

A Reader's Guide To The Nineteenth- Century English Novel

AN INFORMAL
INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD
THAT SHAPED THE NOVELS OF
AUSTEN, DICKENS, THACKERAY,
HARDY, ELIOT, AND BRONTË

JULIA PREWITT BROWN

A Reader's Guide to the Nineteenth- Century English Novel

JULIA PREWITT BROWN

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Introduction

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MY PURPOSE IN WRITING this book is to present basic facts about English society relevant to an understanding of the nineteenth-century English novel. I have attempted to answer most of the fundamental questions American readers and students might have when they first encounter the English novel: What were the main principles of the class system? How much was the pound worth in today's dollars, and what could it buy in the 1800's? What do titles mean, and how powerful were the people who possessed them? What did it mean to be a gentleman? What was the structure of the Church of England, Parliament, local government, the Courts, and who occupied positions within them? What constituted a middle-class education of the period? Which professions were open to which classes of people? What was the state of marriage and to whom was divorce available? And so on.

My focus is on major institutions, how they worked and, where relevant, how they changed in the course of the century. I have dealt with historical episodes or events, primarily as they brought about changes in the institutions that controlled people's lives. This is the perspective of the English novel, and I have tried to some extent to mirror it. Each

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chapter is written with an eye toward the novelist's treatment of a given subject, and the last chapters focus on some of the specifically literary considerations that nineteenth-century novelists faced: censorship, the serial mode of publication, and the use of illustrations.

By "society" I mean, for the most part, those groups that possessed legitimate political and social authority. In the nineteenth century, these were: the aristocracy and the rising business class; the Church of England and, to an increasing extent, the Dissenting religions; the English public schools and universities; the rising professions; and, to a greater and greater extent, the central government. It is on this relatively static power principle, if you will, that I have narrowed and organized the otherwise impossibly large and fluctuating subject of the book, a social-historical background of the novel. I have omitted detailed discussion of the Industrial Revolution, although a discussion of the groups and institutions mentioned previously will, I hope, leave the reader with a sense of its momentous importance.

Outlines are by definition simplifications and thus in keeping with the introductory aim of this book. But simplifications can also serve a complex purpose, and here they serve to emphasize the essential strength and rigidity of the institutions I describe. We can approach the subject of institutions by asking why they exist, as Bentham did, or what they mean, as Coleridge did; but to give a bare-bones outline of an institution that tells us, for instance, the difference between a Duke and a Baronet or rector and vicar is to arrive at something like the primitive evocation of authority found in most nineteenth-century novels. According to this view, institutions are no more and no less than offices that outlive their inhabitants. Titles, chairs, desks, houses, robes, land, all the symbolic objects, spoils, and appearances that comprise institutional authority are, to the novelist, the essence of authority. Like the

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heavy gold chain that passes from one mayor to another in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, it is on these objects that the community's subjective faith in the legitimacy of power is focused. If we do not understand what information is being conveyed by a novelist's use of these symbols, we risk misunderstanding the novel.

It is, of course, possible to enjoy the English novel without much knowledge of English society, just as one can take pleasure in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony without being able to distinguish among the sounds of the various instruments. But an additional pleasure comes with knowledge, as the novels of Jane Austen show. Most Americans begin her novels with the false assumption that Austen is writing about the aristocracy, since several characters in the novels have titles and almost no one works. In fact, there are no aristocrats in Jane Austen's novels, just inflated gentry—members of the much larger and more economically varied class beneath the aristocracy. To miss that is to miss a wealth of irony and humor in Austen's social criticism.

A more complicated example can be found in Dickens's *Great Expectations*. American readers with little knowledge of English social history naturally approach this novel with an assumption that it is normal to want to rise out of one's social class and enjoyable to do so. We can understand the terror of *descending* the social ladder, a subject that will be taken up in the chapter on class and money and one that no doubt makes *David Copperfield* more accessible to Americans than *Great Expectations*. The terror of *ascension*, however, is largely unrecognized by Americans, although considered extensively in the English (and European) novel.

Great Expectations is the story of Pip, a blacksmith's apprentice who receives a large sum of money from an unknown benefactor and undertakes to leave his lower-class origins behind and "become a gentleman." Suspecting that the money has come from a member of the local rich (who has, he thinks,

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recognized his nobler nature), Pip feels justified in snubbing the working people who brought him up. Later Pip is humiliated to learn that, in fact, the money came from a criminal, named Magwitch, for whom Pip had lied and stolen as a child. Knowledge that the money came from this compromised source has the power to push Pip back to the friends of his childhood.

