

**Exploring Class Conflict and Social Stratification in English Literature:
Across historical and contemporary periods**

**Explorando o Conflito De Classes e A Estratificação Social na
Literatura Inglesa: Através de períodos históricos e contemporâneos**

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the themes of class conflict and social stratification as depicted in English literature across historical and contemporary periods. Through an analysis of selected works, including Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Austen's *Persuasion*, the article examines how authors portray class tensions, hierarchies, and power dynamics. The article contrasts Jacobean era representations of rigid social structures with more nuanced portrayals in modern literature, highlighting evolving societal values, increased agency of marginalized groups, and changing gender roles. While disparities exist in the ways class is depicted across eras, enduring themes of ambition, morality, and the consequences of unchecked power remain relevant. The analysis reveals how literature serves as a valuable lens for understanding the complexities of human nature and the enduring pursuit of social status throughout history.

KEYWORDS: Class Conflict, Social Stratification, Gender Roles, Power Dynamics, English Literature

RESUMO: Este artigo explora os temas do conflito de classes e da estratificação social retratados na literatura inglesa ao longo de períodos históricos e contemporâneos. Através da análise de obras selecionadas, incluindo *Macbeth* de Shakespeare e *Persuasão* de Austen, o estudo examina como os autores retratam as tensões de classe, hierarquias e dinâmicas de poder. O artigo contrasta as representações da era jacobina de estruturas sociais rígidas com retratos mais nuançados na literatura

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moderna, destacando a evolução dos valores sociais, o aumento da agência de grupos marginalizados e as mudanças nos papéis de género. Embora existam disparidades nas formas como a classe é retratada em diferentes épocas, temas duradouros de ambição, moralidade e as consequências do poder desenfreado permanecem relevantes. A análise revela como a literatura serve como uma lente valiosa para compreender as complexidades da natureza humana e a busca contínua por status social ao longo da história.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Conflito De Classes, Estratificação Social, Literatura Inglesa, Papéis De Género, Dinâmicas De Poder

1. Introduction.

This article seeks to explore the enduring themes of class conflict and social stratification in English literature, examining their evolution across various historical periods and their presence in contemporary works. Through an analysis of how different authors portray class tensions and hierarchies, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of human relationships and societal structures throughout history.

The initial section of this essay serves as an introduction to the timeless themes of class conflict and social stratification in English literature. By examining notable works from different periods, it will be uncovered how authors have grappled with issues of wealth, power, and social status, shedding light on the struggles and aspirations of individuals within hierarchical societies.

Following this introduction, this article will present a thesis statement that emphasizes its main objective: to analyse the themes of class conflict and social stratification across different historical periods, ranging from the medieval era to the Victorian age, and extending into contemporary literature. Through this thorough exploration, the overall objective is to comprehend the evolution of these themes over time and their continued significance in modern society.

2. Jacobean Era

The Jacobean Era, which lasted from 1603 to 1625, was a notable period in British history characterized by political, social, and cultural upheaval. With the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, James VI of Scotland became the King of England, uniting the crowns of both countries and ushering in the Jacobean period. This era inherited many of the challenges and opportunities from the previous Elizabethan Age, while also facing new and distinct pressures.

Politically, James I's reign was focused on consolidating power and establishing his authority over a realm that was still recovering from the turbulent Tudor period. However, this consolidation faced resistance from various factions, including Parliament and the nobility. (Joyce et al., 2025)

Religiously, the Jacobean Era was marked by ongoing tensions between Catholics and Protestants. Despite the relative stability brought about by the Elizabethan Religious Settlement, religious divisions continued to simmer beneath the surface, occasionally erupting in events such as the Gunpowder Plot. Culturally, the Jacobean Era was a golden age for literature and drama. It witnessed the rise of some of the greatest playwrights and poets in English history, such as William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and John Webster. These writers produced works that still captivate audiences today, exploring themes of power, ambition, and morality in ways that remain relevant throughout the centuries.

The Jacobean Era was a period of contrasting economic conditions, with both prosperity and hardship. The nation experienced an increase in trade and exploration, leading to wealth and opportunities for many individuals. However, these advancements also exposed the country to new challenges and vulnerabilities. The growth of London as a centre for commerce and culture exemplified these changes, as the city became more diverse and dynamic.

On the social front, the Jacobean Era was characterized by significant inequalities and injustices. While the nobility enjoyed luxurious lifestyles and privileges, the majority of the population lived in poverty and squalor. Additionally, outbreaks of diseases such as the plague further worsened existing inequalities and devastated communities.

In conclusion, the Jacobean era was a time of great complexity and contradiction. It witnessed political intrigue, religious fervour, cultural flourishing, and economic expansion. However, it was also marked by social unrest, religious conflicts, and economic hardships. Despite these challenges, the era played a crucial role in shaping the identity and trajectory of the modern United Kingdom.

Amidst these circumstances, William Shakespeare created several remarkable pieces of literature, such as *Macbeth*, a play that explores the intricacies of social classes and power dynamics in early modern England.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare delves into the complexities of class divisions through the interactions and ambitions of the characters. The play commences with Macbeth, a revered nobleman and courageous warrior, encountering three witches who predict his future as king. This initial meeting triggers a chain of events that drives Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, to seek the throne through regicide. Their ambition surpasses their social status, emphasizing the attraction of power and the aspiration to climb the social ladder.

