

**The Question of Class in the Victorian and
Neo-Victorian Novel:
Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and David
Lodge's *Nice Work***

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of class in two novels, one Victorian, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, and the other neo-Victorian, David Lodge's *Nice Work*, to see to what extent that issue continued to preoccupy English fiction. The paper shows that *Nice Work*, a pastiche of *North and South*, and separated from it by over one hundred and thirty years, is concerned with exactly the same issues that were considered of extreme importance to mid-nineteenth century Britain.

Yet, the paper finds that the serious tone and the urgency of purpose which characterize *North and South* are replaced in *Nice Work* by a light tone and a post-modern playfulness both in terms of the treatment of the issues addressed, and the solutions proposed for the social and economic problems facing Thatcherite Britain. The novel seems to mock the attempt on the part of conservative politicians to resurrect Victorian values as a possible remedy for late twentieth-century problems.

In examining the issue of class, the paper briefly reviews the Marxist and Weberian theories about class, and finds that Weber's theory is more nuanced and enables a better understanding of class affiliation and sympathies in the two novels.

The first part of the paper gives a review of Marxist and Weberian concepts of class. The second part presents a basic introduction to the neo-Victorian novel; and the third part examines the two novels.

Key words: class, Victorian, neo-Victorian, Marx, Weber

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This paper examines what many commentators characterize as a British obsession with class.¹ It studies this issue in two English novels separated by over one hundred and thirty years,² and finds that class relations and considerations were as alive and relevant towards the end of the twentieth century as they were in the mid nineteenth century. The paper will start by providing a short review of the theoretical debate about the concept of class itself. That debate informs the analysis of class dynamics presented in the two novels and the solutions they envisage for social and economic problems. The paper will then turn to the term 'neo-Victorianism' to see how late twentieth-century fiction revisits Victorian issues considered to be still relevant and unresolved and even adopts or satirizes Victorian fictional forms. The third, and last, part of the paper will examine the extraordinary extent to which *Nice Work* is influenced by *North and South* and the different treatment it offers to the same issues which novelists still think worth re-examining.

Theorising Class

Karl Marx was the major thinker whose writings influenced, to varying degrees, all other thinkers who thought and wrote about class. He formulated his main ideas in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867–1894).³ For Marx, the basic function of social classes is that they constitute the essential elements of society when it is conceived as a system of production. In other words, whether a few individuals might succeed or fail was irrelevant to the continuing existence of a system which required the presence of two classes, one owning the basic means of production in a society, and the other obliged to work in order to live. An individual's position within a class hierarchy is determined by her/his role in the production process. According to this theory, it did not

1- Toby Young, Why Are We Still Obsessed with Class?, *The Spectator*, October 27, 2012; <http://www.spectator.co.uk/life/status-anxiety/8714541/why-are-we-still-obsessed-with-class/>; Harvey Morris, Britain's Great Class Debate, *The New York Times*, April 3, 2013.

<http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/03/britains-great-class-debate/>.

2- Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* was published in 1854-1855; and David Lodge's *Nice Work* in 1988.

3- Part of *Das Kapital* was published posthumously after Marx's death in, 1883.

really matter which individuals found themselves in which of these classes, for Marx's focus was on the system, not on the individuals within it. The general and classic Marxian scheme divides society, socially and economically, into three classes: the upper, middle and working classes.⁴

However, Marxist class theory has not been without its critics. Peter Saunders, in his *Social Class and Stratification* asserts that "the insensitivity to systems of stratification other than those based on class ... and the unwillingness to consider actual forms of class consciousness as opposed to idealised ones – ... fundamentally undermine Marxist approaches to social stratification".⁵ British historian, Sir David Cannadine, in his book *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, also argues that "on closer inspection, the best that could be said of Marx's three class-conscious classes was that they were ideal types, historical abstractions that grossly oversimplified the way in which the social structure of modern Britain had actually evolved and developed".⁶

One difficulty, according to Cannadine, was that the shared class characteristics and clear-cut class boundaries that Marx and his followers had posited had rarely if ever existed in fact. For him, landowners did not only enjoy agricultural rents; they also made profit from their mines, docks, urban estates, and industrial investments. In the same way, successful middle-class businessmen often set themselves up as "broad-acted gentlemen, thereby straddling the supposedly deep and unbridgeable divide between the country house and the counting house".⁷

4- Marx writes: "The owners merely of labour-power, owners of capital, and land-owners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent, in other words, wage-labourers, capitalists and land-owners, constitute then three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production". Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, New York: International Publishers, On-Line Version: Marx.org 1996, Marxists.org 1999, P: 602, accessed on 17/2/2015.

