

June 8, 2005

In Fiction, a Long History of Fixation on the Social Gap
By CHARLES McGRATH

On television and in the movies now, and even in the pages of novels, people tend to dwell in a classless, homogenized American Never-Never Land. This place is an upgrade, but not a drastic one, from the old neighborhood where Beaver, Ozzie and Harriet, and Donna Reed used to live; it's those yuppified city blocks where the friends on "Friends" and the "Seinfeld" gang had their apartments, or in the now more fashionable version, it's part of the same exurb as One Tree Hill and Wisteria Lane - those airbrushed suburbs where all the cool young people hang out and where the pecking order of sex and looks has replaced the old hierarchy of jobs and money.

This is progress of a sort, but it's also repression, since it means that pop culture has succeeded to a considerable extent in burying something that used to be right out in the open. In the old days, when we were more consumed by social class, we were also more honest about it.

There is an un-American secret at the heart of American culture: for a long time, it was preoccupied by class. That preoccupation has diminished somewhat - or been sublimated - in recent years as we have subscribed to an all-purpose, mass-market version of the American dream, but it hasn't entirely disappeared. The subject is a little like a ne'er-do-well relative; it's sometimes a shameful reminder, sometimes openly acknowledged, but always there, even, or especially, when it's never mentioned.

This was particularly true in the years before World War II, when you couldn't go to the movies or get very far in a novel without being reminded that ours was a society where some were much better off than others, and where the class divide - especially the gap separating middle from upper - was an inescapable fact of life. The yearning to bridge this gap is most persistently and most romantically evoked in Fitzgerald, of course, in characters like the former Jay Gatz of *Nowhere, N.D.*, staring across Long Island Sound at that distant green light, and all those moony young men standing in the stag line at the country club, hoping to be noticed by the rich girls.

But there is also a darker version, the one that turns up in Dreiser's "[American Tragedy](#)" (1925), for example, where class envy - a wish to live like his rich tycoon uncle - causes Clyde Griffiths to drown his hopelessly proletarian sweetheart, and where the impossibility of transcending his lot leads him inevitably to the electric chair. (In the upstate New York town of Lycurgus, where the story takes place, Dreiser reminds us that "the line of demarcation and stratification between the rich and the poor ... was as sharp as though cut by a knife or divided by a high wall.")

Some novels trade on class anxiety to evoke not the dream of betterment but the great American nightmare: the dread of waking up one day and finding yourself at the bottom. This fear gets an earnest and moralizing expression in early books like P. H. Skinner's 1853 novel, "*The Little Ragged Ten Thousand, or, Scenes of Actual Life Among the Lowly in New York.*" which is pretty much summed up by its title. By the turn of the century, though, in works like Stephen Crane's "*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*" and Frank Norris's "[McTeague](#)," about a San Francisco dentist who, unmasked as a fraud, sinks to a life of crime and degradation, the treatment had turned grim and unflinching.

These books were frankly meant to shock their middle-class readers - to scare the daylights out of them - even as they played on their sympathies. They suggested that the worst thing that could possibly happen to an American was to topple from his perch on the class ladder, as happens to poor Hurstwood in Dreiser's "*Sister Carrie*." In his besotted pursuit of Carrie (who meanwhile trades on her beauty and charm to move up from her Chicago boarding house to the bright lights of Broadway), he loses everything and crashes all the way from restaurant-owning prosperity to scabbing for work as a trolley car driver.

The poor are noticeably absent, however, in the great artistic flowering of the American novel at the turn of the 19th century, in the work of writers like Henry James, William Dean Howells and Edith Wharton, who are almost exclusively concerned with the rich or the aspiring middle classes: their marriages, their houses, their money and their stuff. Not accidentally, these novels coincided with America's Gilded Age, the era of overnight fortunes and conspicuous spending that followed in the wake of the Civil War.

To a certain extent James, Wharton, et al. were merely writing about the world around them, though in James there is sometimes a hint of aesthetic snobbery, a sense that refined writing required a refined subject matter. (In "[The Ambassadors](#)," for example, he explains that the Newsomes made their fortune in manufacturing, but can't quite bring himself to be so vulgar as to tell us exactly what they made.) In Wharton and Howells, on the other hand, there is frequently an edge of satire, and sometimes a hint of seismic rumble.

Wharton's most vivid characters are not the aristos, the sons and daughters of the great New York families, who are all a little bloodless and sexually underpowered, but people like Lily Bart, whose lifestyle outstrips her pocketbook and who winds up in economic freefall. And then there are the climbers and the nouveaux, people like Undine Spragg in "[The Custom of the Country](#)," who arrives in New York from provincial Apex City, Kan., determined to rise up in society the old-fashioned way - by marrying, which she does not just once but three times, if you count the one that was supposed to be a secret. One of the messages of the novel is that in America new money very quickly, in a generation or less, takes on the patina of old; another is that the class structure is necessarily propped up by deceit and double standards.

But to a generation of writers after Wharton that structure - the lives and mores of the rich, the well born and the climbers - proved endlessly diverting. Young men and women on the make, and older ones trying anxiously to cling to their perch, through an entire bookcase full of American fiction.

John O'Hara, for example, made a whole career of chronicling the upper and upper middle classes from before the First World War until after the Second, and no one ever observed more astutely the little clues that indicated precisely where one stood on the class ladder: the clubs and fraternity pins, the shoes, the shirt collars. J. P. Marquand pored over much the same territory and, like O'Hara, became both a popular and a critical success. Every now and then a racy book about lowlife - "[Tobacco Road](#)" for example - would catch the public fancy, but for a surprisingly long time middle-brow fiction in America was about upper-middle-class life.