One of the most striking depictions of class disparities in *Macbeth* is evident in the sharp contrast between the nobility and the commoners. As Macbeth assumes the throne his reign is tainted by tyranny and oppression, leading to the suffering of the ordinary people. This inequality in authority and privilege is highlighted by Macbeth's indifference towards the well-being of his subjects, as he prioritizes his own ambitions above the welfare of the nation.

Furthermore, Shakespeare utilizes imagery and symbolism to underscore the class divisions within the play. The recurring theme of clothing, for example, represents the outward display of nobility and authority. When Macbeth ponders the repercussions of King Duncan's murder, he muses, "I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (Act 3, Scene 4). In this passage, the imagery of blood symbolizes guilt and the irreversible nature of his actions, emphasizing the moral decay that accompanies the pursuit of power.

In Act 1, Scene 7, Macbeth contemplates the aftermath of assassinating King Duncan, revealing his internal struggle:

"Within our realm, we possess the ability to impart
Violent instructions, which, once learned, come back
To haunt the originator. This impartial justice
Commends the ingredients of our toxic cup
To our own mouths." (Act 1, Scene 7)

In this passage, Macbeth acknowledges the ethical consequences of his deeds and the inevitable backlash resulting from his relentless pursuit of power. The metaphor of the "toxic cup" emphasizes the corrupting influence of ambition and the self-destructive nature of his ambition to claim the throne.

Macbeth delves into the intricate power dynamics within the ruling class and the common people. Initially, King Duncan wields absolute power, but his authority is challenged by Macbeth's ambitions. Macbeth's rise to power disrupts the established hierarchy, sparking a power struggle among the nobility and causing chaos in the kingdom.

Moreover, Shakespeare illustrates power as corrupting, as seen in Macbeth's spiral into tyranny and madness. Despite becoming king, Macbeth is haunted by paranoia and guilt, finding no peace in his newfound authority. His downfall serves as a warning about the dangers of unbridled ambition and the destructive nature of power.

In summary, Macbeth offers a poignant commentary on class distinctions and power dynamics in early modern England. Through its complex characters and vivid imagery, Shakespeare prompts audiences to reflect on the consequences of ambition, the fragility of power, and the ongoing quest for social dominance.

By examining the depiction of social hierarchy in Jacobean literature, like Macbeth, in contrast to modern works, we gain valuable understanding of the progression of societal systems and power dynamics throughout history. Additionally, this analysis sheds light on the timeless themes that continue to reverberate across various historical eras.

In Jacobean literature, such as Shakespeare's Macbeth, the social structure is portrayed as strict and hierarchical, emphasizing the stark contrast between the nobility and the common folk. The upper class wields authority and benefits, whereas the lower classes are frequently sidelined and subjugated.

Figures like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth disrupt conventional hierarchies by pursuing their ambitious goals relentlessly, aiming to climb the social hierarchy using unethical methods.

To support this argument there is a quote from Act 1, Scene 7, “I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself / And falls on the other-“Here, Macbeth deliberates on the consequences of murdering King Duncan to fulfil his ambition. Within this soliloquy, Macbeth recognizes that his sole driving force behind contemplating regicide is his ambition to claim the throne. This underscores the ambitious nature of individuals such as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who are willing to defy traditional structures and climb the social hierarchy through any means possible, even if it entails committing atrocious acts.

In present-day literature and media, there is frequently a more intricate depiction of social hierarchy, which mirrors changes in societal values and structures. Although hierarchies continue to exist, they are frequently more flexible, as individuals from various backgrounds question conventional power structures. Modern works delve into subjects such as social mobility, identity, and the influence of globalization on class dynamics.

One significant distinction between Jacobean literature and modern works lies in the representation of marginalized groups’ agency. In Jacobean literature, the commoners are often portrayed as powerless victims of the ruling elite, with limited opportunities for upward mobility. Conversely, contemporary works frequently showcase protagonists from marginalized background who assert their agency and challenge societal norms. In Macbeth, there are clear depictions of commoners being portrayed as powerless victims of the ruling elite, especially during Macbeth’s oppressive reign. Act 5, Scene 1 presents an instance of this, where a doctor and a gentlewoman engage in a conversation about Lady Macbeth’s declining mental condition. “Doctor: You see, her eyes are open” / Gentlewoman: “Ay, but their sense is shut.” The doctor and the gentlewoman bear witness to Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking episode, where she reveals her deep remorse for the heinous acts committed by her husband, Macbeth. Despite her privilege position in society, Lady Macbeth falls prey to her own ambitious desires and the merciless deeds carried out by her spouse, ultimately succumbing to madness. This portrayal resonates with the Jacobean literature’s portrayal of the powerless commoners who are at the mercy of the ruling elite’s action.

Furthermore, the role of gender in shaping social hierarchy has undergone changes throughout time. In Jacobean literature, gender roles are typically rigidly defined, relegating women to subordinate positions. However, modern works frequently feature female protagonists who defy gender expectations and challenge patriarchal structures.