5- Peter Saunders, *Social Class and Stratification*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, P: 6.

6- David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, P: 5.

7- Ibid.

Described in this way, the social structure of modern Britain was more elaborate, and also more integrated, than Marx had allowed.⁸

German historian and sociologist Max Weber was also unequivocal about the importance of class in his age; and some sociologists think that he was very close to Marx's thinking. Kieran Allen argues that "Weber's comments on class read like an echo of Marx".⁹ Writing mainly in the early years of the twentieth century, he was thought to engage in a "dialogue with the ghost of Marx",¹⁰ for he addressed many of the issues at the heart of Marx's theory but came to very different conclusions. Weber's sociology,¹¹ was based in a commitment to "methodological individualism".¹² In other words, while Weber recognised that it is useful to employ collective concepts such as 'social class', he argued that these simply referred to groupings of individuals. Unlike Marx, who saw classes as real social entities, Weber used the term to refer simply to groups within a population who shared certain common economic characteristics.

Moreover, the way in which Weber defined class was very different from the way Marx did. According to Weber, class is a function of 'market power' not a matter of owning or not owning the means of production. Seen in this way, people form a class if they share roughly common opportunities in life. What is equally crucial is the position people occupy in the labour market. Some people have particular skills or abilities which enable them to receive high wages when they offer their labour in the market, and this too will affect their class position.¹³

8- Ibid, p: 5.

9- Kieran Allen, *Max Weber, A Critical Introduction*, London: Pluto Press, 2004, P: 81.

10- Peter Saunders, *Social Class and Stratification*, P: 20.

11- As elaborated particularly in his *Economy and Society*, which was published posthumously in Germany in the early 1920s and appeared in an English translation in 1968.

12 Kieran Allen, *Max Weber, A Critical Introduction*, London: Pluto Press, 2004, P: 81.

13- Weber writes: "In our terminology, 'classes' are not communities; they merely represent possible, and frequent, bases for social action. We may speak of a 'class' when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, insofar as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the

In Weber's theory of social classes, there is no place for a concept like 'false consciousness'. For him, people act in ways which make sense to them and according to the values they hold. Consequently, it makes no sense for sociologists to describe these values as 'false', nor to dismiss people's actions as in some ethical way 'wrong' or 'misguided'.¹⁴

Contemporary sociological work on class and stratification has been strongly influenced by the writings of both Marx and Weber. Today work continues in both traditions. Judgement of the relative value of the writings of each remains influenced by personal and political values. Theorists within each of these traditions could, and probably will, continue their argument for years without reaching any point of agreement or compromise. A study by Gordon Marshall and others at the University of Essex has done this, and its results suggest that it is probably more useful to analyze contemporary class relations using a Weberian model than to employ Marxist concepts.¹⁵

As suggested at the beginning of this paper, the question of class continues to be a major preoccupation to the present day, not only for British sociologists, but for Britons in general. The 2013 edition of the British Social Attitudes survey showed that the British are just as likely as ever to identify themselves as belonging to a class:

The proportion of people feeling that they are middle class (around a third) or working class (around six in ten) has not changed much over [a] 30 year period. Nor has the fact that only half of the population spontaneously places themselves as

possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labour markets". Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1978, p. 927.

Kieran Allen, *Max Weber, A Critical Introduction*, London: Pluto Press, 2004, Pp: 82-83.

14- Peter Saunders, *Social Class and Stratification*, P: 23.

15- Gordon Marshall, David Rose, Howard Newby and Carolyn Vogler, *Social Class in Modern Britain*, London: Routledge, 2005, P: 267.

belonging to either class, with others only doing so when prompted to put themselves into one camp or the other.¹⁶

Only 5% said they did not identify with any class. So, it appears that class is still as meaningful a term for Britons as it ever was. Class still functions powerfully in the way people subjectively perceive of their circumstances. But what has changed, or might still change, is whether or not this emotional identification takes the form of mutual interests, and produces emotional solidarity. This is where the change is clearest, the study concludes: “the link between class and politics has almost completely broken down”.¹⁷

As has been shown, the British obsession with class is still as alive and powerful as ever. This explains why a novelist like David Lodge chose to write in the 1980s a pastiche¹⁸ of a novel published in the 1850s dealing with the same issue of class relations. Lodge was not alone in returning to Victorian England for a subject for one of his novels. For almost half a century now, numerous novelists have done so for a variety of purposes, a fact which prompted literary critics to coin recently the term ‘neo-Victorian’ to describe such novels.

