownership of publishing houses, is able to portray the lower middle class as a threat to middle class hegemony. What appears to be moral concern about the behavior of the clerks and shop assistants working for middle class employers is often nothing more than a concern that gambling, drinking, and theater going would make clerks and shop assistants prone to theft or arrive a work in no condition to fulfill their duties to their employers.

Chapter One also shows how self-improvement books by Samuel Smiles and conduct books, while holding out the promise of social mobility for their lower-middle-class readership, more often than not end up telling their readers that they lack either the character or the intelligence to become middle class. These books and tracts work to convince the lower middle class that their aspirations for social mobility are misplaced. In doing so, the self-help movement participates in a growing discourse that portrays lower middle class desire and ambition for social mobility as dangerous and as something that
the middle class needs to contain if it were to maintain its newly won cultural and economic hegemony.

Chapter Two shows how the theme of the dangerousness of the lower middle class extends to fears about their leisure activity. The music hall becomes the locus of much of the middle class fears about the lower middle class. It is at the music hall that the lower middle class begins to develop a sense of itself as a cohesive, yet dynamic class. This assertion of cultural independence is troubling to a middle-class elite that insists on seeing the lower middle class as cultural and economic vassals. What middle-class observers of the music hall find particularly troubling is the music hall’s proclivity to trouble established notions of gender and sexual identities. The popularity of cross-dressing at the music hall raises fears that the young and impressionable lower-middle-class youth are somehow engaging in behavior that spills over from an accepted homosocialbility into a dangerous kind of homoeroticism and even homosexuality. The adoration of female to male cross-dressing performers like Vesta Tilley by male audience members raises fears that the lower-middle-class men are not just effeminate, but are sexually attracted to other men. The license the music hall grants to its performers and audiences to re-imagine themselves in terms of class via the swell song carries with it the license to re-imagine their gender and sexual identities.

Chapter Three shows how David Copperfield by Charles Dickens attempts to answer the socio-literary problem of the lower middle class not by marking it as uniformly dangerous or laughable but rather as legitimate. The novel engages in the ongoing Victorian debate of what it means to be a gentleman and whether gentlemen are
made or are born. David Copperfield shows how the best route out of the lower middle class and into the middle class is not through vulgar economic striving, marriage, or even through education. The best way for lower-middle-class individuals to rise up into the middle class, the novel proclaims is through authorship. As a Bildungsroman, the novel shows how young David Copperfield is able to regain his middle class status by progressing through various forms of literacy and eventually by becoming an author. Armed with the cultural capital that being a man of letters provides him, David Copperfield is able to contain the dangerous and scheming Uriah Heep, marry an Angel in the House, and become a middle-class gentleman.

In positing authorship as the route out of the lower middle class David Copperfield participates not only in ongoing debates about the nature of the gentleman, but also in the ongoing debate about the role of the author in the cultural and social life of the nation. In showing the transformative power of authorship to make safe the strivings of the lower middle class the novel shows how cultural means can transform potentially vulgar and disruptive men like David Copperfield into paragons of middle-class respectability. In doing so the novel creates a powerful lens through which middle class readers can view the lower middle class. I show how this lens becomes the template that other authors, particularly Anthony Trollope, use to structure their own novels about the lower middle class. Trollope is, I show, compelled by the success of the Dickensian template and the structure of the publishing industry to follow David Copperfield’s lead in representing the striving lower-middle-class man.
Chapter Four shows how and why the Dickensian template for representing
begins to lose its power in the 1890s. The changes in the publishing industry brought
about by the decline of the three volume novel, the rise of the newspaper novel, the slow
acceptance of Naturalism, and the diversification and broadening of the reading public
allow novels like *Born in Exile* and *New Grub Street* to offer up alternatives to the
Dickensian answer to the socio-literary problem of the lower middle class. Both of
Gissing’s novels reject the idea of authorship as being the spring board into the middle
class. In fact, both novels take a more pessimistic view of the idea that lower-middle-
class individuals can raise themselves up to being middle class. *New Grub Street* is even
more strident in its rejection of the Dickensian template by portraying authorship as just
another trade in which it is not the noble who succeed but the vulgar. Thus authorship is
not the ennobling profession *David Copperfield* makes it out to be, but is vulgarizing,
particularly because it lures intelligent young men down the path of hubris and poverty.
*Born in Exile*’s Godwin Peak and *New Grub Street*’s Edwin Reardon end their novels not
as dangerous figures but rather as pitiable ones. Yet, for all their rejections of the
Dickensian template, these two novels still adhere to the Dickensian idea that the lower
middle class is a status one must escape from at all costs.

Chapter Four goes on to show how *The Diary of a Nobody* by George and
Weedon Grossmith breaks with this compulsion to portray being lower middle class as
fate worse than death. In the character of Charles Pooter the Grossmiths create someone
middle class readers can laugh at, yet sympathize with at the same time. I show how
during its revision from serial publication in *Punch* into a one volume novel, the text
begins to represent Charles Pooter in more sympathetic light so that readers see his love for his suburban home and his lower-middle-class friends as admirable. In refusing to abandon his semi-detached suburban villa and his defense of the small joys of suburban life, Pooter is announcing to the world that being lower middle class is acceptable. Unlike the dangerous Uriah Heep or the pitiable Edwin Reardon, Charles Pooter may be funny but he declares himself and those like himself to be legitimate social actors. They, Pooter asserts, deserve a place at the table. It is thus that the lower middle class goes from being dangerous, to being pitiable, to being if not admired, at least tolerated.
Notes


2 See William Frierson’s “The English Controversy over Realism in Fiction 1885-1895.” Frierson argues that with the publication of Wreckage by Hubert Crackanthorpe, Mlle. Miss by Henry Harland, Keynotes by George Egerton, Wreckers and Methodists by H. D. Lowery, and Renunciations by Frederic Wedmore 1893 is a watershed year for the critical and popular acceptance of Naturalism in Britain (545).
CHAPTER 1

THE MAKING OF THE (DANGEROUS) VICTORIAN LOWER MIDDLE CLASSES:
FROM DICKENS, TO ALBERT SMITH, AND BEYOND

In this chapter, I deal with the ongoing Victorian animosity towards the lower middle class, or rather those members of society living in the suburbs of London and other large cities and working variously as commercial or civil service clerks, shop assistants, teachers, and milliners. More specifically, I discuss how and why the lower middle class were represented as dangerous and by whom. That is, it is concerned with the question of how does a group that is largely economically, culturally, and politically marginal become so “symbolically central” in the middle class’s struggle for cultural and political hegemony throughout the later half of the nineteenth century (Stallybrass and White 200). In addressing these concerns, I highlight the roles that Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* (1850), Anthony Trollope’s *The Three Clerks* (1857), George Gissing’s *Born in Exile* (1892), and Albert Smith’s *The Natural History of the Gent* (1848) play in the process of placing the lower middle class in the category of the dangerous. I also show how the comic newspaper *Ally Sloper’s Half-Holiday*, music-hall songs, conduct manuals for office clerks and shop assistants, and the self help books by
Samuel Smiles contribute to the ongoing debate about what role the lower middle class should play in the cultural and political life of Victorian Britain. More specifically, I show how this debate over the role of the lower middle class in the cultural life of the period centered on concerns about the intellectual, moral, and physical fitness of the lower middle class for any role, let alone a positive one. Further, close readings of literary and non-literary texts show how literary genres like the *Bildungsroman* draw upon and support existing and emerging ideologies of achievement and social advancement that circulated primarily through conduct and self-improvement books like Smiles’ *Self-Help* (1859) and Isabella Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* as well as in periodicals like *Chamber’s Edinburgh Journal*. Often books of this kind start with a presumption of some sort of lack on the part of their lower-middle-class readership. This knowledge or supposed knowledge about the lower middle class allows those with the cultural power to place the lower middle class within an evolving social taxonomy and in doing so make the lower middle class potentially less dangerous.

Both established cultural and economic elites as well as emerging elites felt it necessary to place the lower middle class among the dangerous and disruptive and did so by deploying a range of literary and popular cultural forms. Such an account troubles the understanding of the cultural role of the lower-middle-class clerk and shop assistant offered up by scholars like Matthew Titolo in “The Clerk’s Tale: Liberalism, Accountability, and Mimesis in David Copperfield” (*ELH* 70:1(2003) 171-195). Titolo sees the clerk or shop assistant fitting more or less comfortably into the existing patriarchal structures of the period. For Titolo, the male clerk plays the role of the dutiful
son or a favored apprentice patiently waiting to attain the status of partner or son-in-law and thus gaining full and unquestioned membership in the middle class (176). What I have found is that the lower-middle-class man does not fill such a role. Rather, he is increasingly seen as a troubling orphan who, like Jo from Bleak House, threatens to disrupt the emergent middle class’s ascent into cultural prominence. One simple explanation for why the lower middle class attracted such sustained and critical attention on the part of so many cultural and economic elites is that its unsettled and fluid composition and its exponential increase in numbers throughout the period. While it is true that combined with the Victorian affinity for neat taxonomies, the fluid nature of the lower middle class’s composition and its ever increasing numbers did indeed provoke much of this attention, such an explanation fails to address fully the question of why the lower middle class received the kind of attention it did. That is, explanations of this sort do not fully explain the specific content and form of the critiques directed towards the lower middle class.

During the Victorian and Edwardian period the lower middle class were depicted as dangerous or at least potentially dangerous in three very broad ways, each of which was driven in large part by the middle class’s anxiety about its own emerging position at the top of the socio-cultural hierarchy of Victorian society. First, there was a religious based critique that saw the lower middle class as morally dangerous to itself and others. Second, the lower middle class was seen as dangerous to the existing and emerging class structures. As such, the lower middle class needed to be contained in some way in order to lessen its potential for disruptiveness. Third is a growing sense at the close of the
nineteenth century that the lower middle class posed a threat to the cultural and physical landscape of Britain. With their demand for cheap novels, cheap newspapers, music hall performances, cheap musical concerts, and other “vulgar” amusements the lower middle class were seen as threatening to bring about the decline of British artistic and high literary culture as well as the imperial hegemony it enjoyed. More visibly, the need to house the ever-increasing hordes of clerks, shop assistants, milliners, and school teachers resulted in the expansion of the suburbs that surrounded London and other large cites. T. W. H. Crossland in particular gives voice to the sense that these lower-middle-class suburbs were defacing the beauty of the British countryside and with it the very things that make Britain unique and powerful. In sum, the lower middle class are seen as threatening because they will influence the middle class into adopting vulgar behaviors and they will become middle class (at least economically) and in doing so taint the rest of society with their vulgarity. While I treat each of these types more or less individually, they are not wholly discrete. Rather, the moral and religious based concerns about the lower middle class often mask class anxieties on the part of many middle class critics and observers.

Throughout the nineteenth century the lower middle class is subject to a sustained moral or religious critique based largely on the moral dangers the lower middle class’s behavior poses both to itself and to those immediately associated with it. These behaviors engaged in by the lower middle class were troubling because the behaviors were seen as being offensive to accepted standards of morality. The moral and religious critique that focused on the moral dangers that the lower middle class’s behavior posed both to itself
and to those immediately associated with it as a result of occupation or habitation was articulated mostly by non-conformist evangelicals, temperance, and social campaigners like the SPCK and YMCA. Despite the obvious concern with morality and the state of the reader’s soul, these works also express considerable concern about the impact of the behavior of the lower middle class on its members’ families, employers, and the general public that had to come into regular contact with them. According to the logic of texts of this sort, employers are at particular risk if their clerks and shop assistants gamble, consort with prostitutes, go to music and dancing halls, drink, and generally lead lives of immorality such that they might be tempted to embezzle funds from the petty cash box to pay for these illicit pleasures. The moral concerns expressed in texts of this kind often serve to mask what were in all reality class-based concerns.

One such example of such sentiments is Hugh Shimmin’s *Liverpool Life,* published in book form in 1856 after being published as a series of articles in the *Liverpool Mercury* during 1855 and 1856 much in the same way that the early portions of Henry Mayhew’s *Life and Labour in London* were published in *The Morning Chronicle.* Like Mayhew’s work, *Liverpool Life* is an exposé of the world lying outside of the everyday experience of the typical middle-class reader. Of particular concern to Shimmin is the behavior of the various lower-middle-class figures he encounters engaged in what he considers questionable activities. Shimmin rhetorically asks of the bank clerk he sees at a dance parlor of low repute, “Would it be anything to his credit to be found where he is now? Would his master commend him for his frugality in money or time if he found him amidst enjoyments to which the *sale de danse* is but the threshold?” (42) Implicit in
Shimmin’s vocabulary is the assumption that the clerk’s time is not his own. Even in his leisure hours, the clerk is somehow beholden to his employer. Thus unlike the emerging bourgeois subject who is imbued with a mythical autonomy, the lower-middle-class subject is not granted any such autonomy. His entire reason for being is confined to the service he can render his employer. While the employer’s obligation to his employee is confined to the paying of wage, the employee’s responsibility extends beyond the economic. Under this logic, the clerk must refrain from any behavior that threatens the employer’s economic interest in him in any way.

Shimmin goes on to observe that the “associations” formed at the theatre, dance parlor, and other haunts of low repute “are far from tending towards the formation of business habits” (90-91). The threat, as Shimmin sees it, is that the lower-middle-class clerk or shop assistant will be lured into debts and through a loosing of his moral standards be tempted to embezzle money from his employer or that he will not be business minded enough to fulfill his duties to his employers. This concern over the impact of the lower-middle-class clerk may have on his middle-class employer dominates much moral/religious based criticism of the lives lived by clerks and shop assistants.

Shimmin does not contain his concern merely to dance parlors. In condemning gambling dens, Shimmin notes that they provide a place where clerks may be “loud in their declamations against the tyranny of their employers” while wasting their time and what little talent they may be possessed of “in betting, card playing, drinking, and smoking” (Liverpool 116). Here we see that one of the driving forces behind the moral condemnation of the behaviors of the lower middle class is economic and political in
nature. Gambling dens, dance parlors, music halls, and other amusements outside the
direction and control of the middle class offer places where disenchanted clerks and shop
assistants may give vent to their grievances and foment revolutionary actions like “the
early closing movement” (Liverpool 116). They also serve as a place in which a lower-
middle-class culture independent of the middle class could develop. As such, these types
of amusement need to be curtailed if the emerging industrial, mercantile, and professional
middle class were to effectively wrest cultural and political hegemony from the landed
aristocracy and serve as a bulwark against the rising working class. That is, the middle
class need to show that it could exert influence on and impose a form of social control on
its employees and those seen to be just below it in the social hierarchy if they were to
claim what they saw as their rightful position at the top of the Victorian social hierarchy.

Shimmin was not the only Victorian social campaigner to highlight what he saw
as the evils of dancing, drinking, and gambling. Samuel Smiles in 1875’s Thrift cites
several examples of clerks embezzling or stealing money from their employers in order
“to pay [. . .] debts incurred” while pursuing a “love for drink and card-playing” (243)
and buying clothes “from a fashionable tailor” (245). For both Shimmin and Smiles, the
danger of such behaviors is not that they directly threaten the cultural, economic, and
political hegemony of the middle class in the way that working class movements like
Chartism did. Rather, they represent the spending of “shillings which would have
bought” a new dress for a wife, or they induce “anxieties” on the part of “‘broken-hearted
parents who find their “only son” upon whom their “domestic happiness centered” has
developed irregular habits, or most importantly that these behaviors deprive employers of
“a fair day’s work for a fair day’s wage” and otherwise make these young men “unfit [. . .] for regular duties” (Shimmin, Liverpool 91). In this way the threat is more insidious in that it is aimed at the heart of middle class hegemony—the family and the workplace—and thus harder to combat than the threats posed by the working class. Chartism and trade unionism could be and were effectively turned back with well-practiced political tactics—trade unions could be outlawed, strikes broken up by the police and by strike breaking employees imported from elsewhere, or co-opted with limited inclusion in the political process—but the behaviors engaged in by the lower middle class could not be so easily contained. Despite their power, temperance, anti-gambling, and anti-theater campaigners never succeed in banning or otherwise eliminating the sale of alcoholic beverages, gambling, or shutting the theaters in the nineteenth century. What was required was either a complete reformation of the lower middle class or at the very least an awareness of the dangers it posed to middle class hegemony.

It is the latter that Shimmin proposes to do via his writing. In Liverpool Life he is dismayed at what he finds going on in working class areas, but he does not seem overly surprised at such behaviors. While he finds the behavior of the working class deplorable, he is outraged by the presence of bank and retail clerks at the fringes of the crowd. That these men are to be found in what he and other observers consider cheap dance parlors, gaming houses, bars, and in the company of suspected prostitutes illustrates the threat the lower middle class collectively and individually posed to the safety of individual middle-class businesses and families as well as to the middle class as a whole. Shimmin’s message is clear: clerks and shop assistants are not to be trusted. They are to be taken into
the bosom of the middle class with great caution. Other religious-based critics of the lower middle class saw the dangers posed by popular amusements as well. In an 1859 sermon John Greville Chester warns his listeners that they face “certain ruin and destruction in frequenting cheap concert halls, singing and dancing saloons, and so-called ‘tea-gardens’, or the like” (9) and goes on to quote an 1852 Parliamentary report that warns of the dangers of dance parlors, gambling dens, and, music halls, and pubs, “‘[l]ate hours, loose associates, abandonment of home, robbery from the person and shops, utter vagabondism, follow in a quickness of succession quite lamentable’” (10). While Chester focuses more intensely upon the fate of his listeners’ souls than Shimmin, he does paint the earthly consequences of what he sees vulgar amusements as being largely economic in nature. That is, these vulgar amusements make the young man unfit for or unwilling to work.

The lower middle class threatens to serve as a conduit for working class depravity to enter into the middle class. Because of its proximity to the middle class, any moral deviancy on the part of the lower middle class threatens to spread like cholera into the middle class. It is appropriate here to use the language of disease and contamination when talking about the dangers posed by the various lower classes precisely because such language was prevalent in a wide range of Victorian discourses. One need only look at literary texts like Dickens’s *Bleak House* or read through social documentary works like those of Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* to realize how extensive fears of physical and social contamination were with regard to the lower classes. Judith Walkowitz characterizes what she calls “urban exploration” texts by writers like Engels,
Mayhew, Greenwood, and Booth as revolving around “tropes of degeneration, contagion, and disorder” (33). In *Bleak House* both Jo and Lady Dedlock represent different types of contagion. Jo represents the physical threat posed to the aristocratic and middle classes by the unwashed and uncontained poor. Jo effectively serves as the route through which physical illness enters into the households of those aristocratic or middle class families foolish enough to invite poor individuals into their homes. Lady Dedlock, on the other hand, represents the threat posed by the upwardly mobile members of the lower classes to both aristocratic and middle class society. Dickens returns to this motif of the lower classes as the carriers of contagion that has the potential to lay waste to middle class society with the image of the two poor and neglected children shown to Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* by the Ghost of Christmas Future. Later in the century Oscar Wilde parodies such concerns, based largely in newly developed theories of degeneracy when in *The Importance of Being Earnest* he has Algy and Earnest discuss the various ways in which to kill off the fictional Jack. The parody arises out of the importance both men place upon finding a method that does not reflect badly on Earnest’s lineage (already under suspicion as the result of having been “born” in a handbag in Victoria Station) and that does not carry with it the taint of contagion as does “influenza” (336 Act I). 7

Throughout the Victorian era, the trope of physical contagion serves as a metaphor for the fears of social mobility that industrialization and urbanization makes possible. These fears found expression in a range of cultural productions that included literary novels, popular songs, periodical literature, social exploration texts, and didactic texts of all kinds.
In works like Shimmin’s we can see the middle class as an emergent\textsuperscript{8} group anxiously working to define and defend the borders that differentiate it from the aristocracy and the working class. Like any reformer, Shimmin must portray the situation as dire. The middle class must be portrayed as being at risk of becoming a non-class if the permeable borders are not effectively closed off or otherwise policed. In doing so, he portrays the sons of the prosperous middle class as already suffering from moral contamination from a debauched aristocracy and from contact with gamblers, pimps, and other individuals who refuse to be integrated into the bourgeois system of behavior. It is not just contact with the debauched aristocracy that threatens the middle class, but it is also feared that through contact with their clerks and shop assistants the sons and daughters of the middle class will be introduced to low and vulgar past times and associations.

In 1858’s \textit{Town Life} Shimmin describes the fall of just such a son, “[a] young man of good education, polished manners, and genteel appearance is observed to become more particular in his dress. He was always neat, but he becomes showy. He takes a fancy for gold studs, large chains, straight collars, curiously cut coats, and is seen to possesses a great variety of vests and trousers” (74). The fall of this middle class young man continues to the extent that he is quickly seen consorting with what Shimmin presumes to be prostitutes, “[t]he dressing and the drinking goes on, and the young man is next seen in the company of the \textit{ladies} who make their way towards [the] ‘Change each day between three and five o’clock” (75, emphasis in the original). Shimmin asks his readers to note how, “the lustre leaves his eye, the elasticity his step, and that lolling gait
of the young debauchee indicates his progress” towards becoming as debauched as the aristocracy and idlers upon which he is modeling his behavior (75). According to Shimmin, the entrance to such a path is found at the various cigar shops that serve as clandestine drinking and gaming houses and which cater to the sons of the well-off merchants and industrialists (191-195). Like the vulgar working class and the lower middle class clerks and shop assistants who consort with them in dance parlors, drinking establishments, gambling dens, and music halls, the aristocracy threatens the integrity of the middle class qua class.

Beset by the threats of moral infection from above and below, and seemingly unable to police the behaviors of their own children, middle-class critics and moral reformers like the YMCA turn their attention to what they saw as the most vulnerable and malleable group, the lower middle class. Unlike the aristocracy and the working class who by the mid 1850s were either still showing or developing workable internal cultural and political strategies of self-defense against middle class encroachments, the lower middle class was open to middle class inducements and pressures because of its marginalized cultural and economic position.

As Anne Janowitz argues in *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* working class socio-political and cultural movements like Chartism worked “to create a self-sufficient intellectual world” that included both political and cultural activity (28). This “self-sufficient [. . .] world” allowed the working class to create alternatives to middle-class cultural institutions. E. P. Thompson’s account of the formation of the British working class’s cultural and political identity argues that the working class or at least
sizable portions of it developed workable institutions and ways of being, what Thompson calls a “collective self-consciousness” (830), that were to some degree independent of middle class or aristocratic control or influence (413, 414, 418, and 421). Thompson rightly rejects the notion that this working-class “collective self-consciousness” was “the product of [. . .] of Methodism [or] paternalism” and sees it rather as the product of independent “working class endeavour” (418) resulting in a “moral rhetoric which was authentic and deeply expressive” (414). Janowitz’s work detailing the work to which working class poets and readers put the Romantic lyric argues for the continuation of the existence and effectiveness of this rhetoric throughout the century. For Thompson the rise in the early part of the nineteenth century of working-class friendly societies with their “secretiveness” and their “opaqueness under upper-class scrutiny” provides “authentic evidence of the growth of independent working-class culture and institutions” (421). The middle-class meddling that was intended to control working class organizations instead often contributed to the development of increasingly autonomous working-class cultural forms, institutions, and rhetorics.

The aristocracy, of course, had their titles, the House of Lords, their pedigrees, and a long tradition of access to prestigious public schools and the Oxbridge colleges with which to ward off excessive intrusion or meddling on the part of the middle class. As Lawrence Stone notes, “[a]s late as 1870 England was basically aristocratic in tone, taking its moral standards, its hierarchy of social values, and its political system from the landed classes” (21). As a result, the aristocracy was able to maintain some semblance of cultural power even while losing economic power by making the middle class desire the
prestige and exclusiveness associated with a title. Anthony Trollope, Albert Smith, and a host of others satirize middle-class snobs who go to extraordinary lengths to emulate the behaviors of the aristocracy. This desire on the part of elements of the middle class to be like the aristocracy gave the aristocracy considerable power to resist and temper middle attempts to dictate the shape of the cultural field. Michael Curtain argues that the widespread popularity of etiquette books like *Manner and Tone of Good Society* or *Solecisms to be Avoided, by A Member of the Aristocracy*, published from the mid-1870s through to the early years of the twentieth century, is indicative of a longstanding desire on the part of large numbers of the middle class to be like the aristocracy. For Curtain, such books with their aristocratic or pseudo aristocratic authors betray a middle class desire to wash out any signs of their work-a-day roots. It is this desire to be something other than middle class by significant numbers of the middle class that allowed the aristocracy to maintain its position for so long despite the long decline in its economic importance throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century.

As Dagmar Kift notes, one result of work like Thompson’s is the realization on the part of scholars that “[t]he nineteenth century can be seen not so much as an age of progress and change, liberty and democracy, but as a period in which the old elite was able to restore its position of power by means of comprehensive exercise of social discipline” (9). For the working class and lower middle class this imposition of social discipline entailed attempts by their “betters” to dictate not just working conditions, but how these two groups spent their leisure time. For the middle class it entailed the imposition of style or the desire to be like the aristocracy. In his influential work *The
English Common Reader, Richard Altick argues that one result of the social mobility provided for by the industrial revolution was that those who were successful “quickly acquired the social prejudices of the class in which they found themselves” (84). Chief among these “social prejudices” was the “powerful desire to protect their substance and privileges against encroachments of the class they had lately left” (84). These phenomenon help explain the development of intricate codes of behavior, the development of institutions designed to enforce those codes, and the demonization of the lower classes, particularly the classes closest to their new class. Yet such models of omnipotent social control overreaches, as Thompson’s account of the development of viable means of self-identification on the part of many working class communities above makes clear. 

If the aristocracy and the working class developed mechanisms for defending their interests vis-à-vis the middle class, the lower middle class did not. The lower middle class was open to influence precisely because they are thought to be open to being co-opted into believing that they have a legitimate chance of ascending into the middle class. This was in part because a large number middle class families could trace their roots back to yeomen farmers, small shopkeepers, office clerks, shop assistants, and even laborers who had taken advantage of the opportunities provided by industrialization and urbanization to improve their economic and social standing. Despite the social stratification that existed throughout the period, the industrial revolution did allow for a great deal of social mobility and allowed the myth of the self-made man to flourish in Victorian Britain. Thus, 1878’s The Clerk; A Sketch in Outline of his Duties and
Discipline, published as part of Houlston’s Industrial Library; 1862’s The Clerk’s Instructor and Manual: Containing Clear and Concise Information on Matters of Business, Duty and Private Conduct with Advice to Young Men on the Employment of Their time and Talents and Hints for a Course of Self-Instruction; 1860’s The Young Man at Rest and at Play: A Plain Sermon; and 1848’s The Young Clerk’s Manual; or Counting House Assistant all hold out, to some degree or another, the hope that the young commercial or retail clerk and shop assistant can, through, hard work, thrift, cultivation of the proper character, and temperance, aspire to and even attain the position of a principal in his firm and with it, middle class status. One observer writing in the early 1870s notes, “[t]he fact is, sir, that clerks, instead of grumbling in your columns, must work hard at self improvement, make the most of themselves by cultivating their faculties, and then watch for opportunities” and goes on to note that “[h]alf the partnership firms in Liverpool twenty years old contain a partner who was once a clerk. [. . .] And this is why really capable clerks utter no complaints” (qtd. in Orchard 41). The implication of such an argument is that getting ahead is not the result of luck, family connections, or even personal affability, but is the result of effort, and more importantly the type of effort anyone is capable of if only they are willing to work hard and maintain sober and thrifty habits. However, other self-improvement books including some of the ones listed above also implicitly argue that most if not all of the clerks and shop assistants are somehow incapable of just such an effort. The Clerk; A Sketch takes a particularly dim view of the ability of clerks to raise themselves up by their own efforts. It tells the young clerk that “book-keeping [sic], though valuable, and even indispensable, is the
lowest of all acquirements that make up the character of a man of business” (126) and goes on to inform him that he “is but a wheel in the machine; he knows little of the power that sets every wheel in motion” (127). The young clerk’s best route to success is through the paternalism of his employer not by striking out on his own, “his natural course to promotion is, as we have before hinted, by making himself indispensable to his employer (127). The Clerk’s Instructor and Manual reminds its readers of their lack of character and judgment by telling them, “[w]henever you may be in doubt, wait for the example of your superiors; be content to follow, and do not attempt to lead” (41). In statements such as these we see the extent to which the lower-middle-class clerk is denied any agency whatsoever. His entire reason for being is to serve his economic and social superiors. Any attempt on his part to rise above is seen as a threat unless those attempts take place within a pre-determined channel.

Samuel Smiles’ Self-Help (1859) and its sequels Thrift (1875), Character (1871), and Duty (1880) encourage the idea that young men of humble social and economic backgrounds can become prominent in their chosen fields. Membership in the middle class is pitched as being available to those members of the lower middle class that accept the behavioral mores of the Victorian middle class. Such a course of action requires the rejection of behaviors and outlooks that are deemed inappropriate or which suggest a connection with the lower classes and thus are open to the charge of being vulgar. All of the conduct manuals cited above explicitly warn young clerks of the dangers of the theater, the gin shop, the gambling den, the dance parlor, reading sensational stories, and, if they can bring themselves to introduce such a corrosive and contaminating subject, the
music hall. Smoking, so warns The Clerk’s Instructor and Manual, will leave the young clerk

restless, feverish, low-spirited, and dissatisfied. The bell that summons you to your official duties would grate upon your ear more harshly than ever. Your mouth would be clammy and bitter, your stomach uneasy, and you would feel as though you were pouring out the vital principle in yawning. (32)

The Clerk; A Sketch cautions its readers that “gaming, levity, and sensational reading, even in their slightest forms” should be avoided (24). The dangers to the happiness of the unwary clerk who engages in these kinds of vulgar amusements are very real the author warns,

[many a time have we seen a trifling loss at cards, a defeat at chess or billiards, a jealousy of some envied glance, or even the whining catastrophe of some sentimental novel, carry its traces of vexation into the morning cast and aspect of man’s features, whence neither the perplexities of bookkeeping, nor the copy of eternal correspondence, could remove it for the day. (24)

The same text goes on to remind its readers that the young clerk is not “bound by good-fellowship [sic] to give into the vulgarities or the follies which he may see practised among” his fellow clerks (31). These “vulgarities” include “the suggestive indelicacies of the ballet” and the theater where “the young are confronted by temptations that lure to sin against the mortal body as well as the immortal soul” (33). The Clerk’s Instructor and Manual is typical of the negative view of the music hall or singing saloons when it notes “[o]f the minor theatres, the less that is said or thought, the better” (34). This hostility for the music halls should come as little surprise given that very same text does not find even the major West End theaters a “safe amusement” for the young clerk (33). All of these amusements were seen as vulgar and dangerous precisely because they represented a form of independence of thought and action on the part of the clerks and shop assistants
who pursued them. These amusements placed the young clerk or shop assistant as outside the direct control of his employer and allowed the young man to think of himself as somehow independent of the demands of his employer.

In their strident warnings against these vulgar pleasures the authors and publishers imply that young lower middle class men are particularly susceptible to such inducements and thus show themselves to be inherently unfit for membership in the middle class. While these works attempt on one hand to co-opt the lower middle class by holding out the promise of membership in the middle class, on the other hand they imply that many, if not most, of the lower middle class is unfit for such membership. Opinions of this sort about the questionable fitness of many lower-middle-class clerks and shop assistants were not limited to the writers of self-help and conduct books. Benjamin Orchard in *The Clerks of Liverpool* notes that many employers felt as the mayor of Liverpool did and “looked on clerks as little better than a lot of thievish scamps” (37) or as “Benjamin Battleaxe,” a correspondent to Liverpool’s *Daily Courier*, writes, “[c]omparatively few can be trusted with money, unless strict and constant and painful supervision is exercised; and the number of unsober or unsteady young men is sadly great” (qtd. in Orchard 41). Beyond illustrating the great contempt with which clerks and shop assistants were held by many of their contemporaries, these accounts highlight the extent to which the self-improvement movement worked to both encourage and discourage the hopes of what Anne Baltz Rodrich calls the “caste of self-improvers” with an eye towards channeling desires for social mobility in non-disruptive ways (39). By focusing on the ideas of success through industriousness and success through the cultivation of inherent abilities,
the self-help movement was able to encourage and discourage social mobility. It did so by inculcating in readers the idea that anyone could become successful, yet reminding the vast majority of readers that they did not have the stuff out of which middle class gentlemen are made because they lacked something in terms of ability or breeding. The various self-help books and novels address one key aspect that makes the lower middle class so dangerous: the pressure and desires for economic and social advancement born of the industrial revolution. Having spawned large numbers of clerks and shop assistants and the myth of social mobility, the industrial, mercantile, and professional middle class, itself largely born out of the industrial revolution, needed some mechanism or mechanisms to control the striving hordes who hoped to have silver service, hired help, and a house in the bucolic suburbs. The culture of self-improvement was such a mechanism.

Alongside the myth of the self-made man is the myth of the self-recovered man. In what Robin Gilmour argues is “the classic novel of self-help,” Dina Mulock’s John Halifax, Gentleman (1856) is a novel that revolves around not simply the struggle towards “an achieved rank” but more importantly around the effort to “recover [...]” one (qtd. in Gilmour 101). John grows up with the notion of being destined for greatness (or at least respectability, which might be more important) as a result of possessing a Greek Bible autographed by his presumed and long dead father “Guy Halifax, gentleman” (101 qtd. in Gilmour). Thus, it is John’s lineage or breeding that accounts for his success, even if that success is achieved in part because of perseverance, industriousness, self-help, and temperance. The moral fiber that allows John to stick to such an arduous regimen comes
from his middle class lineage. The implication is that only those somehow already possessed of the inborn qualities necessary to success will be able to rise in the social order. It is not enough to desire to be industrious, persevering, and temperate, but one must also be predisposed through birth to be able to carry out such a plan. As Gilmour notes, “the confidence that makes John Halifax feel that he can be a gentleman comes from the inner conviction that he is one already, so that rank is not so much earned as retrieved” (104).

Smiles’ *Duty* illustrates this contradiction within the self-improvement movement when he lectures his readers, “[w]e have it not in our choice to be rich or poor, to be happy or unhappy” (12). With this simple platitude Smiles contradicts what many saw as the whole premise of his project, that of self-improvement or more correctly improving one’s station in life, by pointing out to his readers that their economic situations and even their own happiness is beyond their control. Implicitly, Smiles is arguing that while his readers may be able to improve their characters, their intellects, their bodies, and their souls, they cannot improve their station in life and thus, by Smiles’ logic, their happiness. This seems a strange way to go about encouraging people to undertake a course of self-improvement, but as Smiles argues it is not for their own good that they undertake such a course of action, but rather for the good of others. In offering no sustained critique or analysis of the economic or social structures that prevent his readers from improving their stations in life Smiles leaves one to conclude that the fault must be found in some deficiency within themselves. The pervasiveness of this sentiment can be seen in *David Copperfield* when the young David fears his being exiled
to Murdstone and Grinby’s was the result of some “flaw in [his] own breast” (151).

Smiles goes on to impress upon his readers that what is really important is not courage, or ambition, or even economic achievement but rather “‘discipline and subordination’” (13). Smiles is joined in this belief by many of his fellow self-help writers; The Clerk; A Sketch in Outline of his Duties and Discipline argues that one of the benefits of participating in the Volunteer Corps is “the attainment [. . .] of the habit of acting promptly in concert with others, and the subjection for a time to military discipline, which will prove of assistance in promoting punctuality and submission to authority even in business” (36). Thus, the Volunteer Corps serves a way to enforce middle-class authority in terms of notions of propriety, use of leisure time, and other modes of behavior that extends from the office into the home. Later in Duty, Smiles urges his readers to remember that learning “how to bear and how to forbear” is one of life’s most important lessons (92). Through such sentiments, Smiles and his peers impress upon his readers that their role is not to be leaders, but followers. Smiles, in particular, repeatedly reminds his readers that as such, the ultimate goal of their lives should not be striving after fame, wealth, or position, but that they should endeavor to “make [themselves] and each other a little better, holier and nobler,” with the result of having “done the most we could” (13 emphasis added) and that “[c]haracter is made up of small duties faithfully performed—of self-denials, of self-sacrifices, of kindly acts of love and duty” (27). Noble sentiments indeed, but one cannot help but notice the extent to which such injunctions take as their premise the ineffectual natures of their audiences’ characters. The lesson here is that members of the lower middle class are not capable of grand deeds.
and achievements but are instead more suited for “subordination” and “little” accomplishments. They, unlike the middle class proper and the aristocracy, are not meant to change or shape the world on a large scale. By focusing on what they saw as the smallness of the accomplishments of the lower middle class and their limited ability to effect change on a larger scale, middle class observers and critics of the lower middle class, highlight what they saw as the essential differences between themselves and their clerks and shop assistants. It is here that such critiques reveal the extent to which moral and religious concerns about the lower middle class mask a broader class-based concern about the clerks, shop assistants, and other semi-professional individuals sprouting up throughout Victorian Britain and their potential to disrupt the cultural order being erected by the middle class.