Despite these disparities, there are also shared themes that transcend historical periods. Both Jacobean literature and contemporary works delve into the complexities of power, ambition, and morality, emphasizing the universal human desire for recognition and status. Additionally, both eras

grapple with the repercussions of unchecked ambition and the ethical dilemmas inherent in navigating social hierarchies.

In conclusion, comparing the portrayal of social hierarchy in Jacobean literature with contemporary works reveals both the continuity of certain themes and the evolution of societal structures and values over time. By examining how different historical periods depict social hierarchy, we gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of human nature and the enduring pursuit of power and status.

3. Regency Era

During the Regency Era in the United Kingdom, which lasted from 1811 to 1820, the British society was deeply divided by class and social stratification. This period, named after the Prince Regent, who ruled in place of his incapacitated father, King George III, was characterized by a rigid social hierarchy and a significant gap between the upper and lower classes.

At the pinnacle of this social hierarchy were the aristocracy, which included the nobility and landed gentry. These privileged elites possessed immense wealth, power, and influence that had been passed down through generations of land ownership and family connections. They occupied the highest positions in society, exerting significant political and economic influence. Their opulent lifestyles, showcased through grand estates, extravagant parties, and leisurely pursuits, served as a visible symbol of their elevated status and privilege.

Below the aristocracy were the middle class, comprising professionals, merchants, and successful tradespeople. Although they did not possess the inherited wealth and prestige of the upper classes, the middle classes experienced increasing influence during the Regency Era, particularly in urban centres such as London. They benefited from the expanding opportunities brought about by industrialization and trade, allowing them to establish comfortable lifestyles and aspire to social mobility.

Nevertheless, even with the rise of the middle class, social mobility remained restricted during the Regency Era, as class distinctions acted as significant obstacles to progress for many individuals. The working class, which included labourers, servants, and artisans, faced economic challenges, exploitation, and limited chances for advancement. They worked in factories, mines, and as domestic workers, enduring harsh conditions, and low wages, while the upper classes benefitted from their labour.

Furthermore, the Regency Era was characterized by evident gender and racial disparities, with women and minorities facing additional forms of oppression and marginalization within society. Women of all social classes were bound by patriarchal norms, restricted to domestic roles, and deprived of legal and political rights. Similarly, racial minorities, such as Black and Asian

communities, encountered discrimination and marginalization, pushed to the margins of society, and denied equal opportunities for progress.

In essence, the Regency Era in the UK was defined by clear class divisions and social stratification, with the aristocracy dominating the highest social ranks, the middle class striving for upward mobility, and the working class grappling with financial hardships. Despite the emergence of new economic prospects and changing social dynamics, deep-rooted inequalities endured, influencing the experiences and opportunities of individuals from diverse social backgrounds.

Jane Austen's *Persuasion* was released after her death on December 20th, 1817, offering a death depiction of class struggles and social hierarchy in Regency-era society. Taking place in early 19th century England, the book delves into the challenges and intricacies involved in manoeuvring within the strict class system of that era.

Jane Austen delves into the complexities of class conflict and social hierarchy in Regency society in her novel *Persuasion*. The story revolves around the main character, Anne Elliot, whose experiences embody the struggle between fulfilling societal expectations and pursuing personal desires. Anne wrestles with the internal conflict of balancing her obligations with her longing for personal fulfilment. Austen skilfully depicts Anne's inner turmoil through her solitary walks, which provide a temporary escape from the societal pressures she faces. These moments emphasize Anne's appreciation for the beauty of nature, offering solace amidst the constraints imposed by her social status.

“Her pleasure in the walk must arise from the exercise and the day, from the view of the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges, and from repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn, that season of peculiar and inexhaustible influence on the mind of taste and tenderness...” (Chapter 8)

Captain Wentworth's character exemplifies the struggles that people encounter when trying to rise above their social class. Even though he has achieved success on his own, Captain Wentworth is met with bias and doubt from Anne's family because he does not come from a noble background. Austen showcases this through Anne's understanding of how social status continues to affect relationships. The challenges of being accepted by the upper class are evident in Anne's reflections on the unequal partnerships that exist in her social circle. “A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman. He ought not; he does not.” (Chapter 23)

Persuasion by Jane Austen delves into the impact of class dynamics on individual lives through vivid characterizations and incisive social commentary. Austen's keen observations shed light on the challenges faced by those outside the established elite in Regency society. “All equality of alliance must rest with Elizabeth, for Mary had merely connected herself with an old country family of

respectability and large fortune.” (Chapter 4). This quote underscores the importance placed on lineage and wealth in determining social status, emphasizing the challenges faced by those outside the established elite in achieving acceptance and inclusion, prompting readers to reflect on societal expectations and personal fulfilment within the confines of the rigid class structure. Austen’s portrayal of class conflict and social stratification in *Persuasion* serves as a thought-provoking exploration of human relationships and the clash between societal norms and individual desires in Regency society.

Regency literature delves into the theme of class dynamics, which serves as a prominent focal point, mirroring the hierarchical structure of British society in the early 19th century. Through intricate storytelling and nuanced character portrayals, authors of Regency literature delve into the complexities of social stratification, shedding light on the privileges, limitations, and conflicts inherent within various social classes.