Neo-Victorianism

Like all terms starting with the prefix neo, neo-Victorianism implies a new revival of various elements of the Victorian age. The term is new in literary theory and criticism. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, in their book *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009* write that:

16- Alison Park, Caroline Bryson, Elizabeth Clery, John Curtice and Miranda Phillips, eds. *British Social Attitudes: the 30th Report*, London: NatCen Social Research, 2013, P: 176.

17- Peter Saunders, *Social Class and Stratification*, Pp: 24-25.

18- Pastiche is defined as “A literary work composed from elements borrowed either from various other writers or from a particular earlier author”. Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, P: 186.

[I]t has been coined to refer to contemporary literary works which are either set in the Victorian period or engage with an ongoing debate within contemporary literary culture about what makes the Victorian novelist and what he or she represents, aims for, and strives towards is still worth arguing about in, and is indeed relevant to, the twenty-first century.¹⁹

Writing in *The Guardian* in May 2008, contemporary novelist Zadie Smith argued that “Victorian literature ... still matters, greatly, and the reading of Victorian texts, the re-reading and re-writing of them, and the (neo-) Victorian experience they represent is something that defines our culture as much as it did theirs”.²⁰ Yet, Heilmann and Llewellyn acknowledge that the term has until now remained loosely defined although they think of the concept as indicating a series of “metatextual and metahistorical conjunctions as they interact within the fields of exchange and adaptation between the Victorian and the contemporary”.²¹ It is partly this metatextual element in the neo-Victorian novel *Nice Work* which will be explored in the third part of this paper.

Academic studies seem to have adopted the term ‘neo-Victorian’ and preferred it over the term used earlier - ‘post-Victorian’ - “(presumably because of its potential ahistoricity) and ‘retro’/‘faux-Victorian’, which imply an overt nostalgia for the period”.²² This popularity is marked not only in creative but also critical terms with a growth in studies on the contemporary endurance, even revival, of fascination with the Victorians. The authors, however, distinguish between such texts and historical fiction which is set in the nineteenth century, re-writes a Victorian text or portrays a Victorian character.

19- Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, P: 4.

20- Zadie Smith, ‘The book of revelations’, *The Guardian*, 24 May 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/may/24/classics.zadiesmith> (accessed 4 April 2014).

21- Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009*, P: 4.

22- Ibid.

Before a near consensus emerged about the use of the term ‘neo-Victorianism’, some critics referred to novels based on Victorian novels as ‘afterings’. In “The Afterlife of the Victorian Novel: Novels about Novels”, Anne Humpherys writes that some of these novels have been described as ‘postmodern’, but in order to avoid the controversial use of the term and the different things it refers to, she coined the word ‘aftering’ to describe the ‘writing over’ of Victorian novels “that has been such a distinctive part of the late twentieth-century literary scene and the first decade of the twenty first”.²³ According to Humpherys, novelists who choose this mode of writing return to the Victorian period and the Victorian novel because of a “sense of that period’s contradictory richness and simplicity, a period of modern complexities but also of seeming confidence that the novel can represent these complexities”.²⁴ Humpherys concludes that examining a number of terms which have been used to describe the phenomenon of ‘aftering’, one can begin to distinguish its crucial characteristics: sequel, historical metafiction, parody, pastiche, appropriation, intervention, rewrites, alternative history. They all point, though indirectly, to a sense of belatedness: that is, to a recognition that there is nothing new, that we are all caught up in repeated conventions and old stories.

But at a deeper level, what underlies this persistent interest in the Victorian age is a feeling, on the part of many British writers that “conservative Victorian ideals can cure us of our current social ills”.²⁵ Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich argue that contemporary cultural critics construct a history of the present by “writing about rewritings of the Victorian past”.²⁶ With special emphasis on the multidisciplinary nature of this method, they theorize:

23- Anne Humpherys, “The Afterlife of the Victorian Novel: Novels about Novels”, in Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing, ed., *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002, P: 443.

24- Ibid, P: 444.

25- Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich, “Histories of the Present”, in John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff, Eds., *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, P: xii.

26- Ibid, P: xiv.

For the postmodern engagement with the nineteenth century appears to link the discourses of economics, sexuality, politics, and technology with the material objects and cultures available for transportation across historical and geographical boundaries, and thus capable of hybridization and appropriation.²⁷

Heilmann and Llewellyn, referred to earlier, stress that being a truly Neo-Victorian text means more than simply being located in a nineteenth-century setting or borrowing nineteenth-century stylistic techniques. Instead, the texts “must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*”.²⁸ Therefore, it is not only the interpretation, discovery and vision of the past, but the act of reinterpreting, rediscovering and conducting a revisionist examination of that past to engage with the present.

