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Amy Schrager Lang: The Syntax of Class

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Introduction

CLASS, CLASSIFICATION, AND CONFLICT

IN 1851, the *North American Review* published a series of articles on political economy written by its editor, Francis Bowen, a man who would later assume the post of professor of natural religion, moral philosophy, and civic polity at Harvard. “There is a danger,” Bowen wrote, “from which no civilized community is entirely free, lest the several classes of its society should nourish mutual jealousy and hatred, which may finally break out into open hostilities, under the mistaken opinion that their interests are opposite, and that one or more of them possess an undue advantage, which they are always ready to exercise by oppressing the others.”¹ In Europe, as the revolutions of 1848 had amply demonstrated, the danger of rising class consciousness was a clear and present one. But not so, according to Bowen, in the United States, where the “mistaken opinion” that classes stood opposed to one another could only be held by those who failed to appreciate the “peculiar mobility” of American society, the continuous displacement of master by man which tended, in Bowen’s view, to blur, if not altogether obliterate, the boundaries separating the interests of the “several classes” of society.

Properly considered—considered, that is, not in the light of Old World histories but of New World teleology—the existence of class divisions in America need not, Bowen insisted, signal antagonism, much less open hostility. In the absence of social distinctions sanctified by law or custom that “nothing short of a miracle” could change, the language of class was merely descriptive, identifying the broad social groupings natural to “civilized” communities. These groupings might be hierarchical in their arrangement, but in the American context they were entirely fluid in their composition. As Bowen used it, the language of class did not define a field of conflict where opposed interests would inevitably find expression in the political arena, or in the streets; on the contrary, he uneasily claimed, class provided neutral terms of official social description: it mapped the way stations along the route from pauperism to wealth open to each white, male American. Far from being irreconcilable, the interests of owner and laborer, master and man, like those of present and future, necessarily coincided as the latter lived in anticipation of the day when they would replenish the ranks of the former. The mobility of individual men would, in short, guarantee the harmony of interests of labor and

capital and, by all rights, render the United States immune to the class warfare that wracked midcentury Europe.²

Bowen was neither the first nor, certainly, the last proponent of what has come to be known as the doctrine of the harmony of interests, nor was his the only effort to deny the political saliency of a language of class. In the context of an emerging taxonomy of class that newly acknowledged the existence in America of broadly homogeneous social categories, his appeal to individual mobility in the interest of excising the prospect of class conflict was, in fact, reiterated by influential elites throughout the nineteenth century. But the tenacity of Bowen's argument was matched by the tenacity of the fears it sought to allay, fears that were greatly exacerbated by what appeared to members of the newly consolidating middle class to be growing evidence of class antagonism. By the time of the 1849 Astor Place riot, the sarcasm of Francis Grund's 1839 *Aristocracy in America*—"Why sir, this is a republican country; we have no *public* distinction of classes"³—had already given way to portentousness. Reporting on the bloody confrontation between the "aristocracy" and the "people" outside New York's lavish opera house, the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* announced that "There is now in our country . . . what every good patriot has hitherto considered it his duty to deny—a high class and a low class." Interpreted in many quarters as a manifestation of the rising "hatred of wealth and privilege" provoked by the "unjust distribution of the avails of industry,"⁴ the Astor Place riot made clear the civic danger that might attend a classed society. The language of class, as even Bowen's anxious insistence on harmony suggested, was no neutral taxonomic tool. To publicly admit the reality of class in America was to open the nation to the threat of class conflict.

That an unjust distribution of the "avails" of industry had, in fact, divided their world into a "high" and a "low" class could hardly have escaped the notice of urban Americans. The enormous concentration of wealth in the hands of a few—by some estimates, more than half of the nation's wealth was held by 5 percent of the population by 1860—and the concomitant impoverishment of the many was a conspicuous feature not only of the older urban centers of the Northeast but of the new cities that proliferated along the transportation routes opening the Midwest to a flood of immigrants and young native-born men seeking employment. By 1850, the journalist-flâneur George Foster, famous for his voyeuristic glimpses of New York "by gaslight," not only knew that the "wicked and wretched classes" existed but regarded it as the "duty of the present age" to "discover the real facts of [their] actual condition . . . so that Philanthropy and Justice may plant their blows aright."⁵

Whether or not they embraced the duty of their age, middle-class Americans were appalled at the circumstances of the poor and were fright-

ened, too, by accounts of an urban underclass among whom, according to the American Bible Society, “crimes against society are plotted, and the most savage passions stimulated to action.”⁶ Prompted to ameliorative action, middle-class volunteers, many of them women, went into the slums to distribute tracts and Bibles, enroll children in Sunday schools, and minister to the destitute. Professionals and businessmen formed organizations to address the moral depravity and the looming social threat they ascribed to the poor. These organizations, like others of their kind, claimed that “A class more dangerous to the community . . . can hardly be imagined” than the “wretched” and “degraded” population of slum dwellers.⁷ Even the sympathetic Charles Loring Brace, founder of the Children’s Aid Society, was unambiguous about the danger that lay incipient in the urban poor, imagining the inevitable “herding together” of street boys whose eventual consciousness of their power would lead them to lay waste to the city.