A significant theme that emerges in Regency literature is the depiction of social hierarchies and the stark divisions between the aristocracy, gentry, and lower classes. Authors vividly illustrate the disparities in wealth, education, and opportunities that define each social stratum, providing readers with a glimpse into the hierarchical nature of Regency society. Whether through the opulent lifestyles of the aristocracy or the hardships faced by the working class, Regency literature presents a multifaceted exploration of class distinctions and their profound impact on individuals’ lives.

“Anne had always felt that the privilege of rank and connexion could never be altered; and to be known to be related to such a man [referring to a disinherited relative], have her name connected with his, was almost a humiliation.” (Chapter 1).

This quote adeptly encapsulates the core of social hierarchies depicted in Regency literature, shedding light on power dynamics, constraints imposed on individuals, and the inner turmoil stemming from societal norms.

Regency literature frequently explores the themes of marriage and social mobility, as characters navigate the challenges of securing advantageous unions to improve their social standing. The pursuit of love and companionship is intricately intertwined with considerations of wealth, status, and familial expectations, reflecting the practical realities of Regency society. Authors delve into the complexities of romantic relationships within the confines of societal constraints, highlighting the tensions between personal desires and social obligations.

In addition to marriage and social mobility, inheritance laws and entailments play a significant role in Regency literature. These legal constraints often shape characters’ destinies and influence their interactions. The inability to inherit property or titles becomes a catalyst for familial dramas and conflicts, emphasizing the intricate nature of inheritance and its impact on social status.

“‘My situation, ’said Mary, ’is a very peculiar one. I am more thought of in proportion to my fortune than I ought to be. If I was not rich, I should not be half as much valued.” (Chapter 10).

This quote indirectly alludes to the societal expectations imposed on women, although it does not explicitly mention inheritance laws. Women without substantial inherited wealth experienced limited choices and a lower social status.

Regency literature not only serves as a platform for social critique and satire but also employs wit and irony to expose the hypocrisies and injustices perpetuated by the class system. Authors skilfully utilize sharp observations and biting commentary to shed light on the absurdities of aristocratic behaviour and the inequalities faced by the lower classes. By means of satire, Regency literature challenges readers to question the prevailing norms and values, thereby prompting them to reflect on the inherent inequalities within society.

“‘The Elliots must not be under any other roof than their own, ’ was her reason for giving up the lodging. Her motive was good, her intention upright; but she never forgave herself for having made Sir Walter Elliot’s comfort the principal consideration” (Chapter 1).

This excerpt showcases Austen’s critical view of society and use of satire. Lady Russell, known for her adherence to social norms, values the reputation of the “Elliots” above Anne’s well-being. The irony is evident in the reasoning provided – Sir Walter’s comfort. Austen implies that social status takes precedence over genuine care for others. This scenario underscores the inner conflict Anne experiences as a result of societal expectations. Despite recognizing the flawed logic, Anne feels compelled to uphold her family’s reputation. The passage subtly conveys the pressure on women like Anne to maintain appearances, which in turn limits their autonomy and happiness. Through cleverness, the seemingly trivial excuse for relinquishing the lodgings reveals a deeper truth about the inflexible social hierarchy and its effects on personal lives. By depicting this situation, Austen encourages readers to challenge the societal standards that prioritize superficiality over authentic needs.

In addition, manners and etiquette play a significant role in determining social status in Regency literature, as characters are judged based on their behaviour and refinement. Authors meticulously describe the rituals and customs of polite society, emphasising the importance of adhering to social conventions in order to maintain one’s position. The portrayal of manners and etiquette underscores the performative nature of class identity, revealing how individuals navigate and negotiate their place within the social hierarchy. For example, in *Persuasion*, Chapter 7:

“The Musgroves came back to receive their happy boys and girls from school, bringing with them Mrs. Harville’s little children, to improve the noise of Uppercross, and

lessen that of Lyme. Henrietta remained with Louisa; but all the rest of the family were again in their usual quarters.”

In this passage, Austen effectively showcases the nuanced differences between the Musgroves and the Elliots, subtly emphasizing their contrasting behaviours and interactions. The Musgroves, belonging to a lower social class, demonstrate deference and respect towards the Elliots by bringing their children to stay with them. Their actions and demeanour reflect their awareness of social hierarchy and the significance of following proper etiquette when engaging with those of higher status.

Overall, Regency literature offers a diverse range of themes and motifs that revolve around class dynamics, providing us, readers, with a glimpse into the complexities of social stratification during this transformative period in British history. Through the lens of literature, readers gain valuable insight into the intricacies of class relationships, mobility, and identity, thereby enhancing our understanding of Regency society and its enduring impact on literature and culture.

4. Victorian Era

The Victorian Era, which lasted from 1837 to 1901, brought about significant changes in British society, particularly in terms of class dynamics and social stratification. Queen Victoria’s reign had a profound influence on these aspects, shaping the norms, values, and structures that defined the era.