We need not look just at non-fictional representations of the lower middle class to find expressions of concern over the behavior of the lower middle class as it relates to issues of morality and class anxiety. In George Gissing’s Born in Exile (1892), Godwin Peak serves as a warning to middle class readers about the dangers the socially ambitious lower middle class posed. Peak’s character also speaks to the power the middle class exerted in generating self-loathing in lower-middle-class figures. Peak, who hopes to move not just into the middle class, but perhaps even beyond, expresses dismay at the behavior of his family. Peak is particularly concerned by the behavior of his brother Oliver who works in the shop of a seed merchant. More so than the behavior of his working class Uncle Andrew, Oliver’s behavior as well as that of his sister Charlotte (who is engaged to a draper’s assistant) threaten to undermine Godwin’s goal of moving
upward in the social order. Oliver “stands confessed” of being nothing more than a lower-middle-class shop clerk by his ownership of a bicycle (purchased not with an eye to self-improving physical activity as countless instruction manuals urge but rather to impress the young women of Twybridge), his “penchant for cheap jewellery,” his friends “of low intellectual order,” his reading of cheap newspapers which prominently feature word games and puzzles (a clear reference to Tit-Bits and its imitators), and his attendance at music halls where he learns to sing “verses of sentimental imbecility” and to dance like a “nigger minstrel” (64). In short, he has become “a type of young man as objectionable as it is easily recognised” by one of Godwin’s hypersensitive notions of social propriety and sense of cultural inferiority (64). Oliver has become a gent or a swell and threatens to become even more downwardly mobile by racializing himself through his imitation of “nigger minstrel[s]” (64).

Such behavior runs counter to Godwin’s goals of upward social mobility. As Anne Baltz Rodrich notes, many young men of Godwin’s sort replaced their families with a coterie of self-selected fellow self-improvers (43-46). In doing so, they were following the advice of numerous self-improvement books that advised their readers to find a friend or two who would act as their conscience and brothers in arms in the struggle against vulgar amusements and temptations. Rodrich further characterizes the lower-middle-class self-improvement movement as eager “to cordon themselves off from a larger, often unsympathetic economic class” in an attempt to differentiate themselves (46). In separating himself from his family, Godwin epitomizes the element of self-loathing that many members of the lower middle class had internalized as a result of
constant depreciations of their class by the middle class and aristocracy. This internalized self-loathing made it easy to co-opt men like Godwin to the middle class hegemonic project. By fostering this self-loathing and a desire to self-identify themselves as someone separate from their economic class the self-improvement movement as it developed in the later half of the nineteenth century abetted middle class hegemony.

The behaviors of his family as much as the lack of real employment in Twybridge force Godwin to London. His immediate family serves as a constant reminder of his lower-middle-class roots and threatens to imperil any attempt on his part to improve his social and economic standing. As such, they are representative of the lower middle class’s dangerousness to themselves. Their behaviors as individuals threaten to indict not only themselves but also their entire class in the eyes of a middle class anxious to distance itself from any hint of vulgarity. Disowning his family represents Godwin’s first step towards re-inventing himself as a middle class individual. Yet, his apparent willingness to abandon the redeeming effects of the domestic sphere points to his potential danger to the class that he hopes to associate himself.¹⁹ That he eventually resorts to less than honest means to attempt this transformation highlights the very danger lower-middle-class individuals pose to themselves, their employers, and their families. At this level, the threat is local, affecting only the firm, the family, and not society at large. That this is so further points to the lower middle class’s inherent powerlessness. Yet, the fear is that if enough Godwin Peaks imagine themselves to be owed a place in the middle class then middle class will be diluted.
Edwin Hodder’s *The Junior Clerk: A Tale of City Life* (1862) provides us with a more didactic example of the lower middle class’s danger to itself, its families, its employers, and in being all of these things illustrates the lower middle class’s unfitness for membership in the middle class. Hodder’s novel details the fate of George, a young and promising clerk who embezzles money from his employer in order to pay for his gambling debts. Like Dickens’s David Copperfield and Gissing’s Godwin Peak, George comes from a good if not rich family, yet, unlike David and Godwin, he catches the disease of drink, smoke, gambling, and theater going. At death’s door, George is saved by the love of his family, his friends, and the deep Methodist faith they share. The damage of George’s descent into sin and a life of crime is contained within his own family and the firm for which he works. George’s firm holds off prosecuting him for fear of the negative publicity such an action would surely cause. Thus, George’s crime is contained; it does not do irreparable damage to the firm nor does it cause a more widespread financial crisis, as do the financial dealings of fictional middle-class villains from *Our Mutual Friend* and *Vanity Fair*. However, because of their large numbers, the lower-middle-class striver poses a threat to society at large. This is not because as individuals they have the ability to wreck havoc on a national level, but rather because of their large and growing numbers. The fear is that if every firm or middle-class family contained a Godwin Peak or a George that the very fabric of Britain would unravel: thus the need for constant vigilance on the part of middle-class employers and families.

In his Preface to *The Junior Clerk* Edwyn Shipton, a long-time Secretary of the YMCA, recommends the text to “[p]arents and guardians and employers” (iv) as a way to
warn them and their charges “of the subtle dangers” (iv) lying in wait for the unwary young clerk flush with his shilling or so a week. Shipton goes even further in recommending, “employers of young men might, with profit to themselves, secure its distribution among their junior clerks and apprentices” (vii). Thus, while we see Shipton expressing some concern for the souls and general well-being of the clerks as individuals, he realizes that many employers only care about clerks to the extent that the clerks affect the profitability of their businesses. Employers, and apparently Shipton, care about their clerks’ behaviors only in relation to their own profits or losses and their ability to maintain their social position. Clerks who visit the theater, the gin shop, the music hall, and who gamble are threatening, and thus in need of containment, because they pose an economic threat to their middle-class employers. Young clerks or shop assistants, Hodder and Shipton argue, lack the strong moral compass and intellectual vigor of their social superiors and thus all amusements and all programs of self-improvement should be carried out under the watchful supervision of the parents or in the absence of parents under the careful supervision of a middle-class organizations like the YMCA (iv-v).

It is this susceptibility to moral corruption that makes the lower middle class inherently ineligible for membership in the middle class and a result of their large numbers dangerous to middle-class society. George’s first brush with vulgar amusements comes not at the theater or the music hall, but rather at the meetings of a young men’s literature club. It is here that he is tempted to stay out late, dine at fancy restaurants, and eventually visit the theater. Even more menacing is that the tempter is not a low and vulgar figure but rather the apparently upright and solidly middle-class Ashton, who is an
old school mate of George. Unlike George who must work for his living, Ashton spends his days waiting for his inheritance of £200 a year while he works as an assistant to a surveyor. It is at Ashton’s urgings that young George and his staunch office friend and companion Hardy are induced to attend the theater and then spend nights drinking. Even worse, in Hodder’s eyes, the group spends a Sunday walking and then attending a pseudo-scientific lecture that preaches the supremacy of man over nature and god. It is at this lecture that George begins to think too highly of himself and his abilities. Drunk on worldly success (he has received several promotions at the office) George spends nights in town instead of returning to the nice suburban house he has rented for his mother. It is during one of these nights spent at a hotel where George is induced by pride to play cards for money. Despite losing, he nevertheless is entranced by the excitement of the game and is prompted to play on subsequent nights in a vain hope that he will win back all the money he has lost. Beset by gambling debts, George embezzles from his employer. He flees London planning to emigrate only to be stricken by a sudden fever from which the landlady at the lodgings he’s taken while waiting for his ship to sail, his mother, and Hardy nurse him back to life.

George’s response to gambling fits neatly into the stereotype of the seduction of gambling put forth by countless conduct manuals and other accounts of the lower middle class. First, is the stereotype that young office clerks and retail clerks are particularly susceptible; Shimmin in Liverpool Life finds that the vice of gambling is particularly pronounced among “drapers’ and general shop assistants—young men respectably connected, and generally well educated” and who as a result should know better (116).
Second is the notion that these clerks would be seduced by the excitement offered by gambling, the attraction of quick profit, and pulled into despair by the eventual downward spiral of gambling in the hopes of making up for previous losses. The Clerk’s Instructor and Manual warns young men of the dangers associated with gambling, chiefly of “the risk you may incur of being induced to play again in the hope of recovering your loss;” the implication being that young men will be tempted to keep gambling out of a false hope of recouping their ill-afforded loses (31). The real danger is that the losses cannot be made up by more gambling and the young clerk or shop assistant will turn to money lenders and eventually to stealing from their employers or their employers’ customers. A less direct threat is that clerks and shop assistants beset by gambling debts will not be able to give their full attention to their employers’ business. Such concerns persisted throughout the century. Haslehurst Greaves in The Commercial Clerk and His Success, published by Cassell in 1909, warns his lower-middle-class readership that the “results [of gambling] are equally bad” and that the habit “brings with it temptations which will often lead young men into serious trouble.” Greaves goes onto warn his readership that “the effects of gambling are exceedingly detrimental to that proper balance of mind” necessary for somatic and spiritual health that in turn make the clerk unfit for business (74). Again, we see the emphasis placed upon the effect of a clerk or shop assistant’s behavior on the fortune and well-being of his employer.

Hodder’s ostensible point in writing his novel is to highlight the moral dangers to be faced by young lower middle class men and to highlight the role that strong family ties and religious faith can play in protecting them from these dangers. However, the novel
implicitly argues that the lower middle class, no matter how qualified they may seem, are, as a result of their breeding (or lack thereof), unfit for membership in the middle class. Thus, it is not surprising to learn that George is forced to leave school when his father dies having failed to provide for his widow and his son. This failure to set aside for the future is, for Smiles and those like him, perhaps one of the cardinal sins of the thriftless: “[w]hen we hear of that man, who has been in receipt of a good salary, has died and left nothing behind him—that he has left his wife and family destitute—left them to chance—to live or perish anywhere,—we cannot but regard it as the most selfish thriftlessness” and thus the most abhorrent of all sins (Thrift, 14). A few pages later Smiles drives home this point, condemning such behavior by stating most emphatically, “[i]mprovidence is cruelty to woman and children” (Thrift, 17). Hodder implicitly asks his readers to imagine the reasons why George’s father is unable to set aside for the future despite having a presumably comfortable salary—did he gamble, drink, or otherwise foolishly waste his salary on vulgar amusements or on keeping up appearances? The failure of George’s father foreshadows George’s own inability to resist the dangers of London life and serves to further illustrate the danger of inviting apparently deserving individuals into the middle class. Such individuals, no matter how successful they appear to be, harbor within them some danger of contamination. Only exceptional individuals who have proven through multiple trials that they are not susceptible to the diseases of intemperance, profligacy, and vulgarity may have any hope of being granted membership in the middle class. The vast majority of the lower middle
class, however, despite the ever present promise of social mobility are condemned to an eternal existence as mere clerks or even worse a life of crime and sin.

It is such a fate that Dickens’ David Copperfield must avoid if he is to become the hero of his own story. David must choose between the life of the fast young man about town who spends his time drinking, smoking, going to the theater, and parading around town in shoes that are too small for him and that of an industrious, persevering, sober, and thrifty man of character. The first path as we know from Mrs. Crupp’s account (as well as those of Hodder and numerous conduct books for the lower middle class) of her former tenant leads to certain death. She notes that, “‘he died of drink,’ [. . .] ‘And smoke’” (346). Aunt Betsey expresses the opinion that such things are “‘not catching’” and young David naively agrees with her (346). What Dickens’s novel and didactic fictional and non-fictional polemics against the lower-middle-class gent or swell show is that such things are indeed catching, especially for the unwary young man of limited means from the country who by dint of circumstances are brought into regular contact at the office or shop with their economic and social betters. As Shipton warns in his Preface to Hodder’s novel, “parents and guardians and employers need to know very much more than they do, of the London in which young men live” and “need to be warned of the subtle dangers” of the city (iv).

For example, in the anonymous The Merchant’s Clerk, James Howard, a Dick Whittington type young man if ever there was one, arrives friendless and penniless in London where through hard work and faith he finds employment and success. Along the way, James is unsuccessfully seduced to a life of low and vulgar pleasures by his fellow
clerk, Mr. Hobson. James further learns the all-important lesson of self-help (despite the large amount of help he receives from Mr. Harvey, his benefactor). Once he has managed to work his way up from messenger boy to clerk, he unwittingly helps a fellow clerk with his figures only to be rebuked by Mr. Jones the managing clerk. Mr. Jones lectures James, “‘Don’t you know that it was practising a kind of deceit upon me then, making me believe that your fellow clerk had done the things which in reality you had?’” (82) Beyond learning the lesson of self-help, James learns the even more important lesson, that he does not yet have the ability to discern right from wrong. He reflects upon Mr. Jones’ criticism, “[n]ow it had never struck James that he was doing anything wrong by helping Mr. Hobson. He thought it was only kind and right of him to do so when could; therefore the Managing Clerk’s words and manner surprised him very much” (81). He realizes that his character is not sufficiently developed yet for him to trust his own judgment. At this point James is still suspect of being worthy of the trust of his employers, though like David Copperfield and most other Bildungsroman protagonists, he does have his supporters who hope and work behind the scenes to ensure that he becomes the very embodiment of middle-class values. Yet, unlike those born into the middle class, James must prove repeatedly that he is able to resist the temptations of the city and thus prove his character (James is falsely accused of embezzlement when the son of one of the firm’s principals signs for a deposit in James’s name and then takes the money). It is James’s strong religious faith (he reads the Bible every night), his industriousness, thrift, and perseverance that see him through all difficulties. In short, it is
his adherence to middle-class mores that allow him to succeed and attain middle-class status.

As I have been arguing, critiques of the lower middle class have less to do with concerns about morality and a propensity for vice than they have to do with middle-class anxieties about social distinction, mobility, and position. The lower middle class in these critiques is inveighed against for their class pretensions, for not knowing their place in the social order of things, and for presuming to be on an equal footing with either the aristocracy or middle class gentlemen. Asa Briggs argues that with the extension of the franchise from 1867 onward social distinction became the means by which the middle class differentiated itself from the working class and the lower middle class. Works like The Natural History of The Gent (1848) by Alfred Smith, “The Genesis of the Cad,” and “Our Music Halls” with their angry denunciations of the lower-middle-class gent, swell, or cad are reflective of the insecurity that the newly arrived industrial, professional, and mercantile bourgeoisie feel. This fear is succinctly expressed in “Our Music Halls” published in Tinsley’s Magazine in April of 1869.21 Here the anonymous author notes with much concern that, “Nowadays your attorney’s clerk—apparently struck by some ‘leveling-up’ theory of democracy—is dissatisfied unless he can dress as well as the son of a duke” (216). This desire for equality bred of decades of political reform and social upward mobility born of industrialization threatens to destabilize the newly stitched fabric of post-reform British society. The real fear is not that the attorney’s clerk will be mistaken for the son of a duke, but that he will be mistaken for his employer, or even
worse his employer for him and thus devaluing the hard won status the middle class felt they so rightly deserved.

The cartoons and humorous stories of *Ally Sloper’s Half-Holiday* parody this fear. In this comic newspaper, Ally Sloper—a man of a largely unknown and an itinerant background blurs the line between the lower middle class and the working class—is shown in the near constant presence of two members of the aristocracy, meeting with famous and respected public figures, testifying before important public bodies like the London County Council, or even worse being elected to Parliament. By claiming public attention, especially that of the aristocracy, the lower-middle-class Ally picks at the middle-class fear that it will be supplanted by the lower middle class. The illustrators and editors of *Ally Sloper’s* also satirize the Victorian dread of not knowing exactly what class of people to place the lower middle class in. Are they middle class? Are they working class? Are they something else? For the Victorians with their love of classification and order such confusion was deeply unsettling. Ally’s features contain marks of both classes. His large red nose bespeaks a drunken working class rowdy, yet as numerous novels and essays bear out [examples or via footnote], the drunken clerk was as commonplace as the drunken working man. Further Ally’s threadbare suit, tattered umbrella, and aspirations to gentility mark him as lower middle class. Sloper and his companions revel in being gents or swells. His aristocratic companions, fantasies of importance, and his assumption of a class status to which he is not entitled mark him as a particularly comic version of the lower-middle-class swell.
Judith Walkowitz, despite her over-emphasis of the working-class nature of the swell or gent, provides a useful description of the type as characterized by “flamboyant and self-conscious dress, rakishness, and counterfeit status” arising out of “literary satire[s] of pretentious upstarts.” Walkowitz goes on to note that the image of the gent or swell was “ultimately appropriated by popular entertainers and aspiring young clerks and working men about town” who spend their evenings and holidays masquerading as fast young (or old) men about town (43). Such an account squares with contemporary descriptions of the gent or swell that focused on the dress of the individual in question, his attempt through dress to appear to belong to a higher class than his birth and occupation would allow, and his learning how to dress in this manner at the music hall or dance parlor.

Hugh Shimmin in *Liverpool Life* describes the gent as “men with little bits of coloured ribbon round their necks, straight collars, striped shirts, broad straight-brimmed hats with high crowns, loose coats with wide sleeves, tight trousers, and ‘Balmoral boots’” (119). Albert Smith writing in 1848 notes of the gent’s lineage as being common having “sprung up from the original rude untutored man by combinations of chance and cultivation” and who as a result of his propensity to “assume a position which he conceives to be superior to his own” is made not only “ridiculous” but “unbearable” to all people of true culture and breeding who are sure to be filled “with feelings of [. . .] contempt” (Gent 2) for such an “offensive body” of men (Gent viii). In his dress the gent is fond of “large check-trowsers of the true light comedian pattern,” “a short odd coat such as one as that in which Mr. Buckstone might be expected to go to a ball,”
“carrying] a little stick of no earthly use, with a horse’s silver hoof on the top of it,” as well as a “staring shawl and cigar” (Gent 6). Smith goes on to delineate the variations on the gent he has observed in and around London, but the above description serves as a handy means for identifying one in the wild as it represents the gent’s everyday wear.

Beyond blurring the lines between classes, Ally Sloper’s plays on the larger middle class fear of having the lower middle class being mistaken for middle class by the aristocracy and other cultural elites. Other comic papers and pamphlets parodied this concern. In the satirical The Loosēd Interval: A Holiday Handbook And Out-of-Harness Annual, By a Bank Clerk, B. B. (1878), which skewers nearly every middle class ideal, hell is defined as “des-tinction without a difference” thus pointing out the middle-class fear that it was not really so much different from the lower-middle-class clerks it employed (31). Further the title points to another middle-class fear that it exerted no control over the leisure activities of its lower-middle-class clerks, shop assistants, school teachers, etc. The Loosēd Interval in being the fantasy of a bank clerk if he ever found himself “out-of-harness” represents the middle-class anxieties of what would happen if ever did lose control. It places the middle class on notice that the lower-middle-class clerks had desires for and ideas about leisure that conflicted with those of the middle class.

Such concerns were not isolated to the pages of literary or comic periodicals as the aforementioned “Battleaxe” from Orchard’s The Clerks of Liverpool notes, “[w]e do not desire clerks on £80 a-year to emulate us. Our views are the very opposite. Ambition and vanity, not our wishes, lead to the extravagance and absurd display in which so many
clerks indulge. [ . . . ] We require neatness and gentlemanly conduct” (40). Perhaps even more troubling than this latter consequence of clerks and shop assistants being mistaken for the middle class is the horrifying possibility that the aristocracy may find the lower-middle-class gent or swell better company. Thus, the lower middle class is doubly dangerous. Not only does it threaten to bring its middle class employers into disrepute among the aristocracy and threaten to drive them into bankruptcy, but it also threatens to drag a newly reformed aristocracy back into its Regency and early Victorian debauched ways. Ally Sloper, in short represents those elements of the lower middle class that refused to remain, if they ever were, disciplined and subordinate. He and his admirers will go to the music hall, cavort at the seaside, drink to excess, shift from job to job, breed incessantly (as evidenced by the Sloper twins), push themselves into social circles and situations they do not belong, and generally make themselves obnoxious to middle-class propriety. Figures like Ally Sloper threaten to upset the carefully balanced social hierarchy that serves as the bulwark of middle-class hegemony.

Yet the lower middle class is dangerous in other ways as well. Perhaps even more troubling in the eyes of the self-made middle-class is that the lower middle class serves as a constant reminder to the middle class and the rest of society that many in the middle class began their careers as mere clerks and shop assistants. This is an almost unpardonable sin in a society obsessed with heredity and privilege. In David Copperfield Mr. Spenlow expresses the middle-class fear of being associated with the lower middle class in this manner when he learns of David’s plans to marry Dora. Spenlow upbraids David for being a usurper, a destroyer of the social order, and an all around villain of the
worse kind. While Mr. Spenlow’s disapproval of the relationship between Dora and David may be discounted as nothing more than fatherly concern, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that Mr. Spenlow’s concerns arise out of class anxiety and his desire to be seen as solidly middle class. Despite his claims that he is “‘not altogether destitute of worldly possessions’” and that he “‘[has] some property to bequeath to’” Dora, we know that he has no property to give her and that he is indeed destitute of real wealth. David’s reduced economic circumstances at the malicious hands of Uriah Heep make him unsuitable and thus provoke in Mr. Spenlow the anxiety that his daughter will marry into poverty and social obscurity: the very things presumably he spent his life trying to escape. David and those like him, are dangerous because they remind Mr. Spenlow of the circumstances from which he raised himself. Spenlow’s plate, china, and country house are nothing more than a show intended to impress upon the world that he is someone, much in the same way that David’s tight pants and shoes and that of any gent is intended to illustrate to the world that he is more than just a poor law clerk or shop assistant. Allowing David, a poor law clerk with no capital, to marry his daughter would merely remind the world that Mr. Spenlow is in all reality a nobody. In short, Mr. Spenlow is that type of middle-class snob satirized by Albert Smith—himself the son of a surgeon, a one time physician, comic performer [showman], and writer of comic literary sketches and short novels— in The Natural History of Stuck Up People (1847) as being, good people, in fine, [who] partake largely of the nature of mushrooms—inasmuch as they have not only sprung up with great rapidity to their present elevation, but have also arisen from mould of questionable delicacy. But now they have nothing more to do with their former position than has the white button-like fungus in the pottle of the west-end fruiterer with the impure soil from which it drew its vitality. (viii)
Spenlow, like the Lacquer family of Smith’s text and by implication all newly arrived middle-class families and individuals, is keen on distancing himself from his origins as a lowly law clerk and on giving the impression that he comes from a long and respected line of eminent lawyers.

The conflict between David and Spenlow highlights the danger the middle class saw in inviting young clerks or shop assistants without capital into one’s house where they may have contact with one’s daughters. People with cultural and economic capital to protect would be wise to ban the lower middle class from their social sphere altogether, as Smith proposes in 1848’s *The Natural History of the Gent*. He advises his readers to feel at “liberty to kick and insult them, with every [. . .] epithet” upon encountering lower-middle-class gents or swells at polite balls, teas, dinner, and other middle-class amusements (73). However, excluding the young clerk or shop assistant from the middle-class home and recreation deprives such men and women of genteel society and as numerous commentators of the times acknowledged, threatens to drive them into the arms of the gin shop, the theater, the dance hall, the gambling dens, and the music hall where they would acquire bad associates and habits.

Such is, in part, the warning of Hodder’s *The Junior Clerk*. George falls into a life of debauchery because of the lack of good society open to him. George is lured away from dull nights at home with his mother not by teas and dinners with people of good social standing, but by the attractions of the club, the theater, and eventually the gaming table, precisely those dangers warned of by conduct manuals, didactic novels like Hodder’s, and periodical literature. Deprived of the redeeming qualities of middle-class
society as well as being out of the direct surveillance of the middle class, the lower middle class threatens to become even more vulgar and dangerous to polite society if left to indulge its own desires. This fear that the lower middle class had vulgar desires makes sense when one stops to consider that many of the young men employed as clerks and shop assistants and many of the young women employed as milliners did indeed have working class backgrounds. Thus, the fear was that no matter the surface refinement these individuals exhibited there lurked just below the surface a festering vulgarity waiting to tar the middle class.

By 1869 the lack of social situations open to young lower-middle-class men and women became part of the ongoing “Young Man of the Day” letter writing campaign in the Daily Telegraph. One writer claiming to be a City clerk making between “£150-£200 a year” asks “how many mammas would give me one of their daughters who was pretty, clever, and domesticated? Very few indeed. I should be passed by for someone, never mind how unsuitable in other ways, who was certain to keep the daughter in the style to which she has been accustomed” (“City”). Another correspondent notes that he cannot attempt to enter such society as would confer on me any pleasure, simply because my family are poor, unknown, and uninfluential; and any idea of matrimony is speedily banished from my mind by anticipation of the reception I should meet with from the well-to-do parents [. . .] who would elevate their aristocratic noses in unutterable scorn at my audacity in ever dreaming of an alliance with one of their children. (“Dromo” 3)

This same writer notes earlier in his letter that he “and [his] compeers are driven for amusements to music-halls, the last ballet, billiards, and various things so much lamented by” middle-class social campaigners like the SPCK and YMCA (3). The fear is that in the absence of the ameliorating influence of middle-class society or just in the absence of
middle-class surveillance the lower middle class would devolve into an increasingly vulgarized class. Such observations were not confined to the pages of newspapers. Anthony Trollope has his narrator in The Three Clerks express the opinion that access to good society and genteel pastimes are the “truest guards to protect a youth from dissipation and immorality” (19). Even music hall singers and other popular singers could not resist commenting on this lack of proper and morally uplifting society open to office and retail clerks. In George Grossmith’s song “He Went to a Party,” we learn of the delight of a young and nearly friendless clerk upon learning that he has been invited to dinner. Abused by his cheap tailor, the young man shows up poorly dressed at the door of his hostess only to learn that he has arrived a night too late. The song highlights the unfamiliarity of the social world to many young clerks. While they may spend their days in the company of their middle class employers and customers they often spend their nights alone in uninviting lodgings or much to the dismay of middle-class social reformers partaking of the vulgar pleasures of the music hall, the gin shop, the dance parlor, or the cheap theater.

This fear of a vulgarized lower-middle-class man led to his exclusion from the home of his middle-class employer because clerks and shop assistants are thought to be sexual threats. That is, middle-class critics feel that lower-middle-class men could not be trusted to interact with middle-class women unless they were placed under strict surveillance. It is here that the lower-middle-class’s morality or lack of it has wider implications. According to the logic of the lower middle class’s critics, the clerk or shop assistant’s association with supposed prostitutes at the dance parlors, gin shops, gambling
dens as well at the music hall and the depictions of women on the stage at both the theater and the music hall lead him to have an unhealthy view towards women—one focused exclusively on sex. Shimmin’s Liverpool Life, Smith’s The Gent, Tinsley’s Magazine’s “Our Music Halls,” “The Genesis of the Cad,” and numerous other accounts highlight the presence of prostitutes or women of questionable character at dance parlors, music halls, and other places of amusement thought to be frequented by lower-middle-class men in order to impress upon middle-class readers the vulgarity and thus the dangerousness of the lower-middle-class man. Because of his interaction with prostitutes (no matter how fictional such interaction was given his low wages), the lower-middle-class clerk or shop assistant threatens to undermine the bourgeois family both physically via sexually transmitted diseases and morally through his fixation on seeing women only as objects of sexual desire. He threatens to sexualize a feminine body seen as non-sexual by middle-class mores. Smith, in The Natural History of the Gent paints lower-middle-class gent as a sexual pest who often “stares unflinchingly” at “pretty girl[s] in private [theater] boxes” (27). Smith further depicts the gents and swells as a class that suffers from “a strange lunatic notion” that “they have powers to fascinate every female upon whom they cast their eyes, never thinking of the utter contempt always excited by such obtrusiveness” (28). That the object of the gent’s lust is a clearly an aristocratic or middle-class “pretty girl in [a] private [theater] box” is particularly troubling to Smith. Such concerns were not limited to the evangelical non-conformist press or to non-literary social satirists like Smith. Anthony Trollope, in The Three Clerks, has Mrs. Woodward, an upright middle-class widow living near Hampton Court with her three daughters, fear that young Charley
Tudor, a clerk living on £90 a year, who is fond of gin shops, cheap tobacco, and who is secretly engaged to a bar maid, may spend his Sunday morning “smoking and attacking the parlour maid” instead of attending church services if invited down for the weekend (27). Matthew Titolo argues that the other characters and Victorian readers of *David Copperfield* see Uriah Heep as “a sexual marauder” and “a threat to Wickfield’s household firm” in all of its manifestations (190). Much of this fear of the lower-middle-class man’s sexual excesses is the middle class projecting its own vexed gender dynamics onto a group perceived as vulnerable to such representational strategies.

In short, according to their middle-class critics, lower-middle-class men like Charley Tudor or Uriah Heep lack the self-discipline that James Eli Adams argues in *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* was central to the industrial, mercantile, and professional middle class’s ongoing re-definition of the concepts of manliness that occurred throughout the nineteenth century. Unable to submit himself and his desires (erotic and non-erotic) to “an elaborately articulated program of self-discipline” the lower-middle-class man is unable to legitimately claim the status of a middle class individual (Adams 2). He remains instead a member of the under-class that needs to be observed (because he is unable to observe himself) and contained. He is unable to choose appropriate and edifying forms of recreation and amusement. As such, he remains at the mercy of middle-class schemes of representation. Bereft of the symbolic capital arising out of self-discipline the lower-middle-class man, to paraphrase Marx, cannot represent himself rather he must be represented by others. This inability to represent himself makes the lower-middle-class man dangerous because it is feared that
he can be easily manipulated by groups or individuals with self-serving intentions that would ultimately be dangerous to British cultural, economic, and political dominance as conceived of by the middle class.

The lack of access to polite and socially acceptable forms of recreation for lower-middle-class men also served to shut them out of the marriage market. Marriage, as is clear to any reader of Victorian novels, serves as perhaps the readiest (at least in the fantasies of those pursuing it) route to cultural and economic prominence (or at least respectability). To marry into a wealthy family or a socially well-established family is the goal of many a Victorian hero or heroine. Novels, short stories, music-hall songs, and sketches are filled with plots and characters that aspire to rise in the social order through marriage (or fail as a result of bad matches). In advising David to be “mercenary” with regard to his choice of wife, though not with Dora, Mr. Spenlow seems to be encouraging David along a course of action that while it may promise much reward will mark him as that type of lower-middle-class figure one wishes to keep at bay. While David seems to have avoided becoming a swell or a gent, he does, if he follows Spenlow’s advice, threaten to become a lower-middle-class predator in the hunt for a rich daughter or widow to marry. Yet, it appears that men of David’s class have few other options for social advancement, especially if they lack, as many self-improvement manuals implicitly argue, the character to pursue an effective program of self-improvement.

Godwin Peak from Gissing’s Born in Exile plans just such a course of action. Desirous of rising in society, disgusted by the social and physical landscape his birth has condemned him to (despite his obvious attempts at self-improvement), and despite his
self-perceived superiority he plans to use marriage to advance his position, “my one supreme desire is to marry a perfectly refined woman. [...] I am a plebian, and I aim at marrying a lady” (140). He woos just such a woman in the person of Sidwell Warricombe by pretending to be something and someone he is not. While Godwin begins the novel as, if not a wholly sympathetic character, then not fully a villain, it is his actions in wooing Sidwell that transform him into a Uriah Heep type villain. It is the stress of being denied access to what he sees as his rightful place in society, based on his intellectual achievements, that drives him to dishonesty. He quickly becomes the type of dangerous social actor that must be excluded from middle-class society. No matter how much we or the novel’s contemporary readers may have sympathized with Godwin’s plight, his actions mark him as the dangerous kind of lower-middle-class predator that David Copperfield avoids becoming on his road to middle class respectability. Godwin’s actions serve as a warning to any established middle-class father or mother about the dangers of admitting lower-middle-class figures into the domestic circle. As such, Peak is more a villain like Uriah Heep than a hero like David Copperfield.

Uriah Heep with his sham humility, plots and schemes to marry Agnes at all costs is of course the very embodiment of such a dangerous figure. It is Heep’s unwillingness to submit himself to the mores of the bourgeoisie that makes him so dangerous; he plans his social advancement not through thrift, industriousness, temperance, and the development of character (even if he does pretend to adhere to these values), but rather through a persevering program of deception and dishonesty. His actions require that the other characters of the novel take direct action to contain the threat he poses, not only to
them as individuals but more broadly to middle-class hegemony. However, mere exclusion is not enough, he must be branded a criminal by the end of the novel. Heep’s dangerousness stems not only from his actions but also from his family background. Unlike David who can claim to be a representative member of the middle class as a result of his dead father’s presumed class position,—David’s father owned a house and was able to leave his widow enough money to live comfortably and to make her an attractive prize for Murdstone—Heep clearly comes from a working class background. His mother had no rich middle-class husband to leave her a living, she lives in a poorly lit and badly heated charity house. This background marks Heep from the beginning as the type of individual of which middle class society needs to be wary of. That Dickens gives Heep a hideous physical visage merely highlights this aspect of his character.

Yet, denying figures like Heep and Godwin access to the marriage market deprives them from one potentially stabilizing and improving force in their lives. This is because besides serving as a route into respectability, marriage functions for the Victorians as a stabilizing force in the face of rapid cultural and economic changes. Marriage works to provide both men and women with a site outside of the economic sphere where they can reconnect with their humanity. Further, as an institution it is seen as having the power to rein in wild young men of all classes and as a provider of social stability. Samuel Smiles in Duty places particular importance upon the domestic in the formation of character and the curbing of bad habits when he notes “[t]he backbone of character is laid at home; and whether the constitutional tendencies be good or bad, home influences will as a rule fan them into activity” (27) and “[i]t is in the study of the home
that the true character and hopes of the times are to be consulted” (34). Speaking of morality and the cultivation of the principles—“self-restraint,” “self-control,” “imagination,” and “enthusiasm”—he deems essential to the development of character, Smiles pontificates, “most of these principles are implanted at home, and not at school” (33). Thus, while it is hoped by Smiles that young men will have been influenced in the formation of character at home from an early age, he does hold out great hope that the introduction of domestic responsibilities through marriage would compel the development of character. The necessities of housekeeping, it was thought, would force hitherto profligate men to buckle down and become financially responsible and morally upright, as Smiles notes “once married, a man ought forthwith to determine that, so far as his own efforts are concerned, want shall never enter his household” (Thrift, 16-17). This imperative to financial responsibility would result in men forgoing visits to the music hall, the gin shop, or the dance parlor. No less of an authority on marriage and the management of the household than Isabella Beeton, in Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management, first published in 1861, informs her readers of the role of the good wife and mother in carrying out just such a mission, “‘[s]he [. . .] who reclaims the one [her husband] from vice and trains up the other [her children] to virtue, is a much greater character than ladies described in romances, whose whole occupation is to murder mankind with shafts from their quiver, or their eyes’” (7.)28 Here again we see the redeeming qualities of marriage as they relate to bringing wayward young men to heel. Yet, because of his dangerousness and middle-class anxieties about their own class position the lower-middle-class man is denied access to marriage in any meaningful way.
The fate of Godwin Peak from Gissing’s *Born in Exile* in some ways highlights the dangerous results of closing lower-middle-class men out from polite society. Doing so deprives these young men of models from which to develop the manners and social graces that are, in part, the hallmark of the middle-class gentleman. It is not just in terms of manners and social graces that young men like Godwin Peak are deficient, their reverence, what Bourdieu calls “an exalted, misplaced piety,” for science and/or classical scholarship marks them as parvenus (84). Men like Godwin, do not see such accomplishments as natural, but see them as accomplishments and honors won by hard work and great sacrifice. As a result, Godwin and those he represents are overly proud and overly respectful of them, expecting them to confer great honor and privilege upon those who possess them. Because of these deficiencies, *Born in Exile* sees such men condemned to lives of middling opportunities no matter their intellectual abilities in a cultural and economic system, the latter characterized by the amalgamation of smaller firms in to larger syndicates requiring vast amounts of capital, offering few realistic chances for either economic or social advancement. They found themselves at once both underemployed and out-classed by their aristocratic and established middle class superiors as a result of the deficiencies of their Board School educations and their lack of access to economic capital. The result was an increasing class of discontented men and women. This is not to say that this discontent manifested itself in political mobilization for clearly it did not.  