It is in the context of this particular interest in the political, economic and social underpinnings of both Victorian and neo-Victorian novels that Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* and David Lodge’s *Nice Work* will be examined in the remaining part of this paper.

Nice-working *North and South*²⁹

Nice Work (1988) is an example of the neo-Victorian novel which rewrites a Victorian novel. It sets out explicitly to provide a late twentieth-century version of the industrial novels of the nineteenth century, such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* (1850), Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) and, most particularly, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855). The novel declares an awareness of this rewriting by highlighting the fact that one

27- Ibid., P: xv.

28- Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009*, P: 4.

29- This subtitle has been chosen to highlight two distinguishing characteristics of *Nice Work*. The first is that it is a re-writing of *North and South*, and the second is the light tone and humour which replace the serious tone and the urgency of purpose which characterise *North and South*.

of the novel's two major characters, Dr. Robyn Penrose, is an academic specialised in exactly the industrial novels that *Nice Work* parodies. Penrose uses these novels as examples in her academic work. She delivers a lecture on *North and South* in which she explicitly establishes the 'two nations' theme which was central to the Victorian condition-of-England novel³⁰ and which dominates *Nice Work* too. The 'Shadow Scheme' links Dr. Penrose and Vic Wilcox in a professional and sexual relationship. Wilcox is the managing director of an engineering company. Penrose is as unfamiliar with the manufacturing process and the world of business as Margaret Hale in her relationship with the local mill-owner John Thornton in *North and South*.

The novel is set in Thatcherite Britain in the mid 1980s; and Thatcher's ideology, Thatcherism, was considered the "foremost issue for late 20th century Britain",³¹ for Thatcher did not only change the political momentum of her Conservative Party, but also helped make deep and lasting changes in the opposition Labour Party, and consequently in the overall British political scene. The period was characterized not only by the dominance of a conservative ideology but also by a call for a return to Victorian values as a possible panacea for the social and economic problems Britain was facing in the late twentieth century.

Among the traits in Thatcherite philosophy, inherited from the Victorian economic and value system, and addressed in *Nice Work*, is the belief in tough competition as a tool for economic recovery and growth, something which affects companies like J. Pringle & Sons Casting and

30- The term the "Condition-of-England novels" refers to novels also known as industrial novels, social novels, or social problem novels, published in Victorian England during and after the period of the Hungry Forties. The term directly relates to the famous "Condition of England Question" raised by [Thomas Carlyle](#) in "Chartism" (1839), although some of these novels were published earlier. Condition-of-England novels sought to engage directly with the contemporary social and political issues with a focus on the representation of class, gender, and labour relations, as well as on social unrest and the growing antagonism between the rich and the poor in England. Ian Ousby, ed. *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, P: 212.

31- Christine Collette and Keith Laybourn, *Modern Britain since 1979: A Reader*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2003, P: 1.

General Engineering in which Vic is a senior manager. Nineteenth-century intellectual Thomas Carlyle had, in 1843, complained about the animosity created in society as a result of applying economic principles to all aspects of life, writing: "Our life is not a mutual helpfulness; but rather, cloaked under due laws-of-war, named 'fair competition' and so forth, it is a mutual hostility".³² Another trait is that of extreme individualism reaching its apex in Thatcher's assertion that "There is no such thing as society",³³ but only individual men and women.

While the political changes introduced by Margaret Thatcher were genuine and multidimensional, perhaps their greatest impact on British society in general was that of attitude towards class, work, the economy and the individual. The general thrust of her policies as prime minister encouraged a free-market perspective and an emphasis on the enterprise of the hard-working individual. In *Twentieth-century Britain: A Political History*, W. D. Rubinstein, records the cultural shift "in attitudes toward capitalism, especially among the young, such that business life and entrepreneurship became popular career choices [...] capitalism was looked up to as far less 'exploitative' than it had been before".³⁴ These policies impacted academic life as they did other sections of British society. This is highlighted in *Nice Work* by the pressure felt by academics at the University of Rummidge as a result of the cuts made to public funding. It is also felt in industrial companies like Pringle's, which makes Vic Wilcox redundant and drives him in the end to start his own business.

A Weberian concept of class would be a more nuanced approach to the analysis of class relations in both *North and South* and *Nice Work* if only because of the difficulty of positioning the major female character in each. Margaret Hale, in *North and South*, does not belong to the upper

32- James Eli Adams, "The boundaries of social intercourse: Class in the Victorian Novel," in Francis O'Gorman ed., *A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005, P: 148.

33- Heather Nunn, *Thatcher, Politics and Fantasy: the Political Culture of Gender and Nation*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2002, P: 126.