During Queen Victoria’s rule, the British Empire experienced remarkable economic growth and industrialization, leading to the emergence of a growing middle class. This middle class, composed of entrepreneurs, professionals, and white-collar workers, played a crucial role in driving economic prosperity and innovation. They took advantage of expanding opportunities in trade, commerce, and industry, and began to exert their influence in social, political, and cultural spheres.

However, despite the rise of the middle class, Victorian society remained deeply divided, with clear distinctions between the upper, middle, and working class. At the top of the social hierarchy and landed gentry, who maintained their privileged status through inherited wealth and ancestral landownership. They held positions of power and influence in government, society, and the economy, shaping social norms and values.

Below the aristocracy, the middle classes were striving to emulate the lifestyle and status of the upper classes. They sought to distinguish themselves through education, refinement, and adherence to Victorian ideals of morality, hard work, and respectability. Embracing values such as thrift, diligence, and self-improvement, they aimed for upward mobility and social advancement.

During the Victorian Era, most of the society was made up of the working class, which included labourers, factory workers, and domestic servants. These individuals faced harsh working conditions, meagre wages, and limited access to education and healthcare. Meanwhile, the upper and middle class

benefited from the fruits of the working class's labour. Despite their significant contributions to the economy and society, the working-class experienced marginalization, exploitation, and social stigma, with few opportunities for upward mobility.

Queen Victoria's reign saw important social and legislative reforms aimed at addressing pressing issues such as poverty, public health, and working conditions. The Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, and 1884 expanded the electorate and paved the way for greater political representation and participation. Additionally, the introduction of Factory Acts, Mines Acts, and Public Health Acts brought regulations to improve working conditions, protect workers' rights, and alleviate some of the negative impacts of industrial capitalism.

In conclusion, Queen Victoria's reign during the Victorian Era brought about significant changes in class dynamics and social stratification in the United Kingdom. While the rise of the middle class signalled shifts in traditional power structures, inequalities persisted, shaping the experiences and opportunities of individuals across different social strata. Queen Victoria's legacy continues to influence attitudes, values, and institutions in present-day society.

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte, which was published on October 19, 1847, provides a poignant depiction of the class conflict and social injustice that prevailed during Queen Victoria's reign. Through the perspective of its protagonist, Jane Eyre, Bronte delves into the intricacies of Victorian society, shedding light on the disparities in wealth, social status, and opportunities that characterized the era. The novel presents a scathing critique of the inflexible class structure and the injustices endured by those on the fringes of society.

A central theme in *Jane Eyre* revolves around the portrayal of social class and its profound impact on individual lives. As a governess, Jane Eyre occupies a precarious position within the social hierarchy, not fully belonging to either the upper class or the working class. Her experiences at Thornfield Hall, where she serves as a governess to Mr. Rochester's ward, Adele, vividly illustrate the tensions and power dynamics inherent in Victorian society. Jane's interactions with characters such as Mrs. Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst further emphasize the inequalities and injustices faced by individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Bronte skilfully utilizes vivid imagery and evocative language to depict the harsh realities of social injustice in Victorian England. An illustrative instance is Jane's portrayal of Lowood Institution, where she faces mistreatment and deprivation as a student. Her observations on the appalling conditions at the institution serve as a poignant condemnation of the neglect and exploitation experienced by orphaned and impoverished children during that period. As Jane observes,

“Our clothing was insufficient to protect us from the severe cold: we had no boots, the snow got into our shoes and melted there: our ungloved hands became numbed and covered with chilblains, as were our feet” (Chapter 7).

In addition, Jane Eyre delves into the theme of economic inequality and its repercussions for marginalized individuals. The character of Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's first wife, symbolized the exploitation and oppression endured by women of lower social status. Bertha's confinement in the attic of Thornfield Hall underscores how women, especially those considered socially undesirable, were marginalized, and silenced in Victorian society. As Jane reflects,

“There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further outdoor exercise was now out of the question” (Chapter 2).

Through the character of Mr. Rochester, Bronte presents a nuanced examination of the complexities of class privilege and moral obligation. Despite his wealth and social standing, Mr. Rochester is portrayed as a flawed and morally ambiguous individual, whose actions contribute to social injustice and inequality. His treatment of Bertha and his efforts to manipulate Jane's feelings expose the moral compromises and ethical dilemmas inherent in the exercise of power and privilege. As Mr. Rochester admits,

“I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you – especially when you are near me, as not: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame.” (Chapter 17)

To summarize, Jane Eyre serves as a compelling testament to Charlotte Bronte's examination of class conflict and social injustice during the reign of Queen Victoria. With its vibrant characters and insightful social commentary, the book sheds light on the lasting influence of Victorian values and attitudes on individuals. By exploring the interplay of love, duty and societal norms, Jane Eyre encourages readers to reflect on the intricate nature of class dynamics and how they impact personal autonomy and fulfilment.

The examination of working-class challenges in Victorian literature in comparison to other historical periods provides valuable insights into the changing perception of social inequality and economic hardship throughout different eras. Literature has consistently acted as a reflection of the realities experienced by the working class, illuminating their struggles, aspirations, and resilience in the face of adversity.