Rather, according to Gissing and other critics of the lower middle class it resulted in a segment of society devoid of any drive or character, “whose spiritual guide is the
Sunday newspaper” (BIE 269). A class, who while not properly vulgar as the working class were, was full of a “consistent love of everything that is ignoble” (BIE 269), and whose very existence is characterized by an “utter deadness” (270). The danger this discontented class poses is not direct and violent political usurpation, but a slow and insidious “debasing [of] art and literature” and all that is sweet and light about English culture so that “[o]ne hears men and women of gentle birth using phrases which originate with shopboys” (BIE 270). Enervated by the lack of opportunities for cultural and economic advancement these “coarsest million[s]” in turn enervate even those members of society long thought to be the source of England’s culture and strength—the aristocracy and the established rural middle class, and the new middle-class scholar gentleman.

It is this emphasis on the cultural threat the lower middle class poses that is most palpable to a middle class readership in Born in Exile. The novel sees no safe way for the lower middle class as individuals or collectively to be integrated into the cultural and economic life of Victorian Britain. In this respect, Gissing is not alone. In the last decades of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, one finds a groundswell of concern about the cultural contamination inherent in the lower middle class. T. W. H Crossland’s satirical The Suburbs (1905)30 echoes Gissing’s fear as expressed through Peak of the lower middle class with regard to its ability to infect others and to debase British culture. In Crossland’s text, the term suburban works as synonym for lower middle class. He wastes little time informing his readers that the suburban “is a sort of label which may be properly applied to pretty well everything on the earth that is ill-
conditioned, undesirable, and unholy” (7-8). Throughout the text, Crossland reminds his readers that the inhabitants of the suburbs are the despoilers of both the land and culture of Britain. With regard to the despoiling of the countryside, Crossland portrays the suburb as a place “where the only streams are sewers” (16) and as a place where one “shall not find a building that meets the eye graciously or that does not bespeak a vile taste” (18). Crossland goes on to warn his readers that if they were to venture to suburbs like “Bayswater or South Kensington,” “Bedford Park,” “Lewisham,” “Clapham,” or “Surbition,” or even “Ealing” (13-14) they would find a landscape marred by “villas with [. . .] bay-windows and little backyards [. . .], [. . .] rows on rows of indifferent shops [. . .], [. . .] squads of dilapidated ‘family residences’ that have never been inhabited by a single family any time these fifty years, [. . .] hideous Board Schools, [. . .] still more hideous railway-stations, [and] idiotic free libraries” (18). In focusing on the impact the lower middle class, has on the landscape Crossland makes visible the cultural threat he sees it posing. Unlike the abstract threat posed to the quality of literature or music or drama, the physical changes wrought upon the landscape by the lower middle class was palpable. One did not have to be a reader, or theatergoer, or a connoisseur of music to see the danger, all one had to do was look around. Yet, that Crossland ends with an invective against the vulgarity of the suburbs by mentioning the presence of “idiotic free libraries” drives home the cultural threat he sees the lower middle class posing. It is not just the visual landscape that is being despoiled but literature itself, the very thing that, as Linda Dowling argues in Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle, marks British civilization as superior to all of its contemporaries and upon which British cultural,
economic, military, and political dominance rests. Thus, Gissing’s pessimism about the possibility of lower-middle-class figures like Godwin Peak ever finding a place in Victorian society anticipates in important ways the increasingly negative attitude held by cultural elites towards the lower middle class. The message is clear, if a sensitive, well-educated man like Godwin Peak must be excised from society then the hordes of poorly educated suburban lower-middle-class clerks, shop assistants, milliners, etc. are a malignant cancer eating at the very heart of what makes Britain great.

The lower middle class is thus depicted as morally dangerous to itself and others, dangerous to the existing and emerging class structures, and dangerous to the artistic and literary culture of Great Britain. As Chapter Three shows, these negative depictions provide the impetus for Charles Dickens and others to conceive of ways to represent lower-middle-class protagonists as capable and deserving of transformation into middle class gentlemen. Further, it was necessary for Dickens and those who followed his example to accomplish this in such a way that lower-middle-class desires for social advancement do not pose a threat to middle class hegemony.
1 I do not mean to imply that Jo is lower middle class. Instead, the lower middle class poses a similar type of threat to middle class hegemony.

2 F. M. L. Thompson notes that “clerks formed one of the fastest growing occupational groups of the second half of the nineteenth century, male clerks quadrupling in number between 1861 and 1891, from 91,000 to 370,000” (Making 68).

3 For an example of this sort of reasoning see the work of G. L. Anderson of Geoffrey Crossick who approach the “problem” of the lower middle class from a wholly economic stand point. C.f. the volume edited by Crossick, The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914.

4 The only published account of Shimmin’s life appears to be the introduction by John K. Walton and Alastair Wilcox to their collection of his journalism, Low Life and Moral Improvement in Mid-Victorian England: Liverpool Through the Journalism of Hugh Shimmin Leicester, London, and New York: Leicester University Press/ Printer Publishers, 1991. The following account is taken from that work. Shimmin worked primarily as journalist in Liverpool and was an active and ardent campaigner for sanitary reforms. Shimmin was raised by primarily by his mother who was a primitive Methodist and quite involved in the temperance movement. His father who was an alcoholic died after Shimmin had been apprenticed to a bookbinder. (3-4) While an apprentice Shimmin attended Mealy Lane School and the Paradise Street Chapel a Unitarian chapel led by James Martineau. Through his attendance at Paradise Street Chapel Shimmin apparently had some limited contact with the mercantile elite of Liverpool. This contact along with influence of the Mealy Lane School and his mother’s involvement in the temperance movement seems to have inspired him to strive to free himself from his working class roots (4). Embracing the creed of self-help, Shimmin joined the local Mechanics’ Institute and was invited to join the Mental Improvement Society that were housed in the same building (5). As a result of his hard work and dedication to temperance and self-improvement Smiles was appointed foreman of the bookbindery (3) and eventually purchased the business for £70 (6). Shimmin’s first forays into journalism were in 1855-6 when he published two articles in the Liverpool Mercury. In 1860 he become editor and owner of a “new satirical weekly, Porcupine.” In his novel Harry Birkett: The Story of a Man who Helped Himself, By the Author of ‘Town Life,’ etc, (London, 1860) he “continually stresses the importance of self-improvement through steady application to study” (4). Shimmin eventually switched his religious affiliation from Nonconformity to the Church of England (8) and died leaving an estate valued at roughly £5,000 (6).
Shimmin is described by Walton and Wilcox as being taciturn in both his personal appearance and in his demeanor. With regard to personal appearance Walton and Wilcox postulate that his neat, yet careless dress was indicative of Shimmin’s firmly held belief that the character of an individual was best expressed not by his dress or personal appearance, but by his actions. If this is true, then Shimmin’s critique of the pub, the dance parlor, the music hall, and other places of amusement grew out of his distaste for the emphasis they and those who attended them placed on appearance.

5 Shimmin’s loyalty to the middle class employers is clear when he rebukes the clerks and shop assistants who would complain about their employers. In one such rebuke, Shimmin declares, “We heard nothing of the libraries, of the lectures, of the reading rooms” provided for their self-improvement by the generosity of their employers and other benevolent members of the middle class (116).

6 The Early Closing Movement was a loosely organized attempt throughout the century to limit the hours retail shops were opened. It began in the 1840s and continued through the end of the century to enact legislation that would result in retail shops closing in the early evening. On the whole it was largely unsuccessful. Proponents of the movement argued that shop assistants would use the time off for rest and rational recreation that would result in the intellectual and moral improvement of the class and thus the rest of society. Those opposing the movement argued that beyond its economic cost, it was unwise to give shop assistants more time off as they would waste it on trivial and vulgarizing amusements, engaging in political unrest, or drinking.


8 All groups, whether they be residual, emergent, or dominant are constantly facing pressures to define themselves and to police the boundaries that mark them as different from other groups, no matter how secure the group in question position may appear to be.  

For more on the problem of the proper use of leisure see Peter Bailey’s “The Victorian Middle Class and the Problem of Leisure.”

The singer of and the audience for the song “I Am a Young Man That’s Most Highly Respectable” are examples of these striving hordes that:

want parks and mansions, want villas and grounds,
Want racers and hunters, want foxes and hounds.
[. . .]
I want smart footmen, a tiger—but zounds!
I scarcely can keep all my wants within bounds.
I want a wife, with a villa to bring her to;
I want a valet

I want education, but that’s nothing new, you know;
An office of profit, and nothing to do, you know;
I want moustachios adorning my face [sic],
A title, a fortune, and parliament place;
I want admiration, and frolic, and blisses, too,
Soft sighs, soft tears, soft glances, and kisses, too;--
I want all of these things, and you may depend on’t
I really can’t tell you one-half that I want. (34)

This song with its list of extravagant wants and the singers inability to tell his listeners all of his wants represents both the success and the failure of the industrial revolution: that marginalized elements of the population will began to demand material goods and social mobility, as represented by the singers demand for “education,” that cannot be easily satiated.

I cite Smiles Duty here in particular because as Jerome Buckley notes, protagonists of Bildungsroman novels like David Copperfield, Tono-Bungay, Great Expectations, etc. are “guided by a sense of duty to the self and to others, a sense perhaps inculcated or sharpened by parents and childhood conditioning, and perhaps never freely admitted, but nonetheless remaining latent and strong through all the rebellions of adolescence.” (23) A sense of duty or the lack of sense of duty thus either qualifies one to be the hero of their own lives and become something other than just “a mere clerk.”

To be fair to Smiles, some of the motivation for such statement as quoted above may be his desire to address critics who felt Smiles’ earlier works, Self-Help and 1875’s Thrift in particular, encouraged a myopic focus on economic and social achievement. Such criticism were not unfounded as Robin Gilmour notes “without questioning his sincerity
or integrity it can be seen in that his argument implied more than he thought it meant” and that his “language […] is soaked with the vocabulary of investment” (100). In the 1875 Preface to Thrift Smiles notes, “[s]ome of the finest qualities of human nature are intimately related to the right use of money.” (v) Perhaps more damming is Smiles contention in the same Preface that “thrift” or perhaps the pursuit of money is “one of the best methods of abating the Curse of Drink” (vi) and “[e]very man is bound to do what he can to elevate his social state, and to secure his independence.” (vi) [these are from the 1886 edition.] By independence Smiles means first and most importantly economic independence gained through “[i]ndustry […] prudence, frugality, and self-denial.” (vi) It is only after this economic independence has been gained can a man begin to think about improving his mind, though the assumption is that through “industry, prudence, frugality, and self-denial” that the same man has already gone far in developing his character (Thrift 20). Smiles both in a preface to a later edition of Self-Help and here in Duty is working to dispel such notions and to argue that his true meaning of self-help and self-improvement is not the pursuit of worldly success, but rather the cultivation of character and the ennobling of individuals. While this may be the case, one cannot but help noticing that in the Preface to Duty Smiles notes that many of the young men in attendance at the Leeds lectures from which Self-Help grew have gone on “to fill positions of trust, responsibility, and usefulness” (7). As Jerome Buckley in Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding notes, “[i]n the jargon of the time, to ‘make good’ is to make money,” as such terms like the ones Smiles uses here and elsewhere in his works can and should be read as code for the achievement of worldly success (23). Self-Help sold 20,000 in its first year, by 1864 some 55,000 copies were sold, by 1889 some 150,000 copies had been sold and since 1889 an additional 120,000 since then (about 1900). Character was the next best selling volume (“Smiles” Dictionary of National Biography 324). Richard Altick cites the figure of some 258,000 copies of Self-Help being sold by 1905 (Altick 390).

Here as throughout his works, Smiles is quoting a passage from an eminent Victorian or historical figure. In this case he is quoting Macaulay’s recounting of the Duke of Wellington’s remarks upon learning of the sinking of the HMS Birkenhead and the loss of its crew. In Self-Help Smiles recounts this incident at length—the crew stayed on board while the ship sank to prevent themselves from panicking in the water and thus risking overturning the lifeboats of the passengers.

Haslehurst Greaves in The Commercial Clerk and His Success published by Cassel in 1909 instructs his readers, “in order to preserve his bodily health, the clerk should spend as much time as possible in out-door sports or recreation; at any rate, his weekly half-holiday should be spent entirely in the open air. […] Keen attention to physical culture on the part of the clerk is without a doubt an indispensable to success,” (67-68).

The Scots Observer called Tit-Bits “‘a kind of rag-bag in print’” where the typical reader reading on “omnibus or train from his suburban home to his office in the city”
finds bits about Tennyson’s greatness “sandwiched in between a paragraph on ‘Artists and their Models,’ and another on ‘Beauty and How to Get it.’ The three are of equal value to him.” (“Small Change” Scots Observer 20 July 1889: 238, qtd in McDonald, 9). Other common features of Tit-Bits included word games, contests, prize stories written by readers, and excerpts from other periodicals. Gissing makes the winning of a word puzzle a central plot device in his novella Town Traveller; a young awkward clerk wins his financial freedom from his overbearing family and wins the hand of his pretentious girlfriend by guessing the word “Hygiene.”

Minstrel shows were an important and integral part of Victorian music halls, especially following the end of the U.S. civil war in 1865. Throughout much of the 1870, 80s, and 90s, one could attend a minstrel show or performance of one sort or another at nearly all of the major London music halls. As most music hall acts toured the provinces it is highly likely that a young man such as Oliver would have had access to such shows on a fairly regular basis. For an accessible account of one such minstrel performance at a music hall see James Greenwood’ The Wilds of London chapter entitled “Amongst the Music-hall Luminaries” 92-93 [1876 edition].

See below for a fuller discussion of the perceived importance of the domestic sphere, and marriage in particular, in the Victorian period.

The Junior Clerk was reprinted in 1895 as Life in London, or the Pitfalls of a Great City in 1890. Apparently in the almost thirty years since its initial publication its publishers felt there existed a need for such a warning to reach the parents, employers, and more importantly the young clerks and shop assistants of London and other large British cities.

Tinsley’s Magazine was published by the firm Tinsley Brothers famous as the publishers of Lady Audely’s Secret, some of Mrs. Henry Wood’s novels—her novel George Canterbury’s Will was serialized in Tinsley’s Magazine starting with the April 1869 issue, and many other sensation novels and a wide range of what was at the time considered “light” fiction and sensational fiction.

Ally Sloper’s Half-Holiday was published from 1882 through the middle of the twentieth century, though as Peter Bailey notes in “Ally Sloper’s Half-Holiday: Comic Art in the 1880s” History Workshop, 16 (1983), 4-31 it reached its zenith from the 1890s to the start of World War I. Bailey’s essay remains the best and perhaps the only sustained examination of the paper.

From novels to music hall songs, the umbrella, as a practical replacement for the swell’s cane, was a ubiquitous symbol of the lower middle class clerk or shop assistant. Trollope’s Mr. Snape, an older civil servant in the office of Internal Navigation, is pilloried for his black cotton umbrella. Charley Tudor, confronted with a mountain of
debts, considers pawnning his own umbrella. Arlene Young in Culture, Class, and Gender in the Victorian Novel notes “the ubiquitousness of the stick or cheap umbrella” along with a host of other clothing markers that “become associated with clerks and shop assistants” during the period (68).

24 Smith was the son of a surgeon who trained and briefly practiced as a physician in Tottenham Court Road before being convinced that his true calling was as an author. During the 1840s he wrote for a number of magazines including Punch and Bentley’s Miscellany while also serving as the theater critic for the Illustrated London News. He published his first novel, Adventures of Mr. Ledbury and his Friend Jack Johnson, in 1842 serially in Bentley’s. Starting 1847 he produced a series of literary sketches modeled on the Paris Physiologies for the publisher David Bouge. The first of these, The Natural History of the Gent proved to be so successful that he followed it with The Natural History of the Ballet Girl, The Natural History of Stuck-Up People, The Natural History of Dinner Parties, and The Natural History of the Idler Upon Town. After a tour of Europe, he produced his comic first show at Willis’s Rooms in 1850. This performance proved to be critically and financially remunerative so that Smith followed it with a comic sketch on the climbing of Mount Blanc and of Anglo-Continental life and characters that ran from mid-March 1852 to early July 1858. Smith followed with other productions and continued to write comic novels and sketches before his death in 1860.


26 It should be noted that few if any of the contemporary reviewers of Born in Exile found Peak sympathetic or his actions comprehensible.

27 As I discuss in Chapter 3, David’s class status and that of his father is not nearly as settled as I make it out to be here.

28 Here Beeton is quoting from Oliver Goldsmith’s The Vicar of Wakefield (1766). Beeton, like Smiles and most self-help authors employs extensive quotations from what were thought to be respectable and eminent literary, historical, and philosophical figures.

29 While clerks of all kinds generally did not engage in collective political action to improve their economic conditions they did occasionally hold meetings as well as publish articles and letters in newspapers like the Times to highlight their plights. See in particular the 20 Dec. 1894 issue (6), the 31 Aug. 1889 issue (12), the 5 May 1883 issue of the Times for instance in which Civil Service clerks voiced their concerns either through meetings or other forms of collective action (10). It was not, however until the turn of the century that the National Clerks Union began to exert any real influence over pay and working conditions for clerks.
For more on Crossland and the rise of anti-suburban feeling see John Carey’s *The Intellectual and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (1992), especially chapter three “The Suburbs and the Clerk” which explores the ways in which the two terms were often conflated (46-70).

One need not look only to Crossland’s relatively late invective against the suburb to find examples of despair over the fate of the British landscape at the hands of the lower middle class. Mary Bramston’s *The Carbridges: A Suburban Story* published in 1874, which chronicles the fate of the Carbridges, as they are force to sell their rustic home to land developers and move into a suburb. Bramston introduces the story by giving her readers a brief history of the despoiling of the green places and charming country villages of Britain:

> The clear little streamlets that once rippled so peacefully through the golden-green pastures first grow black and foul, and then are arched over from the free air and sunlight, the trees on their banks are cut down, the fields are cut up into building lots, with heaps of bricks and pools of lime upon them, and it is all over with the pretty little village, which the gorging monster with insatiable jaw has claimed for his own, and which henceforth exists no more independently, but becomes at once a suburb of London, and is absorbed into a postal district. (1-2)

Bramston makes it clear that “the gorging monster with insatiable jaw” is the rising numbers of lower-middle-class families desirous of living in the “country.” Other commentators like the Reverend C. L. Marson find in the suburbs “all the misery, squalor, dirt, and degradation which so tickle fashionable fancy with regard to the East-end” (1-2).
CHAPTER 2

QUEEN OF THE DRAG KINGS: VESTA TILLEY AND THE CHALLENGE TO HETERONORMATIVITY ON THE VICTORIAN MUSIC HALL STAGE

While the social exclusion suffered by many lower-middle-class young men and women from respectable middle-class households detailed in Chapter One may be regrettable in its own right, for many Victorian observers of the lower middle class it had other more undesirable effects that in turn make the lower middle class even more dangerous. As the letters from the Daily Telegraph’s series on the “Young Men of the Day” discussed in Chapter One note, many lower-middle-class men turned to the music halls, dance parlors, billiard rooms, and gambling houses as their only means of social interaction. During the mid- and late-Victorian period, the music hall becomes the locus of all that threatened middle-class hegemony.\(^1\) Seen as a dangerous class and barred from socially interacting with their middle-class employers, many lower-middle-class individuals turned to the music hall for entertainment and companionship. In doing so, they gave their critics even more reason to worry about their suitability to be included in polite society. The songs and skits of the music hall glorified drinking, carousing, fancy dress, and freedom from any kind of cares or responsibility. Beyond thumbing their
collective noses at the beliefs and values of the Victorian middle class, the performances on the stage and the behavior of the audience at music halls gave rise to homophobic panic on the part of critics and the culture they represented or that they were attempting to impose via their criticism. The interest shown by young lower-middle-class men in dress and personal appearance, as well as towards other young men at the music hall and the male performers on the stage raised fears among many critics that an accepted form of homosociability was spilling into homoeroticism and even more dangerously into homosexuality.² The presence of female to male cross-dressing performers like Vesta Tilley on the music-hall stages further heightened these concerns.

“The Genesis of the Cad,” published in Tinsley’s Magazine in March 1869 nicely illustrates these concerns. The author finds it deeply troubling that the music hall performer “instructs [the young men] in the art of dress and deportment” (179). He is even more troubled by what he sees as the fawning devotion these students have for their instructors. He goes on to enumerate the ways in which impressionable lower-middle-class young men are turned away from the path of true manhood and inculcated into a love of dress and fashion by the narrow-waisted, small-footed men on stage. As Arlene Young notes in Culture, Class, and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents, and Working Women physical attributes of this kind are commonly associated with femininity (64 passim). The author of “Our Music Halls” also published in Tinsley’s Magazine in 1869 bemoans the fact that these young men dress in suits “carved [. . .] in obedience to the pattern presented by the outside of certain music-sheets” (218). This was no hysterical fantasy of the author. The Era, a paper devoted to covering popular
amusements, especially the music halls, notes in a review of The Sun in London that “the programme here informs the visitor not only what is to be given him in the way of entertainment, but supplies further particulars as to the prices of coats and trousers at a neighbouring tailor’s; […] of hair cutting and shaving at a neighbouring barbers” (4). Such a notice is just one of many examples of music hall style slipping the bounds of the stage and making its way into the streets, offices, and homes of Victorian Britain. The fear that the lower-middle-class men in the audience were taking the parody too seriously becomes reality. While middle-class elites saw the music hall as a threat, the lower middle class began to see it and use it as a place in which to escape the control of its overbearing middle-class employers and the watchful eye of other middle class social reformers. It became a place in which the lower middle class could and did articulate a sense of itself and receive validation of its way of being.

Traditionally scholars have viewed the music hall as a working class phenomenon. However, more recent research has shown that the audiences were more diverse and included large numbers of lower-middle-class individuals. Dagmar Höher notes that “the overwhelming majority of London music halls patrons came from the working and lower middle class” with the suburban London halls like Eastern, Wilton’s, and the Canterbury drawing their audience almost exclusively from the lower middle class (76). Höher argues that many of the London suburban music halls boasted about their accessibility by train, tram, and omnibus in what she mistakenly characterizes as an attempt to attract middle-class patrons who favored the West End music halls. However, my own sense, based on reviewing many of the same advertisements, is that these notices
with their promise of the show ending before the last trains stopped running and their low admission prices (ranging from 6d. to 5s.) hoped more to coax lower-middle-class individuals from their suburban homes than to attract the well-off middle class. In an interview with The Era, E. V. Page, who in addition to being a prolific lyricist of music-hall songs was the manager of the Cambridge Music Hall in London, notes that the audience was mixed depending on the night. Despite Page’s claim for audience diversity it appears that the Cambridge’s patrons were all lower middle class or well-off working class—tradesmen and their employees, “well-dressed young people of the shop-assistant type,” and what Page refers to as the ‘early closing’ audience, which appears to be composed of civil service or office clerks living in the suburbs (17). The author of “Our Music Halls” finds the audiences comprised primarily of “counting-house youth, who otherwise would have to spend [. . .] dull evenings (after duller days in Fenchurch-street or the Minories) in some dingy lodging[s] in Dalston or Hoxton” and who are joined by their fellow “shop[m]e[n], clerk[s], or swell tradesm[e]n” in enjoying the amusements on and off the stage at the music hall (220-221). The speaker of John Davidson’s long poem In a Music-Hall is a “junior clerk” who “[f]rom ten in the morning till six / [. . .] wrote memorandums and things” and who finds relief not in “novels,” “poems,” “plays,” or “the talk of [his] friends” but in rather in “a music-hall, rancid and hot” in the company of his “desk-fellows / with a pipe and tankard of beer” (“Prologue” 2). The “Guide for Visitors to the Metropolis” published in The London Entr’acte, another paper devoted to music halls and other light amusements, lists thirty-one music halls in nearly every part of London. Halls were located in Edgeware-road, Holborn, Hoxton, Knightsbridge,
Islington, Southwark, and Westminster as well as the West End (4). The large number of halls and their geographic dispersion speaks to the ubiquity of music hall entertainment and its wide appeal. With an especially heavy concentration in the southern suburbs and the in-town suburbs of Camden, Holborn, Hoxton, and Islington, affordable admission prices, and the fact that nearly all the halls enforced some form of a dress code, it is clear that many of the halls appealed to the lower middle class and the well-off working class. Dagmar Kift notes how by the end of the century “the lower middle class as a whole had already become an integral part of the music-hall audiences” with many of its members having been there throughout the century (67). The halls were successful in attracting and retaining a lower-middle-class audience because the performances “confirmed and glorified forms of behaviour which were an integral part of the audience’s everyday life but which were regarded as socially unacceptable by other classes” (40). It was to the halls and their comedic songs and skits that many in the lower middle class, especially its young men, turned to find validation for their life choices and from which to take their social cues. This confirmation and glorification of a whole range of behaviors allowed the halls to become the crucible in which important aspects of lower-middle-class identity were formed.

However, one did not have to go to the music hall to be influenced by it and the culture it fomented. As John M. Garret notes in Sixty Years of British Music Hall, from the 1850s onward music hall song-sheets featured colored covers showing the singer engaged in his or her act or illustrating a scene from the song. Garret surmises that the covers, which were coincidentally found to just fit in a single pane of shop windows,
were an ideal way to advertise the songs (n.p.). The lavishly colored song sheets focused on the appearance and dress of the male performer. Staples of the covers included narrow waists, small feet, elaborately (or according to the critics of the music hall, garishly) patterned waist-coats and trousers, small canes with jeweled heads, gaudy watch chains and fobs, monocles, and rakishly worn top hats. ³ Perhaps more important than the publicity for the songs that this form advertising ensured, the display of music hall song-sheets in shop windows meant that one did not have to actually purchase the song sheet or even regularly attend the music hall to be familiar with the fashions and behaviors encouraged by the music hall performer. Because of the ease with which music-hall songs were advertised and the popularity of periodicals like Ally Sloper’s Half-Holiday⁴ that took much of their comedy from music-hall culture, the influence of music hall in popularizing swell style was pervasive and threatened even sober middle-class homes.

One staple of the music hall performances, especially the swell songs, is the imitation and parody of aristocratic and middle-class styles. The performances at the music halls, the illustrations on many music-hall song books, and the fact that a number of lower-middle-class individuals dressed in imitation of their favorite performers represent a form of unacceptable sophistication on the part of lower-middle-class figures. Attacks on these practices reveal an attempt to impose or re-impose what Joseph Litvak terms “a hierarchy of sophistications” upon those individuals seen as somehow transgressing class boundaries (16). It is at the boundaries, as Stallybrass and White remind us, where hierarchies are most vulnerable and thus most in need of enforcement by cultural elites or their representatives (200 passim). By emulating, however poorly, the
dress and manners of the aristocracy and the fast young man about town, lower-middle-
class gents and swells threaten the social hierarchy particularly because, as Litvak notes,
“to sophisticate oneself, [...] is to desophisticate others” (17, emphasis in original). By
donning the clothing, manners, and leisure activities (or a simulacra of them) of its
betters, the lower middle class makes these markings of cultural capital and attainment
less valuable. This is especially true if large numbers of the lower middle class engage in
such practices. The very things—clothes, manners, and use of leisure time—that once
were marks of distinction become marks of vulgarity. As Litvak argues, “Victorian
fiction teaches its readers how to act by dramatizing the considerable power and prestige
to be gained through a sophisticated manipulation of cultural codes” (14). Music hall
performances accomplish much the same task and in doing so highlight the ease with
which the cultural codes may be attained, manipulated, and thus ultimately illustrating the
hollowness of these codes. The lesson is, if Champagne Charlie or some other music-hall
character can transform himself into West End swell merely by donning a fashionable
coat, a cane, using fashionable slang, and attitude so can the clerks and shop assistants in
the audience. Much ink was spilt by the critics of the music hall on reminding the public
that the dress, accessories, and bearing of the music-hall inspired lower-middle-class gent
or swell were nothing more than cheap knock-offs. Yet, in reminding their readers of the
ease with which the markers of class could be appropriated by half-educated clerks and
shop assistants, these critiques reveal the weak foundations upon which middle-class
status itself rested. The repeated demonstrations of the ease with which middle-class style
could be adopted led to increasing fears that the very codes and concepts the middle class
deployed to differentiate itself were being slowly eroded and unraveled even as they were being built. In the 1860s these fears coalesced with debates over electoral representation. Politicians like Robert Lowe expressed the fear that universal suffrage or even expanding the electorate would devalue the power and prestige of the middle and upper classes. This dilution would result in all the classes “becom[ing] too much like each other” (5 qtd. in Gallagher). By this logic, enfranchising the lower middle class and the working class would mean giving power to those members of British society that lacked social power and would eventually level down rather than an “elevate” the disenfranchised (“Mr. Lowe” 9). Thus for Lowe, expanding the franchise would threaten middle-class hegemony rather than enhance it as those who argued for increasing the electorate said it would. Further, any sort of social, economic, or political mobility “artificially accelerated” was, according to Lowe, going against a “natural process” of incremental change. This “natural process” rewarded only those members of the lower middle class and working class “who [. . .] have exercised [. . .] prudence and self-denial” (“Mr. Lowe” 9). Thus, any usurpation of the “natural process” was especially distasteful because it would devalue the efforts of those members of society who had worked to make themselves respectable. Expanding the franchise would reward those, who like the gents and swells, wanted the benefits and privileges that come with social position without being willing to expend the effort to be worthy of it. Resistance to and criticism of socially ambitious men and women of the lower middle class present at the music hall is part of ongoing critique of the wider economic, political, and social aspirations of the traditionally disenfranchised. The expansion of the electorate in 1867 meant that the
middle class had increasingly to rely on markers of social distinction to distinguish itself from the lower middle class. One way of accomplishing this sense of distinction was to insist upon a natural and impermeable boundary between the middle class and the lower middle class.

This fear of erasing what were seen as natural and essential social distinctions reverberates throughout much of Victorian culture. Robin Gilmour’s reading of Trollope’s Duke of Ominum’s reaction to his daughter’s assertion that her beloved is a gentleman is illustrative of this fear. As Gilmour notes, the Duke expresses the opinion that markers of gentility, education, character, and civilization like the term gentlemen have become meaningless because “[t]here is not a clerk in our public offices who does not consider himself to be a gentleman. [. . .]. The word is too vague to carry with it any meaning” (qtd. in Gilmour 13). While the Duke can rely upon his aristocratic title to maintain his cultural position, the hordes of middle-class readers of Trollope’s novel lack his safety net. The very concepts the middle class had cultivated to facilitate its rise in the social hierarchy and that it deployed to maintain its hegemony were in danger of being diluted by even larger hordes of lower-middle-class gents, swells, ordinary clerks, shop assistants, and milliners appropriating those concepts for their own use. Combined with the broadening of the franchise, attempts via self-help and self-improvement to don the mores and character of the middle and upper classes, and attempts on the part of the lower middle class at cultural equality through dress and deportment led many middle-class critics and observers to place the lower middle class in the category of the dangerous. This dangerousness arises precisely because such efforts highlighted the
extent to which the symbols of class and distinction were not, as Ruskin argues in *Modern Painters*, the result of physical or moral breeding but were the result of base effort or even worse the economic wherewithal that often resulted from industriousness of one’s immediate fore-bearers. Even worse is the idea that these class markers can be cheaply purchased by a three-penny clerk in some suburban shop.

Yet the very attempts by lower-middle-class individuals to sophisticate themselves dooms them to vulgarity in the eyes of all authentic aristocratic and middle-class individuals and makes the former dangerous to the social order. The dangerousness arises principally out of the lower-middle-class swells’s refusal to remain in the class he was born in and by his refusal to rise in society by dint of hard work and thrift as the numerous self-improvement books and pamphlets urge him. Rather, the gent or swell tries to move up in society by sophisticating himself.

As Litvak points out, etymologically sophistication has more to do with unnaturalness, sophistry, over-refinement, “corruption,” “perversion,” and even vulgarity (3-4). As such, it is a double edged sword; those deploying sophistication as a means of accumulating cultural capital risk being seen as vulgar and committing a “social offense” (Litvak 26). This form of vulgarity that offends the social order, Litvak argues, is intertwined with a form of sophistication that leads to a “vulgarity” that is a “sexual offense,” which of course is either homosexuality or using sex to rise in the social order (26, emphasis in original). This interweaving of class and sexual transgression was not lost on the critics of the music hall. The author of “Our Music Hall” hopes that some guiding hand will whisk these wayward youth from the music halls and send them to
“serve a couple of years before the mast,” where “they might be woke up to something like manhood” (218). Here we see concern about the kind of masculinity the clerks and shop assistants possess added to earlier concerns about their sham gentility. Couching his concern about the lack of “manhood” possessed by clerks and shop assistants allows the Tinsley’s critic to broach the subjects of gender and sexuality in a way that does not offend Victorian sensibilities. Further, by implying that the young men of the music hall need to be sent to sea to learn about true “manhood” the Tinsley’s critic implies that the music hall is teaching its audiences a kind of masculinity that is effeminate at best and that leads to dangerous sexual practices at worst.

Music hall performers and songwriters were not immune to or ignorant of such sentiments and did their best to satirize them and the individuals so identified. In the music hall song “The Little Dark-Eyed Swell” (1873) sung by the Celebrated Virginia Female Christys the singer waxes poetical over her “little dark eyed swell” (4) and takes on the role of the dominant partner in the relationship. Reversing the traditional gender roles, the woman in the song becomes the observer and pursuer.

I follow’d him I cannot tell you why  
But he had such a wicked killing eye  
That Cupid with his dart made a capture of my heart as daindily [sic] he sail’d by  
I watch’d him to his home and at the door  
He stopped and smiled on me  
And from his little glove he trew [sic] a kiss of love  
With a wicked little laugh at me (2-3).

The descriptions of the dark eyed swell offered up by the lyrics highlight the extent to which the young swell has taken on not only the physical but the behavioral characteristics stereotypically associated with Victorian women. He is a “handsome little
curly headed swell” (4) with “little feet” (3). The lyrics continue, noting how he is coy, innocent, and beguiling: “Oh he dances like a charm and his little heart is innocent of guile” (2-3). Given the conventions of the music hall it is highly likely that the action of the song would be acted out by the performers so that one of the presumably all female troupe would play the part of the little dark eyed swell by cross-dressing. It is equally certain that performances of this sort would have garnered a roar of laughter from the audience, including those delicate and ridiculous gents and swells in attendance. Both the lyrics with the objectification of the male by the female gaze and the performance highlight the conventional wisdom that many of the men attending the music hall and dressing the part were effeminate or somehow lacking an appropriate kind of masculinity. That is, the lyrics parody the prevailing notion that lower-middle-class men who frequented the music halls failed to hew to the model of muscular Christian masculinity. Like many marginalized groups, the lower middle class found itself and its reputation tarred by the behavior of its most visible members and the fantasies (or nightmares) of its critics.

This fear of the effeminized man runs through much of late-Victorian culture. In 1895 the Pall Mall Gazette ran a piece titled “A ‘Problem Dialogue: The Question of the Hour” in which two young male clerks discuss not weighty matters like “heredity” or “the equality of the sexes” but rather debate the best place to go “at Easter” (8). In the end the two young men decide that they cannot decide and it would be best to “go where the girls make up their minds to go” and to take their “marching orders” from the women (8). The men characterize their attempt to reach a decision as foolish and beyond their
ability. In parodying these two young clerks, the Pall Mall Gazette invites its readers to laugh at the state men have been reduced to by the influence of the music hall and the rise of the New Woman.

Music-hall performances and the editors of the periodical press were not alone in questioning the masculinity of lower-middle-class men. Two incidents drawn from Dickens help bear this out and betray the anxiety felt by the lower middle class about its own claims to manliness. In David Copperfield, young David finds it necessary to prove his manly mettle by boxing with the “young butcher” only to end up with “two beef-steaks put to [his] eyes” (261). Being bested by the butcher’s boy illustrates that young David is not yet ready to claim middle-class status. The novel, however, marks young David’s readiness to claim the title of a full-fledged bourgeois man when he is able, after having “received new provocation from the butcher,” to “gloriously defeat him” (266). This proof of David’s manliness serves as one more reminder to the reader that young David does indeed have the stuff to be the hero of his own story. By defeating the butcher, David puts aside all the doubts about his manliness that critics have about the ability of lower-middle-class men to be “woke up to something like manhood” (218). Pip, in Great Expectations, has a similar moment of growth through physical violence, only this time it is the working class Pip with his rough hands, thick soled boots, and blacksmith’s arm that pummels the pale and pimply lower-middle-class Herbert (page#). In both instances, we see Dickens’s novels working to establish either the manliness or lack of manliness on the part of a lower-middle-class figure through a physical contest. Yet, in doing so, especially in Great Expectations where Herbert attains, or more
correctly retains, his middle-class status despite his evident lack of muscul arity, we see Dickens through his novels questioning Victorian conventions of gentlemanliness and masculinity that are rooted in the body.

