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Social Class Matters

The year was 2002 and I was a junior in high school. The leaves on the trees were turning magnificent shades of apricot-orange, and I was eagerly anticipating another exciting football season under the Friday night lights. Those were my favorite nights—throwing a North Face jacket over my high school’s mascot-covered t-shirt and making my way with friends to the stadium for a night of doing everything but actually watching the game. And during that particular fall, I recall missing a football game one evening because I was with my parents at a car dealership buying a new car. That was typical at my school: turning 16 meant that you took your driving test and it was most likely in the driver’s seat of your brand new car (I did not get a brand new car when I turned 16; it was a used one and I had a part-time job to help pay for my gas and car insurance). My junior year flew by, then came senior year, and then college applications became the talk among my peers, “Which colleges did you apply to?” and “I will miss everyone when we go away,” because a part of our conversation. It was assumed, because of our middle-class identity, that college was the admirable next step.

According to Kraus and Park (1), a person’s social class determines how they value themselves. One could come to the conclusion that because of this, the social class that I belonged to growing up, and to this day, determine how I value myself: a middle-class member of society with the means and support to “go after my dreams.” Both of my parents graduated

from college; my mother with her Bachelor's degree, my father with his Master's degree.

According to Gabrenya, I am 42% more likely to earn a Bachelor's degree than someone whose parents did not attend college (7). It can be concluded that because of social class, a person's chances of receiving the support they need to do things like going to college, increase or decrease, depending on their social class.

For the duration of the past five weeks, our class has analyzed the works of authors and characters who come from a variety of social classes. Throughout my paper, I will be focusing on three specific stories that we have read: Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Each of these stories hails from a different time period, the 1800s, 1900s, and 2000s, respectively. According to *Publisher's Weekly*, Melville's story is one of "curious tendencies and obstinate attitude." *As I Lay Dying* tells the unforgettable tale of the Bundrens, a poor family from a rural farm, and their peculiar travel adventures to Jefferson County, Mississippi. And lastly, *The Road*, a dark and twisted tale of a father and son trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic world.

How is the topic of social class defined? *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines social class as, "people having the same social or economic status." Throughout my paper, I will analyze how the characters value themselves in *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *The Road*, versus how society (i.e., the reader) views them because of their social class and privilege (or lack thereof), thus, making the determination that social class does matter.

In the story of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Herman Melville depicts an upper-class lawyer and the relationship that he has with a lower-class scrivener, Bartleby. In an article for the

Leviathan, Matteson states that Melville's "critiques of prudence dealt with conflicts both private and public" (26) which means that he was aware of social class and how it affected a person. Melville's work came during the time of Henry David Thoreau but rather than write about the injustices of the federal government, Melville chose to write about the lives, and subsequent fall, of common people. According to the narrator, Bartleby, the strange man who did his work, but not a single thing more, was of the lower-class, and made sure that everyone knew. The lawyer often mentions his frustrations of Bartleby and his lack of initiative which leads me to wonder, maybe this is due to feeling different than those he is working for. In the end, Bartleby decides he is not going to work, takes up residence in the now-vacant lawyer's office, is subsequently arrested, and then dies due to starvation in prison. Was Bartleby's fate determined from the get-go, due in part to his lack of desire, direction, and passion? I would argue that yes, Bartleby came from the lower-class and did not have parents or siblings or friends to look up to, and that ultimately led to his untimely death. Bartleby viewed himself as someone who did the bare minimums to get by; society viewed him as someone who was deprived of any goal-oriented thoughts.

The characters in *As I Lay Dying* embodied many of the same characteristics and traits of Bartleby and I believe it is also because they were from the poor, working-class. The children in *As I Lay Dying* took on the same opinions and views as their mother, describing the effects of the Cognitive Idealist Model that Gabrenya discusses in *Culture and Social Class* (5). Addie Bundren, the mother of the children in the novel, was born into a world of loneliness and trepidation. Her parents were unable to give her the comfort, both mentally and physically, to allow her the confidence to get through life's battles, and thus, she passed this type of thinking

onto her children. Throughout the novel, the children are desperately clinging to the idea of love and acceptance because they were never given this growing up in their working-class family. As a reader, I found a correlation between Addie's childhood and the children's inability to see past greed and the need for affection as they traveled with their mother's body through the hot streets of Mississippi.