During the Victorian era, working-class struggles were frequently depicted within the context of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Renowned authors such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell effectively captured harsh realities endured by factory workers, labourers, and domestic

servants, exposing the exploitative labour practices and social injustices prevalent during this time. Notable novels like Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* offer poignant portrayals of working-class life, emphasizing the dehumanizing impact of industrial capitalism and the challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Throughout different historical periods, including the Elizabethan era, the struggles of the working class have been a common theme in literature. Playwrights like William Shakespeare delved into the challenges faced by ordinary people, showcasing themes of loyalty, betrayal, and resilience in the face of adversity in plays such as *King Lear* and *Henry IV*. Similarly, during the Romantic era, writers like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge celebrated the dignity and creativity of the working class in their poetry, emphasizing their connection to nature and profound emotions. Despite variations in portrayal the themes of economic hardship, social injustice, and human resilience remain constant across different epochs, reflecting the enduring struggles of the working class.

To summarize, analysing the challenges faced by the working class in Victorian literature alongside those in other time periods provides a more intricate comprehension of how views on social inequality and economic struggle have changed over time. Through exploring the similarities and distinctions in how working-class individuals are depicted throughout various historical contexts, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of the timeless issues and worries that transcend generations, ultimately cultivating empathy, comprehension, and a greater respect for the human condition.

5. Modernist Era

The period known as the Modernist Era, which spanned from the 1890s to the 1940s, was a time of significant societal and cultural transformations in the UK. This era was characterized by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and technological progress, all of which had a profound impact on British society. These changes challenged established norms and values, reshaping the very fabric of society in the process.

During the Modernist Era, urbanization accelerated, and cities grew at an unprecedented rate. The rise of industrial capitalism drew people from rural areas to urban centres in search of work, leading to the rapid expansion of cities. This growth resulted in overcrowded tenements and slums springing up alongside new factories and industrial complexes. The shift towards urban living brought about substantial social and cultural changes, as traditional rural communities were replaced by diverse, anonymous, and socially fragmented urban environments.

Technological advancements were also a key aspect of the Modernist Era. The introduction of electricity, the telephone, and the automobile transformed daily life, revolutionizing communication,

transportation, and leisure activities. These innovations enabled greater connectivity and mobility, shrinking distances and broadening horizons. However, they also gave rise to feelings of alienation, dislocation, and anxiety as individuals struggled to cope with the rapid pace of change and the breakdown of traditional social ties.

The Modernist Era in the UK was marked by a culture of experimentation, innovation, and avant-garde artistic expression. Artists, writers, and intellectuals defied traditional artistic forms and embraced new modes of expression like stream-of-consciousness narration, abstract painting, and atonal music. Modernist literature, as seen in the works of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T.S. Eliot, moved away from linear narratives to capture the complexities of human consciousness through fragmented, non-linear structures.

Additionally, the Modernist Era brought about significant changes in social attitudes, particularly in gender roles, sexuality, and identity. The suffrage movement gained traction, advocating for women's rights and political empowerment, while discussions on sexuality and sexual liberation challenged Victorian-era taboos. These shifts in social norms reflected broader changes in attitudes towards individualism, autonomy, and self-expression, as society grappled with the effects of modernity and the breakdown of traditional hierarchies.

Overall, the Modernist Era in the UK was a time of rapid change and upheaval, driven by industrialization, urbanization, and technological progress. It was a period of cultural exploration and experimentation, with artists and intellectuals pushing boundaries and questioning established norms. The legacy of the Modernist Era continues to influence contemporary attitudes, values, and cultural identities in British society.

In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, the examination of class conflict and social hierarchy is intricately intertwined within the narrative, providing insights into the complexities of post-war society during the Modernist Era. Through the interaction of its character, Woolf sheds light on the disparities in wealth, status, and opportunities that characterized British society in the early 20th century.

One of the key themes in *Mrs. Dalloway* is the depiction of the evident class division and social structures prevalent in interwar London. The novel contrasts the lives of the upper-class elite, exemplified by characters like Clarissa Dalloway, with those of working-class individuals such as Septimus Warren Smith and his wife, Rezia. Through their unique perspectives and experiences, Woolf presents a nuanced exploration of the advantages and limitations associated with different social classes.

Clarissa Dalloway personifies the epitome of upper-class privilege and social status, embodying a world of opulence, sophistication, and leisure. As a member of the aristocratic elite, Clarissa effortlessly navigates exclusive social circles, attending extravagant parties and gatherings, where she

is revered and esteemed by her peers. Woolf's portrayal of Clarissa's privileged existence emphasizes the stark contrast between the upper class and the rest of the society, underscoring the deep-rooted inequalities that characterize British society during the interwar period.

“Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?” (Chapter 1)

This statement captures Clarissa Dalloway's reflection on her own mortality and her position in the social structure. It represents the existential inquiries that emerge in the midst of the advantages and opulence of her high-class lifestyle.

In contrast, Septimus Warren Smith presents a striking juxtaposition to Clarissa's world of privilege and ease. A traumatized veteran of World War I, Septimus grapples with mental illness and the aftermath of his experiences, struggling with feelings of isolation and despair in a society that fails to comprehend or support him. Woolf's depiction of Septimus and his wife, Rezia, sheds light on the challenges faced by the working class and marginalized individuals, who often bore the brunt of the social and economic upheaval following the war.

“Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down). He waited. He listened. A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death.” (Chapter 3).

This excerpt portrays the fragmented mental state of Septimus Warren Smith and his estrangement from society. It emphasizes his disappointment with the world and his endeavour to discover amidst the disorder and anguish of the post-war society.

Furthermore, Woolf employs innovative narrative techniques, such as stream-of-consciousness narration and interior monologue, to delve into the inner lives of her characters and explore the complexities of class identity and social belonging.

“Big Ben struck ten. The sound of the hour, across the stir and mumble, boomed out, falling like a vast gong upon the instant. And for Clarissa, catching it, the stroke was an achievement of the greatest importance. London, this morning, June, the early breeze blowing, and the never-ending procession of people... all was contained in that moment, a world held fast or very nearly held fast” (Mrs Dalloway, Part I)

This quote aptly showcases the fragmented and subjective essence of consciousness that stream of consciousness narration seeks to depict. It explores Clarissa's perspective on the world,

encapsulating how her thoughts shift between the current moment, personal meaning, and the enormity of the city and its people. Through these stylistic devices, Woolf invites readers to immerse themselves in the minds of her characters, experiencing firsthand their struggles, desires, and aspirations, regardless, of their social standing or background.

To summarize, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* provides a thought-provoking examination of class divisions and social hierarchy during the Great Depression and post-war era. By skilfully portraying characters and employing unique storytelling methods, the book sheds light on the lasting effects of inequality and financial struggles on individuals. It encourages readers to reflect on the intricate nature of class dynamics and how they influence personal autonomy and satisfaction in a rapidly evolving society.

Modernist literature, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, introduced innovative narrative techniques, and delved into existential themes that represented a departure from earlier literary periods. One key difference can be seen in narrative techniques: Modernist writers, such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, utilized stream-of-consciousness narration and nonlinear storytelling to portray the fragmented and subjective nature of human consciousness. This approach contrasted with the more linear and structured narratives of previous eras, like the Victorian period, where authors like Charles Dickens and George Eliot favoured traditional storytelling methods.

Themes of identity and existentialism also provide a point of comparison. During the Modernist Era, authors grappled with existential inquiries regarding identity, alienation, and the quest for meaning in a world that was becoming increasingly complex and uncertain.

“For what was this all about? Sitting here, watching the people pass; reading a book; feeling as if life were steady, habitual, and yet beneath, something swollen which one could not name. but sitting here, she felt, was an assertion of something. What? Against what?” (Part I)

This is in stark contrast to earlier periods, such as the Romantic era, where literature celebrated individualism, imagination, and the connection between humanity and nature. Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge focused on themes of transcendence and the strength of the human spirit in harmony with the natural world.

Fragmentation and disillusionment are common themes in modernist literature, reflecting the societal changes following World War I. In contrast, earlier literary periods, though also marked by social change, often portrayed a more stable society. Victorian literature, for example, explored tensions between tradition and progress, but the depiction of fragmentation and disillusionment was more subtle.

Social critique and satire are key elements that set modernist literature apart from earlier periods. Modernist authors frequently used irony and satire to criticize societal values and norms. Virginia

Woolf and James Joyce, for instance, used their works to expose the contradictions and absurdities of modern life. This differs from earlier literature, where satire focused on different social issues.

In essence, modernist literature introduced new techniques and themes while also drawing from earlier literary traditions. By comparing modernist literature to earlier periods, we can better understand how literature reflects and responds to the changing dynamics of society, culture, and human experience throughout history.

6. Contemporary Era

Contemporary British literature of the 21st century continues to highlight the theme of class conflict and social stratification, showcasing the ongoing disparities and tensions within British society. Authors delve into the intricacies of class dynamics, providing nuanced perspectives on wealth, privilege, and power, while also examining how class intersects with race, gender, and other identity markers.

One aspect of modern British literature is its exploration of the enduring legacy of class divisions and the prevalence of social inequality. Writers such as Zadie Smith and Ali Smith delve into the experiences of individuals from various social backgrounds as they navigate the complexities of urban life. Through their vivid characters and insightful social commentary, these authors illuminate how class influences identity, opportunities, and social mobility in contemporary Britain.

Moreover, contemporary British literature also addresses the impact of economic austerity and neoliberal policies on class dynamics. Authors like Alan Hollinghurst and Jonathan Coe explore the consequences of economic recession, austerity measures, and social fragmentation on communities throughout the UK. Through their narratives, these writers examine the widening gap between the affluent and the marginalized, as well as the breakdown of social cohesion and solidarity in an increasingly divided society.

Furthermore, modern British literature frequently questions conventional narratives surrounding national identity and social unity, especially following Brexit and amidst discussions on immigration and multiculturalism. Authors such as Kamila Shamsie, with *Home Fire*, and Nikesh Shukla, with *The Good Immigrant*, tackle themes of race, ethnicity, and belonging, shedding light on the struggles of immigrant communities, and urging readers to confront the intricacies of identity and acceptance in present-day Britain.