Despite Dickens’s occasional challenges to these conventions, the lower-middle-class man, much like the Victorian woman, was understood through his body. As Arlene Young notes, “Victorian authors [. . .] represent lower-middle-class figures—almost always male—as diminutive” (61), “largely sketched from the blueprint of the conventional Victorian woman,” (62) marked by “unassertiveness,” and thus “lack[ing] manliness” (67). Albert Smith in describing the lower-middle-class gents harps on their diminutiveness, “Observe, [. . .] their Lilliputian boots, their tiny gloves. There is no deception” (Gent 13). It is clear throughout The Natural History of the Gent (1848) that Smith goes to great lengths to impress upon his readers the love of finery—lace, silk, jewelry, pins, and other accessories—that lower-middle-class gents have and which points to their effeminate nature about which there can be no deception. That is, for Smith it is impossible for any right-minded observer to be deceived by the gent’s “sham gentility” or by his failed attempts at masculinity. Following Smith’s logic, the gent’s penchant for “little stick[s] of no earthly use,” for fancy dress, and for jewelry is all the evidence one needs to see that gents are not real men and thus not able of attaining middle-class status nor deserving of it if they somehow manage through luck or scheme to attain it (Gent 6). Such representational strategies along with the proclivity to define the lower-middle-class man “by what he wears” and to deny him “interiority” work to confine lower-middle-class men in their bodies much as Victorian women were and in
doing so denies both groups agency and the status of bourgeois individuals (Young 63). Like the Victorian woman, the Victorian lower-middle-class man has his objecthood enforced by a widespread and deeply entrenched institutions and cultural practices.

Representational strategies of this sort are reflective of deep-rooted anxieties surrounding the figure of the lower-middle-class man. These strategies perpetuated the image of him as dangerously effete and enervated. His masculinity was called into question by his unhealthy adoration and emulation of male music-hall performers and what was seen as an unhealthy interest in fashion. Perhaps even more damningly, his masculinity and sexual orientation was called into question by his taste for male impersonators on the music hall stage. Throughout much of the late-Victorian period, cross-dressing was a regular feature of the music-hall stage. While contemporary accounts nearly always go to great lengths to stress the comedic or even artistic nature of both the performances and the performers we can assume that both were on some level sexually appealing, tantalizing, shocking, and even inspiring for their audiences and performers. As Laurence Senelick notes of drag performance on music-hall stages, their popularity and the veil of theatricality “rendered [them] not so much innocuous as accessible” (“Boys and Girls Together,” 93). This accessibility allowed audiences and performers to explore the meanings and boundaries of gendered and sexual identities in a socially acceptable way. Yet, despite this veil of theatricality, such performances remained controversial and potentially dangerous to the heteronormative order. The ways in which cross-dressing challenged the heteronormative regime are two fold. As Lisa Duggan argues, female to male cross-dressing on and off the stage in the late-nineteenth
century was an “appropriation of ‘masculinity’” and “were the seeds of a new identity” that threatened to “separate [women] from the family-based female world, defined their desire for other women as erotic, and declare their unyielding commitment to a new way of life” (809). For men in the audience, female to male cross-dressing created a safe space in which to express and explore their nascent desire for other men via the disguised female body. The practice also allowed these men to rationalize their same sex desires by telling themselves that they were taken in by the mimetic nature of the performance. In any event, the potential for social disruption was enormous.

Vesta Tilley, the best remembered of all the Victorian music hall male impersonators, went to great lengths to emphasize her off-stage femininity, the artistry of her on-stage performance, and to realistically represent the male body in a bid to move male impersonation from bawdy breeches parts to something that would garner critical acclaim from theater and other critics. Tilley’s efforts to make her act non-controversial highlight the potential for such acts to represent, as Duggan argues, a whole scale rejection of the heteronormative order. In order for her act and herself to be accepted and to enlarge the audience for music hall acts in general, Tilley engages in a well-thought out campaign to highlight the artistic nature of her act and her normative behavior off stage. During her third visit to the United States in the fall of 1897 and the winter of 1898 Tilley and her manager/husband Sir Walter de Frece gave extensive interviews in New York and Boston in which it appears the prerequisite was that the writer would emphasize Tilley’s off-stage femininity. The Herald, a Boston newspaper, notes of Tilley:

It is a delightful fact to set down that, unlike most male impersonators, Vesta Tilley in private life is not a wee bit masculine. She dresses in good taste, and is
as feminine as if she could not and never had worn trousers in a way to set the
fashion. Moreover, she loves womanish finery, and has a passion for pretty gowns
and for jewelry—if it is set with diamonds—and for all kinds of smart and pretty
things. (“Vesta Tilley in Town.” np.)

In stressing the delightfulness of Tilley’s feminine appearance vis-à-vis other male
impersonators, The Herald’s interviewer makes it clear that the prevailing opinion of
male impersonators is less than favorable. More specifically, The Herald’s interviewer is
expressing the belief that those performers engaging in female to male cross-dressing
were somehow suspect in their adherence to conventional gender and sexual norms on
and off the stage. Tilley’s off-stage embrace of femininity via her carefully scripted
interviews is intended to show the world that she is not a gender or sexual deviant and
that her on-stage performance is nothing more than a highly artistic performance and thus
innocent of all charges of impropriety.

Channing Ellery in the February 1898 issue of The Concert Goer concurred with
the piece from The Herald noting, “Vesta Tilley does not look in private life at all as she
does on the stage. She is essentially feminine as Mrs. de Frece, pale, delicate and
noticeably refined, with a rich halo of dark hair encircling her expressive face” (3). In
addition to stressing Tilley’s femininity, accounts like Ellery’s also highlight her status as
a bourgeois lady. Tilley’s dual personas as a swellish lower-middle-class man about town
(or the seaside) and as the embodiment of upper-middle-class femininity combine the
discourses of gender, sexuality, and class highlighting their interconnectedness. That is,
Tilley’s off-stage assumption of a particularly feminine bourgeois role is supported by the
accoutrements of a bourgeois individual—diamonds, furs, “pretty gowns,” lodging in
fancy hotels, hobnobbing with royalty, extended vacations on the continent, etc. By
adopting the persona of an *upper-middle-class woman* with all that it implies in her off-stage appearances, Tilley is able to deflect criticism of her stage persona and its potential for troubling accepted notions of gender.

Yet, Tilley was not content to rely on deploying the power of class and femininity alone to win for herself and her act a reprieve from moral censure. Critics both in America and in England were equally anxious to point to the refinement of Tilley’s performances by stressing her artistry, her professionalism, and the care with which she chose and wore her costume.10 The *Concert Goer* participates in this when it notes that Tilley is possessed of an “expressive face” (3). In characterizing Tilley in this way The *Concert Goer* is furthering Tilley’s goal of being portrayed as intelligent and artistic, and thus a performer whose act is worthy of aesthetic appreciation by middle-class connoisseurs. Such characterizations fitted neatly with Tilley’s own conception of her career as portrayed in her 1934 autobiography Recollections of Vesta Tilley and with the program to elevate music hall (or variety theatre as she and her circle liked to call it) into respectability carried out by Tilley’s husband Sir Walter de Frece and his sometime business partner Sir Oswald Stoll.11

Ellery continues his account of Tilley by focusing on the traits that highlight Tilley’s artistic nature, “[w]hich is surely not to say that she is not refined as she appears before the public, only that the illusion she creates when personating a young fellow is so perfect and *artistic* that you can scarce believe it is ‘Miss’ Vesta Tilley you see before you imitating the ways and manners of the Piccadilly swell or the summer young man by the sad sea waves” (4, emphasis added). Yet, in stressing the perfectness of the illusion of
Tilley’s performance, Ellery hits on what surely would be seen as a troubling side effect of it when he notes,

[in] wear[ing] her coats, trousers and top-hats with an elegance and ‘chic’ which would put ninety-nine out of a hundred of us men to shame. It is said now that Vesta Tilley sets the fashions in men’s dress in London, and judging by what she has displayed here in the way of clothes and manner of carrying them off, she might easily give points to the entire male sex. (4)

Richard Prentis, writing in celebration of Tilley’s seventieth birthday in 1934 corroborates these accounts of men imitating the dress and manner of Tilley’s stage appearance. He recalls, “after every one of her visits to my native town I would buy a fancy waistcoat which I could ill afford, and I have distressing memories of a pair of patent-leather boots with dove coloured uppers and mother-of-pearl buttons” (n.p.). Thus, the fears of Tinsley’s Magazine discussed in Chapter One come to fruition but only in a more dangerous way. Not only were the denizens of the music hall emulating the vulgar sophistication of the male music hall performer, but a large numbers of men in both America and England were taking their cues in terms of dress and deportment from a cross-dressing woman. More troubling is the implication that the “wayward youth from the music halls” find men sexually attractive and that the only way for a woman to make herself attractive to such men is to dress in drag. By imitating the dress and style of a female to male cross-dressing performer like Vesta Tilley the lower-middle-class gents and swells illustrate the ease with which behaviors could jump from the music-hall stage to the streets.

All of this raises the question of what exactly did Vesta Tilley do on stage that made her and her managers so anxious to present her and her act as artistic and
normative? To some extent, this question is difficult to answer definitively. Beyond the collections of music-hall songs archived in the British Library, the Harvard Theatre Collection, and other research libraries there is little archival material to work with. Contemporary accounts of music-hall performances are always colored by the writers’ biases as the accounts Tilley gives of her performance and persona makes clear.

Newspapers like *The Era* that devoted themselves to covering the music halls were often as much trade publication as newspaper. As such, they strive to present music halls and their performances as respectable. Reviews of the various London and provincial music halls that appear regularly in *The Era* often emphasize the respectability of the physical space and make it clear that no vulgarity of any kind on the part of the audience or the performers is permitted. Reviews and editorials critical of the music halls were often motivated by the authors’ own sense of propriety or were tied to other social issues. Thus, William Archer’s claim that “the art of the music-hall is the art of elaborate ugliness, blatant vulgarity, alcoholic humour, and rancid sentiment,” is as much the result of his being a theater critic writing in *The Theatrical ‘World’ of 1895* as it is any inherent vulgarity of the music hall (100). Archer’s negative view of music halls is the result of his desire, and that of his editors and publishers, to clearly demarcate the difference between theater and music hall in order to maintain the cultural status of the former.

Further attacks on the music hall by self-proclaimed social reformers like Laura Ormiston Chant are wildly sensational and exaggerated. Chant directs the bulk of her outrage at the behavior of the audience and the presence of prostitutes, particularly in the promenade or bar area, rather than at the stage. This is not to say that the music halls did not traffic in
suggestive and even indiscrete performances heavy with sexual innuendo for they clearly
did, but often not in an open manner.

As Peter Bailey notes in “Conspiracies of Meaning: Music-Hall and the
Knowingness of Popular Culture” the gestures and lyrics of music-hall performances and
songs relied upon the audience’s “knowingness” to set off the “cue or flash charge” (148)
contained within the performance. Is was not so much what the performer said or did but
more in the way she said or did it. The character Julian Aragon in Davidson’s In Music-
Hall boasts,

Cheek’s nothing; no by Jingo! I’m obscene!
My gestures, not my words, say what I mean
And the simple and the good,
They would hiss me if they could, (“Julian Aragon” 11-12).

The lyrics of Vesta Tilley’s songs contain within them nothing that overtly points to
anything sexual or subversive. Nor do the publicity photographs and song sheet covers
illustrations of Tilley give any hint to what her performance was really like. Despite this
lack of archival evidence, it is all but certain that her performances included suggestive
turns of phrases, gestures, and even patter that relied upon the audience’s “knowingness”
to be effective and that these phrases, gestures, and patter were rife with sexual innuendo.
Archibald Haddon in his memoir of the music halls recalls that in Tilley’s “gait and
gesture” that one finds her artistry (97). It is within the patter, or the spoken interludes or
commentary that nearly every comic singer included in her act that along with gestures
that the real artistry occurs. This patter could be either done in character or could be the
performer momentarily stepping out of the role and commenting directly to the audience.
Since much of the patter was not recorded or indicated in the song sheet with fairly
innocuous commentary, the lyrics of the songs remains the best place to look for phrases that lend themselves to innuendo. In “Sydney’s Holidays are in September,” which is ostensibly about how a young London clerk or shop assistant passes himself off as an aristocrat during seaside vacation, the chorus includes the refrain, “Naughty boy! Naughty boy!” (Lyle). On the surface “Naughty boy! Naughty boy!” can be read as nothing more than the singer and the audience (audiences were encouraged to sing the chorus) chiding Sydney for his act of class-based subterfuge. Such a reading is entirely valid. However, there is another way to read the “Naughty boy!” refrain. “Naught boy!” or “you naughty boy” was a phrase used by London street prostitutes (and even the prostitutes present at the music hall) to advertise their presence and availability. With this in mind, the “Naughty boy!” refrain takes on another meaning altogether as does Sydney’s pretence of nobility. Just in case any in the audience miss the point that Sydney is on the prowl for a prostitute the song asks them to “[n]ote the reckless manner in which Sydney spends a ‘tanner’ / On a lady divine.” What Sydney is looking for at the seaside, on the pier, and along the boardwalk is a good time of another sort. He is not just out for the air and the sights, but he hopes to engage in some kind of sexual activity. That this Sydney is in all reality a woman makes this cruising for sex a more vexed question. The male audience, knowing that this Sydney is really a woman dressed as a man, is allowed to engage in fantasy of actually approaching one of the infamous male prostitutes or “‘Mary-Ann’s’ of London” [sic] without having to admit to the reality of their attraction to this diminutive man with delicate features and small feet (Sins 8). The song and its lyrics are suggestive enough to even allow young women in the audience to imagine the
freedom cross-dressing would allow them. Dressing as a man while on holiday, so the song suggests, gives young women an opportunity to experience the sexual freedom Victorian men enjoyed.

Other songs offered opportunities for a performer like Tilley to engage in suggestive gestures with her body or props. The use of props in a suggestive manner was well established music hall tradition. George Leybourne who performed as “Champagne Charlie” was notorious for his use of a trick champagne bottle that would explode during the climatic moments of the song. One can easily imagine the gestural possibilities suggested by a lyric such as found in “The Seaside Sultan (Back to Work),” where Tilley sings to an imagined flirting partner, “you ought to see my yacht!” followed by the line, “an accident that’s happened to his pants” (Murphy). Here “yacht” is a place holder whose meaning becomes clear through a gesture to a specific part of the performer’s real, or in Tilley’s case imagined, anatomy. The audience, prepared for such gestural and verbal innuendoes gets the joke. Nearly all of the accounts of Tilley’s performances are vague, but they do emphasize the fact that much of her success was due to her gestures and the control she exerted over her props. Like so many other successful music hall performers, she knew how to use her cane, her hat, and other accessories to add meaning to the words of the song.

While these performances deal more with sexual innuendo than with troubling gender identifications, Tilley’s act did openly address the issue of gender identification. In “Quite a Toff in my Newmarket Coat” she sings, “The fashions are changing each week I’ve heard say / They are taking the women for the men” (Ball). It does not take
much to imagine the possibilities such a line offers up to a female to male crossing-dressing performer. While the line most obviously applies to Tilley as she performs the role of the toff, it could as equally apply to the young gents and swells in the audience who have dressed themselves in imitation of Tilley or some other music hall performer. The implication is, if the line between men’s and women’s fashions is being blurred then what is one to make of the gender boundaries those fashions are meant to police? Can not they too be blurred? And if so how? The possibilities for gender play in Tilley’s act were very real. In a fictional account of visit to the Cambridge Music Hall appearing in Ally Sloper’s Half-Holiday, Ally’s daughter and chronicler notes that Vesta Tilley performed and observes that there was much flirting going on between the stage and the audience (“Tootsie at the Cambridge”). In another account of Tilley’s performance, Tootsie remarks, “we all fell in love with [Vesta Tilley]” (“Tootsie at the Canterbury”). The “we” is suggestive as Tootsie attends the music hall with her fiancé Lord Bob, the Duke Snook, and her father. Tootsie even goes so far as to ask parenthetically, “(Why isn’t Bob like that?)” (“Tootsie at the Canterbury”). The “that” refers to Vesta Tilley or the character she is performing. Tootsie, while admiring Vesta Tilley, does not want to be her but wants as a companion a man (or a woman) who dresses like woman dressing like a man: she wants whatever “that” is. As Tootsie provides the bulk of the commentary in Ally Sloper’s Half-Holiday it is unclear if Lord Bob, the Duke Snook, or Ally Sloper desire Vesta Tilley or someone or some “that” like her. One thing is clear, on at least one occasion they all “fell in love with [Vesta Tilley]” and perhaps even found themselves desiring whatever “that” she represents (“Tootsie at the Canterbury”). Tootsie’s language
here mirrors the obliqueness of music-hall performances and song lyrics, relying on the knowingness of her audience to decode the message. On one level it is all very above board as Tootsie reminds her readers that she is one of those “Well-Regulated Girls,” and on another there is something titillatingly bawdy about the whole thing (“Tootsie at the Cambridge”).

Fears about cross-dressing moving from the stage to the street were not entirely unfounded. In mid-1870 through 1871 London was transfixed by the scandal of the Boulton and Park cross-dressing trial along with other cases of young men of mixed class backgrounds appearing in public dressed as women. In the Boulton and Park case, both men, along with Lord Arthur Clinton, M.P. and several others, were arrested and put on trial for parading around London in women’s clothing and for passing themselves off as married or for being in the company of Boulton and Park while the latter were cross-dressed. The prosecution also charged that by cross-dressing, Boulton and Park were engaged in a kind of fraud. Specifically, the prosecution claimed that the two were engaged in a wide spread conspiracy to engage in sodomy by duping unsuspecting men into engaging in sexual relations. Among those arrested with Boulton was a bank clerk who, after his arrest disappeared, into the wilds of London. At their initial Bow street hearing, Boulton and Park were dressed as women, a fact the London Times reports in some detail that is surprising for the time,

Boulton wore a cherry-coloured evening silk dress trimmed with white lace; his arms were bare and he had on bracelets. He wore a wig and plaited chignon. Park’s costume consisted of a dark green satin dress, low necked, trimmed with black lace, of which material he also had a shawl round his shoulders. His hair was flaxen and in curls. He had on a pair of white kid gloves. (“Police News” 30 April 1870: 11)
This report generated such excitement that on the occasion of Boulton and Park’s second court appearance, the London Times notes that the “approaches were again literally besieged by the public” and that “much to the disappointment, apparently, of the crowds” Boulton and Park “appeared in male attire” (“The Charge of Personating Women”).

Around the same time of Boulton and Park’s arrest there was an apparently unrelated arrest of Walter Thurston for “being dressed in women’s clothes [. . .] for an unlawful purpose” (“Police News” 29 June 1870: 11). More alarmingly than merely appearing in women’s clothes was the testimony of a police officer who stated that “one of the men who was with the prisoner put his arm around him and kissed him” (11). Thus, along with their gender deviancy, Thurston and his companions threatened to become sexual deviants. Thurston and his companions argued that the whole incident was nothing more than a joke gone bad. They claimed that while drinking Thurston had sung a song in “character” and they bet him he would not appear in public dressed as a woman. Accepting the bet, the party went to a public house (11). All the men involved in this case appeared to be either working class or shop assistants at a Drury Lane paint supply store who were somehow involved or influenced in some way by amateur theatricals or the music hall.

Both cases combine and illustrate the fears circulating around gender and sexual deviancy and highlight the anxieties the Victorians felt about these two phenomena. By focusing on the act of kissing and the claim that Boulton and Lord Arthur Clinton paraded around London posing as a married couple, the press accounts focus on the potential for what the Victorians saw as a deeply troubling form of sexual deviancy. The
extent of the homophobic panic that the actions of Boulton, Park, and Thurston brought to the surface is evident in the shrill language of the anonymous author of the pamphlet “Men in Petticoats: Stella, Star of the Strand.” The author rhetorically asks his audience “what words can paint the infamy of such hellish proceedings upon the part of men towards those of their own sex” in order to highlight what he saw as the true crime of men like Boulton and Park (3). The author highlights the fear that unsuspecting men will be enticed into homosexual desire by the wanton display of what appear to be feminine charms only to discover that the object of their desire is another man. For the author of “Men in Petticoats,” the blurring of gender and sexual boundaries in this way will lead to the destruction of the individuals involved and more frighteningly to the destruction of British culture and with it Britain’s global economic and political hegemony.

While the Thurston case appears to be a singular incident in the life of the men involved and quickly disappeared from the newspapers, the Boulton case was not and did not disappear from the law’s or the public’s attention. In the details that emerged from the trial it became clear that Boulton, Park, and their companions were engaged in a more regular practice of dressing in drag and going out to the theater, the music hall, restaurants, public houses, etc. around London (“Law Report.” 10 May 1871). Even more troubling was the testimony that Boulton attempted to pass himself off as the wife of Lord Arthur Clinton. Boulton and Lord Arthur went so far as to print up calling cards to that effect, taking lodgings as a married couple, Boulton going by the name “‘Stella,’” and his wearing a wedding ring (“Law Report.” 12 May 1871). During the trial, police officers and other witnesses testified that Boulton and Park attended the theater and
music hall dressed as both men and as women, noting that when dressed as men they often appeared to be women dressing as men—wearing makeup, jewelry, etc. (“Law Report.” 10 May 1871). Other witnesses reported seeing the two flirting and “nodding” at men while in attendance at both the theatre and music hall while dressed as women and as men (“Law Report.” 10 May 1871). All of the accounts of Boulton’s and Park’s behavior highlight the ease with which the two blurred gender roles. That Boulton’s and Park’s gender performances were convincing is evidenced by the presence of an amazed clerk on the night of Boulton and Park’s arrest. Hugh Alexander Mundell testified that despite Park and Boulton’s repeated assertions that they were indeed men, he was quite convinced of the fact that the two were women (“Men in Petticoats” 4-7). Mundell’s reported testimony is illustrative, “I was told in the theatre by [. . .] the gentleman in the box, (6) that they were men. [. . .] I certainly believed Boulton was a woman. I said I have never been taken in so in all my life. I thought they had done this twice for a lark” (7). This refusal by Mundell to admit to himself that he consciously sought out the company of Boulton and Park, despite being told repeatedly by Boulton, Park, and others that the two women were men, hints at the very real possibility that he actively and consciously sought out the company of men cross-dressing as women. It is this possibility that the prosecutors feared: the existence of a community of men who enjoyed the company of other men dressed as women.

Boulton and Park’s defense centered on the claim that their dressing in women’s clothes was the result of their involvement with amateur theatricals, yet the accounts given at trial indicate that Boulton “as early as 1867 was seen walking in the Haymarket
with one of the defendants [. . .] dressed as women and with painted face” and that both Boulton and Park had been brought before a magistrate on previous occasions “and bound over to keep the peace” (“Law Report.” 10 May 1881). The case highlights that the concerns about the dangerousness of men being influenced by cross-dressing women performers and the fear that the type of sexual and gender bending performances at the music hall were not mere fantasy but were based to some degree in actual events. Park’s attorney, in particular, argued that what Boulton, Park, and the others were accused of doing was nothing more outrageous than what occurred on the stage at the present time and that had a history dating back to the time of Charles II and that “no immorality appeared to have attached to the practice” even during those infamously immoral times (“Law Report” 12 May 1871).

While the case of Boulton and Park may have been unusual it certainly did add fuel to the concerns many observers had about the potential influence of the music hall on impressionable young men of the lower middle class, especially those performances like Vesta Tilley’s that purposely played with gender and sexual identities. That the attorneys defending Boulton and Park focused on the “theatrical” aspects of their clients’ behavior and argued that their assumption of female clothing and manners were nothing more than “performances” that did not extend into behavior that could be considered homoerotic or even homosexual shows the extent to which the public and the law were concerned about the gender and sexual identifications of urban men (“Law Report” 12 May 1871). As Morris B. Kaplan notes, the defense was forced into this tact by the insistence of the prosecution to “establish” a clear “link” between male-to-female cross-dressing and
homosexuality (49). The case highlighted the concern that if two sons of solidly middle-class families and a member of the aristocracy who was also a serving MP could be seduced into such “frolics” and from there into a “guilty and immoral confederacy,” then what would happen to lesser men like office and retail clerks if they were exposed to cross-dressing on the music hall stage (“Law Report” 16 May 1871)?

It must be remembered that the Boulton and Park trial preceded the passage of the Labouchère Amendment in 1885 and the Cleveland-street scandal of 1889. However, the trial and the anxiety over the kind of masculinity being advocated at the music halls is indicative of a growing homophobia that culminated in the criminalization of all same sex male sexual intimacy via the Labouchère Amendment, the Cleveland-street scandal, and the Wilde trials. It is in the late-nineteenth century, as Foucault reminds us, that the legal and medical discourses of homosexuality began to take root. The Boulton and Park trial, the attacks against music hall inspired gents and swells, and the presence of all forms of cross-dressing in the music halls need to be read against this backdrop.

As noted above Tilley herself was clearly aware of dangers her act posed and of the hostile cultural and legal forces arrayed against those seen as advocating or participating in any kind of male same sex practices. Her insistence on being portrayed as an artist, on being portrayed as excessively feminine, and the paragon of domesticity off stage reflects her anxiety of being seen as dangerously deviant. In her autobiography, The Recollections of Vesta Tilley, written as Lady de Frece,15 Tilley is careful to note that while men did copy her dress and manners it was mainly American men and men who were already somewhat suspect in terms of their sanity. She notes with some
incredulousness the results of a performance in New York during which she had to improvise ribbons for cuff links during a costume change, “[s]hortly afterwards a leading firm of gentlemen’s hosiers, on Broadway, were exhibiting cuff links in the form of a black ribbon bow, as the very latest fashion in London, and many of the jeunesse dorée wore them” (126). Yet, somehow such a confession of her influence on men remains safe if confined to an American male audience.

Tilley’s low regard for the originality or the sophistication of American men is clear. When discussing why she did not have many songs satirizing American men she notes, “for some time I really could not see any striking characteristic in the American male. Their ‘Dudes’, as they called them, were merely a fair imitation of the London gene [sic]. Their soldiers and sailors were as near to the British pattern as possible” (194). The implication is that while American men might be taken in by her performances, real British men were not. Unlike the characterless American men, who had no real sense of their manhood, British styles of masculinities were somehow authentic and based in and reflected the character of the man in question. By showing themselves to be imitators of first authentic British men and then of a female to male cross-dressing music-hall performer, American men show themselves to be suspect. In the eyes of a culture that placed great importance upon notions of authenticity and genuineness especially as they related to character and identity, such a charge was highly damning. Thus, it is safe for Tilley to acknowledge that these suspect men did take their cues from her.

Tilley goes even further in attempting to distance the copying of her dress by some men from the behavior of “real” men when she recounts an encounter she had with
Mr. Harry Thaw, the infamous husband of Evelyn Nesbitt and the murderer of New York architect Stanford White:

On one of my visits to New York, I was lunching with some friends, and my hostess drew my attention to a young man seated at an adjoining table, remarking: ‘He has been studying your stage clothes—look at his waistcoat!’ I had brought among my stage costumes a dozen or so of the fancy vests which I had purchased at the sale of the effects of the Marquis of Anglesea. They were the most elaborate, and made of the finest of silks, but one could hardly imagine them being worn with ordinary male attire. Still they were most effective for stage purposes, and the gentleman in question was adorned with something very similar. (211)

Tilley goes on to note of Thaw that “[h]e spoke in a very quiet tones and I imagined that he was of a very nervous temperament, but his manners were perfect and I thought him a very agreeable man; yet there seemed to be something preying on his mind” (211). By associating those who copied her stage dress with Americans and murderers Tilley is clearly attempting to play down the danger acts like hers might pose to British men. Yet, as many critics of the music hall and the lower middle class noted, the health and character of the young men attending music-hall performances were highly suspect.

In sum, female to male cross-dressing music hall performances provided a safe space where what Judith Butler terms “disavowed male homosexuality” could be expressed through admiration for the performers and their acts (89). That is, the “heightened [. . .] masculinity” performed by cross-dressing artists like Tilley allowed admiring male audience members to preserve their “disavowed homosexual” desires because despite the ease with which performers copied male attire and manners male audience members could justify their attraction to the impeccably dressed male figure on stage by telling themselves that the object of their desires was not a he but really a she.
and thus the desires were perfectly “natural” (88). For the women in the audience, and here I should note that Tilley in her autobiography insists that the vast majority of her admirers were women, female to male cross-dressing performances allowed them to sublimate their “disavowed homosexual” desires towards an appropriate male object. Alternatively, as Lisa Duggans argues, performances like Vesta Tilley’s allowed the women in the audience to imagine a life outside of the narrow confines of the patriarchal household. It allowed them, much like New Women novels did, to imagine a life independent of the father, the husband, the domestic household, and motherhood. Further, the playing with gender identification and the disruptions in dominant conceptions of sexual desire that cross-dressing was sure to occasion represents a form of resistance to or failure to correctly heed “[t]he injunction to be a given gender” that carries along with it a failure to adhere correctly to the “discursive” injunctions “to be a good mother [or father or wife or husband], to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker” that pervades the music hall and its culture (Gender Trouble 185 emphasis in original). As such, the refusal “to be a given gender” or to desire a person of a given gender occurs simultaneously with the refusal “to be a fit worker” that is implicit in one’s presence at the music hall and bespeaks of one’s refusal to be satisfied with the sanctioned roles delineated for lower-middle-class individuals by bourgeois culture. Experimentation with gender and sexual roles and identities, even if confined to the fantasy world of the music hall, represents not just a rebellion against restrictive moral regimes but a threat to the class and economic system that underwrites and is in turn underwritten by the heteronormative regime that dominated Victorian society. As Patrick Joyce notes about
the music halls, “the various ‘social selves’ of audiences were examined, undermined and re-created in the halls themselves” (306). Those “social selves” included the audiences’ sense of class, gender, and sexuality. The music hall worked to encourage in its “readers” a rejection of the very values the novel worked to inculcate—adherence to a strict work ethic, temperance, deference to authority, thrift, etc.¹⁸ Music halls posited the dangerous proposition that if social roles could be altered by a mere change of costume and accent, then so too could gender and sexual roles.

Music-hall performances challenged heteronormative culture in other ways as well. In addition to performances that promoted a loosening of heterosexual mores, that encouraged men to view women as sexual objects, that openly parodied and rejected notions of self-discipline and restraint, that encouraged intemperance, and encouraged men and women to explore class, gender, and sexual identities, musical hall performances often represented marriage as something to be avoided at all costs. In many music-hall acts marriage was an institution that if not avoided, was on the whole, a disaster for both men and women. Numerous critics deplored what they saw as the rejection of marriage present in many music-hall songs¹⁹ and the love of exclusively male companionship in others.

In “The Genesis of the Cad,” we see the author lecturing the clerks and shop assistants that they have “not the same right to celibacy” that the fashionable aristocratic and middle-class bachelors do (180). For such authors the intense homosocial nature of the halls is deeply threatening to the survival of British culture because they advocated the delay or rejection of marriage. For these critics, music-hall songs like the “Howling
“Swell,” “One of the Racing Boys,” “You Should Never Marry,” “The Swell in the Alpine Hat,” “Immenseikoff,” and “A Man of the World” threaten to mislead the impressionable young clerks and shop assistants into the dangerous waters of homoeroticism through the celebration of dress, deportment, and behavior that is focused on attracting the attention of other young men rather than on attracting the attention of polite young women. In “The Swell in the Alpine Hat,” the singer confesses, “that for dress I’ve a passion” and boasts that he is imitated by many other young men. The attention of other young men pleases the singer as much as the attention he garners from young women. “You Should Never Marry” warns the young clerk or shop assistant that marriage means, “[y]ou’ve got to knock off smoking and your daily pint of beer” and “[y]our boots are nearly dropping off your feet” (5). The song does not expressly criticize the existence or rightness of heteronormative love. However, by warning the young clerk or shop assistant that heteronormative love results in marriage, which carries with it the loss of the freedom and means to pursue favored leisure activities and the loss of the ability to dress in anything but worn out boots, patched coats, and buttonless jackets, the song serves a warning to the young gent or swell. The choice is clear: get married and become a badly dressed drudge or remain single and continue to enjoy the pleasures of the music hall, the dance parlor, and one’s male companions. The outright rejection of marriage in favor a fast life style is even more explicit in “A Man of the World” which ends with the anti-epithalamic lines, “Ask yourself the silly question, / Would I marry?—oh dear no!” (5) The song “Old Thingummy’s Daughter, or Led to the Slaughter” casts marriage in an even more negative light. Here an indebted young swell who once was the “[l]eader of
fun, always” must say “[f]arewell!” to “all [his] jolly companions” because his impending marriage means “the end of a jovial swell, / The end of a bachelor free.” In the spoken patter that functions as the chorus the performer notes how,

I’m going to marry old Thingummy’s daughter,
My time’s growing shorter, my eyes fill with water,
I feel like a baa lamb, that’s lead to the slaughter,
Because I’m about to be wed, wed, wed. (5)

The performances and songs of male singers like George Leybourne, Arthur Lloyd, and Alfred Vance, who together created and popularized what were know as swell songs and characters like Champagne Charlie and Cool Burgundy Ben, created models for culturally disenfranchised clerks and shop assistants. In nearly all of these swell songs, the singer boasts of his success with women, yet pointedly rejects their advances in favor of spending time with his fellow swells. In the “Exhausted Swell” the singer relates how, “Once a lovely girl said ‘marry me,’ and I confess, / I was so exhausted that I couldn’t answer ‘yes!’” (5) The song continues, “I have seen all sorts of girls, French, Spanish, Greek, and Dutch, / But I always was too languid to admire them much.” (5) The singer’s exhaustion and languidness serve as effective code for the singer’s disinterest in female companionship. In Arthur Lloyd’s “‘Immenseikoff’ or the Shoreditch Toff” we hear the singer boasting,

With the fair sex, ‘bless ’em’ need I say—
That I am ‘Number One’,
It’s really quite a bore to me
The way the girls do run,—
Not away from me, but after me, (5)

In this song, we see an even more explicit rejection or ridicule of female companionship. These explicit and implicit rejections of female companionship are a clear rejection of the
heteronormative and capitalist order. With their intense homosocial and homoerotic nature, music hall songs and performances threaten not only the sexual and gender order of the day, but the bourgeois class structures predicated on heteronormativity.

With this threat in mind it is easy to see why the music hall attracted the criticism it did. For lower-middle-class men (and some women) the music hall functioned much like the West End club did for aristocratic and middle-class men and the self-generated friendly society, the mechanics’ institutes, and public houses did for working-class men. That is, the music hall provided lower-middle-class men a place for socialization away from the confines and restrictions of the home, lodging house, or their place of employment. The music hall was a place where clerks, shop assistants, milliners, and others could find validation of their choices of clothing, use of leisure time, behavior, and interests even if such validation was only obtained vicariously through the pages of newspapers, comic journals like Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday, or from the illustrated music-hall song book covers on display in shop windows. Beyond providing lower-middle-class individuals the physical and imaginative space in which to recreate themselves, the music hall provided a space where gender and sexual, and thus class, identities could be safely explored. The music hall gave its audiences and performers a kind of freedom to imagine what it would be like to be a different class, gender, and sexuality. Yet, unlike novels and other forms of printed culture that allowed a similar kind of imaginative projection, the music hall allowed its audiences to actively play out the fantasies it encouraged. Part of the allure of going to the music hall was that it was frowned upon by the middle class, that it required (or at least encouraged) dressing the
part, and that it actively encouraged the audience to sing and dance along with the
performers on stage. These invitations to participate made the fantasy more palpable
than any novel-induced fantasy ever could. It allowed the audience to see itself as Algy
the Piccadilly Swell, Champagne Charlie, or Cool Burgundy Bill. Thus, the music hall
provided a place where a kind of lower-middle-class culture could and did develop. This
is not to say that the culture that developed in and around the music hall was not
mediated or influenced in any way by aristocratic, middle-class, working-class cultures
for clearly it was. Rather than see music-hall inspired culture as little more than a
vulgarized version of other Victorian sub-cultures we should see it as a particularly
creative and innovative amalgamation of aristocratic, middle-class, and working-class
cultures; one that reflects the lower middle class’s unique and often indeterminate
position in the cultural hierarchy of Victorian Britain.

