

Introduction: Culture and class

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Guest Editor

In their recent, ground-breaking comparison of the levels of inequality among all of the developed countries of the world, *The Spirit Level*, Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson show that there is a growing disparity between rich and poor which continues to entrench the divisions of class in modern society—in terms of income, employment, education, housing and even life expectancy. Moreover, while money and resources remain the most fundamental factors in defining class, culture plays a more and more significant role in the everyday reproduction of class consciousness, privilege and power:

We all use matters of taste as marks of distinction and social class—we judge people by their accent, clothing, language, choice of reading matter, the television programmes they watch, the food they eat, the sports they play, the music they prefer, and their appreciation—or lack of it—of art.

Middle-class and upper-class people have the right accents, know how to behave in 'polite society', know that education can enhance their advantages. They pass all of this on to their children, so that they in turn will succeed in school and work, make good marriages, find high-paying jobs, etc. This is how elites become established and maintain their elite status.

People can use markers of distinction and class, their 'good taste', to maintain their position, but throughout the social hierarchy people also use discrimination and downward prejudice to prevent those below them from improving their status. Despite the modern ideology of equality of opportunity, these matters of taste and class still keep people in their place—stopping them from believing they can better their position and sapping their confidence if they try [...] Bourdieu calls the actions by which the elite maintain their distinction *symbolic violence*; we might just as easily call them discrimination and snobbery. Although racial prejudice is widely condemned, class prejudice is, despite the similarities, rarely mentioned.

(2009: 163-4)

It is this encounter between culture and class that the special issue of the *Nordic Journal of English Studies* seeks to explore, both theoretically and through the lens of literature. The ambition is not only to contribute to the renewed debate about class that has begun to emerge in recent

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years, but also to discuss how literature can in different ways dramatize the experience of class on a more personal level in fiction, poetry, drama and autobiographical writing. The conclusion that underpins all of the essays in this collection is that not only is the personal political, but that literature has a unique capacity to illuminate this everyday relationship of class, and the way it interacts with gender and race. As Fiona Devine and Mike Savage note in the conclusion to their book *Renewing Class Analysis*: “The practice of everyday life [...] is all important. It is in this respect that we recommend that the economic should be brought back into class analysis, although not the economic in a narrow sense but as a set of practices that are imbued with cultural meanings and experiences. Indeed, the concept of class is crucial for understanding the mutual constitution of the economic and the social” (2000: 196).

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that one of the reasons why the analysis of class needs to be renewed is that until recently, the experience of class has tended to be neglected, not least within academia. While the concepts of gender and ethnicity have fared better, class is often paid lip service to as part of the paradigm of oppression, but seldom seriously explored, even though the condition of class remains a fundamental part of life in modern society. Stefan Collini also remarks on this lapse in previous research preoccupations: “In the frequently incanted quartet of race, class, gender and sexual orientation, there is no doubt that class has been the least fashionable [...] despite the fact that all the evidence suggests that class remains the single, most determinant of life chances” (Quoted in Day 2001: 17). The collection of in-depth studies of class included here is therefore offered as a contribution to the redressing of this critical imbalance.

The articles in the issue can be grouped around two main points of departure: theoretical and literary, although in most cases the two aspects are combined in order to flesh out the critical discussion of class by comparing with different literary representations of it. Julian Markels for example begins by making a strong case for the return of class as a key component in the literary critical discourse before applying the concept to a discussion of Barbara Kingsolver’s postcolonial novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. Similarly, Hans Löfgren explores some of the sociological and literary implications of the Marxist concept of class, using Malcolm Cowley’s *Exile’s Return*, Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* as contrastive

frames of reference. In an essay that traces the link between culture, alienation and social class, George Snedeker revisits the work of Jean-Paul Sartre in order to show the continuing cultural and political relevance of Sartre's critique of class society.

In relation to the more pronounced literary studies in this issue, the ambition has been once again to show not only the continuing importance of class as a social and cultural marker, but also how a class analysis of literary texts alerts us to the fundamental ideological nature of literature. As Gary Day reminds us, there is an intrinsic "link between the economic form of capitalism and 'literary' representation", a connection that seems to have disappeared in the postmodern discourse (2001: 1-2). Thus, in this context, Barry Ryan traces some of the ethical and aesthetic aspects of class in James Joyce's story "The Dead", while Åke Persson looks at the relationship between marginalisation and recovery in Roddy Doyle's novel, *Paula Spencer*, a text that is set against the background of the economic collapse of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger'. In an historically informed survey of the political and personal function of poetry in the lives of ordinary people, Andy Croft celebrates poetry's contribution to the cause of radical social change. William Frederick examines the complex psychology of class in Peter Currell Brown's modern industrial novel, *Smallcreep's Day*. As part of the more recent intersectional re-encounter between class, gender and race, Chloé Avril interrogates the representation of Black masculinity in Huey Newton's autobiographical *Revolutionary Suicide*. Turning to 19th century British colonialism, Stephen Donovan also connects class, masculinity and history through a critical recovery of a previously neglected, pioneering Rhodesian novel: Richard Nicklin Hall's *Bulawayo Jack; or, Life Among the Matabele Kopjés*. My own essay situates itself in a similar intersectional context through its discussion of the clash between class and gender in John Sommerfield's 1930's novel, *May Day*.

Referring to the recent emergence of a much recycled image of the feckless working-class 'chav' figure in British popular culture recently, Imogen Tyler concludes that "the level of disgust directed at the chav is suggestive of a heightened class antagonism that marks a new episode in the dirty ontology of class struggle in Britain" (2008: 18). Similarly, Owen Jones's comprehensive survey of this demonizing class stereotype claims that such collective ridiculing is also aimed at disarming any attempt to alter the status quo of class privilege:

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It is both tragic and absurd that, as our society has become less equal and as in recent years the poor have actually got poorer, resentment against those at the bottom has positively increased. Chav-hate is a way of justifying an unequal society. What if you have wealth and success because it has been handed to you on a plate? What if people are poorer than you because the odds are stacked against them? To accept this would trigger a crisis of self-confidence among the well-off few. And if you were to accept it, then surely you would have to accept that the government's duty is to do something about it—namely, by curtailing your own privileges. But, if you convince yourself that the less fortunate are smelly, thick, racist and rude by nature, then it is only right that they should remain at the bottom. Chav-hate justifies the preservation of the pecking order, based on the fiction that it is actually a fair reflection of people's worth. (2011: 137)

It is these fictions of class representation that this collection also seeks to challenge by countering the stereotypes with a more nuanced response to the cultural connotations of class, both in society and in literature. Gary Day notes that it is the plight of the poor that “reminds us that class, and what we mean by it, is once more an issue in British society” (2001: 204). It is the hope that this new collection of research articles will help to promote a greater critical awareness of the continuing connection between culture and class within the field of English studies, both in Scandinavia and elsewhere.

References

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