34- Rubinstein, W. D., *Twentieth-Century Britain: A Political History*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, P: 333.

class; nevertheless, she has upper class sensibilities and values. At the beginning of the novel, she shows her class bias when she discusses the family's relative isolation with her mother who mentions the Gormans, a neighbouring family considered by the mother as possible society. Margaret objects to them on the ground that they were traders.

'Gormans', said Margaret. Are those the Gormans who made their fortune in trade at Southampton? Oh! I'm glad we don't visit them. I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off, knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence.' ... I like all people whose occupations have to do with land. (*NS*, 19)

Margaret makes clear that her objection to the Gormans is made primarily on the basis of the source of their wealth and stating clearly that she does not consider trade to be a 'respectable' source of wealth. Adopting the aristocratic and gentry values she is brought up to respect, she deems respectable only the wealth derived from land ownership. In this value system, even agricultural workers and farmers are more worthy of her company than traders. She also objects to the bragging and the pretension associated with the *nouveau riche*.

Margaret's education and upbringing make her despise traders, bankers and manufacturers because they are uncultured philistines. When her father decides to abandon his rectory and finds employment, through his friend, Mr. Bell, as a private tutor of a wealthy manufacturer in Milton-Northern, she expresses surprise and objection. Her father is qualified to teach classical literature, but "what in the world do manufacturers want with the classics, or literature, or the accomplishments of a gentleman?" (*NS*, 39). Banishing manufacturers from the elastic and all important category of 'gentlemen' is the ultimate sign of rejection since the term itself was invented to allow for "social

and political accommodation between the aristocracy and the middle classes".³⁵

After the family settles down in Milton-Northern, Mr. Hale introduces his student, Mr. Thornton, to his wife and daughter. Margaret's initial reaction to him is mixed. She finds his self-confidence, assertiveness and the fact that he rose from extreme poverty to wealth by hard work, sound judgment and good character remarkable. Yet, her admiration is checked by class prejudice. When her father recounts how Mr. Thornton, his sister and mother lived for years only on porridge and water in order to pay his dead father's debts, and how he rose to become one of Milton's most successful manufacturers, she says, "What a pity such a nature should be tainted by his position as a Milton manufacturer". (NS, 87)

Nice Work, like Lodge's two other novels in the campus trilogy, *Changing Places* and *Small World* acknowledges its debts openly. In addition to the commentary on the genre to which it belongs, contained in Robyn Penrose's lecture on the Condition of England novels, it has epigraphs from Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*, Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley*, and Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations*; thereby conveniently reinforcing the note of social realism characterizing the main narrative of the novel. Furthermore, the intricate details of the novel allude persistently to several characteristic tropes of these novels; the two worlds at the thematic core of *Nice Work*, are as sharply demarcated, as the 'two nations' – the rich and the poor – in Disraeli's time. One of Lodge's epigraphs quotes from *Sybil* where Morley, Disraeli's character, explains that Queen Victoria rules over "two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, and fed by different food, and ordered by different manners. . . . (Sybil 145; NW, ix)

35- Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981, P: 2.

However, and although *Nice Work* can surely be classified as a condition-of-England novel, the two worlds David Lodge seeks explicitly to explore are not ‘the haves and the have nots’ of Disraeli, but academia and industry. Although in the background of the novel, as Lodge says in a BBC Radio 4 interview, there was a division between “those who had work and those who didn’t,” and there was the West Midlands industry which lost a third of its companies and the very high unemployment rates among young people.³⁶

One of the two protagonists of the novel, Robyn Penrose, is a Marxist feminist university lecturer who entertains a similar snobbish attitude towards manufacturers and expresses sentimental impractical support for the workers at Pringle’s. The same tension that ensued between Margaret Hale and John Thornton about the nature of work in the Victorian mill and manufacturing in general is echoed by the confrontational tone of the discussion between Robyn Penrose and Vic Wilcox about work in general, the particular kind of work each of them does and also about leisure:

“I don’t like making men redundant,” he said, “but we’re caught in a double bind. If we don’t modernize we lose competitive edge and have to make men redundant, and if we *do* modernize we have to make men redundant because we don’t need ‘em any more.”

“What we should be doing is spending more money preparing people for creative leisure,” said Robyn.

“Like women’s studies?”

“Among other things.”

“Men like to work. It’s a funny thing, but they do. They may moan about it every Monday morning, they may agitate for shorter hours and longer holidays, but they need to work for their self-respect.”

“That’s just conditioning. People could get used to life without work.”

“Could *you*?”