In addition, contemporary British literature delve into matters of social equity and advocacy, amplifying voices that are often marginalized and advocating for systemic transformation. Writers like Bernardine Evaristo, in *Girl, Woman, Other*, and Reni Eddo-Lodge, in *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, address topics such as racial inequality, systemic racism, and

intersectional feminism, contributing to broader dialogues on fairness, diversity, and social justice within British culture.

On the whole, 21st-century British literature offers a varied and profound exploration of class divisions and social hierarchy, mirroring the complexities of contemporary British society. By focusing on the experiences of diverse communities and scrutinizing systems of power and privilege, modern authors enhance our comprehension of the obstacles and possibilities for social progress in the pursuit of a more just and inclusive society.

In Zadie Smith's *NW*, the novel serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the persistent concerns surrounding inequality, marginalization, and social justice in the context of contemporary urban life. Through the experiences of its characters, Smith delves into the intricate dynamics of race, class, and identity, presenting a nuanced portrayal of the obstacles and disparities faced by individuals residing in a diverse and rapidly evolving city like London.

A central theme in *NW* revolves around the pervasive nature of inequality and marginalization, particularly among those hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds. Smith vividly depicts the struggles of characters such as Leah Hanwell, who grapples with feelings of alienation and displacement despite her relentless efforts to establish a prosperous life. Leah reflects upon her upbringing in the council estate and the barriers she encounters while attempting to break free from the cycle of poverty: "Was she really free? Was she really nothing like the circumstances into which she had been born?"

Furthermore, Smith's exploration of social justice extends to her portrayal of racial tensions and discrimination within the urban landscape. Characters like Natalie Blake, a successful lawyer who conceals her Jamaican heritage, confront the complexities of racial identity and cultural assimilation in a predominantly white society. Smith emphasizes the ways in which race intersects with class and privilege, shaping individuals' opportunities and experiences:

"All the dark people here, living, dying, surviving, they're here because they were allowed to come. In the back of big vans, late at night, on small boats, under the cover of darkness, children and adults with no past, no names, no records, no expectations, no family, no future"

Moreover, *NW* delves into the themes of gentrification and urban renewal, exploring the effects of economic development on local communities and social cohesion. By portraying Felix Cooper, a former drug addict turned community activist, Smith delves into the tensions between long-time residents and affluent newcomers who aim to reshape the neighbourhood. Felix contemplates the changes in his community with a mixture of acceptance and defiance:

"It's just a matter of time before we're not around anymore. Before they price us out of here, before they force us out of here, before they make it impossible for us to live here. In the meantime, we keep living".

To summarize, Zadie Smith's *NW* provides a thought-provoking examination of ongoing concerns regarding inequality, marginalization, and social justice in contemporary urban life. Through its vibrant characters and insightful social commentary, the novel encourages readers to confront the complexities of race, class, and identity in a diverse and rapidly evolving marginalized communities.

7. Conclusion

In considering my examination of class conflict and social stratification in English literature throughout historical and contemporary eras, I am impressed by the depth and complexity of the themes I have encountered. From the hierarchical structures of medieval times to the intricate portrayals of modern social stratification, literature has functioned as a potent tool for scrutinizing the intricacies of human society.

My analysis has allowed me to trace the development of literary representations of class dynamics, observing how authors from various periods grapple with issues of power, privilege, and inequality. From Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to Zadie Smith's *NW*, we have been exposed to a diverse range of stories that shed light on the challenges, ambitions, and injustices inherent in hierarchical communities.

Furthermore, my exploration has underscored the enduring significance of these themes in comprehending shifts in society and cultural perspectives on class throughout history. While the specifics of class conflict may have changed, the fundamental inquiries into power, agency, and justice remain pivotal to the human condition. Literature offers a timeless platform for exploring these matters with depth and sophistication, providing insights into the complexities of social hierarchy and the pursuit of social justice.

Upon reflecting on my discoveries, I am reminded of the profound influence that literature wields in shaping our perceptions of the world. Through its vibrant characters, immersive settings, and thought-provoking themes, literature encourages us to confront the realities of class distinctions and social stratification with empathy, understanding, and critical analysis. By challenging the narratives that influence our collective consciousness, we are better prepared to navigate the intricacies of class dynamics and strive towards a fairer and more inclusive society for all.

My investigation into the evolution of literary representations of class dynamics has not only uncovered the deep connections between literature and historical/cultural contexts but also highlighted how authors are influenced by the social and political landscapes of their eras. Literature has been utilized as a tool for social criticism and analysis, reflecting the fears, conflicts, and hopes of society from the Industrial Revolution to the aftermath of World War II.

Moreover, my examination has shed light on how literature acts as a catalyst for social progress and change. Authors, through storytelling, challenge established beliefs and advocate for marginalized voices, promoting equality and justice. Whether it be the anti-slavery literature of the 19th century or the feminist literature of the 20th century, literature has been instrumental in driving social movements and fostering collective action.

In reflecting on the broader implications of my research, it is evident that literature not only provides a glimpse into the past but also offers guidance for the future. By delving into past and present narratives, we are able to comprehend the intricacies of class dynamics and social hierarchy, empowering us to envision a more inclusive and fair society. Through ongoing exploration and discourse, literature has the potential to motivate us to challenge existing power structures, break down systemic injustices, and work towards a more equitable and compassionate world for future generations.

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