Lastly, in McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, I made the assumption early on in the novel that the father and son came from a middle-class family. I came to that conclusion for several different reasons, the first reason being: the appearance of the father and boy, while disheveled and malnourished, must have been well-fed and sturdy, prior to the event that wiped out the planet. McCarthy does not mention the state of the father and the boy (or even their names) anywhere in the story so it is up to society to determine how they perceive them to be. Secondly, I felt as though McCarthy eluded to the idea of the father and son coming from a home where a mother was the main stay-at-home figure for the family. According to Tuli, "people who found pleasure in housework were probably rare then and continue to be uncommon now" (66). Throughout the story, I felt as though the father had been the primary financial provider for his family but when given the task of keeping himself and his son alive, nothing was off limits or unheard of—he went through great lengths to make sure that his son was fed and felt secure. While he certainly was not doing "housework", he was the primary caretaker of his new-found family. And lastly, I believe that the father and son believed in themselves—they had enough confidence and hope to keep going, something I feel as though had to be learned by the father from his parents growing up. Despite a dismal situation, and even more dismal outcome, the hope of survival never went away.

The three works that I have discussed, all show the outcomes of varying social classes. The way that the character(s) in the novel versus how society (the reader) depicts them, can be very different. Maybe it is my middle-class upbringing that allows me to make the assumptions that I have made throughout this paper: someone low-class or high-class, may feel very differently than I do. According to Nicholas Emler and Julie Dickinson, children from varying social and economic backgrounds were able to make distinctions and assumptions about the fairness (or unfairness) of income differences in those with a different economic background (191). The outcome of the study showed that there are potential correlations between “parental values, the ethos of the schools, the information provided by adults, and the beliefs of peer” (198), showing that a number of factors make up the assumptions that the children came to.

In conclusion, I hope that helpful dialogue can be started in regards to our self-proclaimed class structure and how we define ourselves. I feel like the stories that we read throughout this semester all focused on varying levels of social class and in most of them, the reader (society) was left to sort of make their own conclusions. Throughout my paper, I analyzed how the characters value themselves in *Bartleby*, *the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *The Road*, versus how society and the reader views them because of their social class and privilege, thus, making the determination that social class does matter.

Bibliography

Kraus, Michael W., and Jun W. Park. "The Undervalued Self: Social Class And Self-Evaluation." *Frontiers In Psychology* 5.(2014): 1-9. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 24 June 2015.

Gabrenya, W.K. Jr. "Research Skills for Psychology Majors: Everything You Need to Know to Get Started." *Culture and Social Class*. Florida Institute of Technology. Web. 19 June 2015.

W.K. Gabrenya Jr. is a professor in the Psychology department at the Florida Institute of Technology. I found his portrayal and opinions about culture and social class to line up perfectly with my thoughts on three of the texts that we read in class. Although published in 2003, I still found it very relevant and helpful when working through the reasons why various characters in the texts did the things that they did. I felt as though his article was easy to read and understand. I think that I most enjoyed his use of photos and graphs throughout the article, breaking up long instances of text and keeping me interested until the very end.

"Bartleby, The Scrivener." *Publishers Weekly* 261.4 (2014): 186. *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 23 June 2015.

This was an unusual source but I really found it interesting. It was a book review of *Bartleby* by *Publisher's Weekly*. It was in a little insert and it caught my eye right away. I felt like it was useful for my research essay because I was able to grab some unique and quirky things that *Bartleby* did during his time at the law office.

Matteson, John. "'A New Race Has Sprung Up': Prudence, Social Consensus And The Law In 'Bartleby The Scrivener'." *Leviathan* 1 (2008): 25. *Project MUSE*. Web. 20 June 2015.

Sanburn, Josh. "The Joy Of Less." *Time* 185.10 (2015): 44-50. *MasterFILE Elite*. Web. 24 June 2015.

Tuli, Karunesh. "Fast-Forward Family: Home, Work, And Relationships In Middle-Class America." *Foreword Reviews* 16.2 (2013): 66. *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 21 June 2015.

This was a short essay written by Karunesh Tuli and edited by Elinor Ochs and Tamar Kremer-Sadlik of the University of California Press, a reputable producer of books and scholarly articles. I felt as though this was a good source because it was a quick and easy-read. Although it didn't directly relate to *The Road*, it gave an abstract look at why I felt like the father and son from the story came from a middle-class family.

Emler, Nicholas, and Julie Dickinson. "Children's Representation of Economic Inequalities: The Effects of Social Class." *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* (2011): 191-98. Print.