36 BBC Radio 4 Book Club at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00fc3wg>.

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s nice work. It’s meaningful. It’s rewarding. I don’t mean in money terms. It would be worth doing even if one wasn’t paid anything at all. And the conditions are decent – not like this.” (NW, 126-127)

For Vic Wilcox, it is difficult to comprehend that “Women’s studies” are more meaningful than engineering work and making engine parts. On the other hand, Robyn’s concern about working conditions at Pringle’s and her suggestions sound utopian. Her saying that “People could get used to life without work” sounds naïve, off hand and even immature. And her depreciation of manual work is at odds with her Marxist convictions. Although she is more educated than Gaskell’s Margaret, her understanding of the value of manual work and of the industrial process is more limited.

Vic’s attitude to work reveals on telling effect of the Thatcher government policies which put the concept of ‘work’ under a new light. Vic argues for the “useful” in education, like mechanical engineering, whereas Robyn asserts the value of an education centred on “ideas, feelings” (NW, 83). Vic claims that the “only criterion” to use in evaluating education is the money to be earned as a result of time and energy being invested and expended (NW, 84).

Robyn herself gradually comes to realize that the humanities, and by extension, literary studies have become marginalized across university curricula. Her boyfriend Charles has been lucky enough to obtain a lectureship at the University of Suffolk after finishing his Ph.D. He joins the university faculty as an expert in Romantic Literature. For those who have qualifications in literature, it had become so difficult to find a job that he describes the post he gets, with hyperbolic exaggeration, as “the last new job in Romanticism this century”. (NW, 47)

Vic’s rather indignant attitude towards the role of the arts is highly representative of modern utilitarian society. Regarding arts degrees as a waste of money, he ventures a suggestion of building more polytechnics as they are much cheaper. He cannot possibly understand

how Robyn can label reading “work,” when it is “what you do when you come home from work, to relax” (NW, 334). Robyn tries to make Vic understand that in Universities, “reading is work. Reading is production. And what we produce is meaning” (NW, 334). But Robyn’s unconditional defence of liberal education is unceremoniously struck down by Vic’s sharp retort: “Who pays?” (NW, 116). Such sharp responses by Vic persist in many of their exchanges throughout the novel. Even Basil, Robyn’s educated brother, questions the value and efficacy of academic work when he learns that Robyn is busy with her book on the image of women in nineteenth-century fiction, and raises a crucial question: “Does the world really need another book on nineteenth-century fiction?” (NW, 309). To this vexatious question, Robyn can only admit that she doesn’t know, but it is her chief hope of getting permanently employed somewhere.

Lodge’s characterization is intended to satirize academic assumptions and presumptuous grandstanding, and shows that such Marxist deconstructionists are good only at dissecting and analysing texts and are out of touch with the real problems of the world they live in. On the other hand, and compared with John Thornton, Vic Wilcox is more assertive and less apologetic about the industrial condition, which attests to the hegemonic status of the middle class ethos which has been growing and becoming strongly entrenched in British society. David Cannadine claims, although not uncontested,³⁷ that this dominance had already started in the nineteenth century.

The conversation also reveals typical class attitudes to art and the humanities, where the middle classes are represented as philistines who do not care, or who do not have the time for, the humanities. The fictional Thatcher government ‘Shadow Scheme’, designed in response to the government’s announcement of 1986 as Industry Year, is itself an attempt to bridge the attitudinal gap between industry and academia. Robyn Penrose’s snobbish attitude towards industry is symptomatic of what some intellectuals characterise as a national derision of engineering and manufacturing work. The *Daily Mail* newspaper, perused by Vic Wilcox

37- For the opposite view that the aristocracy remained the dominant power, see Perry Anderson, “The Origins of the Present Crisis,” *New Left Review* 23, 1964, P: 29.

on the first morning in the narrative, reads: "Various bodies in Manufacturing Industry are working themselves into one of their regular lathers about the supposed low social esteem bestowed upon engineers and engineering". (NW, 25) Significantly, Vic feels culturally timid and inferior in his relationship with Robyn. When he invites her to lunch, he goes out of his way to make his wife, Marjorie, prepare something that meets what he thinks to be Robyn's life-style standards:

And he insisted on having a starter.

"We never have a starter," said Marjorie.

"There's always a first time."

"What's got into you, Vic? Anybody would think the Queen was coming."

"Don't be stupid, Marjorie. Starters are quite normal."

"In restaurants they may be. Not at home."

