



Social Class in 19th Century England

Emma Unit
Mrs. Parnell



“POLL EVERYWHERE” QUESTION

GO TO: Pollev.com/katieparnell471 and answer...

Why did Knightley get so upset with Emma?

Knightley's speech to Emma

Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation—but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed!—You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her—and before her niece, too—and before others, many of whom (certainly *some*,) would be entirely guided by your treatment of her (Austen 351-352).

Video clip: Knightley's Anger



“Mr. Knightley helps to develop in the child Emma the conscience and memory of an adult”
(Brown 23).

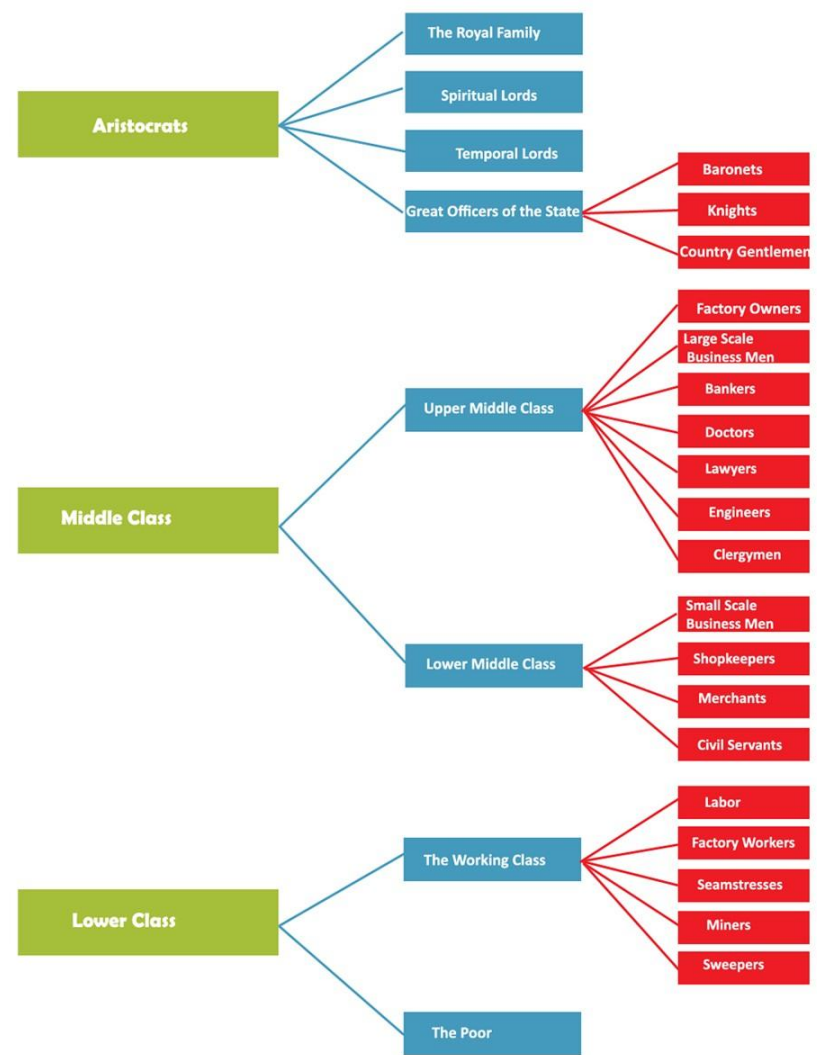


Social Class Definition

Social class: a group of people within a society who possess the same socioeconomic status. The term *class* first came into wide use in the early 19th century, replacing such terms as *rank* and *order* as descriptions of the major hierarchical groupings in society (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica).

Social Class Hierarchy

“The greatest of all qualifications to notions of hierarchy...has been the acquisition of wealth”
(Brooke 185).





Ancient history

“The truth is that the issue of hierarchy versus equality is as old as the recorded social history of the human race...Paul had declared to the Galatians: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free’” (Brooke 184).

“*Emma* can, in fact, be read as Austen’s attempt to deal with the threatened erosion of the old social order and the conflicting claims and ideologies of the emergent middle classes” (Tobin 413).