While the music hall did provide space for a segment of the lower middle class to
articulate its own sense of itself, these self representations were often read by middle-
class elites as indicators of the lower middle class’s dangerousness and vulgarity. Thus,
the lower middle class is dangerous to the middle class because it poses a threat to the
moral, sexual, gender, and class structures the middle class invested so much cultural and
economic capital to construct. These structures not only allowed the middle class to
maintain its dominance over the working classes but served as useful weapons in the
middle class’ ongoing struggle for cultural and political hegemony with the aristocracy.
As such the middle-class cultural elites or their spokespersons worked tirelessly through
essays, novels, and other cultural productions to depict the lower middle class as
dangerous and thus in need of supervision and containment. Denying the lower middle class access, both physically and imaginatively, to the markers of middle class status like dress, deportment, character, and economic achievement by questioning the lower middle class’s ability to attain these markers and by stressing their inherent dangerousness if they did indeed appear to attain such markers became a successful strategy of protecting a middle class sense of cultural distinction. Highlighting the lower middle class’s proclivity for amusements that challenged the heteronormative order gave the middle class a threat to Victorian society that only the middle class could claim to contain.
NOTES

1 Dagmar Kift notes that the music hall articulated values diametrically at odds with those propagated by and attributed to the Victorian middle class: asceticism, prudery, refinement, abstinence, a puritanical work ethic, marriage, and family as the bedrock of social order with the woman’s role as housekeeper and mother. (176)

As a result Kift argues that “many Victorian contemporaries did not portray the halls so much as capitalist businesses but rather as manifestos of a somewhat dubious counter-culture” (176).

2 Here as elsewhere I use the terms homosocial, homoerotic, homosexual, and their relations out of convenience for as innumerable critics and scholars have pointed out such terms and the identities they represent [denote] did not come into existence until late in the century even if the social and bodily practices we have come to associate with them were most certainly in widespread existence. [Jeffery Weeks, et al.]

3 Young John Chivery from Little Dorrit is an excellent literary example of a lower-middle-class youth dressing in the style celebrated and popularized by the music hall.

4 See Peter Bailey’s “Ally Sloper….” For more on the genesis and influence of Ally Sloper on late-Victorian culture.

5 Arlene Young notes that such pretensions to status constitute the lower middle class’s “greatest sin” (67) Such fears of the leveling of society are not confined to the Victorians. As Jerome Christensen notes, “The problem, perceived by many commentators on eighteenth-century mores, was usually associated with the ‘present rage of imitating the manners of high life [that] hath spread itself so far among the gentlefolks of lower life, that in a few years we shall probably have no common folk at all.’” Practicing Enlightenment, n118.

6 As Lisa Duggan argues, reading nineteenth-century accounts of gender and sexuality requires reading against the grain as they are always “mediated sources contaminated by hostility,” a lack of a vocabulary to express practices that clearly were in existence, and I would add mediated by a reluctance to discuss issues of gender and sexuality in anything resembling a forthright manner (809).

7 John Davidson’s “The Male Coquette” is similar to this song in presenting a young man who with “soft and softening eyes,” “hands [. . .] soft and small,” “[f]alsetto [. . .] voice,”
and being “only five feet five!” is “born to flirt” (57-59). Davidson’s poem like the music-hall song plays with gender roles in presenting the coquette as a man.

Michael Costell characterizes these boxing matches as “ritual event[s] between nobs and snobs which serves to prove the former appropriate masters” (123). Costell, Michael. “Nicholas Nickleby: Dickens’s First Young Man.” Dickens Quarterly. 5: 3 (September 1988), 118-128.

Nellie Powers, who performed in the late 1860s and early 1870s as a female to male cross-dresser, is a good example of such a breeches role. In a review of her act from 1869, The Era takes time to “remind her that any youth—swell or no swell—who presented himself at a City office in the scanty garments she affects would in more than one sense of the word be regarded—perhaps envied in this sultry weather—as peculiarly cool [sic] customer (4). Power’s popularity as a performer thus rests as much with her suggestive costume as it does with her ability to sing or even to artistically mimic the appearance and behavior of young man. Bessie Bonehead, May Henderson, Hetty King, Ella Shields, and Bessie Wentworth are among Tilley’s peers as male impersonators.

See Barry Faulk’s Music Hall & Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture for a more sustained discussion of the motivations of late-Victorian critics in highlighting the professional and artistic merits of music hall performers, especially Chapters One and Two (23-74). Faulk's discussion of Arthur Symons's motivations for seeing the music hall as more than just a comic or vulgar past time and seeing it as an aesthetic to be cultivated and thus appreciated by a select few is particularly toothsome.

Tilley published her autobiography not under her stage-name but as Lady de Frece. Tilley had a close professional and personal relationship with Stoll and he wrote the foreword to her autobiography. Both Walter de Frece and Stoll were knighted after WWI for service to the nation, primarily for providing entertainment to the troops and for using their music halls to help the recruitment effort. Walter de Frece served for a time as a Member of Parliament while Tilley was still appearing on the stage and would have, in this position, been especially sensitive to any accusations of impropriety on the part of his business (he was Tilley’s manager) or in Tilley’s act. For more on Tilley’s, de Frece’s, and Stoll’s attempts on improving the image of music halls and on Tilley’s emphasis on the artistry of her act see Sara Maitland, Vesta Tilley. London: Virago, 1986. Music-hall artists, owners, and managers constantly worked to promote and improve the image of the music hall. In their promotional materials, letters to the editors, and in reviews of music halls found in publications like The Era one finds nothing short of a concerted effort to convince the public (and politicians) that the halls themselves were comfortably appointed, that the audiences were well behaved and respectable, and that the performances were devoid of vulgarity of any kind.
Boulton himself was a bank clerk and Park an articled law clerk (“Law Report.” 12 May 1871: 12).

Lord Arthur Clinton died mysteriously of a sudden case of scarlet fever just prior the trial opening in May of 1871. Given the legal penalties of suicide at the time and the nature of the case most believed that this was a case of suicide covered up as a natural death.

For more on the Boulton and Park trial and its implications in terms of class, gender, and sexual identity see Morris B. Kaplan’s “‘Men in Petticoats’: Border Crossings in the Queer Case of Mr. Boulton and Mr. Park” in Imagined Londons. ed. Pamela K. Gilbert, Albany: SUNY P, 2002, 45-68. Kaplan also argues that pornographic texts like the privately printed The Sins of the Cities of the Plain (1881), which features fantasies of male to female cross-dressing as well as scenes in which Boulton, Park, and Lord Arthur play prominent roles, illustrates an ongoing interest among a small segment of London’s population in gender and sexual role playing. Interestingly enough, the protagonist of The Sins of the Cities of the Plain, Jack Saul, begins his London adventures as a draper’s shop assistant (65-67).

After retiring from the stage, Tilley adopted yet another persona, that of Lady de Frece, the wife of a former M.P. and knight of the realm.

Tilley first performed in the United States in 1894 at Tony Pastor’s Theatre in New York City.

Stanford’s murder and Thaw’s trial was one of the most scandalous incidents of the early twentieth century. Thaw shot and killed White over allegations that White had raped Thaw’s wife, Evelyn Nesbitt (known as the girl in the red velvet swing), when she was a Broadway chorus girl and spread rumors about her and Thaw. The trial included a ruined woman, claims of hereditary insanity, allegations of infidelity, sexual deviancy, a heir to a Pittsburg fortune, a New York society architect, high society gossip, and Broadway chorus girls. The case received wide coverage in all the New York papers and was extensively covered by the London Times. The allegations and counter allegations of the two trials were so scandalous that the Canadian government protested the importation of obscene content via American newspapers and the New York District Attorney threatened to bring the newspapers before a grand jury on charges of sending obscene materials through the U.S. Mail. For more information on the case, Henry Thaw, Evelyn Nesbitt Thaw, and Stanford White see Paul R. Baker’s Stanny: The Gilded Life of Stanford White. New York: Free Press; London: Collier Macmillian, 1989, Michael Macdonald Mooney’s Evelyn Nesbit and Stanford White: Love and Death in the Gilded Age. New York: Morrow, 1976, F. A. MacKenzie’s The Trial of Harry Thaw. 1928. Holmes Beach, FL: Gaunt, 2000, “Shooting Affair in New York.” London Times. 27 Jun 1906: 5, “The New York Murder Case.” London Times. 28 Jun 1906 : 5, “The Thaw

18 For more on how Victorian novels prescribed behavior to their readers see D.A. Miller’s The Novel and the Police.

19 I should note that my review of music hall songs at the British Library and at the Harvard Theatre Collection found a large number of songs glorifying marriage and heteronormative love.

20 The description of one hall in Islington makes it clear that some owners made clear attempts to present their halls as club-like in comfort and diversity of amusements, “Those fond of billiards and other games may now be amply gratified, the rooms set apart for the lovers and handlers of the cue being among the handsomest in the Metropolis, and for this alone Messrs. Turnham and Adams will be warmly appreciated by the Islingtonians” (“The London Music Halls—Philharmonic.” 11).

21 As the halls became more established and larger, this invitation to participation lessened greatly. All the same, attending the music hall remained a highly participatory activity. Most, if not all, halls provided the audience with a promenade, a bar, and other public areas where they could see and be seen. That is, where they could re-create in less theatrical ways the on-stage performances.
CHAPTER 3
AUTHORIZING THE LOWER MIDDLE CLASS IN THE NOVELS OF
DICKENS AND TROLLOPE

In 1892 The National Review writes with a mixture of amazement and smugness that “literary gents had become as respectable as the industrious manufacturer” (476). Such a statement highlights the dynamic nature of Victorian culture and the extent to which artistic and intellectual endeavors were capable of providing enterprising individuals with avenues of social advancement. In both real life and literary representations lower-middle-class individuals took advantage of the opportunities provided by artistic and cultural activities to rise in the social hierarchy. However, doing so was not easy or uncontested. As I have argued in previous chapters, one consistent response to the problem of finding a place for the lower middle class was to categorize it as dangerous and thus as in need of containment through reform, if possible, and ostracization, if necessary. Yet, this process of typing the lower middle class as dangerous and in need of segregation from the middle class is not the only response to the increasing presence of the lower middle class in the economic and cultural spheres.

The rise of the lower middle class posed very real questions about how authors and other cultural producers should represent it as a whole and how they should represent
individual lower-middle-class figures. **David Copperfield** responds to this literary and social problem by constructing “a fable of cultural emergence” for the lower middle class that works to make specific types of lower-middle-class individuals and their strivings acceptable to middle-class readers (Gilmour *Idea* 135). Specifically, **David Copperfield** deploys the *Bildungsroman*—a novel of social and personal development¹—as a frame for constructing a narrative that grants cultural legitimacy to the lower middle class. As an integral part of this process, the novel deploys authorship as the vehicle for its protagonist’s personal and social progress. In doing so, it creates a compelling narrative about the lower middle class that becomes the template for subsequent literary representations of this emergent and potentially disruptive group.² **David Copperfield**’s solution to the problem of the lower middle class becomes *the* answer in part because of chronology (it gets there first). Further, the text’s solution is compelling because of the structure of the literary field during the nineteenth century and because the genre it deploys, with its emphasis on the social development of a protagonist, helps to create and entrench Victorian ideas about social mobility through personal achievement. More importantly, the novel’s use of authorship meshes with and appropriates the emerging Victorian discourses of the man of letters. Because of its success, **David Copperfield** becomes the template that other Victorian authors used to represent the lower middle class. This chapter shows how and why **The Three Clerks** (1857) by Anthony Trollope, **Robert Thorne** (1907) by Shan Bullock, and William Kent’s autobiography, **The Testament of a Victorian Youth** (1934), deploy the Dickensian template for representing the lower middle class.
One of the central concerns in *David Copperfield* is finding a way of regulating the strivings of lower-middle-class individuals in such a way as to make them acceptable middle-class subjects. With its emphasis on the social development of the protagonist, the *Bildungsroman* becomes the ideal genre to allow *David Copperfield* to argue for the inclusion of liminal figures like David under the broad rubric of a middle-class gentleman. Yet, the novel does not see the social development and the social mobility it implies as resulting from purely economic effort. The novel transforms David into a middle-class gentleman through cultural means, specifically by making David an author. In doing so, the text converts David into a particular kind of Victorian gentleman, the newly emergent intellectual or scholar gentleman advocated by Arnold, Carlyle, Kingsley, and others. Rather than becoming a captain of industry, David becomes a captain of culture. As such, his newly acquired title of a gentleman achieved by being an intellectual, scholar, or artist carries with it greater cultural status than if he were simply another Victorian economic success story. The status of an author, gained through industriousness, perseverance, and many of the other catch phrases of the burgeoning self-improvement movement, allows David to claim the title of middle-class gentleman because he is not tainted by the lingering vulgarity of having worked for his position. Unlike the always interested man of commerce, David can lay claim to the most elusive of all traits of the Victorian gentleman, disinterestedness. As an author, David need not sully himself with base economic concerns. He has freed himself from working or rather from earning so much for so much work. Leaving the business decisions to his publisher, David is free to be a middle-class gentleman by doing the right kind of work.
But if David becomes a middle-class gentleman by the end of the novel, does that mean that he is not middle class at the beginning or in the middle of the novel? Does his attainment of status in the final chapters mean that he is lower middle class for the rest of the novel? The answer, much like the answer to the question of who and what the lower middle class is throughout the Victorian period, is a complicated one. On one level, David is middle class. His father obviously had enough economic capital to leave a house and modest income to his widow and orphan son. Aunt Betsey clearly has enough money to not only live comfortably but pay hush money to a mysterious ex-lover, and invest in the markets. Yet, if we probe more deeply we see that David’s father’s social position was not all that settled. He suffered from the delusion that his country cottage was an estate, he married a poor child wife, and he was unable to leave his son either a business or a profession. The instability of David’s social position, perhaps one of the clearest hallmarks of the lower middle class, is evidenced by his mother’s selling his caul for a mere fifteen guineas. That the well-off Aunt Betsey is in reality David’s great aunt tells us that the Copperfields, or at least David’s branch of it, have suffered some form of social downward mobility. Further, that David’s father was twice the age of his bride tells us that perhaps he was not possessed of capital or a sufficiently prosperous business until late in life. Whatever David’s father’s social and economic position, it is clear that it was not sufficient to adequately look after and establish his son in some business or profession. In fact, we get no clear indication of his father’s profession. That David’s social standing fluctuates throughout the novel speaks of his marginality; he finds himself at times a bottle washer in a London warehouse, the cast off stepson exiled to
some dreary and mean-spirited school, an articled law clerk, a private secretary to an 
obscure scholar, an ordinary clerk, a short hand reporter, etc. What this multiplicity of 
roles points to is that David has no clearly defined class. As such, we cannot comfortably 
say that he is middle class. Nor is he working class. He is, like so much of the lower 
middle class, a member of no clearly defined class. His standing fluctuates with each job 
he holds. Yet, even if we were to consider David middle class we need to realize that the 
term itself was in the process of being defined and was extremely broad. Blackwood’s 
Magazine, writing of Dickens and his propensity to draw his characters from the middle 
class, paints a broad picture of the middle class that is illustrative of the Victorian 
uncertainty over the boundaries of this newly emergent and powerful group. For 
Blackwood’s the middle class ranges from

the squire whose acres are too few, or his family too recent, to rank among the 
aristocracy of his country—and from the merchant, who is not rich enough to be a 
millionaire, the scale fluctuates and descends to the poor curate, the poor clerk, 
the poor teacher, who have just enough to live honestly, to struggle through debts 
and incumbrances, and keep—if only by an arm’s length—the wolf from the door. 
(452)

David is drawn from the lower strata of this range. Throughout the novel, he struggles to 
rise above the level of those who “struggle” to “keep the wolf from the door.” His very 
indeterminedness makes him a figure in need of a route that would provide him a stable 
and respectable social position if he is to become the hero of his own story.

David Copperfield uses the genre of Bildungsroman to weave a “fable of cultural 
emergence” because it allows the combining of David’s personal maturation with his 
social development (Gilmour Idea 135). In doing so, the novel highlights the extent to 
which the two kinds of development are integral to becoming a fit middle-class subject.
As John O. Jordan argues, in *David Copperfield* the personal is social. The *kind of personal development* David undergoes is deeply implicated in the “social sub-text” of the novel and the “class anxieties” and aspirations arising out of it (63). David’s becoming an author plays a key role in resolving these “anxieties.” As Murray Baumgarten notes, the “relationships between literacy and social success, writing and heroism” play a central role in the novel and are key to David’s development into a middle-class gentleman (39). David’s metamorphosis into an author is vital to readers identifying him as a middle-class gentleman.

This identification occurs despite the fact that readers get very little information about David's artistic process or even about his books. In narrating, his literary successes David reminds us that if he “refer[s] to them, incidentally, it is only as part of my progress” (671). The use of the word “incidentally” in reference to his literary work makes it clear that David as narrator regards his social advancement and not his growth as an author as the thrust of his tale. Any reference to his books is pure coincidence and serves as a mere marker of David’s social progress much in the same manner that reference to bank balances or the number of factories owned might serve for a captain of industry. David’s books do not mean anything outside of conveying status upon their creator. Knowledge about their content would not serve to enlighten readers about David’s character any more than the knowledge that he is the author of some books has already. His growing mastery of the mysteries surrounding the art of novel writing is not what will make him the “hero of [his] own life;” the social position this mastery provides him will effect this transformation (1). Specifically, the lesson the reader learns by
following the trials, tribulations, and successes of David is that in order to be successful and content one must not only develop artistically but socially; one must find one’s place in the social world through struggle and perseverance.

Artistic development as represented in this *Bildungsroman* serves a social rather than artistic function. The goal of becoming an author is not to discover and express some great and enduring truth about the world or the self, but to rise in the social hierarchy. This is not to say that the novel does not tap into the truth myth about the nature of authorship in order to effect David’s rise because it certainly does so, but it does so only in order to ensure that David does indeed become the hero of his own story. In using authorship in this way, the novel appropriates the idea of authorship and uses it in ways that Carlyle and later Arnold would find deeply troubling had they turned their attention to the novel.

In the fictional realist world of *David Copperfield*, social mobility is best attained not through following a vulgar Smilesian program of self-improvement resulting only in economic advancement and gain, but rather through a program of artistic and intellectual self-improvement resulting in cultural advancement (along with economic advantage). Attaining the role and status of an author uniquely fulfills these requirements in that it promises economic advancement, independence, and most importantly cultural status. The successful author, despite the years of toil and struggle in some back street garret writing newspaper and magazine stories for so much pence per word, does not carry with him the taint of vulgarity born of making one’s living through commerce that the successful coal merchant, dust man, green grocer, stock broker, or manufacturer does.
The latter may claim the title of gentleman only by virtue of his bank account, his ability to live in a fashionable part of town, his ability to attire himself and his family in the fashions of the day, etc. The socially upwardly mobile author is able to claim the status of an even more exclusive type: the artistic or intellectual or scholar gentleman. The position aspiring authors could enjoy influenced many to try their hands at authorship and influenced the way in which they wrote about authorship in their works.

Anthony Trollope viewed his turn to novel writing as uniquely able to provide him with both economic and social advancement, “I have certainly always had also before my eyes the charms of reputation. Over and above the money view of the question, I wished from the beginning to be something more than a clerk in the Post Office. To be known as somebody,—to be Anthony Trollope if it be no more,—is to me much. The feeling is a very general one” (Trollope, Autobiography, “Barchester Towers and the “Three Clerks”). This concern with reputation follows Trollope’s defense of the right of authors to receive money for their “labours” much like any other professional man. More importantly, Trollope notes that the concern with reputation, both literary and social, is widespread among aspiring authors and the general public. Trollope wants to be somebody in the literary world and in the wider world. That he chose in the late 1840s to become a somebody through authorship instead of the stage, sculpture, painting, politics, or science speaks of the increasing respect authors commanded in Victorian society even at this early date.

Dickens’s and Trollope’s turn to authorship to allow lower middle class figures to rise into the middle class indicates the unique cultural position inhabited by those
individuals who could claim such a title. Dickens’s own success did much to propagate the idea of the man of letters as a respectable figure. In *David Copperfield* we see the transformative power authorship has to make individuals like David into heroes and middle-class gentlemen. Murray Baumgarten argues that in *David Copperfield* the notion that an ability to write or rather a character’s abilities as a writer are closely linked to his “value” as a bourgeois individual and that literacy’s ability to convey social status lies at the center of *David Copperfield* and much of Dickens’s fiction (41). Baumgarten argues the more complex one’s literary skills the higher one’s status. Authorship, lies at the pinnacle of this hierarchy and as such it is no surprise that the hero of the story attains his status as such through authorship. Following this logic, the novel posits that the most valuable kind of individual is one possessed of the highest kind of literacy—the author. As someone capable of reading and performing a kind of writing that appeals to and affects a wider public, the author deserves a prominent place in the social hierarchy.

Dickens was not the only Victorian to see authorship as admirable. Carlyle, who did much to elevate the status of authors, poses the question of the value of authorship in *On Heroes and Hero Worship* by rhetorically asking his readers, “is it not verily, at bottom, the highest act of man's faculty that produces a Book?” (165). Carlyle goes on to argue that books represent “the purest embodiment of Thought a man can have” and the act of writing them represents “the activest and noblest” of all human endeavors (emphasis in original, 165). In noting what he sees as “the [. . .] supreme importance of the Man of Letters in modern Society” Carlyle reminds his readers that such a view is not revolutionary, but should be considered a commonly accepted idea (165). This rhetorical
move along with Carlyle’s rebuke of the treatment authors have received, highlights the
extent to which Carlyle is aware of the need to rehabilitate the image of the author into a
figure worthy of respect and reverence. Carlyle’s popularity as well as the immense
popularity of authors like Dickens point to the rise in status of authors, even if Carlyle
would have excluded from the realm of authors those writers of “the wretchedest
circulating-library novel[s]” (On Heroes 160). In any event, David does not become one
of those kinds of authors. He becomes “a genuine Man of Letters” who “is uttering-forth
[. . .]the inspired soul of him[self]” (On Heroes 155).

The scholar gentleman as a cultural type is largely immune from charges of vulgarity because he can lay claim to the title not as a result of the common and thus vulgar ability to make money, but through the result of his innate and carefully cultivated genius and sensibility. The time spent struggling represents not vulgarity and lowness but rather a rite of passage towards what Arnold terms “human perfection” (37) that is characterized by “an inward condition of the mind and spirit” rather than “an outward set of circumstances” (Culture 33). Such a route fits more comfortably with the notion that gentlemen are born and not made. The difference in the Arnoldian and Carlylean scholar gentleman is that it is based on in-born ability as opposed to being based on family lineage. Walter Besant echoes this understanding of the nature of the scholar gentleman in his 1884 lecture to the Royal Institute. This lecture went on to become “The Art of Fiction,” in which Besant notes that authorship “is so far removed from the mere mechanical arts, that no laws or rules whatever can teach it to those who have not already been endowed with the natural and necessary gifts” (3-4). Here again we see that through
authorship one can claim the title of gentleman-author based on the cultivation of innate ability or talent rather than basing such a claim on the social status of one’s ancestors.

Yet, it was not only writers of poetry, philosophy, and other exalted genres who benefited from this social sanction. In 1897 the New Review ironically calls “the Victorian Era [. . .] the Golden Age of Fiction” and observes with some dismay that “serious reviews” carry “weighty articles” discussing the work of novelists (“A Warning” 308). The New Review’s irony and dismay is occasioned by what it sees as the excessive focus of novelists on pleasing what it saw as the ever increasing vulgar public and grubbing after sales and royalties. Notwithstanding the New Review’s well-known conservativism, the article points to the increasingly prominent role authors played in public life during the period and to the real possibility of financial gain to be gotten through the writing of novels. Matthew Arnold’s ongoing project of valorizing literary culture that crystallized in Culture and Anarchy highlights the extent to which an educated, intellectual middle-class elite strove to place literary works and those who produced them at the zenith of Victorian culture.  

Men of letters, specifically literary men like Gotthold Lessing and Johann Herder, Arnold argues, are vital because of their ability to “humanise[. . .] knowledge” and “to diffuse sweetness and light” (Culture 48). By placing such importance upon those men of letters connected with writing literary works, Arnold makes it clear that those men of letters who write Poetry (novels, poetry, drama, etc.) should be considered with reverence.

It was not only Arnold and other Oxbridge defenders and definers of high-culture who saw a social role for literature. The Rev. H. G. Robinson, who taught at York
Training College, notes that in “English literature [. . .] we have a most valuable agency for the moral and intellectual cultural of the professional and commercial classes” (427). Robinson argues that even the most hardened cases, Arnold’s Philistines, can be subdued by a well-chosen course of education via “English literature” (427) as opposed to Classical or European literature, which should take a “secondary” role (425). Robinson goes on to argue that studying English literature will inculcate “a love for manly sincerity, stainless faith, [and] fearless advocacy of truth” (431). It follows that, if as Arnold, H. G. Robinson, and others argue literature and high culture have a civilizing or “softening effect” on individuals then the individuals responsible for producing literature and culture should be accorded an honorable place in society (Baldick 65).  

However, not just any kind of literature would do. Both Arnold and Robinson eschewed the reading of novels, tracts, and other forms of text churned out by Grub Street hacks. What was needed they argued was the study of the literary output of the “highest and most gifted minds of the nation” (Robinson 427). Between Arnold and Robinson we see a productive tension over the kind of literature and thus the kinds of authors that should be granted respectable positions in society. Arnold (and Carlyle) feel that only those authors already established and recognized by long ages of readers and critics should be so honored, while Robinson with his emphasis on the value of English literature for the majority of students allows for the inclusion of authors and texts of a more recent vintage. That being said, the two camps shared a common view that literature is capable of “tak[ing] coarseness and vulgarity out of a soul” (Robinson 431).
It is on this basis that men of letters like Arnold and Robinson argued that authors should be thought of as respectable.

High culture critics were not the only ones that argued for elevating authors in the cultural hierarchy. Sir John Lubbock’s “100 Best Books” in 1896 [1895] and the debate surrounding it implicitly make a similar argument. Following the publication of the list in the *Contemporary Review* and then in the *Pall Mall Gazette* numerous correspondents wrote in either to support or critique Lubbock’s list. Other journals and newspapers offered up commentary on the list. The *Pall Mall Gazette* even went so far as to include Lubbock’s list along with those of other prominent men of letters in a *Pall Mall Gazette Extra* in 1896. Among the contributors were Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Wilkie Collins, Oscar Wilde and numerous publishers. Routledge advertised a series entitled “Sir John Lubbock’s Hundred Books” for £18 12s. which was quite a princely sum considering that Lubbock offered up his list to the working men of England (10). What the furor over Lubbock’s list highlights is the seriousness with which literature of all kinds was taken, even though the works of British novelists made up only a small portion of it. As *The National Review* notes in 1892 “literary gents had become as respectable as the industrious manufacturer” (476). The author goes on to note, just in case any of his readers felt that the respectability of an “industrious manufacturer” was in doubt, that authors “ceased to be bohemians like gipies [sic] and strolling players” (476), “there is already being created a privileged Profession of Literature” (481) and that authorship is on the same level of any “genteel industry” (476).
Yet, as John Sutherland notes, despite all these essays and high-toned paeans to literature and those that write it, one reason for the rise in the status of the author during the Victorian period was Dickens’s own success as an author. Sutherland argues that Dickens’s success “did more to raise the profession than any number of Thackerayan or Carlylean lectures on ‘The Dignity of Literature,’ or ‘The Hero as Man of Letters’” and “helped to make fiction writing as professionally respectable as the law [or] medicine.” (67). While the reasons why authorship rose in respectability throughout the nineteenth century are more complex than Sutherland’s deification of Dickens implies, we cannot ignore the influence Dickens’s example must have had on shaping public opinion with regard to the respectability of authors.

Thus, authorship, or the hope of becoming an author, served as perhaps the readiest conduit to the middle class for the rising number of educated, but economically marginal members of Victorian society. Unlike rising through commerce, rising through intellectual efforts of one’s pen did not carry with it the cultural stigma of having worked for one’s position. As an author, as opposed to a writer or Grub Street hack, one did not directly engage in the buying and selling of commodities in order to attain financial independence, but relied upon the utilization of one’s innate genius. Becoming an author allowed not only for worldly success, but also allowed for a greater sense of personal achievement, contentedness, and cultural position. By having David rise in the social hierarchy by becoming an author, Dickens is actively constructing along with Arnold, Carlyle, and others the idea that authors, no matter their birth, deserve to be called gentlemen. By tapping into this discourse, David Copperfield is able to make social
mobility non-threatening. It does so by making figures like David appear to be always already members of the middle class who do not threaten the prevailing social order but rather strengthen it by their inclusion.\textsuperscript{8}

Authors, critics, librarians, and readers found the authorship route to the middle class appealing, especially with regard to lower-middle-class figures because it not only fulfills the Victorian myths about the possibility and desirability of moral and intellectual advancement but also the success of such figures is not economically threatening. That is, the idea that young men could improve or cultivate their intellectual faculties and become artists or intellectuals worked as a form of collective wish fulfillment for a society obsessed with the very idea of progress and the hope, expressed by Arnold, that the world is getting not just richer but better.\textsuperscript{9}

Early in the Victorian period, lower-middle-class social mobility through cultural means is seen as relatively non-threatening to established middle class economic elites who were initially more concerned with the accumulation of financial capital rather than cultural capital. Further, lower-middle-class men who advance by becoming authors, artists, or other types of intellectuals do not by definition enter into direct economic competition with pre-existing middle class elites; they do not threaten to usurp their employers; they do not threaten to become politically radical because as respectable middle-class authors, scholars, and intellectual gentlemen they are fully integrated into bourgeois culture. Unlike the vast army of clerks hoping to become partners, the number of lower-middle-class men considered capable or interested in becoming authors, artists, or other types of intellectuals is considered relatively small and thus non-threatening.
Only the most deserving members, that is, the most industrious, most perseverant, those most blessed with natural genius or ability, etc., of the lower middle class could follow this route. Thus, the relatively small numbers of lower-middle-class men rising through cultural means in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century served to confirm dominant views about the lower middle class rather than raise alarms. This attitude was not static; from the 1860s onwards the lower middle class was seen as a growing cultural as well as economic threat. While to some extent the threat posed by the lower middle class always is figured as a cultural one, as the century wore on the cultural threat became more pervasive.

This change is a result in part of an evolving understanding of class identity. While earlier in the century class could be and often was thought of in terms of economic or occupational affiliations and access to the vote, expansion of the franchise and the rise of consumerism resulted in the implicit recognition that class identities cohere around what Pierre Bourdieu calls a sense of cultural distinction based on a whole range of practices—dress, speech patterns, choice of leisure activities, etc. Further, the 1870 Forster Education Act gave increasing numbers of lower-middle-class men the rudimentary educational skills to aspire cultural and economic advancement. With this literacy, the newly literate lower middle class could conceivably become cultural actors capable of creating tastes and desires and more importantly become capable of satisfying those desires and tastes. As such, it threatens middle-class cultural hegemony more so than it threatens the economic position of the middle class. This aspect of the threat the lower middle class are thought to pose has been discussed in Chapter One.
Because of the position authors held in Victorian culture as a result of a sustained campaign by a diverse set of elites including Dickens himself, *David Copperfield*’s deployment of authorship as the route for lower-middle-class men to enter into the middle class becomes the pre-eminent model for representing the lower middle class. That is, it is seen by both readers and other writers as the way to allow for social mobility in a culturally acceptable manner that produces individuals more at peace not only with themselves, but also with the world they inhabit. If we compare David’s relative contentment with the more melancholy existence of Pip, we find that, unlike Pip, whose social position and even the question of his personal happiness is very much an open question at the end of *Great Expectations*, David has an established and stable social position. While his happiness is tempered by a melancholy born of the realization of his past follies, he is, we can safely conclude, happy. One has little trouble imagining David and Agnes living happily ever after; one cannot say the same for Pip and Estella (even if one agrees that the two end up together). Pip’s story in true *Bildungsroman* fashion “conclude[s] more or less uncertainly” (Buckley 23). The important difference is that Pip, unlike David, has chosen, or perhaps it has been chosen for him by circumstances, the economic route into the middle class.

While Pip’s fate may be the result of a mature Dickens holding a more cynical view on the question of the efficacy of social mobility, I argue that what is really at work in novels like *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* is an investigation, not of the question of social mobility *per se*, but rather an investigation of how best to allow for social mobility. As part of this investigation, Dickens must work outside of the confines
of the *Bildungsroman* in order to have David end the novel happily married and secure in his social position. Authorship provides Dickens with a plausible way of giving David’s fate closure. David’s settled position at the end of the novel bespeaks of the transformative power of authorship.

The rise of respectability of authors throughout the Victorian period helps to explain why texts like *The Three Clerks* (1857), *Robert Thorne* (1907), and *The Testament of a Victorian Youth* (1934) look the way they do. However, it does not fully explain why someone like Trollope who was eager to establish himself as a literary figure would, as I show below, hew to a literary template so rigidly. As John Sutherland argues, one answer to this quandary is the stature of Dickens as an author and the popularity of his texts with readers, critics, and circulating librarians. Related to this is the role that the structure of the literary market place played in encouraging the production of texts that followed the pattern of successful texts.

Dickens’s stature as the preeminent novelist of the early to mid-Victorian period cannot be overstated. Numerous critics, even if they did find things to criticize in Dickens’s novels, felt as did *Blackwood’s Magazine* that “[i]n his own sphere, no man living equals Mr. Dickens” (465). Some nine years after *Blackwood’s* anointing of Dickens as a novelist with few rivals the *Westminster Review* in “Modern Novelists: Charles Dickens,” while thinking that Dickens will not become “an English classic,” lauds him as “a man of genius” (441) who “has [. . .] no rival” and who “may claim the foremost place” (415) “among those who have [. . .] exercised a very considerable influence upon society” (414). The *Westminster Review* goes even further in its praise of
Dickens when it states, “[i]t is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the light literature of the present generation has been created and moulded under the influence of his style” (415).

It is thus little wonder given the critical acclaim with which Dickens’s literary productions were greeted and promoted as models that less established writers would want to emulate not only his style but also his strategies for representing a range of cultural types including the lower middle class. Given the increasing commercialization of the publishing business and the rise of the lending library system both of which were predicated on the sale and circulation of works that would appeal to the greatest numbers of readers it is not hard to imagine that publishers and librarians were eager to support works that followed a proven template. As critics later in the century would point out, the highly commercialized nature of the literary field was more concerned with sales and not offending anyone’s sense of morality than it was with the production of “artistically” valuable works of literature. What was important was that a book circulate and sell, not that it break new ground in the representation of character or type, etc.

Once proven successful in terms of capturing and holding the reading public’s attention the Dickensian template for representing the lower middle class became nearly impossible to challenge. Emerging and second tier authors like Trollope would find it in their own artistic and economic interest to mimic Dickens even if they found his style and representation of characters lacking. In fact, it appears that Trollope was fairly successful in a strictly economic sense when he followed the Dickensian template for representing the lower middle class. The first edition of The Three Clerks published in three volumes
for the standard price of 31s. 6s. sold 948 copies out of a printing of 1000 and earned for Bentley a profit of £94 4s. 7d. Trollope himself received £250 for the novel, a clear indication of both Trollope’s status as a marketable name and his publishers faith in the marketability of texts that followed the Dickensian template (Gettman 125). Even figuring in the miscellaneous overhead incurred by Bentley to remain in operation, The Three Clerks still earned a profit of some £48 for the firm (Gettman 125).