What an improbable and arbitrary set of circumstances and characters this will seem to us if we approach it with no knowledge of the English class system and of the immense shame that would naturally attend Pip both for the source of his fortune and his conduct after acquiring it. American novels are not wholly without this complex sense of class and money. At the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, Twain seems to make the ironic suggestion that money has ruined Huck—but it is only an ironic suggestion, and we are permitted to believe otherwise. English novels, however, as a rule are more conscious of the irreparable element in class relations. Beside Twain's forgiveable con-artists, the "King" and the "Duke," Dickens's Magwitch appears as a monster of suffering and peril who bears all the burden of guilt for Pip's expectations.

The meaning of money lies at the center of Dickens's investigation of society, as it does those of other novelists of the period. Yet the one thing we almost never encounter in critical studies of the novel is a frank discussion of money values. "I could be a good woman on five thousand a year," says Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, and some critics have taken this to suggest the inklings of conscience. Mistranslating the sum to about \$20,000 in today's currency, they assume Becky is saying that if she could meet her needs and not have to scrape, she could resist temptation. In fact, her statement would more accurately translate to, "I could be a good woman on a million dollars a year." The value of the pound has risen nearly forty-fold since the nineteenth century; a cost-of-living source written during the period in which Thackeray set *Vanity Fair*

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shows that on £5,000 income a year the typical family employed twenty-two servants, ten horses, and three carriages (the great status symbol of the century). Far from suggesting a conscience, Becky's wistful-sounding observation is probably the most unvarnished statement of greed to be found in that novel.

Several nineteenth-century novels open with explicit money transactions that determine all that follows. In Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood is vulnerable to the tragedy of seduction precisely because she has no money; in the beginning of the story her relatives cheat her out of the inheritance that might have protected her. Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* opens with a scene in which a drunken man sells his wife and daughter to a passing sailor for 5 guineas at a country fair. The sum is significant. Students often take the equivalent to be about \$20 in today's currency. Of course to sell one's wife and daughter for pocket money would be an act of temporary insanity; terrible as it is, anyone who has ever gotten drunk can, on some level, empathize with it. But to sell one's wife and daughter for a thousand dollars, which is a closer equivalent, constitutes a different action. It means that even when he is drunk, Michael Henchard lives like a clenched fist, to borrow a phrase from Thomas Mann, and is capable of greed. The act becomes far more despicable, and it explains much that follows: why the wife and sailor consider the transaction binding, why Henchard is too ashamed to tell people what he has done and therefore lessens his chances of locating his wife, and, most important, why, after the opening scene, Hardy can manage all kinds of difficult transitions, changes, and bizarre coincidences with perfect ease. After Henchard's act, anything is possible; the morally destructive landscape for which Hardy is famous has been established.

While the purpose of this book is mainly to convey facts, there are also a number of impressions about the nineteenth

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century that I would like to convey. The most important of these is the concept of scale. When cartographers draw up a map, we take for granted the provision of a size scale in the margin. Many history books, however, neglect to establish at the outset those fundamental differences in scale between our society and those of the past. Contemporary America is so much larger and more diffuse than nineteenth-century England that the small size of Victorian institutions relative to their immense power is almost incomprehensible to us. The aristocracy was smaller than most high school graduating classes in this country. The state Church, of which there is no equivalent in the United States, was in full control of any education of quality well into the nineteenth century. And the compactness of these institutions made it possible for them to cooperate with one another with an efficiency that would be impossible today, since the number of people occupying positions of power was so small that all parties either knew or knew of each other, and a great many people were related by family. Until well into the century, the aristocracy and the Church had as fluid and comfortable a relationship as the English courts and prisons. The younger sons of the aristocracy could usually find an easy life in holy orders if they had no property to inherit. The Church, in turn, supplied the aristocracy with tutors, who were often recompensed for their services by the bestowal of livings after their students grew up. Victorian novels show that in all kinds of individual and collective matters, the Church played handmaiden to class. We are contemplating, in other words, a structure of power and patronage so highly integrated and personal that it had the self-confidence to inaugurate the very reforms that eventually brought it to its knees. (To give a well-known example, the first effective factory legislation of the century was the work of a Tory aristocrat, the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury.)

The liberalization of society, a major subject of the nineteenth-century novel, is also embodied in its form. The

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complicated formal unity of novels like *Middlemarch* and *Vanity Fair*, with their patterns of interlocking plots and images, their digressions and challenges to their own integration, parallels that state of "transition" in English society at the time which almost every major thinker of the age identified as its cardinal trait.