What was the appeal? Vouyerism, in part. (It didn't hurt O'Hara's sales one bit that he saw it as part of his mission to inform us that upper-class people had very busy sex lives.) Fiction back then had a kind of documentary function; it was one of the places Americans went to learn about how other Americans lived. In time novels ceased to be so reportorial, and after World War II, moreover, as the middle class in America swelled in numbers and importance, the world of the upper crust lost some of its glamour and importance.

The old kind of class novel - about striving and trying to move up by learning the upper-class code - is still being written. "[Prep.](#)" a first novel by Curtis Sittenfeld, about an ambitious scholarship girl who finds herself in over her head, smoldering with class resentment, at a school that closely resembles Groton, recently became a surprise best seller. But more often the upper class is portrayed these days as a little beleaguered and merely trying to hang on, like the members of the New England family in Nancy Clark's 2003 novel "[The Hills at Home.](#)" all failures in one way or another, who have retreated back to the ancestral manor, or like Louis Auchincloss's WASPy lawyers and businessmen, who have a sense of themselves as the last of a breed.

Elsewhere in the fictional landscape, a number of young writers - short-story writers especially - are still working in the afterglow of our once very hot literary romance with the world of Wal-Marts and trailer parks, so vividly evoked in the writing of Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason and Frederick Barthelme, among others. But to a considerable extent novels these days take place in a kind of all-purpose middle-class America, in neighborhoods that could be almost anywhere, and where the burdens are more psychic than economic, with people too busy tending to their faltering relationships to pay much attention to keeping up with the neighbors.

It's a place where everyone fits in, more or less, but where, if you look hard enough, nobody feels really at home. Our last great middle-class hero, someone who really enjoyed his vacations and his country club, was John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom, and he died a premature death. Nowadays when a writer like Richard Russo, Russell Banks or Richard Price comes along, with an old-fashioned, almost Dickensian vision of life among the poor and working classes, it's a little startling; they seem like explorers who have returned from some distant land.

Novel reading is a middle-class pastime, which is another reason that novels have so often focused on the middle and upper classes. Mass entertainment is another matter, and when Hollywood took up the class theme, which it did in the 1930's, it made a crucial adjustment. During the Depression, the studios, which were mostly run by immigrant Jews, turned out a string of formulaic fantasies about life among the Gentile upper crust.

These movies were essentially twin variations on a single theme: either a rich young man falls for a working girl, as happens in, say, "[Easy Living](#)" to take one of many examples, or an heiress takes up with a young man who has to work for a living (in a number of cases he's a newspaperman, which was Hollywood's idea of a truly disreputable profession back then).

[Joan Crawford](#) made a specialty of the working girl role, in movies like "[Sadie McKee](#)" and "[Dancing Lady](#)" and also did the heiress in "[Love on the Run](#)" and "[I Live My Life](#)" But the great example of this genre is "[It Happened One Night](#)" with Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable, who famously dispensed with wearing an undershirt.

"It Happened One Night" implicitly answered the question of what an upper-class woman got in return for trading down: great sex. In other versions of the story the upper-class person is merely thawed and humanized by the poorer one, but in every case the exchange is seen as fair and equitable, with the lower-class character giving as much as he or she gets in return. Unlike the novels of class, with their anxieties and sense of unbridgeable gaps, these are stories of harmony and inclusion, and they added what proved to be an enduring twist on the American view of class: the notion that wealth and privilege are somewhat crippling conditions: if they don't make you an out-and-out twit, they leave you stiff, self-conscious and emotionally vacant until you are blessed with a little lower-class warmth and heart.

The formula persisted right up through movies like "[Love Story](#)" and "[Pretty Woman](#)" though it seems to be in disuse now that films, like novels, are increasingly set in an upscale, well-scrubbed America where WASP's are an endangered, pitiable species. Like the in-laws in "[Meet the Fockers](#)" and "[My Big Fat Greek Wedding](#)" they are still hopelessly uptight but not that wealthy anymore.

Television used to be fascinated with blue-collar life, in shows like "The Honeymooners," "All in the Family," "Sanford and Son" and "Roseanne," but lately it too has turned its attention elsewhere. The only people who work on television now are cops, doctors and lawyers, and they're so busy they seldom get to go home. The one vestige of the old curiosity about how other people live is in so-called reality television, when Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie drop in on rubes in "The Simple Life," or when upper- and middle-class families trade moms on "Wife Swap" and experience a week of culture shock.

But most reality television trades in a fantasy of sorts, based on the old game-show formula: the idea that you can be plucked out of ordinary life and anointed the new supermodel, the new diva, the new survivor, the new assistant to Donald Trump. You get an instant

infusion of wealth and are simultaneously vested with something far more valuable: celebrity, which has become a kind of super-class in America, and one that renders all the old categories irrelevant.

Celebrities, in fact, have inherited much of the glamour and sexiness that used to attach itself to the aristocracy. If Gatsby were to come back today, he would come back as Donald Trump and would want a date not with Daisy but with Britney. And if Edith Wharton were still writing, how could she not include a heavily blinged hip-hop mogul?

But if the margins have shifted, and if fame, for example, now counts for more than breeding, what persists is the great American theme of longing, of wanting something more, or other, than what you were born with - the wish not to rise in class so much as merely to become classy. If you believe the novels of Dickens or Thackeray, say, the people who feel most at home in Britain are those who know their place, and that has seldom been the case in this country, where the boundaries of class seem just elusive and permeable enough to sustain both the fear of falling and the dream of escape.