UPPER CLASS/ARISTOCRATS

- The Royal Family
- Spiritual Lords
- Temporal Lords
- Great Officers of the State
 - Baronets
 - Knights
 - Country Gentlemen

Gentility was marked by:

- Morals
- Birth into a good family
- Land
- Wealth

(White 38)

("19th Century England Social Hierarchy")



MIDDLE CLASS

The middle class consisted of newly educated experts in industrial technologies, along with other college-educated professionals; they were white-collar workers who were not paid as much but still saw a distinction between themselves and the lower classes (Helmer).

Upper Middle Class– These were the people at administrative levels enjoying high authority and high social status in the society:

- Factory Owners, Large Scale Businessman, Bankers, Doctors, Lawyers, Engineers, Clergymen

Lower Middle Class– A step lower to the upper middle class people group.

- Small Scale Businessmen, shopkeepers, merchants, civil servants

("19th Century England Social Hierarchy")



LOWER CLASS

Although the middle class was gaining real traction in 19th-century England, a third class of unskilled laborers, known as the **underclass**, were a blemish on all of Victorian society. The British underclass worked menial jobs when they were available, and there were no labor laws to protect them from abuses (Helmer).

The Working Class– This was the upper lower class in the hierarchy. These were men, women and children who used to do the lowest level work for the country. This included following profiles:

- Labor, factory workers, seamstresses, miners, sweepers

The Poor – These were the people living on charity.

- Gypsies

("19th Century England Social Hierarchy")



Character's classes



Upper Class:

- Woodhouses
- Knightleys
- Churchills

Middle Class:

- Westons
- Eltons
- Jane Fairfax
- Miss Bates

Lower Class:

- Harriet Smith



Noblesse Oblige

Mr. Knightley requires the exercise of noblesse oblige, “the feudal doctrine that the upper classes have a duty to take care of the lower, by doing charitable deeds and by setting a good example of manners and morally unblemished behavior” (White 39).



The Offense

“Miss Bates’s characterization makes her a symbol of Highbury itself...Emma’s insult is an affront to the democratic character of the community itself” (Brown 18).

“I really believe, if she had only a shilling in the world, she would be very likely to give away sixpence of it’...Miss Bates, who can little afford generosity, is a more effectively charitable figure than Emma herself. Austen satirizes Emma’s perspective more fully by revealing it during Emma’s walk to visit the poor cottagers” (Spratt 203).

Emma vs. Miss Bates



Emma's Life:

- Grand house
- Handsome
- Clever
- Young
- Born rich /heiress of 30,000 pounds
- Unmarried but depends on no one

Miss Bates' Life:

- Makes a small income go a long way
- Rents a cramped drawing room
- Older
- Annoying
- Sunk from the comforts she was born with
- Unmarried and depends on others for gifts of food

“Austen asks the reader to judge Emma by her attitude toward poor women...As a powerful and wealthy woman, Emma has a special responsibility to assist and protect women who are economically vulnerable and socially disadvantaged” (Tobin 418-419).



Contrast between Knightley and Emma

- “One of the most striking features of *Emma* is the contrast between the heroine’s snobbery and Mr. Knightley’s readiness to mingle with all about him on relatively equal terms” (Brooke 180).
 - We can ask, how important is social class after all when we look at how Emma and Knightley view it?
- Why does Emma view Miss Taylor/Mrs. Weston as her equal but not Robert Martin?
- Emma and Knightley disagree on Harriet’s social class. How come she intends to marry her off to gentlemen if Emma doesn’t know Harriet’s parentage?



Upward Mobility

- What is your reaction to this? “American students are strongly predisposed to believe that individuals can move up in class...sure of their ability to transcend class boundaries...Americans tend to be embarrassed by the very idea of class” (White 35).
- A man born a gentleman could lose his status if his behavior was ungentlemanly
- If a woman got married to a gentleman, then her status would increase like Mrs. Weston and Mrs. Elton
- The social mobility of women “is correlated with the degree of their education” (White 42). Is this relevant to America today?



MODERN AMERICAN SOCIAL CLASSES

- **Upper Class:** Celebrities, “White Collar” workers
- **Middle Class:** “Blue Collar” workers
- **Lower Class:** Unemployed

*** How has COVID-19 revealed our social classes?