Although this book does not engage in any full-scale literary analyses—that is not its purpose—it is my hope that its readers will be left with a sense of the importance of historical information to aesthetic readings of the novel. The current trend in literary studies is ahistorical, viewing literature as a self-enclosed, self-referential linguistic system with no relation to "real life" except what the naive reader invents. This approach has contributed something to poetry criticism and to the criticism of fiction written *before* the great age of novel writing. But it has had little to tell us about nineteenth-century fiction. The earliest novels are rooted in romance and are often more preoccupied with earlier genres than the societies in which they are set; the "wobbley backdrop" of preposterous inns in *Don Quixote*, to use Vladimir Nabokov's phrase, tells us more about Continental romance than about seventeenth-century Spain. But the social background of Victorian fiction is distinguished by its dense and detailed accuracy. Charles Dickens and George Eliot researched in depth the events and institutions of their day before writing. Dickens even confessed himself unable to work for long periods without the inspiration of the sights and sounds that the streets of London gave him on his long walks. However engaging these novels are as independent verbal structures, then, their relation to real life cannot be dismissed so easily. We have only to contemplate Dickens striding through the streets of London—observing, listening, remembering—then returning to his house to write, to see how close the relation actually is.

A final word about the way I have limited the subject of the book. Generally considered, the Victorian age extends over a

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period of about one hundred years and is bounded by two great wars: the French wars that ended in 1815 and the First World War of 1914. This book concentrates mainly on the first part of the age up to the Second Reform Bill of 1867, on what most historians take to be the heyday of liberal, evangelical, industrial society. It was during this phase that the great shifts from agriculture to industry, from country to city, and from parish to central government took place. The book also concentrates on *English* society; Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and the rest of the Empire are absent except when they figure in mainstream English events. And in discussing society, as I have said, my focus is more on institutions than historical episodes. The aristocracy, the parliamentary system, the Church, the legal system, the universities, most of the professions—all withstood the assault of social and economic changes for at least two generations before losing their highly stable, exclusive, homogeneous character. As the historian David Thomson commented, this seemed to preserve the identity of the nation and it may have been responsible for the picture of unity transcending diversity that characterizes the great novels from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872). Dickens died in 1870, and Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1874–1876), records such a sharp turn away from the formal unity of its predecessors that we can say that the “classic” Victorian novel ends with it.

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CHAPTER I

Class and Money

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A SCENE in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is typical of many scenes in nineteenth-century fiction in which a young man or woman openly discusses marriage prospects with a friend. The man is Colonel Fitzwilliam, and he explains to the heroine why he must marry for money. Brought up to lead an aristocratic life and honestly unwilling to give it up, he needs a monied marriage to maintain the expensive leisure to which he is accustomed. He cannot afford the luxury of falling in love with a poor woman.

Colonel Fitzwilliam is an amiable character, and he is no less amiable after this admission. The heroine does not judge him morally; nor does Jane Austen, by means of narrative comment, make any apology for the seeming crassness in his situation. The reasons for this that concern us here are, first, that Jane Austen does not require us to admire him, only to admit his reality, or the truth that amiability is often quite compatible with ruthlessness; and, second, that Jane Austen could not see into the future and, therefore, predict that a generation of readers would exist as willfully obtuse about the power of class as our own. Right or wrong, this is how things stand for her characters: Class and money are the media

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through which they must shape their lives. Jane Austen was not interested in people who try to find themselves by going outside of society. Certainly no one succeeds in doing so even in a minor way in her novels or, for that matter, in the novels of Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, or Hardy.

Class and money are givens in the novels discussed in this book. They are to the novelist as the clay is to the potter, for they are not only the substance with which characters must structure their lives; they *define* character and social life. Most of the novelists discussed here would as soon set a novel outside the class structure as a potter would envision making a pot without clay.

No hero in an English novel, for example, moves in and out of society with the ease of a Huckleberry Finn. In Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Pip can only move up and down the social scale. All Huck needs to get into society is money; Pip, in contrast, needs education, manners, fine clothing, furniture, servants, the right friends, *and* money—and all of this still does not erase the stain of his origins. The society satirized along the river in *Huckleberry Finn* is a wholly seen landscape in which everything is brought into the light, whereas the society Pip encounters when he sets himself up in London is full of shade. Large areas of darkness exist, suggesting those areas of knowledge and experience that Pip can never know.

What is class? Social and economic distinctions have always existed, but I use the word here as most historians use it: to define a specifically post-Industrial Revolution, nineteenth-century phenomenon. To traditional and Marxist historians alike (if such a distinction is legitimate in historical studies today), a *class* society is set off against an *aristocratic* society as a means of understanding the transition into the modern industrial world. In Engels's terms, it was the Industrial Rev-