"In Robyn Penrose's home," said Vic, "they'd have a starter. I'd take a bet on it." (NW, 232)

And when they were having lunch and Robyn used literary language, the narrator comments, "Vic didn't resent her high-flown language. That she used it unselfconsciously in conversation with him, whereas she had spoken normal English to the rest of the family, he took as a kind of compliment." (NW, 243)

Lodge delineates clearly the differences between Robyn Penrose and Vic Wilcox, the representatives of the 'two nations' here, in the food they eat, the newspapers they read, their tastes in music, home decoration, leisure pursuits, and even alarm clocks. In what might be an overt tribute to Mrs. Gaskell's novel, he has also established them as representative of the North and the South. Vic has been living in the industrial midlands all his life, having grown up in a terraced house in Rummidge, where his old father still lives. Robyn has been brought up in Southern England. She was born in Australia from where her family moved her, when she was five, to the South Coast of England; and she is cosmopolitan with no particular filial attachment to her parents' home. As the novel begins, both Vic and Robyn are described as living and working in the same city;

yet, they remain unaware of the existence of each other and each other's worlds until the Shadow Scheme gets under way.

Margaret's attitude in *North and South*, and the attitudes of Vic and Robyn in *Nice Work* testify to the soundness of the Weberian argument that people's actions are shaped by cultural and status considerations and not necessarily by class affiliation.

Yet, the issue is problematized when Robyn tries her idealized sentiments of standing on the side of those who, she thinks, are badly treated workers. She hears a conversation between Managing Director Vic Wilcox and one of his managers about a machine that was continually breaking down, the manager blaming an Asian worker for the problem, and Vic instructing him to give the worker a formal warning every time the machine broke down, and then fire him when he had received three warnings. She looks for the Asian worker, Dany Ram, and tips him of the management plan to fire him, which causes a walk out from the factory. When Vic knows that she is behind the agitation, he pressures and persuades her to tell Dany that she made a mistake and that there was no plan to fire him. She accepts to do so because Vic tells her that if the walkout turns into a strike, the factory will close down and all the Asian workers, not only Dany, will lose their jobs. Robyn realizes that her understanding of industrial relations is immature and settles down for a literary explanation of factory conditions she offers to her sympathetic boyfriend, Charles:

You could represent the factory realistically by a set of metonymies - dirt, noise, heat and so on. But you can only grasp the *meaning* of the factory by metaphor. The place is like hell. The trouble with Wilcox is that he can't see that. He has no metaphorical vision."

"And what about Danny Ram?" said Charles. "Oh, poor old Danny Ram, I don't suppose he has any metaphorical vision either, otherwise he couldn't stick it. The factory to him is just another set of metonymies and synecdoches: a lever he pulls, a pair of greasy overalls he wears, a weekly pay packet. That's the truth of his existence, but not the meaning of it."

“Which is ...?”

“I just told you: hell. Alienation, if you want to put it in Marxist terms.” (NW, 178-179)

In this regard, Margaret Hale was more successful in her endeavour to help Nicholas Higgins, John Thornton's worker. Her success is based on a thorough understanding of both the workers' grievances and the manufacturers' problems. She persuades Nicholas of the errors of the union leaders and agitators, on the one hand, and John Thornton of the importance of improving the working conditions of his workers and engaging them in managing their own affairs. Conversely, and realizing her inability to do anything to improve the 'actual' working conditions of the foundry workers, Robyn resorts once again to her imagination. While attending a committee meeting, she fanaticizes about them in a passage worth quoting because it sums up Robyn's vision:

[S]he transported them, in her imagination, to the campus: the entire workforce ... and unloaded them at the gates of the campus and let them wander through it in a long procession, like a lost army ... their eyes rolling white in their swarthy, soot-blackened faces, as they stared about them with bewildered curiosity at the fine buildings and the trees and the flowerbeds and the lawns, and at the beautiful young people at work or play all around them. And the beautiful young people and their teachers stopped dallying and disputing and got to their feet and came forward to greet the people from the factory, shook their hands and made them welcome, and a hundred small seminar groups formed on the grass, composed half of students and lecturers and half of workers and managers, to exchange ideas on how the values of the university and the imperatives of commerce might be reconciled and more equitably managed to the benefit of the whole society. (NW, 347)

While in *North and South*, Margaret seeks to bring together the workers and the manufacturers after making them realize that their common interests could be achieved through cooperation and mutual understanding, and succeeds in her endeavour, Robyn could only bring

about that reconciliation and sharing through an act of imagining. And perhaps it is an acknowledgement, on Lodge's part, that the gap is so wide and each camp's understanding of the concerns and preoccupations of the other is so limited that any 'actual' bridging of the gap is a quixotic effort. In the radio interview referred to earlier, Lodge talks about his initial conception of Vic's character as a business man facing the possibility of losing his job and meeting a woman from a completely different walk of life. When he started doing research on the kind of job Vic had, Lodge says he knew very little about industry that he had to 'shadow' a managing director in order to gain some insight into that world.³⁸

But this is also informed by the different functions envisioned for the novel as a genre capable of addressing society's problems. *North and South* aims at providing a serious examination of the condition of England and attempts to provide solutions. Its prescription comes in the form of reaching a compromise between the workers and manufacturers based on mutual interest and understanding.