While the sale of 948 copies sounds low, the principle purchasers of three-volume novels were the circulating libraries like Mudie’s and W. H. Smith’s so that the number of readers was higher. Guinevere L. Griest notes that Mudie’s Select Library, the largest and most influential of the circulating libraries throughout the Victorian period, usually purchased roughly 500 copies of most three-volume novels with each copy being read by an average of ten to twenty readers, giving a total readership of 5,000 to 10,000 (165-66). While not a blockbuster or best seller, The Three Clerks represents the kind of predictable book that helped keep publishers like Bentley profitable. The circulating libraries’ decision to purchase nearly the full printing of the novel should be considered a success. This is especially true since The Three Clerks was not serialized prior to its publication as a three-volume novel. As a result, it had to rely solely on Trollope’s name (Griest 112), which was known as a result of the popularity of The Warden and Barchester Towers but did not become truly great until Framley Parsonage appeared serially in Cornhill Magazine during 1860-61, and the recommendation of the libraries to attract readers (Letters Trollope 91). Chronologically, The Three Clerks lies in the middle of Trollope’s transformation into a novelist of popularity and literary repute.
While Thackeray may have selected Trollope for inclusion into the fold of *Cornhill Magazine* based on the literary strength of *The Warden* and *Barchester Towers*, Trollope’s ability to successfully publish and circulate a novel without the aid of serialization certainly played a role in what was as much a business decision as a literary one for Thackeray and the investors in *Cornhill Magazine*.

Serialization often served to stoke interest in three volume novels with the text being published in three volume form just prior to the last serial installment. This tactic ensured interest in the novel and more importantly for the libraries and publishers a ready audience for the three-volume version of the text. Further, success with the circulating libraries often ensured a market for later reprints of the novel in single volume format. Based on the figures cited above, *The Three Clerks* can be considered a solid seller; one that while not breaking any new artistic ground or setting sales records did keep Trollope, his publishers, and the circulating libraries in business. While Bentley did express some minor disappointment in the sales of *The Three Clerks*, he was willing to offer £300 for Trollope’s next novel (*Letters Trollope* 62) and was willing to bring out a cheap edition of it in 1858 (*Letters Trollope* 76). As further evidence of *The Three Clerk’s* success, one can find it in various Mudie’s catalogue well into the late 1880s (*Catalogue* 275). In May of 1878, Mudie’s was selling a surplus copy of the novel for 7s.6d. while a similar copy of Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* was being sold for only 6s. (*Clearance Catalogue* 39). This shows that there existed a substantial market even for Trollope’s lesser novels.

Combined with critical reviews of texts that did not have lower-middle-class protagonists striving to reach the middle class, economic pressures to write for a market
predicated on the circulation of three-volume novels of conventional plot and characters ensured the continuation of the Dickensian template. As both Gettman and Griest note, publishers and proprietors of circulating libraries often exerted a strong influence on not only the physical form of a book but also on its content and theme. A decision not to circulate a novel or to purchase only a limited number of copies was often disastrous for a novelist’s future prospects as well as leading to financial losses for the publisher. That these forces compelled even a successful author like Trollope to follow their dictates is indicative of the power of the circulating libraries.

Critics also had a hand in creating the conditions that compelled authors into portraying the lower middle class as unworthy of hero status unless they somehow transformed themselves into upstanding members of the middle class. Influential journals like the Westminster Review often chided authors like Trollope for attempting to make heroes out of lower-middle-class figures. In The Small House at Allington, Trollope returns to the lower middle class and hopes to create a lower-middle-class hero, only this time one who does not follow the Dickensian model. The results were less than successful as far as the critics were concerned. The Westminster Review writes dismissively of “John Eames, [ . . . ] an average specimen of a Government clerk, the history of whose career no one, who did not look at mankind with the impartiality of a photographer, would have taken the time to write” and finds him wanting as a hero (251). In critiquing Trollope’s The Small House at Allington by characterizing it as a mere “chronicle [ . . . ] of ordinary people[,]” peopled by “unattractive [ . . . ] heroes[,]” and thus resulting in a “tedious” story, the Westminster is really critiquing stories that do not focus
on the striving of an admirable protagonist to escape the ordinariness of the lower middle class. Of course, according to the logic of the Westminster Review, the protagonist becomes admirable primarily because of his striving to become middle class. Any protagonist who fails to strive after this most exclusive and worthy goal is not worth being a hero of a novel, let along a novel consisting of “thirty chapters” (“Contemporary Literature: Belles Lettres” 251). The Westminster Review was not the only journal to find Johnny Eames unsatisfying as a hero. Both the Spectator and the North American Review took issue with him, the latter calling him “[t]he great blemish” in the novel (298 July 1864, 292-8). The Spectator finds Johnny interesting only after he “put[s] off his hobbledehoyhood, and do[es] battle” (423). The implication is that Johnny becomes interesting only when he begins to strive like his scheming social climbing counter part Arthur Crosbie. The message to aspiring and even to established authors who are thinking of including lower-middle-class characters in their novels is clear: in order for lower-middle-class heroes to be considered compelling they must aspire to break out of the lower middle class and become middle class gentlemen.

In The Three Clerks Trollope clearly takes this advice to heart. Charley Tudor (who starts the novel as a young civil service clerk living on £90 a month and is fond of ginshops, music halls, and who is heavily in debt), in contrast to Johnny Eames, ends The Three Clerks as the author of three novels, a “distinguished master of modern fiction,” and the master of a suburban villa (528). Charley’s skills as an author and the status it brings him, leads to his praises being sung in parliament. It is safe to say that the young “ne’er-do-well” Charley ends the novel as the most respectable of middle class
gentleman. He achieves that status based solely on the efforts of his pen. His elevation into the Weights and Measures Office comes not because of his “knowledge, accomplishments, industry, morality, outward decency, inward zeal, and all the cardinal virtues” important to a Civil Service clerk, but comes because his position as an author allows the parliamentary defenders of the Civil Service to sing his praises and to hold his achievements up as representative of the quality of men employed in the Civil Service (523). That Charley is more than just a Grub Street hack is clear by his rejection of the advice given to him by the editor of the fictional Daily Delight, the publisher of Charley’s early sensational adventures and romances, and by his subsequent decision break out on his own for a bit of “solitary soaring” (522). This desire to be more than a writer of vulgar adventures and romances as well as his resisting the attempts of his publisher to write for a market highlights Charley’s desires to make something of himself and points to his being possessed of some genuine genius. As such, according to the logic of journals like the Westminster Review he has what it takes to be hero.

Just as David’s happiness exceeds Pip’s so too does Charley’s exceed that of the third clerk of the Three Clerks, John Norman. While Norman’s social position as a country squire and magistrate is higher than Charley’s, Norman does not marry the love of his life but must settle for her sister. While John is happy, the novel makes it clear that his life is not quite as fulfilling or satisfying as that of Charley. It is Charley with his numerous children, his care for his mother-in-law, and his substantial suburban villa that becomes the pater familias, not John Norman. In elevating the son of a poor country curate over the son of substantial and respectable country squire through authorship the
novel highlights the transformative power of authorship. The Three Clerks even goes so far as to suggest that it is knowledge of Charley’s “literary efforts” that plays an important role in Katie’s recovery (520). Authorship thus has the power not only to transform wayward young clerks but also to cure sick maidens.

While David Copperfield becomes an author and thus a middle-class gentleman, he does so only after many false starts and only after rejecting alternative paths to the middle class. In rejecting these alternative paths, the novel shows how they deny a sense of humanity and individuality to young men like David and thus threaten to preclude their ever becoming middle-class gentlemen. Education or at least a particular form of education is the first path to the middle class young David pursues, rejects, and exposes as dehumanizing. The process of David’s dehumanization begins even before he arrives at Mr. Creakle’s school. Upon his delivery at the coach office in London, young David is left like a piece of luggage “till called for” (68). This process continues when Mr. Mell is forced to tie the placard warning the other students to “‘Take care of him. He bites’” on David’s shoulders (74, emphasis in original). The language Mr. Mell uses to explain the purpose of the sign is instructive, “‘that’s not a dog. That’s a boy’” (75). In the space of several pages young David is reduced first to the status of luggage and then to the status of a mad dog that bites. The lesson is clear: the type of education represented by Mr. Creakle’s school has as its mission to remind young men like David that they are not human and that their status as middle-class individuals will be highly compromised if they choose to follow it as the path to becoming middle-class gentlemen. They may become successful merchants, barristers, etc. but unless they find some ennobling force
to counter the vulgarizing influence of Mr. Creakle’s school they are doomed to failure as gentlemen. As a case in point, Traddles becomes a successful lawyer in spite of, not because of Creakle’s school. In a way that mirrors David’s story, Traddles succeeds because it is the only way for him to consummate his love for Sophy. His desire, both emotional and sexual, for Sophy is what drives him towards success. Mr. Creakle’s influence is so malignant that it even has the power to corrupt young men like Steerforth, who should be by virtue of his birth the very embodiment of the middle-class gentlemen. Creakle’s school reinforces the lessons of hardness and selfishness that Steerforth’s home life has inculcated in him.

By denying figures like David their humanity and individuality, educational systems like Mr. Creakle’s are denying the possibility of an enlightened middle-class status to their students. As Matthew Arnold notes in 1881, “the natural product of a course of Salem House and Mr Creakle” is people like Mr. and Miss Murdstone known more for their “hardness, their narrowness, their want of consideration for other people’s feelings” and whose “bad qualities exhibit themselves without mitigation or relief” (“Incompatibles” 276-277). Even worse “it is Murdstone, the serious man, whose view of life and demands on life have made our Hell-holes, as Cobbett calls our manufacturing towns” and who produces a “religion” and culture that is little more than “a lie and heathenish superstition” (“Incompatibles” 279, emph. in original). These, then, are the effects of Mr. Creakle’s school and Murdstone’s rearing on David, on a whole class of young people, and upon Britain’s body and soul. It produces narrow, unfeeling men and
women, it produces cities devoid of light, and it produces a culture devoid of sweetness and light.\textsuperscript{15}

Yet, the novel does not completely reject the role of education in making middle-class gentlemen. Dr. Strong’s school clearly plays a central role in helping David develop his innate abilities and character. Devoid of the regimentation, punishment, and malign neglect that characterizes Mr. Creakle’s school (it is no surprise that Creakle ends the novel as a magistrate in charge of a prison), Dr. Strong’s school provides David and his fellow students the space and support necessary for the development of the kind of interiority and character central to the idea of the bourgeois individual. Put more bluntly, Mr. Creakle’s school resembles a factory or a prison while Dr. Strong’s endeavors to serve as a surrogate family to the young men. However, as I will discuss later, the influence of Dr. Strong’s school does not automatically transform David into a middle-class gentleman.

It is not just education that the text rejects as a way for allowing lower-middle-class men into the middle class. The novel also casts doubt upon that other pillar of Victorian faith with regard to social mobility, industriousness. The decision by Mr. Murdstone to put David to work because “this is a world of action, and not for moping and droning” results in David being sent to work in the wine warehouse where he learns that industriousness for the sake of industriousness gains one very little (147). Unlike David’s later embrace of industriousness in order to gain the right to court and marry Dora, the path of industriousness forced upon him by Murdstone is motivated solely by
the desire for economic gain. Getting rid of David reduces Murdstone’s out of pocket expenses and allows him to disavow future claims for economic support on David’s part.

Murdstone’s banishment of David produces unhappiness and pulls David further from his goals of “growing up to be a learned and distinguished man” and he feels that with every passing day he is moving further and further from the world of middle-class gentility (150). David rues the loss of what he “had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised [his] fancy and [his] emulation up by” (151). In short, David mourns the sense of cultural distinction that is slowly ebbing away from his person. Instead of becoming more and more refined as a result of his education through work, David feels that his tastes and person are becoming more and more vulgarized. Even at this early stage of his development, David understands that the work he is doing at the warehouse is not the kind of work fledging middle-class gentlemen do. Rather than rouse David to fight to retain his nascent sense of middle classness, his experiences in the warehouse engender a sense of doubt about his own character and the most frightful of all realizations that his fate may be result of some “flaw in [his] own breast” (151). Thus, the cruelty of Murdstone becomes evident.

It is through condemning David to Mr. Creakle’s school and to the warehouse that Murdstone attempts to effect David’s déclassement by making him less human and by denying him the experiences that will allow him to develop the hallmarks of the middle-class individual: interiority, refinement, and a sense of distinction in relation to other classes (Bourdieu Distinction 147, 150-51). In short, Murdstone hopes to transform David into a “twopenny clerk” (Bullock 123) forever condemned to wear “corduroy
trousers” (149). David escapes this fate by running away from the warehouse with the idea of finding his long lost Aunt Betsey. The move to Dover represents a sea change for David’s prospects. Once under the care of his aunt and Mr. Dick, David again resumes his progress towards becoming a middle-class gentleman by going to school and by being re-integrated into middle class family life where he learns not just his ABC’s but also learns to cultivate a character, the sentiment, and interiority appropriate to a young man of his (hoped for) station. That the novel must resort to such an unlikely turn of events points to the very real difficulty young men like David faced in attempting to improve their lot.

Despite the good effects of Dr. Strong’s school and his aunt’s care, David is not automatically ensured a position in the middle class. Instead, he must again prove his worthiness through work, though importantly his clerkship in Mr. Spenlow’s law firm is intended to provide young David with a profession and thus gain for him the status of a gentleman. “Work,” as Robin Gilmour notes, “the employment that a gentleman could undertake without injury to his gentility, was at the heart of Victorian attempts to re-draw the boundaries of gentility” (“Between Two Worlds” 116). As Gilmour argues, the fact that a man worked no longer alone excluded him from the ranks of gentleman, rather it is the type of work he does that either allows or prevents him from rightfully claiming the title.

Thus, we should see David’s apprenticeship to Mr. Spenlow as materially different from his banishment to the warehouse of the wine business because it allows David to accumulate cultural capital as opposed to just economic capital. Importantly,
David (or more correctly his Aunt) must exchange economic capital for cultural capital. Where one form of work impresses upon David and the world his lowness the other form impresses upon David and the world his potential for upward mobility and his cultural distinction. With its emphasis on physical labor, the warehouse highlights the former while the intellectual work of the law practice allows for the latter. Even though David seems to be making good progress as an articled law clerk and thus well on the road to being able to claim the title of a gentlemen—he is after all invited to his master’s house for the weekend—the reversal of his aunt’s fortunes along with the exposure of Spenlow’s poverty following his death makes clear to David the precariousness of basing one’s claims to middle class-status on economics alone. David realizes that the cultural position Spenlow has purchased is not stable nor permanent but can evaporate as quickly as the pounds, shillings, and pennies that purchased it disappear. Spenlow’s meager collection of economic and cultural capital mirrors that of David Copperfield’s own deceased father. The meagerness of the family grave plot speaks to the class pretensions of David’s father, as does the naming a cottage as one would name an estate. The fate of both men illustrates the futility of attempting to rise in the social hierarchy through economic means.

As a result of his aunt’s impoverishment at the hands of Uriah Heep, David finds himself occupying a much lower social position—he is no longer an articled law clerk and presumptive heir to the Spenlow dynasty. He finds his hopes to marry Dora dashed by the reality of his situation and by Spenlow’s violent disapproval of the match. Debarred from courting Dora by his reduced economic prospects, David must find
another route into the middle class if he wishes to achieve his immediate goal of winning
Dora’s hand in marriage and his long-term goal of becoming a full-fledged member of
the middle class. David’s love for Dora is in large part a love of what she represents. As
John O. Jordan points out, “David’s courtship of Dora has important class implications”
and is tied to his attempts “to improve his social station” (77). Because of both his aunt’s
financial ruin and that of Spenlow, David does not gain materially by marrying Dora.
However, his ability through industriousness, thrift, and perseverance to provide a home
with servants for the idle and incapable Dora allows David to prove to the world that he
is a middle-class gentleman or something close to it. At this point David has re-gained the
social position that his father presumably held at his death. In marrying a child-bride,
David mirrors the actions of his father who married his own child-bride in David’s
mother. David’s ability to humor Dora in her fantasies of wealth and his ability to support
her childish ways provides David with some of the proof he needs to illustrate his fitness
for middle-class status. Marriage to Dora provides David with yet another form of
cultural capital that his authorship does not. Together the two types of cultural capital
provided by authorship and marriage illustrates his “achievement of [an] identity” that is
recognizable and non-threatening to his middle-class neighbors (Welsh 112). David’s
ability to overcome all of the obstacles that lie between him and this “achievement of
identity” as illustrated by his winning the hand of Dora functions much like his pugilistic
bouts with the butcher in Canterbury: it highlights his superiority and his fitness for the
position of a middle-class gentleman.
This achieved status is largely due to the kind of work he does to achieve it. Specifically, the work David chooses in pursuit of these goals is of an intellectual order—short hand reporter, secretary, short story writer, author—and thus are intended to reinforce his eligibility for entry into the middle class. They do not threaten to pull David away from what he sees as his inherent gentility but rather reinforce his possession of a specific kind of work-based middle-class gentility. All of the professions David pursues involve writing of some kind. As has already been noted, Maury Baumgarten argues that *David Copperfield* is predicated, in part, on mapping the links between literacy and social status (39). David’s narrative choices in emphasizing the non-physical aspects of the work highlight the difference between them and the work forced upon him at the warehouse. Short hand is represented as a skill that must be practiced and which can only be mastered by those imbued with the gifts of memory and perseverance. While David works hard to master shorthand he does so by laboring only in an intellectual sense, not a physical one. Like the Oxbridge student cramming for his exams, David pours his intellectual energy into mastering shorthand. The immensity of David’s accomplishment is clear when Traddles exclaims that a thorough command of short hand is “equal in difficulty to the mastery of six languages” (512) and when we learn that David is held “in high repute for [his] accomplishment in all pertaining to the art” (610). The uniqueness of David’s “accomplishment” is reinforced by our knowledge that Traddles “has tried his hand” at it and has failed (610). In all of the descriptions we get of David’s struggle to master the mysteries of shorthand we are never given any indication that the difficulty lies with mastering its physical aspects: writing fast enough, physically making the
correct marks, etc. but rather the difficulty lies with the intellectual aspects of it: remembering the right marks to make and then decoding the marks he has made. The mastery of short hand leads David to try his hand at “authorship,” resulting in a good living, a nice cottage in the suburbs, and marriage to Dora (610).

Thus, with very little introspection we learn of David’s development beyond merely transcribing the words and thoughts of others. It is his attainment of “authorship” perhaps more than his salary that convinces Dora’s aunts to allow the couple to marry. Within the fictional world of the novel, authorship, as the highest form of writing, implies stability and ability to earn independently. As an author, David is no longer subject to the whims of an employer. He no longer works at the pleasure or displeasure of another. He becomes the captain of his own ship and more importantly becomes a captain of culture. David has learned the important lesson that Arnold was to teach the Victorians: there is far more value “in becoming something rather [than] in having something” (Culture 33). In authorship, David has achieved a sort of human perfection that can never be taken from him unlike a mere social position bestowed upon him as a result of wealth. David has transformed his very soul and not just his social self through authorship. It is this transformation that marks him as deserving of first Dora and then Agnes. Where David’s desire for Dora represents David’s naïve understanding of what it means to be middle class, his desire for Agnes represents a more mature understanding of what it means to be middle class. Agnes represents the values that the middle class told itself were key to its ascension in the social and political hierarchy of Victorian Britain—patience, thrift, industriousness, temperance, perseverance, faith, and a deep
reverence for the power of domesticity to make men and women whole. Thus, it is important that David becomes deserving of Agnes only after he proves that his “pursuit of perfection” is authentic and life long (Arnold Culture 32). Both women serve as trophies and tokens in the novel. That David is able to recognize in Agnes those values that he been striving after for several hundred pages enables him to become the hero of his own story and it is only through the reflection and cultivation provided by authorship that David is able to see the value that Agnes represents. That this process is largely hidden from the reader indicates both its transformative power and the danger it poses to the middle class if those not proven worthy by a long and arduous initiation are given access to its secrets. Like a newly initiated member of secret society, David keeps the secret of the society safe in fear of losing his newly won honor. The logic at work here is that if everyone knew all the secrets of transforming oneself into a middle-class gentleman then the value of being a gentleman would be lessened.

It is not only through recounting David’s actions that we see David Copperfield exploring the efficacy of the various routes into the middle class. In the character of Uriah Heep, the novel provides David with a companion who illustrates the ineffectiveness of alternative paths to the middle class. Uriah, in his pursuit of respectability through economic means becomes David’s double. Both in his body and in his actions, Uriah highlights the vulgarizing influence of the cash nexus. His myopic obsession with economic advancement to the exclusion of everything else allows no time for the cultivation of taste, sentiment, personal deportment, and morality that are, at least in the novel’s view, the hallmarks of a middle-class gentleman. Uriah’s fate at the end of
the novel serves to confirm the correctness of David’s choices of eschewing rising into the middle class only through economic means. Unlike David who has learned to discipline his undisciplined heart and to cultivate the better parts of his nature and talents, Uriah has given free reign to his desires in a way that confirms his vulgarity. In doing so, he has given notice that his vulgarity is more than just skin deep; he remains the monstrous “freak” who threatens the social order (Moretti 201). Uriah’s vulgarity is so deeply rooted that it is able to subvert even the admirable trait of humility into a grotesque caricature of itself.

That Uriah learned the vulgarized version of humility that he uses as weapon from his father speaks to the very real differences between himself and David. While both are orphans and importantly orphans of socially marginal fathers, the fate their fathers left them to differs substantially. Despite his obvious foolishness in marrying a child bride and naming a small country cottage as if it were a country estate, David’s father did have the character to set aside enough money to look after his widow and orphan (though he showed, in Lady Bracknell’s view, the bad taste in dying young and leaving an orphan). Such is not the case with Uriah’s father. He failed to adequately provide for his widow and young son, leaving his widow to spend the rest of her days in a charity house. This failure to provide for his family’s fate is indicative of Uriah’s father being possessed of, as Samuel Smiles makes clear in *Thrift*, the most heinous of character flaws.¹⁹

That Uriah, unlike so many other fictional Victorian villains, is not exiled to the continent or the colonies hints at the danger he still poses to David. Uriah’s continued presence in England reminds David of the precariousness of his own position if he ever
strays from the cultural high ground he has claimed. Uriah serves for David and the rest of society as the embodiment of the dangerousness and vulgarity of socially ambitious lower-middle-class figures and the potential threat they pose to middle-class society unless they are successfully co-opted or contained. Uriah Heep, has after all, attempted to defraud the Bank of England, an act that threatens, at least symbolically, to destabilize the very foundations of British commerce and power. This is in addition to his assaults on the domestic bastion of middle-class society—the family and the domestic space—by using blackmail to force Agnes to marry him. Uriah’s presence serves to remind David that, like all protagonists of *Bildungsromane*, the question of his fitness for inclusion in the middle class is always open to question.

It is not just Uriah’s presence that serves as a warning to David. In his speech to the assembled worthies, Littimer, now prisoner “Twenty Eight,” attempts to implicate David in the crimes Littimer and Steerforth committed. Littimer is reminding David and all those present that for all of David’s outward appearances he is just as suspect as any prisoner in Mr. Creakle’s house of rehabilitation. Littimer’s condemnation of David is worth quoting at length:

‘there is a gentleman present who was acquainted with me in my former life. It may be profitable to that gentleman to know, sir, that I attribute my past follies, entirely to having lived a thoughtless life in the service of young men; and to having allowed myself to be led by them into weaknesses, which I had not the strength to resist. I hope that gentleman will take warning, sir, and will not be offended at my freedom. It is for his good. [. . .]. I hope he may repent of all the wickedness and sin to which he has been a party.’ (833)

Littimer, who had been the facilitator of much wrong-doing now takes up the mantle of the accuser. By obliquely pointing out what he perceives to be David’s shortcomings,
Littimer is serving as spokesperson for the established middle class. Littimer does so by shifting the blame for his actions away from any inherent or learned badness in himself to the “follies” and machinations of “young men” from the middle class and those who slavishly follow them. It is telling that Littimer uses the plural “men” to refer to the crimes of Steerforth. By doing so, he is attempting to implicate David in the ruining of little Em'ly. Littimer implies that he is imprisoned not for his own crimes but rather for David’s. David, so Littimer reasons, is doubly suspect. Condemned throughout the early parts of the novel by Littimer the gentleman’s man for not being born into the established middle class, David now finds himself condemned by Littimer the prisoner for being complicit in his corruption at the hands of Steerforth and for being complicit in the crimes and deceits of Steerforth. The message to those present is, “beware of the potential contagion in your midst.” Uriah Heep drives home the point that David’s past makes him ineligible for membership in the middle class by saying, “you was violent to me yourself, Mr. Copperfield. Once, you struck me a blow in the face” (834). By highlighting David’s loss of temper and his proclivity for physical violence, Uriah is attempting to call into question David’s claims to be a middle-class gentleman. Uriah, then asserts that the “affliction” David has suffered in the death of Dora is proof of his unfitness for middle-class life and is a sign that David should be imprisoned and rehabilitated under the Creakle method.

The logic at work here is that as long as people like Uriah Heep and Littimer exist and as long as David remains unmarried David’s status is open to question. Franco Moretti argues that the role of villains like Uriah Heep and Littimer is to “‘force’” the
narrative to continue “generating” events (201). David’s subsequent marriage to Agnes cements once and for all his place in the middle class and allows the novel to end with the question of David’s status settled. The disruption of the social order represented by Uriah’s attempts to force a marriage with Agnes is forever precluded by David’s marriage to her. It is this final act that transforms David from potentially a threatening figure to defender of the status quo (Moretti 201). It is through marrying Agnes that David prevents the villains Uriah Heep and Littimer from forcing the narrative to continue and in doing so earns the right to be the hero of his own story. Further the marriage and the ensuing happiness it produces marks “the end of becoming” for David (Moretti 23, emphasis in original). David no longer has a desire to change or become something different. He has achieved all that he had hoped to achieve. David has achieved what Arnold would call “perfection.” Yet, as Moretti notes, David’s and Agnes’ marriage does not represent a retreat from the world but rather serves to give notice to the world at large of David’s “inner harmony” and his embrace “of the role and symbolic value of work” as defined by middle-class society (24). The marriage fully integrates David into the social world by uniting the two competing yet complementary underpinnings of the Bildungsroman: the drive “towards individuality” and interiority that is associated with it and the drive towards “normality” (Moretti 16). David, through his act of authorship expresses his individuality and interiority and through his marriage with Agnes internalizes the social norms of middle-class society. In doing so, he becomes a bulwark against the forces that threaten to disrupt the social norms upon which middle-class society is based.
The Dickensian template, with its deployment of the *Bildungsroman* is characterized by a concern with the question of social mobility and with the social development of a male protagonist who rises in the social hierarchy by becoming first a writer, then an author, and who is inspired to achieve the status of a middle-class gentleman by the love for and devotion to a woman who he sees as the embodiment of middle-class values. The Dickensian protagonist is able to develop the individualized interiority and the internalized adherence to middle-class social norms that allows him to become non-threatening. Further, as Robin Gilmour notes, the protagonist does not so much transform himself but rather discovers or uncovers his true self and social position (Gilmour 101). That is, despite his humble beginning, the Dickensian protagonist through perseverance, industriousness, self-help, etc. is able to reveal his true genius and noble nature. The Dickensian model thus becomes the answer to the literary problem of the lower middle class because it maps out onto existing Victorian myths about who and what they were and were becoming as a society. Yet, the Dickensian template does more than just mirror Victorian’s attitudes and myths about themselves and their society. It helps to create those attitudes and myths.

More specifically, the Dickensian template with its investment in the idea of social mobility achieved through doing the right kind of work mirrors and actively constructs the Victorian *mentalité* of industriousness, perseverance, and self-improvement that finds its ultimate (and some would argue most vulgar expression) in the works of Samuel Smiles. Smiles’s books like *Self-Help*, *Thrift*, and *Character* serve as important monuments to the Victorian fetishization of personal achievement and
growth. Deploying as they do a genre that has at their core the idea of personal
development and achievement novels like David Copperfield operate at the center of the
ongoing construction and valorization of industriousness, perseverance, self-
 improvement, etc. as means to rising socially. Casting his protagonist as an author allows
Dickens to uncover and participate in the construction of a more stable and culturally
rewarding path into the middle class, one devoid of the vulgarization and precariousness
that accompanies economic advancement.

The extent to which the Dickensian template became the answer to the literary
problem of the lower middle class can be seen by turning again to how other authors
deploy it. Despite the vast differences in their conceptions of realism and Trollope’s own
disavowal of Dickens’s talents as a writer of fiction, Trollope in The Three Clerks
follows the Dickensian template for social mobility. He does so by having Charley Tudor
achieve his success through the use of his pen. Charley achieves that most elusive of
Victorian goals, respectability, and through it the permission to court and marry his
beloved Katie Woodward not by years of toiling, scrimping, and slowly advancing
through the hierarchy of the civil service, but rather by writing sensational and
melodramatic stories for cheap newspapers and eventually novels. Like David
Copperfield, Charley progresses from simplistic forms of literary activity to more
complex ones and along the way accumulates enough cultural capital to become middle
class. Through such efforts, he earns the respect of his friends and family and the undying
love of Katie Woodward. It is Charley’s success that saves the Woodwards from the
“disgrace” of Alaric’s embezzlement (437). That Charley begins the novel as the most
suspect of the three clerks in the novel and becomes by the end the most respectable of middle-class gentlemen is testament to the transformative power of authorship.

As in David Copperfield, Trollope’s novel provides us with an examination of alternative paths into the middle class. Like David Copperfield, The Three Clerks validates Charley’s path into the middle class via authorship and like Dickens’s novel, Trollope’s novel explores alternative paths into the middle class only to find them wanting. Thus, Alaric Tudor’s path of achievement, advancing in the civil service hierarchy through cultivating friendships with those possessed of an abundance of “respectability,” by investing his salary in questionable stocks, and other “ambitious schemes” is by the end of the novel shown to be the route to neither happiness nor respectability (18) According to the logic of the novel, such a course of action leads to “poverty, scorn, [. . .] bad repute[,]” and exile to Australia (531). In the end, Alaric is a pitiable and tragic figure while the novel holds Charley up to its readers as the kind of man one should emulate. In contrasting these two paths to respectability and gentlemanliness in this manner, The Three Clerks is following the Dickensian model with regard to questions of how to represent the lower middle class and how to provide for the upward mobility of its members.

By taking as their central question of how to provide for the social mobility of lower-middle-class figures, both novels preclude the notion of having their protagonists remain lower middle class. As Franco Moretti argues, the role of the hero protagonist in the English Bildungsroman serves not to disrupt the social order but to restore normality (199 passim). The Bildungsroman, with its emphasis on the social development of the
protagonist, precludes authors from portraying lower-middle-class life as an end in itself. Rather, the genre disciplines the author into having a striving protagonist who rises above his ordinary station and make something of himself, i.e., to become middle class. By striving through normative means to become middle class, the protagonist paradoxically disarms the social “threat from below” that characterizes the Bildungsroman (Moretti 200). Unlike a Uriah Heep or Alaric Tudor who plot and scheme, the David Copperfields and Charley Tudors of the world rise through industriousness, perseverance, and self-improvement. The Dickensian model results in novels that restrict the types of representations of the lower middle class seen by critics and readers as viable. Combined with the Bildungsroman’s emphasis on the social development of its protagonist the realist novel is predicated on the notion that being lower-middle class is an affliction to be cured of or a plight to be escaped.22

Shan Bullock23 in 1907’s Robert Thorne24 has his own lower-middle-class clerk shrug off the last vestiges of his clerkiness by emigrating to New Zealand and by becoming an author. However, Bullock does color his iteration of the Dickensian template with a bit of cynicism born of the realities of the times. In the novel’s framing epistle written to the fictional Robert Thorne by the real Shan Bullock, Bullock explains to Robert why he has attached his name to the work,

[w]riting a book, you see, is not everything: in fact, as many besides ourselves have discovered to their cost, it often is eventually nothing. What hits publishers in the eye, [. . .] is the combined assault of reputation and a name. And you, my dear Thorne, had only behind you the reputation of a Twopenny Clerk joined with the name of a Sixteenth-century Seaman. (vii)
Here we see Bullock acknowledging that the business of book publishing like so many other aspects of Victorian culture is closed to the lower middle class. It is only through the intercession of an already established figure that the fictional Robert is able to attain the status of an author. Rather than being a cynical replacement of one name for the other on the part of Bullock, the swapping of names is presented to the readers as being consistent with the wishes of the fictional Robert, “I have yielded to your solicitude and put my own name [...] on the title-page. Our book, then.” (vii). Thus, we have the real author Bullock filling the role of the educator or mentor who mediates between the aspiring protagonist and society found in so many Bildungsroman texts. In filling this role, Bullock is able to help Robert find his proper place in society by serving as both an educator and as a buffer.

While Thorne ends the novel as a colonial farmer, he gains, if not respectability per se, a certain amount of the manliness that he had come to feel was lacking in his life as civil service clerk. The dual professions of farmer and author allow Robert to rise in the eyes of the world. As a farmer, he is no longer an enervated clerk but is engaged in manly work. As an author, he is no longer a half-educated, ill-cultured clerk only fit for transcribing the thoughts of others, but is giving voice to whatever genius he may have. In both cases, Thorne achieves a degree of independence. He is no longer working or living at the behest of others, but is free to make his own economic decisions and give voice to his own cultural presence. Further, Thorne’s insistence that Bullock appear as the author of the text paradoxically validates his cultural presence and status as an author given the state of the literary field at the end of the nineteenth century and through the
early years of the twentieth century. As Peter McDonald argues in *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practices, 1880-1914* the period was increasing characterized by a rejection of texts seen as commercial ventures or aimed at popular and thus vulgar audience.²⁵

George Moore’s 1884 and Grant Allen’s 1892 protests against what they saw as the restrictive policies of the circulating libraries are at their core pleas to free writers of fiction from the restrictions of the market.²⁶ Writing in the December 10th 1884 issue of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Moore calls for authors to fight for their “freedom from the illiterate censorship of a librarian” and vulgar tradesman otherwise known as the proprietor of Mudie’s Circulating Library (2). Both writers argue that fiction should be judged by artistic criteria rather than commercial or moral ones. Arguments of this sort fit with a growing movement that felt authors should give free reign to their genius and avoid debasing themselves by writing for the market. Moore’s attack on the circulating libraries was published within months of Henry James’s “The Art of Fiction” appearing in *Longman’s Magazine* in which James urged fiction writers to be true to nature.²⁷ Moore’s essay addresses what he sees as shortcomings in James’s thesis by addressing the structural constraints authors faced in adhering to their artistic goals of writing texts that breathed with reality. Yet, Moore’s views were not universally accepted. George Gissing writing in response to Moore’s essay argues that it is not so much the system that is in need of change but authors, calling for “literary men with power and courage to produce original books” who are not afraid of “do[ing] their best lest they should damage their popularity, and consequently their income” (“Letter” 2). For all of their differences,
these essays reflect a late-century concern over the influence of the market on the production of literary works.

This concern was expressed by a wide range of commentators throughout the 1890s. E. Lynn Linton writing in the first issue of the *New Review* expresses little sympathy for those writers who “barter” their genius or their “sense of light for money, fame, position, [and] place” or who “prostitute” themselves and their work in order “to sait [sic] the debased taste of the purse bearers and applauders” (78). Given such sentiments in an early issue of the magazine it should come as no surprise that in 1897 that the *New Review* in “A Warning to Novelists” heralds the emergence of writers who view fiction as “an art in itself” rather than a means of making money, attaining social position, or “conveying moral and historical evidence” (314). This ongoing debate illustrates is that increasingly large numbers of authors were rejecting market-driven conceptions of authorship and along with them the notion that an author should do everything possible to get his name before his readers in order to ensure large sales. This change would bode ill for the Dickensian model of using authorship as a means of economic and social advancement.

In allowing Bullock to lay claim to the novel and thus eliding his act of authorship, the fictional Thorne signals his understanding of how the literary field operates and as such stakes an even larger claim to cultural sophistication. In denying his authorship or rather the publicity that comes along with it, Thorne is telling readers that what is important to him is not fame, fortune, and social position but rather the expression of his genius. His willingness to engage in such an act of denial highlights his
independence and again serves to bolster his claim to cultural legitimacy. He is not writing like so many to earn a few pence or to gain social prestige, but he is writing to give vent to his soul. Yet again, in his insistence that Bullock, a recognized author, “sell” the text to publishers, Thorne displays an even deeper understanding of the nuances of the literary field with its competing injunctions against calling too much attention to oneself for fear of appearing too market driven and the need for some level of recognition to drive sales.