Nice Work does not have such claims. It provides a satirical portrayal of this feminist Marxist academic who is specialised in the industrial novel but has little grasp of the conditions of industry and the reality of industrial relations. At the same time it encompasses many other elements, like academic life, the workings of financial institutions, feminism and eroticism. Consequently, and although it belongs to the nineteenth-century realist tradition of the novel, it is so different from it. For that tradition, the worlds of work and leisure are conceived as stark opposites, as in the separation of the factory and the circus in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, to which *Nice Work* makes numerous allusions. In that sense, it can be argued that the developments in the condition of England that differentiates the late twentieth century from the middle of the nineteenth is in terms of the systematic disruption of the relations of work and play. In terms of form too, the two novels are exact representations of the value and nature of work. The serious tone and tight design of *North and South* are intended to hammer down its

38- BBC Radio 4 Book Club at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00fc3wg>.

message with palpable urgency in a manner that makes the writing process itself all work and no play. By contrast, the comic and at times satirical style of *Nice Work* makes it a playful, amusing and entertaining piece of writing.

North and South presents, in simple terms, the relatively simple economic antagonisms between workers and manufacturers, while these relations are projected on a much more diverse political and economic situation in *Nice Work*. Unlike Milton Northern and Darkshire, the vibrant centre of industrial activity and economic power in *North and South*, manufacturing in Rummidge and the Midlands is in decline, and the relative dispositions of state, industry, financial and educational institutions are strikingly different; there are no nineteenth-century equivalents, for example, for the powers of 'fictitious capital' represented by the financial markets which feature in *Nice Work*, or for state-run institutions like the university, which is culturally central but, at the same time, under ideological attack from the centres of political power. Still, the conclusion of *Nice Work* is strikingly similar to that of *North and South*, in the words of Richard Bradford: "The message seems to be that estranged polarities of opinion are bad for everyone".³⁹ Both Robyn and Vic learn to see issues from each other's perspective, to the extent that Vic enrolls in one of Robyn's tutorials at university.

A stark example of the sarcastic and playful treatment of the condition-of-England issues that *Nice Work* grapples with is the ending. In her lecture, Robyn is sarcastic about the solutions provided at the end of condition-of-England novels:

Unable to contemplate a political solution to the social problems they described in their fiction, the industrial novelists could only offer narrative solutions to the personal dilemmas of their characters. And these narrative solutions are invariably negative or evasive. ... In short, all the Victorian novelist could offer as a solution to the problems of industrial capitalism were: a legacy, a marriage, emigration or death. (NW, 82-83)

39- Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 36.

Elizabeth Gaskell, in *North and South*, makes Margaret Hale inherit Mr. Bell's property and money which makes her capable of entering a partnership with John Thornton, who also becomes her tenant. By making them seal their relationship with marriage, she makes the settlement complete, a settlement based on reconciliation, harmony, mutual interest and also love into the bargain.

Nice Work, on the other hand, provides a more versatile ending which gives Robyn a variety of positive choices. She is provided with a magical mix of opportunities which look like variations on the typical endings provided by industrial novels. She is offered a job in an American university; she inherits an amount of money from her uncle Walter large enough to enable her to live comfortably. However, she follows Margaret Hale's example and invests in Vic Wilcox's new business venture as Margaret made John Thornton her partner. She is offered marriage and financial security by her long-term lover. However, she decides in the end to stay on at Rummidge University when she is offered the prospect of re-employment. So, what *Nice Work* seems to be saying, ironically, is that such fairy-tale solutions as those provided in nineteenth-century novels are not adequate to the complex demands of contemporary life.

As this paper has tried to show, the issue of class continued to be a major preoccupation for British fiction towards the end of the twentieth century as it was in the 1850s. Similarities abound between the way British class structure is represented in both *North and South* and *Nice Work*. It is also seen that characters' actions are not always based on class affiliation but are rather shaped by cultural and status considerations. However, *Nice Work* presents a more diverse and complicated political, economic and cultural scene, which means that the solutions provided by industrial novels, like *North and South*, are not tenable in late twentieth-century Britain. And despite its indebtedness to the realist tradition of the Victorian novel, *Nice Work* exhibits a postmodern playfulness and lack of urgency in dealing with its subject matter and in proposing solutions to Britain's social and economic problems.

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