Thorne’s outcomes—he is both a farmer and author—allow him to combine both intellectual and physical labor. In doing so, Thorne is finally able to declare himself possessed of an acceptable form of muscular masculinity. Like many heroes of Victorian adventure stories, Thorne proves his masculinity in the untamed colonies. While he does not battle savage lions or Amazon queens, agricultural labor does allow him to be more than “a—little pen-driver” (220) and allows him to take his place along side the “omnibus driver, [. . .] bricklayer, [and] navy [sic] digging yellow clay from a trench” who “were men, and looked men, and led men’s lives” (220). That Thorne is able to exchange his negative comparison for a more positive one vis-à-vis the male working-class body speaks of the “progress” he has made. Yet, in comparing his lower middle class body to those of manual laborers Thorne betrays the “timidity” and “embarrassment of someone who is uneasy in his body” that is characteristic of the lower middle class (Bourdieu Distinction 207). The text deconstructs itself. Thus, even while being a marker of Thorne’s successful social mobility, his comparison of himself to the working-class body also works as a “desperate attempt[. . .] to reappropriate an alienated being—for others”
and thus points to his remaining an “objectified body” rather than an independent self-contained consciousness (Bourdieu Distinction 207). As such, he is defined not by his own perceptions of who and what he is, but is still subject to the “collective perception” (Bourdieu Distinction 207). Thus, for all his progress Thorne remains marginalized. This continued marginalization of Thorne illustrates that as the century wore on authors, readers, and critics began to have doubts about the transformative power of authorship.

Beyond using authorship to effect Thorne’s transformation, the novel endeavors to draw a picture of lower-middle-class life that is both sympathetic and illustrative of why it is something that even men of middling talents like Thorne must escape from if they are ever to have any hope of giving full reign to whatever genius and ability they have. The novel for all its positive representations of the lower middle class argues that it is only by escaping the confines of the lower middle class that men and women like Thorne will find fulfillment as individuals. As such, much of the plot of Robert Thorne\(^\text{28}\) revolves around the lack of opportunity for economic and social advancement provided by the civil service and other lower-middle-class professions. The novel is also permeated by a sense of entrapment, even if that entrapment is represented as fairly pleasant at times. In depicting the hardships of lower-middle-class life as pleasant the novel engages in a discourse of the “taste of the necessary” in which choices imposed by economic necessity are transmuted into what those making them see as aesthetic choices (Bourdieu Distinction 372-81). This “taste of the necessary” drives Robert’s decision to enter the Civil Service in the hope that it will provide him with a stable income and a
fixed social position at the minimum. He sees it as the best he can hope for and envisions the life of a Civil Service clerk as pleasant despite the evidence to the contrary.

In order to achieve this goal, he engages upon an independent course of study and then moves to South London to attend a polytechnical college to prepare for the Civil Service exam. Like David Copperfield, Robert Thorne highlights the limitations of education as a route into the middle class. Despite months of cramming and intensive classroom work Robert fails to make the cut on the Civil Service exam. On a subsequent try, he just barely qualifies for a post, placing 86th. As a result, Robert wins a place in the Tax Office. As he prepares to take his place at the office, Robert imagines a bright future:

I should strive in my office and gain reward for good service. Soon I should be able to hold my head as high as any Bertie Willard; have clothes fine as his, have money of my own; after a while, who knew, have a house somewhere, with steps to the door and mahogany furniture in the rooms and gilt mirrors standing behind ormolu clocks. A self-made man. (30)

Here Thorne falls victim to the kind of elevated expectations of social mobility satirized in Gilbert & Sullivan’s HMS Pinafore in the person of Sir Joseph who transforms himself from “office boy” to “junior clerk” to “ruler of the Queen’s Navee!” by diligently performing the most mundane of tasks. The appearance of Somerset House and that of his fellow clerks quickly disabuses Thorne of such fantasies of economic and social advancement:

I found myself in a large drab-painted hall, with a flagged floor, a high corniced ceiling, [. . .]. By the door a line of red fire buckets hung under a coiled hose and a row of numbered bells. [. . .]. the air was heavy with an odour of dust and Irish stew. Presently a clerk, wearing a shabby office jacket, and carrying a novel, a magazine, and a copy of The Times, and a bundle of papers came down the stairs, [. . .]. (34)
The very atmosphere of Somerset House reeks of depression, inertia, shabbiness, narrowness, and poverty.

The more Thorne learns about the Tax Office and the more he realizes that no amount of education or industriousness will elevate him beyond his current economic or social position. Thorne’s first office companion, Oliver, notes the limitations imposed upon Thorne by his low exam score, “‘[i]f you’d been a bit higher up they might have given you a chance somewhere’” (40). Oliver is equally quick to inform Thorne of the lowly ranking of the Tax Office in the civil service hierarchy, “‘[i]t is one of the worst’” (40). Thus, rather than being a place where one can become a self-made man the Civil Service and in particular the Tax Office is the type of situation where “‘[a] man gets no chance’” to improve himself or his position (40). Unlike Sir Joseph, Thorne will never become “the Ruler of the Queen’s Navee!” let alone anything other than a lowly “twopenny clerk” as long as he works at the Tax Office. Thorne, like so many other young lower-middle class men who followed the path of education and industriousness in the hopes that it would lead them to homes with “mahogany furniture” and “gilt mirrors” finds that these supposed tickets to the middle class lead instead to hallways reeking of “Irish stew” and offices furnished with “thin and shabby” carpets (36-7).30

Condemned by his lack of formal education, his low exam score, and his lack of social connections to a life as a human copy-machine, Thorne finds hope in courting the beautiful sister of his poly-technical school mate Bertie Willard. However, just as Spenlow forbids David from courting Dora, Mr. Willard, a pompous factory owner, forbids Thorne from having any contact with Nell because of Thorne’s uncertain and
unpromising future. Anxious to marry Nell by winning the approval of Mr. Willard, Thorne submits himself to a short-lived program of self-improvement in order to prove that he is “more than a twopenny clerk” (123).

Thorne’s salvation comes not by proving his worthiness to Mr. Willard, but through Willard’s sudden death brought about by the bankruptcy of the Ajax Insurance Company of which he is a director. The bankruptcy and death leaves the Willard family in much reduced financial straits. Here again we see the extent to which Robert Thorne follows the template laid down by David Copperfield. Mr. Willard’s fate mirrors that of Mr. Spenlow’s in that both are exposed as hypocrites and snobs. Like Spenlow, Willard, whose factory produces shoes of the cheapest manufacture, highlights the precariousness of rising into the middle class through economic means. Unlike the cultivation of character, taste, sentiment, or artistic and intellectual achievement, pounds, shillings, and pence can quickly disappear. Willard, abandoned by his money and the respectability it brought him, kills himself with worry, drink, and smoke within the space of a single evening. Just like the cheap shoes with cardboard soles that his factory churns out, Willard wilts away in inclement weather.

Yet, for all of the novel’s hewing to the Dickensian model of the Bildungsroman we do see Bullock modifying the model as a result of the different literary and cultural conditions in which it is written and published. Bullock is forced by these conditions to qualify the extent to which his protagonist can attain the status of an intellectual or artistic gentleman. Robert is only able to attain this status by emigrating and, perhaps most importantly, through the direct intercession of the established author Shan Bullock.
While this last aspect, the intercession of an established author, is implied in Dickens telling the story of David Copperfield—it is David’s story presented to the reading public under the name of Charles Dickens—it is just that, only implied. In Robert Thorne, Bullock makes the need for intercession explicit and part of the story and thereby calling attention to the lack of cultural capital possessed by figures like David and Robert.

However, even in this aspect the novel cannot completely negate the overall thrust of the narrative, which is that even the lowest, least manly, and most poorly educated member of the lower middle class can attain some degree of cultural respectability for both himself, his fellow clerks and shop boys by becoming an author. In becoming authors figures like Robert Thorne and Charley Tudor bring public recognition to their value as cultural actors as well bringing recognition to their fellow clerks, shop assistants, teachers, etc. I say this because despite the frequent attacks on clerks and the negative portrayals of lower-middle-class life in Bullock’s novel, one finds large sections where the way clerks live and the struggles they face presented in a sympathetic light. Thorne, for all his moments of disgust with the office, finds that “Nell and I were entirely happy” (172) and claims “[p]overty did not make life grey” (173). It is the joys of home that make his “jerry-built home,” (280) “clothes,” (249) and the social limits of clerks like himself, or rather the limits imposed upon them, bearable. Even if Thorne’s sympathetic accounts of lower-middle-class life are little more than making virtues out of necessities and thus work as a regulating or containing device their eloquent calls to see clerks as human beings worthy of respect and sympathy trump their conservative potential.
Passages like the following force readers to set aside at least temporarily their prejudices against the lower middle class:

A Twopenny clerk. Why yes. Still he, with all the others, is to be respected. He is doing his best. He is cheerful, manly in his small way, hopeful, amazingly contented. Also he has a soul, this figure that I see in the crowd, and he has an ideal, and always he cherishes that enabling good thing, the love of a good woman. (138)

Here, with his emphasis on the joys of home life Robert Thorne mirrors David Copperfield. Just as dreams of Dora and eventually Agnes provide David with the motivation to become a gentleman and then find contentment in that station, so too does Robert Thorne find inspiration and contentment in the love of Nell. His love for Nell and the happy home the two create keeps Thorne going through the lean years of poverty and privation. Thorne’s desire to make Nell even happier and to save his children from the fate he has suffered leads him to the decision to quit his post at the Tax Office, emigrate to New Zealand, and pen his autobiography. Further, this paean to domestic life goes against the stereotype commonly found in fiction and other forms of popular entertainment like music hall sketches that depict lower-middle-class domestic life as cramped, quarrelsome, and for men effeminizing. It is in the domestic that Thorne like David Copperfield and Charley Tudor before him finds the inspiration and strength to elevate himself from the station to which fate had seemed to condemn him. Further, by embracing the domestic, Robert Thorne highlights the non-threatening nature of characters like Thorne. Unlike Uriah Heep or Alaric Tudor, Thorne does not plot or scheme to attain his goals. He is shown to be willing to rise, if at all, only through non-disruptive channels.
It was not just literary figures who saw promise in the Dickensian model of social mobility through authorship and other cultural means. In William Kent’s 1938 memoir of his late-Victorian lower-middle-class upbringing and life, *The Testament of a Victorian Youth: An Autobiography*, we see Kent eager to lay claim to the status of a middle-class gentleman through a variety of means. Among them is his “conversion to the gospel of cricket” (57). Kent also signals his eligibility by abandoning the extreme evangelical Methodism of his father. Kent then goes to note his position of responsibility earned through years of diligent work at the London County Council—placing fifteenth out of 500 examinees on the entrance exam and third in penmanship (159-61)—, and most importantly his ongoing attempts to become an author culminating in writing and publishing his autobiography. All of these are attempts on Kent’s part to illustrate his explicit movement away from any hint of his lower-middle-class origins.

As part of this project, Kent focuses on his increasing literary skills. He relates how he began writing short stories and book reviews in his spare time as a young man (159), writing the sports column for his father’s short-lived newspaper *The Battersea Mercury* (169-70), founding and editing a privately printed journal *Moocher* and literary club while at Kennington Road Evening School, and culminating in authoring and publishing his autobiography (227-30). Again, these experiences are intended to illustrate to readers the extent of Kent’s transformation from a non-conformist lower-middle-class man to that of a cultured middle-class scholar gentleman. Where the former is characterized by narrowness of thought and ambition, the latter is characterized by open mindedness and expansiveness of both thought and experience. Kent’s experiences are
intended to impress upon the reader the sense of growth and development so central to
the notion of the middle-class scholar gentleman and the literary Bildungsroman. Central
to this development is writing and authorship. Further, Kent’s experiences highlight the
extent to which the Dickensian template influenced not just literary representations of the
lower middle class, but the perceptions and aspirations of real individuals. The
Dickensian template becomes a guide both for other authors and for young lower-middle-
class men authoring their own lives.

It is in Kent’s autobiography that we see the ultimate, though by the time of its
publication residual, expression of the Dickensian template or answer to the literary
problem of the lower middle class. This template, as I have shown above, is predicated on
the idea that being lower middle class was a fate to escape from at all costs. The template
deploys authorship instead of economic means to effect this escape because of the unique
cultural position authors began to hold in the Victorian period. Combined with power of a
genre like the Bildungsroman to discipline authors, critics, and readers into expecting
significant social upward mobility by a protagonist, the socially constructed elevation of
the author provides a powerful lens through which Victorians could imagine the strivings
of some elements of the lower middle class as safe.

As the following chapter shows, the Dickensian template did not go unchallenged.
In the last decades of the century literary tastes did change as a result of changes in the
structure of the literary field and authors did emerge that challenged the preeminence of
the Dickensian template, even if while incorporating some of its aspects. Among the
changes that allowed writers and publishers to produce texts that did not hew to the
Dickensian template were the rise of the single-volume novel accompanied by the serialization of novels in newspapers, the decision in 1894 by the circulating libraries Mudie’s and W. H. Smith’s to stop purchasing three-volume novels, increasing economic prosperity, the rejection of popularity and sales as the mark of success by many authors and critics, and an ever increasing number of readers as a result of the 1870 Forester Education Act. The increase in the number of readers in the wake of compulsory education meant a new diversity in the overall readership both in terms of taste and purchasing power.

However, the changes that did occur and the extent to which authors like George Gissing felt compelled to debunk the Dickensian template highlight the pervasiveness and influence it had and continues to have in our understanding of the lower middle class. The Dickensian template for representing the lower middle class premised on a male protagonist striving to escape his lower-middle-class upbringing via authorship was successful for so long because it participated in the ongoing construction of Victorian notions about collective and individual progress, self-improvement, and the idea that a natural aristocracy of men of letters would organically emerge through perseverance, struggle, and careful self cultivation. The ongoing process of re-imagining the gentleman as a man who did some kind of labor, though importantly not physical labor, was also key to the success of the Dickensian template. As authors, the protagonists of these works engaged in the kind of intellectual and cultural work that was the hallmark of the middle-class Victorian gentleman. The success of the template was further supported by the
structure of a literary field dominated by the circulating library that placed familiarity of
plot and character and mass-appeal above artistic innovation.
By *Bildungsroman* I mean a novel focusing on the cultural, economic, and psychic development of an individual that often includes autobiographical elements. As Patricia Alden notes, central to the genre is the notion of individual selfhood achieved through growth and social experience as an education which forms, and sometimes deforms that self. The projected resolution of this process is some kind of adjustment to society. Wherever it appeared, the *Bildungsroman* was associated with bourgeois humanism, with faith in progress and with the value of the individual. (1) Alden also notes that in the *Bildungsroman* “ideas about the worth of ordinary men and women and the legitimacy of social mobility [. . .] found a literary voice” (1). Both Jerome Buckley’s *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974 and Franco Moretti’s *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, London: Verso; New Left Books, 1987 have extensive discussions of the genre and its literary and cultural roles in the nineteenth century.

2 This conception of the establishment of Dickensian template owes a great deal to Frederic Jameson’s notion of the “Dickensian paradigm which for so long furnished later or lesser novelists with a solution to a host of narrative and ideological problems” (132). While the paradigm that Jameson sees other novelists working from is the use of the impossibly “childlike heroine,” the basic idea that Dickens, or as Jameson points out “the idea of Dickens,” exerts a strong influence on subsequent narratives is compelling (132). Thus, this chapter and the one that follows is in many ways an extending of Jameson’s idea of Dickensian paradigm and the relationship between Dickens and Gissing. However, unlike Jameson I find the reasons for Dickens influence and Gissing’s rejection of the Dickensian template less in the personal makeup of the authors involved and more the result of larger cultural and economic forces.

3 For more on the construction of the Victorian middle-class gentleman see Robin Gilmour’s *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*. See also James Eli Adams’ *Dandies and Desert Saints* for more on the intersections of the idea of the gentleman with the Arnoldian man of letters and muscular Christian masculinity.

4 Throughout this paragraph, I am using the words literary and literature in the broadest possible sense to include all forms of prose, drama, poetry, and even journalism. I do so based on how many Victorians viewed the term. *The National Review* in 1892 defined
“literature as meaning imaginative, descriptive, rhetorical, writing of all kinds” and notes that to think of journalism as something different “is absurd” (477 [A London Editor. “Authors, Individual and Corporate.” The National Review. 19 : 476-487]). While the need to buttress an all encompassing definition of literature illustrates that such an inclusive definition was not universally accepted, it also illustrates that it did have its defenders. Further, the only really overreaching claim that the author in The National Review seems to be making is the inclusion of journalism as literature and it is unclear exactly what he means by journalism. Does he include short notices of court cases and turf reports or does he mean instead longer pieces found in magazines like The National Review or Blackwoods, etc. dealing with issues of foreign affairs, domestic politics, art, etc?


6 In his introduction to Matthew Arnold James Gribbler argues that Arnold only reluctantly took up the cause of English literature over that of Classical literature. He did so only because faced with the prospect of no literature at all being including in many educational schemes and the inclusion of English literature he chose the lesser of two evils (18). [Gribble, James. Ed. and Intro. Matthew Arnold. Educational Thinkers Series. New York: Macmillan, 1967, 9-32.]

7 Lubbock offered up a revised list for the Pall Mall Gazette that included Adam Bede, David Copperfield, The Pickwick Papers, Pride and Prejudice, Emma, Vanity Fair, and all of Scott’s novels (Pall Mall Gazette 100 24).

8 Franco Moretti argues that the Bildungsroman constructs its narratives around a “villain” who “stands for social mobility” and thus becomes “perceived” by the normative characters of the novel “as a taxonomic anomaly: a freak, a ‘monster’” (200-201).

9 Arnold in Culture and Anarchy argues that one of the outcomes or goals of culture is the “perfection” of not just the individual but of the whole human race and its store of knowledge and appreciation of the beautiful (32-34 and passim—Yale UP ed.). Arnold throughout Culture and Anarchy places a great emphasis not on the physical or mechanical aspects of progress but on the spiritual and moral progress that can be attained through culture. Arnold reminds his readers that Britain’s greatness lies not in its coal but in its culture, in the output of its authors, playwrights, philosophers, men of letters, and its craftsmen (Culture 35-6).

10 Given the accepted practices at the time Trollope would have received his payment upon delivery of the manuscript.
Gettman cites operating expenses of £1496 6s. 9d. for a six month period ending on September 30 and the publication of seventeen first editions and sixteen reprints.

Priced at 31s.6d. three-volume novels were too expensive for most households to afford and nearly all the copies of published three-volume novels were purchased by the circulating libraries.

Smith Elder & Co. paid Trollope £1,000 for Framley Parsonage to be serialized in Cornhill Magazine and then as a three-volume novel by the firm (90, 108 Letters Trollope). Mary Hammer argues that it was not until the publication of Framely Parsonage that Trollope became a truly recognized novelist (31-32).

Royal A. Gettman in A Victorian Publisher: A Study of the Bentley Papers (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1960) notes that publishers often did make suggestions to authors regarding characters, plots, and settings, though he goes on to note that such suggestions were usually pressed upon or accepted by mere writers like Sheridan Le Fanu and not authors who, like Charlotte Brontë, went on to become canonical staples. See in particular pages 154-164. Trollope himself appeared more than willing to make changes to Barchester Towers (1857) to satisfy his publisher William Longman (46-7 [The Letters of Anthony Trollope, Vol. 1: 1835-1870. Ed. N. John Hall with Niina Burgis. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1983.]). As a result, Trollope may have felt that bowing to his publisher’s demands somehow impinged upon his artistic freedom and thus in writing his next novel created in Charley a version of himself that was able to resist such demands.

Throughout this and the following sections of the essay Arnold argues that in order to improve all aspects of British life, from the design of its cities; its conduct of domestic affairs; its management of its empire especially Ireland; etc., the education of the middle class needs to be improved by the establishment of well-conducted “public schools” (“The Incompatibles.” 283 passim). It is, for Arnold, the only way to “transform our middle class and its social civilisation” (“The Incompatibles.” 284).


We may of course also compare David’s mastery of shorthand writing and implicitly the ideas he is transcribing with Mr. Dick’s and Sophy’s work as copy clerks. One requires the mere copying of a verbal text while one requires the transcribing, transformation, and translation of a text. The latter requiring more intellectual muscle than the former.
I do not mean to imply that authorship is not work. Clearly, it is as Betsy Trotwood notes, “I never thought, when I used to read books, what work it was to write them,” but it is the kind of work that a gentleman does and work with “its own charms” (838 OWC). For David the “charms” of writing are not merely pecuniary but cultural.

For a discussion of Samuel Smiles and his view that failing to make provisions for one’s widow and orphans is one of the worst sins a man can commit see Chapter One.


This reading is influenced in part by Helen Chappell’s observation that “[t]he one class you do not belong to, and are not proud of at all, is the lower middle class” (qtd. in Felski 34). The “you” in Chapell’s quote and in Rita Felski’s reading of the quote is anyone who is lower middle class and who is attempting to pass as middle class, especially those attempting to pass as middle class through academic or cultural means.

Bullock was born in Ulster in 1866 and died in 1935. His real name was John William Bullock He was himself a Civil Service clerk working at Somerset house. He was elected to the Irish Academy of Letters following George Moore’s death. Bullock was best known for his novels and stories about life in Ulster; Robert Thorne was his first novel not set in Ireland. The Times in its obituary noted that with Robert Thorne Bullock “made a great impression” (The Times, Thursday, Feb 28, 1935; pg. 17 “Mr. Shan F. Bullock Irish Novelist And Poet”). Bullock’s other novels include, The Cubs, The Awkward Squad, Ring o’ Rushes, By Thrasna River, The Charmer, The Barrys, Irish Pastorals, The Squires, The Red Leaguer, Dan the Dollar (Bullock vi). (find dates for other novels) The Times ends its obituary noting that Bullock was an avid cricket player and golfer, playing both well into his sixties.


For another account of Victorian authorship, the literary field, and the changes it underwent see Adrian Poole’s Gissing in Context, especially chapter four, pp 105-135.


Despite its relatively late publication date, I include Bullock’s text in this discussion of Victorian representations of the lower middle class because it is set in the late 1880s and early 1890s and because it is thoroughly Victorian in terms of style, tone, and outlook. It is a remnant of Victorian realism.

Sir Joseph does of course have other literary connections, Royal Gettman notes that Sir Joseph was modeled on W. H. Smith owner of the ubiquitous railway bookstalls and the only serious competitor to Mudie’s Select Library in the circulating library business (33).

Bullock’s literary representation of the plight faced by many Civil Service clerks appears to be fairly historically accurate as the following excerpts show,

[t]he average salary for the first-class clerks is 150∫., after an average of 14 years service. There are 15 out of this 19 [first-class clerks in his office] married, with an average of six in each family. From 150∫. deduct say 70∫. for house-rent, clothing, fuel and light, soap and cleaning articles, schooling &c. (under rather than overestimated) and it leaves 80∫., or 8 1/4d. per head per diem, for food, literature, recreation, sickness &c. [. . .]. the condition of these men [is] one continued struggle for existence. (“Civil Service Reform.” Justitia: Another Taxpayer. London Times : Wednesday, Jan 27, 1869; pg. 4). The writer goes on to make a distinction between “what are called ‘superior,’ ‘aristocratic,’ office[s]” and “less aristocratic, ‘inferior’ offices” with the latter employing the majority of clerks (Justitia: Another Taxpayer. “Civil Service Reform.” The Times : Wednesday, Jan 27, 1869; pg. 4).
CHAPTER 4
REJECTING THE DICKENSIAN TEMPLATE, THE VULGARIZATION OF
AUTHORSHIP, AND THE RETURN OF URIAH HEEP

The previous chapter analyzed and described the Dickensian template with regard to the socio-literary problematic of the lower middle class, looked at various iterations of it, and showed why it was seen by readers, writers, critics, librarians, and others as a compelling answer to the socio-literary problem of the lower middle class. Central to the Dickensian template is the premise that the protagonist must strive to escape from his or her lower-middle-class situation or must strive to keep from becoming downwardly mobile and that the best means of accomplishing this task is through becoming an author. Such a narrative was compelling because it mapped onto existing and emerging Victorian notions about self-help, perseverance, the cultivation of innate talent or genius, the development of character, and the desirability of limited social mobility. Further, there were powerful institutional forces supporting the production of novels that followed the Dickensian template. Key among these was the close relationship between publishers and circulating libraries like Mudies. These forces combined to create a literary field that encouraged and at times compelled writers to produce texts in which lower-middle-class
protagonists spend much of their time striving to break free from the bondage of their lower-middle-class existences by becoming authors or through other cultural means.

Yet, not every writer unreflectively embraced Dickens’s model of using intellectual or artistic achievement as a means of effecting social mobility. George Gissing’s *Born in Exile* (1892) in particular exhibits a great degree of skepticism about not only the efficacy of social mobility through such a route, but even expresses doubts about the whole notion of social mobility, especially for lower-middle-class figures. *Born in Exile* was proceeded by *New Grub Street* (1891) in questioning the role authorship and cultural means can play in providing a channel for social mobility. *New Grub Street* is a novel that in “map[ping] the literary crisis of the age, as literature is transformed into pure commerce” questions the newly won status of authors in Victorian society (Bar-Yosef 186). In both of these novels, there is a sustained critique of the Dickensian template. They represent the first movement away “from the Dickensian plots and stereotypes” of Gissing’s earlier work and a move towards what Fredric Jameson characterizes as “the emergence of a new paradigm from the dead weight” of Dickensian realism (129-130). The protagonists of these two novels attempt to rise through cultural means and fail in one way or another. Further, it is not merely that the protagonists fail in their attempts to become middle-class gentlemen, but that in *New Grub Street* the scheming villain, Jasper Millvain, succeeds that marks these works as indicative of a wider rejection of the Dickensian template.¹

The way *New Grub Street* represents authorship is significantly different from that of *David Copperfield*’s approach. Where *David Copperfield* elides all discussion of
the work of authorship in order to create and perpetuate the myth of authorship as an ennobling profession, New Grub Street is a “revelation of the inglorious truth about the writer’s life and work” (Sloan 86). As such, it strips away the Victorian myths surrounding authorship. In the novel, “literature has become a mere trade” and thus no more worthy of adulation or respect than any other profession or trade (Brantlinger 186). This purposeful vulgarization of authorship deconstructs the Victorian myth of authorship as a genteel profession in order to serve Gissing’s larger point that there exists no route out of the lower middle class. New Grub Street further highlights “the impossibility of making culture work in the class-harmonizing way that Arnold advocated in Culture and Anarchy” (182). That is, the two novels implicitly argue that lower-middle-class individuals can accumulate as much cultural capital as they like but they will never be able to be more than lower middle class. This is because due to their initial lack of cultural capital they will purchase through effort and denial the wrong kinds of cultural capital. Godwin Peak and Arthur Reardon both pursue and to some degree acquire residual forms of cultural capital that in turn condemn them to failure.

This is not to say that these novels represent a whole scale rejection of the Dickensian template. As Brantlinger and Jameson argue, one of the tensions at work Gissing’s novels of the 1890s is the adherence to established and residual literary practices—realism and the three volume novel—while at the same time attempting to innovate and achieve some form of artistic independence via Naturalism. Thus, we see in these novels (as is the case with most complex cultural productions) an uneasy balancing of the residual, the established, and the emergent. One residual or established practice is
the inclusion of lower-middle-class protagonists who desire to escape the lower middle class at all costs. In *Born in Exile*, Godwin Peak’s desire to escape the lower middle class is similar to that of David Copperfield, Charley Tudor, and other Dickensian characters. Much of the angst driving Godwin Peak, as the reviewer of the *Daily Chronicle* notes, arises out of his frustrated class ambitions (“Unsigned Review.” *Daily Chronicle* 199-200). The young Godwin is driven by the belief that he is “an aristocrat of nature's own making—one of the few highly favoured beings who, in despite of circumstance, are pinnacled above mankind” and he dreams of “a triumphant career; an aristocrat *de jure* might possibly become one even in the common sense did he but pursue that end with sufficient zeal.” (*BIE* 41). Jealous that his self-perceived intellectual superiority has not been rewarded with a commensurate economic and cultural position Godwin is driven to attain the position he feels he is entitled to by any means necessary, even if that means becoming a “conscious hypocrite.” (*BIE* 169). In having Peak follow such a path, the novel is consciously rejecting the Dickensian template and in doing so, engaging in what Bourdieu calls an act of position-taking of his own with regard to the literary and social problem of the lower middle class. That is, Gissing rejects the Dickensian template with hopes of clearing space in the literary field, both in terms of book sales and in terms of literary status, for his own cultural productions and thus for himself as an *author*.

In rejecting the Dickensian template by casting doubt on the efficacy of authorship as *the* route to the middle class and on the ideology of the scholar gentleman put forward by Carlyle, Arnold, and others, Gissing’s novels cast doubt more broadly on the very notion of social mobility inherent in the Dickensian iteration of the
Bildungsroman. As Jonathan Wild argues in “‘The Decently Ignoble—or, the Ignobly Decent?’: George Gissing’s Fictional Clerks,” even in his early depictions of the lower middle class Gissing realizes the impossibility of social as well as economic advancement (21). Wild goes on to note that in the character of Charles Scawthorne of 1889’s The Netherworld, Gissing creates a “spokesperson for [a] more specific frustration regarding social exclusion” and its impact on the emotional and intellectual development of young men and women from the lower middle class (22). Scawthorne’s character further personifies another of Gissing’s central concerns, “the impossibility of the exiled [the intellectual lower-middle-class] individual making a reasonable marriage match” (Wild 22). With Godwin Peak, Gissing creates a character who even more forcibly illustrates these concerns and who highlights Gissing’s sense that Victorian social structures have no place for educated and socially ambitious lower-middle-class individuals. Born in Exile ends with Godwin exiled from England, having been rejected by the Warricombes and by his lower-middle-class intellectual friends. Godwin is in the end, like his father, “powerless to obliterate the traces of his rude origin” and is thus unable to be considered a gentleman of any sort (BIE 30). He might be possessed of great intellectual gifts, but they are not enough in the face of social and economic barriers to effect any real change in his social position.

His attempts to break free from his lower-middle-class origins result in his complete rejection by nearly all segments of British society. Godwin is not rewarded with a comfortable middle-class home and a loving wife as is David Copperfield, nor is he even deemed fit for rehabilitation as is Uriah Heep. His ambitions make him wholly unfit
as any kind of Victorian subject. *Born in Exile* thus contains a hero who is also the narrative’s own “taxonomic anomaly” (Moretti 200-01). In constructing Godwin’s character in this manner, the novel crystallizes its criticisms of Victorian society’s shortcomings as it relates to the lower middle class.

Peak’s movement away from the intellectual and the artistic lies at the heart of the novel. Peak leaves his circle of autodidactic friends in London for the quasi-aristocratic world of the Warricombes when it becomes clear to him that the world represented by Earwalker and Moxey holds little if any promise of social mobility. This lack of social mobility condemns Peak to a life lived in rented lodgings exposed to the “hateful [. . .] vulgarity” of the London working classes and toiling at the chemical factory as a chemist (126). It is Peak’s abandonment of his London life and his hypocritical embrace of the Church that most confounded the *London Times* reviewer in 1892 (“Recent Novels” 18). Yet by becoming a “conscious hypocrite” Peak hopes to trade the vulgar lower-middle-class life he feels he lives for the idyllic world of the “wealthy middle class” that he feels has the power to humanize and “ma[k]e receptive of all gentle sympathies” even one of his rebellious and scornful nature (BIE 170). As a member of a marginalized emergent class, he finds great comfort in the “worn-out creed[s]” of old and established middle class families like the Warricombes (BIE 171). In justifying his actions to himself, Peak argues that the atmosphere of the established and residual rural middle class is “more beneficent, than even the mood of disinterested study” to his development.³

However, by rejecting the world of “disinterested study” for one of “conscious hypocri[sy]” Godwin unwittingly betrays his “rude origin” and gives up any chance of
truly becoming a middle-class gentleman, as the term is understood by Carlyle et al. By consciously striving after social position, Godwin marks himself as unfit for the title of a middle-class gentleman. While writers like Carlyle and Kingsley held fast to the idea that gentleman were not born in the familial sense, they did claim that men of great character were born in the sense that they were imbued with the seeds of greatness. Men, they argued, could claim the title of a gentleman or hero based on the work they accomplish or the character they exhibit. Yet, becoming a gentleman or hero was never a goal in itself, but rather the result of unconscious effort. Carlyle in his 1831 essay “Characteristics” places great deal of emphasis on the unconscious genius or hero. That is, the true hero, genius, or gentleman is unconscious of his power, his genius, or his character except to know that it is good (16 passim). As Carlyle notes, the true man of character does not set out to become one, but rather he becomes one through unconscious work, “the great, the creative, and enduring is ever a secret to itself” (18). Carlyle goes on to create a binary between the unconscious man of character and the conscious man lacking character, “Unconsciousness belongs to pure unmixed life; Consciousness to a diseased mixture” and “Unconsciousness is the sign of creation; Consciousness, at best, that of manufacture” (16). Here we see Carlyle equating unconsciousness with naturalness, goodness, and consciousness with artificiality, evil, and degeneracy. Godwin in his conscious assertions of his superiority and his plans for advancement reveals his “small[ness], barren[ness], and transient[ness]” (Carlyle, “Characteristics” 18). Yet, Godwin is conscious of this fault in himself. He purposefully conceals his ambitions from
Sidwell. He knows that appearing to lust after glory and position will unmask him for the sham that he is.

Even more damning to Godwin’s chances is that he does not abandon the world of intellectual pursuits for the marketplace in an attempt to rise by becoming rich. Such a path would be understandable and even acceptable to his Victorian peers. Rather, he attempts to rise via the Church through an act of intellectual and moral hypocrisy. It is this act of hypocrisy that dooms Peak to his fate. He is astute enough to know, just as David Copperfield discovers, that economic claims to middle-class status are precarious and tainted at best. Yet, he fails to appreciate the consequences of his actions. In a supreme act of hubris, Peak hopes for even more lofty goals than young David does. While David hopes only to become a gentleman and to marry first Dora and then Agnes, Peak dreams of becoming an aristocrat in name as well as in spirit. Elevation to the peerage could and did happen as a result of great economic success, though it carried with the taint of commerce, but for a young man of Peak’s prejudices the Church appeared to offer a much better route into the middle class or even the aristocracy. Peak’s “exalted” and “misplaced piety” for scholarship and classical learning draws him to the Church expecting it to provide him with the cultural capital he so sorely lacks (Bourdieu 84).

Like Uriah Heep, Peak is determined to rise by any means necessary; in this case “authoring” a new vision of himself that he feels will allow him easier entry into the middle class by providing him with cultural capital. Peak’s intellectual hypocrisy mirrors Uriah’s forgeries. Much like Uriah, who justifies his actions by pointing out the
shortcomings and hypocrisy of David and those like him, Peak reasons that the Church is full of “deliberate schemers from the first, ambitious but hungry natures, keen-sighted, unscrupulous” men who have chosen the Church not out of piety but out of social ambition (BIE 179). While such mirrorings might appear to argue against reading Gissing as breaking with the Dickensian template we need to remember that Born in Exile has no David to balance its transgressive anti-hero Godwin Peak. Further, even though Gissing refers to Born in Exile as Godwin Peak in a letter to his sister Ella, we should not see Godwin as a Copperfield-like character (Gissing, Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family 318).

Contemporary reviewers certainly did not see Peaks’s social ambitions as legitimate. The London Times reviewer puzzled over Peak’s act of hypocrisy, stating that “such a sudden and violent deflection from ordinary straightforwardness appears well-nigh impossible” for such “a strong, self-contained, and proud character” (“Recent Novels” 18). The reviewer goes on to puzzle over why Peak would choose the clergy over business or science. What the London Times fails to realize is that Peak is not after money or even scientific fame, but is after cultural capital and the social advancement he can purchase with it. That Peak misreads the cultural opportunities, as well as his chances to win Sidwell’s hand, available to him via the clergy points to his lack of real knowledge about how Society operates. Always the outsider, Peak misses the nuances that a man brought up in Society instinctively understands. His lack of cultural capital proves fatal.

While Peak’s experiences illustrate the scarcity of opportunities available to young lower-middle-class men and the dangers such men pose to the middle class, New
Grub Street debunks the Dickensian notion that authorship provides a way of allowing for social mobility because it is able to elevate the sympathies and feelings of those engaged in it as a profession. Throughout the novel, authorship and all forms of literary endeavor are shown to have a vulgarizing effect on those who engage in them. Jasper Milvain makes this point clear from the very start when he reminds his family that “Literature nowadays is a trade” and those who succeed in it are more often not “men of genius” but rather “skilful tradesm[e]n” who “think[. . .] first of the market” (NGS 4). This view of the author as a mere tradesman is not confined to the fictional Jasper Milvain. In 1892 Edmund Gosse writes of the novelist, “[h]e toils at his novels as if he were the manager of a bank or the captain of an ocean steamer (172-3). While David Copperfield engages in authorship in order to win the right to be called a middle-class gentleman and to earn enough to support Dora in her idleness, authorship is still presented in David Copperfield as a mysterious art that only men of genius are able to successfully pursue. This is so even though David’s rise can be attributed to his perseverance and industriousness. David’s silence on the specifics of his rise to authorship allows readers to assume that he succeeded as an author not because he thought of the market, but rather because in barring his soul to the world via his writings he found a sympathetic audience who saw him as a man of great intellect and possessed of great character. In short, David’s writing, or rather his silence about it allows readers to assume that he is man of genius.

Milvain, the anti-hero who succeeds and prospers in New Grub Street, makes no such concessions. He is forthright in his declarations that he is merely providing the
reading public with so much writing for so many pounds or pence or shillings just as any
street costermonger would sell his wares. While David uses authorship to rise in the
social hierarchy, he does so by cloaking himself in the myth of the man of letters. Milvain
does the same, but only in a more deceitful and vulgar manner. In his single minded
desire to succeed, Milvain resembles Uriah Heep who pursues a law career because it
offers him (or so he thinks) both pecuniary rewards and respectability.

Unlike Heep, Milvain has learned the lesson of David Copperfield, that in order to
propel oneself into the middle class one must possess cultural capital or appear to possess
it. Milvain schemes to acquire cultural capital (or the simulacrum of it) at all costs and
then use that capital to obtain passage into the middle class. This is not to say that Jasper
Milvain is not middle class at the start of the novel. He clearly is. Though like David
Copperfield and Charley Tudor, he must struggle to keep from slipping out of it. At the
start of the novel, Milvain’s introduction emphasizes the fact that he belongs to that class
of young men who, as Virginia Woolf notes, “London has swallowed up” by the millions
(84). His “clothes [. . .] were of expensive material, but had seen a good deal of service.
His stand-up collar curled over at the corners.” His figure is “meagre” and possesses the
“pale complexion” more fitting a poor clerk than a young man of means. These details
tell a middle class readership that Milvain does not have the ready money to regularly
update his clothes and is most likely still wearing the one or two suits that he arrived in
London with or purchased shortly after arriving there. Readers further learn that he lives
off the limited inheritance of his mother and that his sisters have been reduced to taking
pupils and “taking an engagement as visiting governess.” The implication is that his
sisters, lacking dowries and the financial means to attend balls and other social gatherings, are destined to become spinsters. From all of this it is clear to readers that Milvain is a man of no fixed profession or class. As the son of “veterinary surgeon” he exists at the very lowest rungs of the middle class, if at all. His lack of economic capital is echoed by his lack of cultural capital. It is with regard to the latter that Milvain differs from Heep. Milvain realizes that if he is to rise socially he will need cultural capital. Thus, instead of studying for the Civil Service exam or sitting for the bar he studies the literary field. He does so because he realizes, as is clear from his early conversations with his sisters, that the myth of authorship as a noble profession still exists. That he slowly works his way into the literary world illustrates that, like Uriah Heep, Milvain understands he lacks the means to move quickly. In his statement to his sisters, “You have to become famous before you can secure the attention which would give fame,” Milvain makes it clear that he realizes that he is no Oscar Wilde who can come down to London with his Oxbridge degree and set up shop as an editor, essayist, or speaker (351). He understands that he must first cultivate the social and business connections necessary for success as a man of letters. He reminds Reardon of the importance by telling him, “‘At present it’s a large part of my business to make acquaintances. Why, look you; a man who has to live by miscellaneous writing couldn’t get on with out a vast variety of acquaintances’” (148). Reardon reflects of Jasper, “‘Well, there’s the successful man, you see. Some day he’ll live in a mansion, and dictate literary opinions’” (149). In these statements, the text makes it abundantly clear that it is not by force of genius alone that a writer becomes an author.
While the Milvains are clearly not as poor as the Heeps, the two sons share both a desire and need to succeed at all costs. For both men, the fates of their families depend upon their success or failure. This pressure, in part, leads them to take extreme measures to achieve their success. They will do anything not to be poor. Even Milvain’s sister Dora expresses doubt as to his “moral nature” (243). Both Heep and Milvain are secretive as to their goals and ultimate intents and show themselves willing to dissemble in order to avoid openly offending anyone who might be of use to them in the future. On more than one occasion, Milvain remains quiet about his allegiances and loyalties. He aligns himself with Fadge and repeatedly shows himself willing to do Fadge’s dirty work and yet remain silent of his knowledge of Fadge’s (and his own role) in attacking Alfred Yule. Milvain’s final judgment that Fadge grew “meaner the more prosperous” he became highlights the complete lack of conscience or sense of remorse over his role in furthering Fadge’s vindictiveness (469). Nestled in the arms of Amy Reardon, oblivious to his greed and his vulgarity, Milvain shows himself to be utterly devoid of character. That someone like Milvain can succeed to the editorship of a respected literary weekly shows how vulgar the literary field and authorship have become. It is no longer the realm of men of character and genius, but the realm of scheming and vulgar. Nothing could be further from the Dickensian model of social mobility than this.

Like Uriah Heep before him, Milvain realizes that in order to play the role of the middle-class man of letters he will need to get married. In choosing a wife he is as mercenary as he is in choosing a career and his companions. Despite his initial attraction to Marian Yule, he remains wary of her because of her poverty and lack of social
connections. It is not until she stands to inherit £5,000 that he proposes marriage. Milvain dreams of how the inheritance will allow him to appear to be a successful man of letters, thus enabling him to pass of his articles, commentaries, and reviews as more insightful than they really are. Marian’s loss of the inheritance as well as Amy Reardon’s new found independence and wealth makes Milvain second guess his proposal to Marian. Amy’s £10,000 and her social graces make her a better vehicle for Milvain to ride into the middle class than Marian Yule. Further, in Amy Reardon, Jasper Milvain finds the perfect complement to his greed, social ambition, and shallowness. Amy Reardon is as Dora Milvain notes “‘cold, cruel, unprincipled creature’” (465). Milvain realizes this, but his half-hearted attempt to marry the heiress Miss Rupert has left him without recourse and his “expectation of the word [from Miss Rupert] which should make him rich” makes him contemplate doing his duty to Marian Yule (450). Yet, in visiting Amy Reardon ostensibly to learn more of Biffen’s death he is struck how “her beauty had matured” and how readily she would “take a foremost place among brilliant women” (452). Together, Amy and Milvain rationalize a way for him to break his engagement to Marian. Milvain in speaking her praises to Dora notes, “‘I have never yet met a woman so well fitted to aid me in my career’” (464). It is of course Amy’s £10,000 that makes her so attractive to him. He admits at the of the novel, “‘I owe my fortune to you, dear girl’” (468). In the closing pages of the novel, the two delight in the success of their various schemings unperturbed by their greed and shallowness.

While Jasper Milvain is an Uriah Heep type character, Edwin Reardon is a David Copperfield type of character. Like David, he received a reprieve from a life of drudgery
via the intercession of a relative. He has worked his way up from being a secretary to
becoming the author of a few novels. Like David, he is also a man who has traveled on
the continent and who has courted and married a beautiful middle-class bride only to be
disappointed by her shallowness. It is here that the similarities end. Unlike David,
Reardon lacks the ability to contain the vulgar Jasper Milvain. This failure is perhaps the
ultimate indication of the failure of authorship. Milvain succeeds in his schemes, in part,
because Reardon lacks the cultural means with which to oppose him. Milvain’s scheme to
falsely adopt the role of a man of letters in order to rise in economic and social hierarchy
is seen by a vulgarized public (vulgarized in the eyes of the novel’s middle class
readership) as authentic and thus unassailable. Reardon’s degraded economic position
along with his rejection of his position as an author leaves him unable to retain the love
and loyalty of his wife. This failure on the domestic front combined with his failure as an
author leaves him devoid of any cultural authority with which to contain Milvain’s threat
and his vulgarity. The most Reardon can do is accuse Milvain on the street in “an
unsteady voice” [. . .] ‘It's very much owing to you that I am deserted, now that there's no
hope of my ever succeeding’” (240).

While Milvain grows increasingly vulgar as he grows increasing successful as a
man of letters, Reardon re-gains an element, albeit only temporarily, of respectability
once he is reduced to being “once more [. . .] a harmless clerk, a decent wage-earner”
(234). It is at this moment that the text tries to elicit sympathy from readers for Reardon
as a character. Reardon, the text suggests, has erred in attempting to raising himself from
his lower-middle-class origins, but has all the same been mistreated by his middle-class
wife and by extension by middle-class society. His estrangement from his wife is indicative of “the impossibility of” intellectual lower-middle-class “individual[s] making a [ . . . ] marriage match” (Wild “Decently” 22). In chapter 31, the novel makes an explicit claim for sympathy for Reardon. The chapter opens with the narrator admitting that the middle class reader has “neither understanding nor sympathy” for Reardon and then goes on to enumerate the reasons why the middle class reader should have some understanding and sympathy for a character like Reardon (387). The narrator reminds the reader that had Reardon and his friend Harold Biffen been “[g]ifted with independent means, each of them would have taken quite a different aspect in your eyes” (387). That is, if they had only the cultural and economic capital, their fates and thus the middle class readers’ views of the two men would have been vastly different. It is likely, as I argue below, that both would have been more successful as men of letters and as authors if they had been middle class and had access to the comforts that such a status brings with it. In relating Biffen’s heroic efforts to save the manuscript of his novel, the text shows that men like Biffen and Reardon do not lack courage. Rather what they lack is understanding and a willingness to write for the market. Such a trait would be excusable in men of “independent means” who have the freedom to write “significant” works and who have a “society of admiring friends to encourage” them and help create a market for that work, but Reardon and Biffen lack all of this (388). Yet, the novel still asks its middle-class readers to see the heroism in the two men, to recognize their struggles even if they are not struggles for pounds, pence, and shillings as admirable and noble. In any event, Reardon
and Biffen are not dangerous, pitiable but not dangerous. Reardon in particular repents for his sin of hoping to achieve fame and fortune in London when he tells Biffen,

‘The one happy result of my experiences [. . .] is that they have cured me of ambition. What a miserable fellow I should be if I were still possessed with the desire to make a name! I can't even recall very clearly that state of mind. My strongest desire now is for peaceful obscurity. I am tired out; I want to rest for the remainder of my life.’ (399)

Through Reardon’s repudiation of his ambitions the text lets its middle class readership know that the vast majority of lower middle class individuals are not dangerous. It is also tells any ambitious clerks, shop assistants, or school teachers who may be reading the novel that they are better off staying out of London and not attempting “to make a name” for themselves through authorship. That Jasper Milvain does not heed this warning marks him as the dangerous kind of lower-middle-class striver. As I show below this rejection of the idea of striving to escape the lower middle class plays a prominent role in another text’s rejection of the Dickensian template.

New Grub Street differs form David Copperfield in that rather than seeing authorship as the route out of poverty and obscurity, Gissing’s novel shows how authorship or the ability to engage in literary endeavor is predicated upon a certain amount of material comfort. Early in his career as a man of letters Reardon is stymied by his poverty. He awakens to “literary production” only after “recover[ing] from his state of semi-starvation” (53). While Reardon is able to produce two three volume novels while a clerk, he does not produce anything truly worthy of mention until he inherits “four hundred pounds” from his grandfather. This money gives him the freedom to produce a novel that sells for fifty pounds and his last (though he does not know it at the time) work
of any quality, *On Neutral Ground*. It is then that the financial pressures of marriage begin to make further literary work difficult. Reardon might, the novel implies, be able to eke out a “moderate income” as does Alfred Yule by writing anonymously for the periodical press and for second-rate book publishers. Yet, such a life is portrayed as unfulfilling and not at all possible given the type of woman Reardon has married. The Yule household is one of rancor and eventually falls into “ignoble violence” as Alfred’s position deteriorates (253). While not poor, Yule finds himself “living in a poor house in an obscure quarter” of London on an income that in the best years never exceeded £250 a year (283). Yule, despite his years of hard work lives no better than the vast majority of clerks and shop assistants and unlike the armies of clerks he has no hope of advancement upon the retirement of a more senior clerk and no government pension to look after him in his old age (283). He declares to Marian that the result “‘of many long years of unremitting toil, is failure and destitution’” (336). This, then is all the social advancement one can hope for from authorship: not a very inspiring tale when one considers that Alfred Yule’s brother lives in some comfort in the country after retiring from a career as a successful industrialist. One brother is the local squire, the other an obscure writer eking out a living in London. Even if John Yule is not universally loved by his neighbors, he at least has their grudging respect. Through Alfred Yule’s fate and the rise and fall of Reardon, *New Grub Street* portrays becoming an author or man of letters as something other than the golden ticket to the middle class that *David Copperfield* and *The Three Clerks* present it as being. Rather, the novel illustrates authorship as something that
results from middle-class status not arising out of it. Nor does ennable or elevate the character of those who pursue it as a career.

Gissing was not the only late-Victorian to challenge the Dickensian template. George and Weedon Grossmith’s The Diary of a Nobody, published serially in Punch in 1888 and 1889 and then in an expanded and revised form as a novel in 1892, offers another kind of challenge to the Dickensian template. It breaks from the Dickensian tradition of representing lower-middle-class life as something to be escaped from at all costs. Further, while writing and authorship play an important role in the plot and the setting of the text, they are not vehicles of escape, nor are they the reason that readers identify with and come to see something admirable in the protagonist, Charles Pooter. The Diary has commonly been read by critics as a sharp satire on the pretensions of the suburban lower-middle-class. In reading the text exclusively as a satire such critics lose sight of the ways in which the text interacts with prevailing literary trends and blinds us from seeing the more nuanced cultural work it accomplishes. Unlike the other literary representations of the lower middle class discussed up to now, The Diary does not turn on the protagonist’s attempts to escape the confines of the lower middle class. Rather, its protagonist, Charles Pooter, is quite happy and content with his suburban lower-middle-class existence. If we look beyond the gaffes surrounding Pooter’s DIY adventures, his many social faux pas, and his nearly always demeaning interactions with tradesmen and servants we find that the novel celebrates the virtues of lower-middle-class suburban life. This is especially true in those sections of the text that were added in 1892 for its publication as a novel. No longer tied to meeting the demands for humor place upon it by
Punch’s readership, the novel is able to offer a more balanced take on lower-middle-class life and is able to transform Charles Pooter from a character readers laugh at to a character readers laugh and sympathize with. Two incidents from the novel highlight these moments of celebration of lower-middle-class life. The first is Mr. and Mrs. Pooter’s party and the second is the miraculous ending. In between the two incidents the novel transforms itself from a satirical swipe at the lower middle class to a more nuanced and positive depiction of the lower middle class. This transformation is in part the result of the text being expanded for publication in novel form.

On November fifteenth Mr. and Mrs. Pooter hold their “first important party” since moving to the suburbs. Pooter’s summary of the diary entry calls the “Party a great success” despite the late arrival of Pooter’s employer, Mr. Perkupp, who arrives to find the Pooters’ and their guest in the middle of a spirited pantomime performance led by the Pooters’ son Lupin and the Holloway Amateurs (60). Although Perkupp says the proceedings look “amusing,” Pooter fears that his boss is none too amused at finding one of his trusted clerks enjoying such vulgar amusements. The potential for even more embarrassment is raised when it turns out that the Pooters have run out of champagne and food. Mr. Perkupp leaves after a short time and tells Pooter he may take the next morning off. Despite these breaches of decorum and civility, Charles and Carrie lose little time in rejoining their guest and dancing the night away like youthful lovers (62). In showing little remorse at the treatment of Mr. Perkupp, the novel endorses the lower middle class practices of the Pooters and their guests. Despite his later fears to the contrary, Pooter does not find his prospects at the office hindered by his and his guests’ behavior. In fact
Pooter is “greeted with an unexpected promotion” at the new year (84). In addition to the promotion, Pooter receives a £100 raise in salary “in consequence of his conduct” over the past 21 years (84, 86). It is clear that Perkupp does not think any less of Pooter after having seen him engaged in what can only be considered low and vulgar amusements. In fact, Perkupp thinks so highly enough of Pooter that he agrees to give Lupin a place in the firm despite Lupin’s spotty work history. These actions serve as an endorsement of Pooter and his lower middle class ways, by showing that one need not be embarrassed about being lower middle class.

The miraculous ending in which Pooter saves the firm and is rewarded is the second incident celebrating the lifestyle of the lower middle class. Having saved the firm from near certain ruin, Pooter receives the heartfelt thanks of Mr. Perkupp. As a way of thanking Pooter for his “important service” Mr Perkupp announces that he “will purchase” the Pooters’s home and give it to them. What is interesting is that Mr. Perkupp, in asking Pooter if he enjoys his house and if he is “happy” with the neighborhood is hinting that he will, if Pooter so desires it, purchase the Pooters a house in a better neighborhood.⁵ Pooter’s response to this question, “‘I love my house and I love the neighbourhood, and could not bear to leave it,’” is indicative of an embrace of lower-middle-class values. Set on its own, Pooter’s contentment with his lower-middle-class life could be seen as nothing more than a sign of his internalizing the prevailing ideology or “the taste of the necessary” (Bourdieu 372-81). However, if we place Pooter’s love for his home and his neighbors in the larger context of the last third or so of the novel we can
see how it becomes an articulation of pride by Charles Pooter for who and what he is. As such it is much like Robert Thorne’s homage to “Twopenny” clerks.

In the sections of the text added after its initial publication in Punch the work moves noticeably away from being solely a satire on the lower middle class to a more celebratory treatment of people like the Pooters and allows us to see Pooter’s embrace of his home and neighborhood as more than just an unconscious acceptance of his fate. In the last third of the novel, Pooter goes from a bumbling lower-middle-class bank clerk to being a *pater familias* in the fullest sense of the term. Importantly, he does so not by escaping or denying his lower-middle-class roots but by remaining lower middle class and embracing his class position. One clear sign of this transformation is Pooter’s assertion of what he sees as his rightful power over his household. He does so by rebuking Mrs. James of Sutton who introduced Carrie to among other things spiritualism and “smock-frock[s]” (49). The reference to Carrie wearing a “smock-frock” at the urging of Mrs. James is a clear allusion to the type of dress favored by many New Women in the late 1880s and early 1890s and points to Mrs. James as being a disruptive feminist presence in the Pooter household. Mrs. James and her fashion advice threaten to transform Carrie from a paragon of domestic virtue into a transgressive New Woman. Pooter attempts to express his disapproval of his wife going about sans corset, but is largely ineffectual. Pooter sees Mrs. James as disruptive presence. He “wish[es] that Mrs. James wouldn’t come to the house. Whenever she does she always introduces some new-fangled rubbish into Carrie’s head” (106). Carrie manicuring her nails leads him to reflect “[o]ne of these days I feel sure I shall tell her she’s not welcome” (106).
The “‘smocking’” incident takes place in the section of The Diary that was initially published in Punch and as such is indicative of prevailing views that lower-middle-class husbands were little more than henpecked wretches. It is not until we get to the sections of the text added for publication as a novel that we see Pooter becoming more effective at asserting his control over his household. It is the introduction of Spiritualism into the Pooter household that provokes the emergence of Pooter’s new found manliness. He is at first brow-beaten by Mrs. James and the rest of the household into going along with a number of séances. Eventually, however Pooter, expresses his disapproval of spiritualism and Mrs. James, “‘Hush, madam. I am master of this house’” and vows that “‘she should never enter the house again’” (128). It is not just Mrs. James’s introduction of spiritualism, manicures, and new interior decorating ideas into the home that enrages Pooter, but it is her attempt to usurp his power by suggesting “‘I think Mr. Pooter, you are rather over-stepping—’” (128). It is this statement that earns Mrs. James her banishment. The text thus links spiritualism with the trangressive New Woman. In setting up the climatic confrontation with Mrs. James, the text lets its readers know that this is not the first time Pooter has acted to protect the domestic space from the co-joined dangers of the New Woman and spiritualism. He recalls that “put an end to it years ago when Carrie [. . .] had séances with poor Mrs. Fussters” (123). He also adds, somewhat mysteriously, that Mrs. Fussters died some time ago. Pooter signals his manliness by banishing a representative New Woman from his household. In letting readers know that there are some things Pooter will not stand when it comes the domestic space the novel makes an appeal for readers to see him as heroic. While Pooter does not face down lions
or alligators or even deadly cannon fire, his encounter with and banishment of Mrs. James is enough to signal his possession of a certain degree of manliness and in doing so represents a breaking with the long-standing tradition of representing lower-middle-class married men as pitiable henpecked failures.

It is this assertion of his control over the domestic space that allows readers to see Pooter’s expression of love and contentment in his lower-middle-class ways as more than just an ironic containment device. Placed near the end of the text and after readers have seen Pooter continually embarrassed by the butcher, the iron monger, the grocer’s boy, junior clerks, and a host of others, Pooter’s assertion of his manly prerogative functions as device that allows Victorian readers to see Pooter and the life he represents as admirable. Thus, Pooter’s statements that he “feel[s] people are happier who live a simple unsophisticated life” and “I believe I am happy because I am not ambitious” can be read in a new and more positive light (115). This is especially so if we stop to consider that Pooter’s assertion of control over the domestic comes after a long list of incidents that illustrates his repeated failures. Pooter has gained his readers’ respect by banishing Mrs. James as well as saving the firm and done so not through rejecting his lower-middle-classness but rather by embracing it.

That the domestic plays such an important role in solidifying Charles Pooter’s attainment of status is one of the few links he has to the other lower-middle-class protagonists. The validation that successful domestic relations provide David Copperfield, Charley Tudor, Robert Thorne, and Charles Pooter allows each of these men to proclaim themselves successes. For the others, success in the domestic sphere serves to
confirm successes achieved in the public. Their status as authors placed them in a position to achieve domestic happiness. For Pooter, the stabilization of his domestic situation allows or pre-figures his public success. Importantly that success is not as a public figure but is confined to the relative obscurity of his firm. Pooter shares his success only with his close friends Gowing and Cummings, his wife, and his son rather than with thousands upon thousands of adoring readers. Pooter, unlike David Copperfield, Charley Tudor, Robert Thorne, and William Kent does not turn to authorship to effect his escape from the lower middle class. His authorship, if one can call it that, is not of a public nature. He wishes to remain a nobody living in Holloway.

The Diary of a Nobody clearly breaks with the Dickensian template’s penchant for depicting the lower middle class as a status to be avoided at all costs and the use of authorship to escape such a fate. Yet, the discussion above does not address why the Grossmiths’ wrote the text that they did, why it found a publisher, and why readers responded to it. One answer lies in looking at the biographies and dispositions of its authors. George and Weedon Grossmith were the sons of a London-based court reporter and sometime popular lecturer and entertainer. In short, they were lower middle class. George Grossmith after briefly studying for the bar joined his father in the family business of court reporting and giving light lectures. Weedon Grossmith studied art and found some limited success as a society portrait painter though the lack of social connections meant that he never really flourished. Eventually George found himself more interested in giving lectures and comic routines accompanied by musical sketches than in being a court reporter. After several years as an itinerant lecturer and comic singer
George joined the Savoy Opera Company and took his first Gilbert and Sullivan role. After several years playing leading roles in Gilbert and Sullivan operas George resigned from the Savoy to pursue his own interests. He toured extensively throughout Britain and the United States as a comic singer and comedian. During this time he regularly appeared as the invited entertaining at fashionable dinner parties and soirees. In 1888 he wrote the installments of *The Diary of a Nobody* for *Punch*. Weedon Grossmith after abandoning his career as a portrait painter joined a number of traveling comedic companies and played in a number of light theater productions. In 1892 the two joined forces to expand and illustrate *The Diary of a Nobody*.

What this brief history illustrates is that unlike Dickens, Trollope, Bullock, and Gissing who saw themselves as authors and who were fully embraced by and integrated into the literary field, the Grosssmiths were outsiders. They were actors and not even serious actors at that, but comedic ones. As such, their cultural capital was negligible. They had status as comedic actors, but not as writers let alone *authors*. Thus, they did not approach the writing of fiction, let alone a novel, as something that would make their name in the world. They were not attempting to establish themselves as authors, but saw the writing of *The Diary* as an amusing pass time or way to make extra money. As such, they were not as interested in following the conventions laid down by literary field for being taken seriously as authors. In *Piano and I*, his second volume of memoirs, George Grossmith notes quite emphatically that he is “not much of an author,” having “only been concerned in two books” up to that point, the first being memoirs of his early life on the stage *A Society Clown* and the second being *The Diary of a Nobody* (179).
Reminiscing about his being called to write obituaries for theatrical figures, Grossmith writes “[w]hy a humorist like myself should be called to write such serious matter I never could understand” (Grossmith Piano173). Clearly, George Grossmith did not view himself as a man of letters or someone who could claim the title of a gentleman based on his intellectual or artistic achievements. It is clear from reading Piano and I that George viewed himself first and foremost as a humorist and comic singer, not as an author, not as a man of letters, nor as an Artist. I say this not to denigrate him, but to point out that he saw himself as a man of the comic stage and of the light opera. In his roles for Gilbert and Sullivan, Grossmith often played the “little man” and likely he sympathized with such figures on some level. His two volumes of memoirs focus almost exclusively on the range of theatrical people he knew and met, his travels as a solo artist, his experiences with the Savoy Opera Company, and make little if any mention of his literary efforts.7

Much the same can be said of his brother Weedon. The brothers’ lack of position within the literary field and their lack of desire to have a position allows them to free themselves from either having to follow an already established literary convention or from feeling compelled to position themselves as serious authors through an act of what Bourdieu calls a position-taking. This is not to say that in writing The Diary they did not engage in an act of position taking, but merely to point out that unlike an aspiring or struggling author like Gissing, their position-taking was materially different; it was not designed to clear space for themselves in the literary field. Nor was it intended to change the way readers and writers approached imagining the lower middle class. Again, this is not to say that it did not effect the way in which readers and authors imagined the lower
middle class, but merely to point out that unlike a text intended to make an artistic statement, *The Diary* was intended to amuse and to make a bit of money. Unfettered by the constraints of the literary field the Grossmiths are free to represent the lower middle class as both laughable and sympathetic. Knowing that their text would not be reviewed by serious magazines like *Blackwoods*, or the *New Review*, or *The Spectator*, and that it would not be picked up in any large way by the circulating libraries, the Grossmiths did not operate under the compulsion to provide their readers with a protagonist who is admirable because he strives to escape his lower-middle-class origins. Their very marginality gave them the freedom to break away from the prevailing literary conventions regarding the representations of the lower middle class.

This is not to say that the Grossmiths did not deploy existing character types and situations when writing about the lower middle class for clearly they did. However, the way that they deployed the existing stereotypes of the lower middle class is materially different. Charles Pooter at first look appears to be little more than another in a long line of pompous, self-important, self-conscious, socially inept, and snobbish lower middle class suburbanite characters well-known to audiences from novels, literary sketches, and music hall performances. Yet, as the above discussion of the plot and situations of the novel point out, he develops into a character that readers can sympathize and identify with. Charles Pooter, unlike Uriah Heep, Alaric Tudor, or Godwin Peak, does not represent a threat to the status quo as a result of his striving to escape the lower middle class. In being content to live in Holloway even when given the chance to move to a better suburb, Pooter expresses real pride in his way of life. Unlike Robert Thorne, Pooter
does not compare his way of life to those of more authentic social actors but operates under the assumption that he is one too. Pooter opens his diary by writing, “‘[w]hy should I not publish my diary?’ and continues, “I fail to see [. . .] why my diary should not be interesting” (10). From the very beginning Pooter assumes that he has as much right as any free born Englishman to publish his diary, to be taken seriously at a Mansion house ball, and to be accorded the respect and admiration that his position as senior clerk in his firm entitles him to. While on one level these assumptions can be read as comical pomposity on Pooter’s part, but viewed as part of a narrative that ends with him embracing his suburban lower-middle-class ways, these assumptions should be read as declaration of pride. Pooter unlike so many of his lower-middle-class peers in literature is not running from his class. He is not disowning it. He is not pretending to be something he is not. In doing so he demands that readers, even though they may laugh at him, respect him and laugh with him. To see him and those he represents as valid social actors.

But the Grosssmiths’ position vis-à-vis the literary field does not explain the popularity of The Diary at the time of its publication nor its continued presence as a minor classic. Looking at the structure of the literary field around the time The Diary was published as a novel can help us understand what it was that helped make the novel and its representations of the lower middle class compelling to its readers. Further, these structures helps explain why the Grosssmiths were able to succeed with a novel about the lower middle class that did not acquiesce to the Dickensian template.

The market for inexpensive single volume novels grew throughout the last decade of the century making works like The Diary increasingly attractive to publishers. Even
though the novel was published in 1892 a full two years before the circulating libraries announced that they would no longer purchase three volume novels, the decision was certainly influenced by the rise of inexpensive single volume novels aimed at a mature audience. By May of 1894 Cassell’s Family Magazine confidently proclaimed, “[o]f single-volume stories we never grow tired” (948). Coming only six months after the circulating libraries’ injunction against three volume novels, it is unlikely that the change in taste for single volume novels was wholly the result of the libraries’ action. Further, as the circulating libraries business models were predicated on purchasing and loaning expensive three volume novels, it is unlikely that they would have issued such a directive unless they felt compelled to act by changes in readers’ habits. As Simon Eliot’s research of book prices in the nineteenth century shows, from 1885 though 1915, over sixty percent of the books published were priced at or below 3s 6d, which was the original published price of The Diary (19-43). Edmund Gosse’s “The Tyranny of the Novel,” published in April of 1892, is typical of the widespread dissatisfaction with the circulating library and fiction. In this essay Gosse rhetorically asks, “[i]f we could suddenly arrive from another planet, and read a cluster of novels from Mudie’s, without any previous knowledge of the class, we should be astonished at the conventionality, the narrowness, the monotony” (174). Despite their lack of experience in the literary field the Grossmiths along with their Bristol publisher J. W. Arrowsmith were part of a growing trend of inexpensive one volume novels. This is not to say that the Grosssmiths’s novels should be grouped with the great experimental novels of the 1890s. Rather is should be seen as the result of a general dissatisfaction with the way the literary
field was operating and the product of a willingness on the part of critics, librarians, publishers, and readers to open up to new kinds of texts.

Combined with the obvious attempts at making Charles Pooter a more dynamic and sympathetic character that appear in the section of the text written for novel publication, Arrowsmith’s actions to convince readers of the novel’s merits helped to place the novel in the mainstream of the literary market and position it as a text that appeared to be a serious literary work. One such action was the steady inclusion of quotes from critics and celebrities. Member of Parliament and literary critic Augustine Birrell lauds the novel and declares that sharing his name with “an illiterate charwoman” is for him “a matter of great pride” (9). While the inclusion of such letters appears on the surface to be nothing more than a mundane attempt by a publisher to advertise the merits of a book and his own name as a publisher, if we look further into the matter we will see it as a carefully considered strategy to gain cultural legitimacy for the text. By printing the letters of one member of the aristocracy and two Members of Parliament, the 1919 edition follows a tactic deployed by other publishers, editors, and authors to gain some measure of cultural legitimacy for their product.

In January 1890 W. T. Stead the editor of the newly launched Review of Reviews choose to open his new publication not with a prospectus or letter to his readers but rather with a number of letters and notes reproduced representing “some of the foremost statesmen, men of letters, lawyers, soldiers, scientists, and divines of our time” (3). By letting his readers know that the likes of Alfred, Lord Tennyson; Sir Henry James; William Gladstone, and others support and recommend his review, Stead is telling his
readers and prospective readers that his review is officially sanctioned or as Bourdieu would call it consecrated by the literary and political establishment. It is in this light that we should read the J. W. Arrowsmith’s use of similar letters in the 1919 edition of the Diary of a Nobody. The letters are used to convey cultural legitimacy upon the texts they accompany. The Diary of a Nobody, despite the lack of cultural capital possessed by its authors is being positioned by its publishers as a literary text. The addition of illustrations in the original publication as a one volume novel work in a similar manner. As such, we should read it as something more than just a comical poke at the lower middle class.

Born in Exile, New Grub Street, and The Diary of a Nobody all challenge the Dickensian template for answering the socio-literary problem of the lower middle class. Each of them represents in its own way a different kind of challenge to the Dickensian template. Born in Exile shows that rising through cultural means is not the viable option David Copperfield makes it out to be. New Grub Street does much to debunk the myth of authorship as a noble profession by showing middle class readers that it just another trade and like other trades it is often the vulgar and unprincipled who rise to the top. Further the novel shows that the bulk of lower-middle-class men in women would be better off taking positions as drapers, school teachers, estate agents, etc. than trying to rise through authorship. The Diary of a Nobody, even more so than New Grub Street, challenges the idea that the protagonist or hero needs to struggle to escape the lower middle class. Charles Pooter, despite the opportunity to do so, refuses to reject his lower-middle-class status. Unlike Edwin Reardon, who only learns to value his lower middle classness after much struggle and turmoil, Charles Pooter confidently projects contentment with living
in Holloway and is proud to be a bank clerk. His greatest pride comes not in leaving the suburbs, but in seeing his son brought into the firm as a clerk. While the novel invites readers to laugh at Pooter initially, it gradually presents Pooter as a character readers can sympathize with and admire. He is neither dangerous nor pitiable.

These texts are able to challenge the Dickensian template because of the changes that occurred in the shape of the literary field, specifically the decline of the three volume novel and with it the influence of the circulating library, the increasing literacy of the British public, the challenges posed to reading as a form of entertainment by other forms of popular culture like the music hall, the theater, and the early cinema, and the very real changes that occurred in the economic and class make up of Britain. The slow but steady move away from heavy industry to a service and mercantile based-economy that was increasingly dependent on a professional and semi-professional managerial class as well as the sheer size of the enterprises themselves made it unlikely that a young man or woman starting life without cultural and economic capital could rise up and become a partner in the firm. The increasing complexity of the British Empire also made it unlikely that a young clerk without a University education could become more than a mid-level clerk in the Civil or Foreign Service despite the demands that a world-wide Empire place upon their expertise. The London County Council was, as Susan Pennybacker shows in A Vision for London, perhaps the one place where young men and women of the lower middle class stood a real chance at rising, however, this remained a local phenomena that was more of experiment than a sustained structure. All of these factored in to the demise of the Dickensian template. As the nature of the lower middle class changed, so too did
the kinds of problems it posed to British society and to those cultural actors to whom it fell to represent them. The answers provided by the Dickensian template no longer satisfied the reading public. Its faith in social mobility could no longer be borne out by reality. Its faith in the nobleness of authorship could no longer be sustained in the face of so much evidence that authorship was little more than a trade like the law, perhaps respectable but not the exclusive domain of the virtuous, the man of genius, or the noble. Authorship or the writing of fiction, despite the immense efforts by Arnold, Carlyle, Dickens, Kingsley, and others ended the Victorian period very much like it began the century, as a somewhat suspect way for a man or a woman to make a living.
NOTES

1 For more on Gissing’s vexed relationship to Dickens see Poole’s *Gissing in Context*, especially pp 105-135.

2 As Patrick Brantlinger notes, in *New Grub Street* “vulgarity,” as in so many of Gissing’s other novels, “defeats culture” (181).

3 I refer to the Warricombes as not just established but residual because they represent a residual element of the middle class that bases its wealth and cultural position in land and tradition—the Warricombes have been in Exeter for a number of generations—unlike the newly dominant middle class that bases its wealth and cultural position on industry, the professions, and mercantile commercial activities. Importantly, the Warricombes do not work; Martin Warricombe dabbles with his geology and Buckland serves as a secretary to a MP and has hopes of entering Parliament himself. Neither has a profession so to speak or is actively engaged in commerce or industry. As such, the two Warricome men represent a residual iteration of the gentleman.

4 For several nights following the party Pooter has recurrent dreams of Mr. Perkupp being mistreated by the party guests.

5 The Pooter household is located in the northern suburb of Holloway with a train line running behind it. Lupin unfavorably describes it as “a bit ‘off’” (23).

6 See Marlene Tromp’s “Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage, and Victorian Spiritualism.” *Victorian Literature and Culture*. 31:1 (March 2003) : 67-81 for a fuller discussion of the nuances of Spiritualism in Victorian culture. Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar also make the connection between spiritualists, especially “rebellious women spiritualists,” and “the figure of the New Woman” as particularly troubling and threatening figures to Victorian men (32).

7 George Gissing does mention meeting Marie Corelli and Mark Twain, but does so only in social settings and it seems from his descriptions of their meetings that they were mainly social. George did serve as chairman for a dinner honoring Twain and it seems the two did carry on a bit a friendship and share a mutual admiration for each others talents as humorists (Grossmith *Piano* 190-92).
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