In a social world routinely, if sensationally, represented as divided between “millions” and “mills,” “fashion” and “famine,” or, in Lydia Maria Child’s words, “magnificence and mud, finery and filth, diamonds and dirt,”⁸ the failure of traditional modes of social description to accommodate new social and economic relationships heightened public awareness of class differences. But so too did the ranging of those differences across terrain already marked out by ideologies of race, gender, and ethnicity greatly complicate the rendering of these new relationships. The language of poverty and wealth did not address the new self-consciousness that prompted chattel slaves to forecast their liberation by laying claim to the titles of “man” and “woman,” or encouraged feminists to recast women as “citizens,” or disposed angry white workers to describe themselves, however reluctantly, as “slaves.” As the spread of a market economy and the shift to industrial modes of production proletarianized the trades, as the “slavery of wages” confounded categories of labor and race alike, as abolitionists and women’s rights advocates claimed new social and political identities for slaves and women, as traditional customs of deference fell away, and as urban disorder of all sorts increased, middle-class fears of conflict called both the nature and the saliency of long-standing vocabularies of social difference into question.

The emphasis on social taxonomy in the treatises of political economists like Bowen, the strategic deployment of moral vocabularies in the reform tracts of Brace and his allies, and George Foster’s effort to disaggregate the poor into the “wretched” and the “wicked” all reflect both the new awareness of class distinctions among Americans at midcentury and the increasingly problematic nature of social classification. In the quarter century following the revolutions of 1848, legislators, journalists, ministers, labor leaders, political radicals and fledgling political scientists,

playwrights, and novelists would struggle to find a social vocabulary adequate to the task of naming, ordering, interpreting, and containing the effects of class difference in a period that saw not only the emergence of new social groupings and new kinds of people but one in which new class formations challenged the ideals of traditional republicanism and political democracy.

Not only Bowen's *North American Review* but other such influential journals as *Merchant's Magazine and Commercial Review* and *Southern Quarterly* devoted their pages to articles on "Abuses of Classification," "The True Theory of Labor and Capital," and "The Distribution of Wealth," while the *Democratic Review* printed titles like "Poverty and Misery, versus Reform and Progress." Elsewhere, in sketches like *Harper's* "The Factory Boy" or Fanny Fern's *New York Ledger* tale "Cash" and in illustrated papers featuring bootblacks, street toughs, Bowery b'hoys and their brazen g'hals, Broadway Brummels and black dandies, journalists and artists labored to delineate new social types. Reformers like Brace wrote tracts urging the employment or, in the case of girls, the domestication of the "dangerous classes," while sensationalists like P. H. Skinner detailed their violence in novels like *The Little Ragged Ten Thousand* (1853). In the increasingly class-segregated theater, "Mose," the volunteer fireman, brought working-class audiences to their feet, and pageants of city life like "The Seamstress of New York" (1851), "Katy, the Hot Corn Girl" (1854), and "The Rag-Picker of New York" (1858) joined the most famous and long-lived of the working-girl melodramas, Francis S. Smith's "Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl, or Death at the Wheel" (1871). Minstrel shows, in the meantime, used blackface and transvestism to negotiate the complexities of class and ethnicity for the entertainment of white workingmen.

Likewise, from the faded aristocracy of the house of the seven gables to the orphan girls of domestic fiction, from the exploited factory operatives and domestic servants to the street "arabs" and the beleaguered free blacks who take center stage in midcentury novels, the fiction of this period recorded the deep unease that attended the naming of class in the United States. It is with these last that this book is concerned.

The Syntax of Class explores the literary expression of the crisis of classification that occupied public discourse in the mid-nineteenth century. It focuses on a group of novels written, like most novels, by middle-class city dwellers, in this case by American women and men living, almost without exception, in the urban Northeast. Their particularity lies in the fact that they tell stories of people who are not—or are not yet, or are never to be—themselves members of the middle class. Explicitly, as an element of the narrative itself, or implicitly, as a condition of their

production—or both—these novels entail a definitive encounter between members of different classes.

The novels under consideration here are not offered as representative of the mass of fiction of this period, although in many respects they typify, as a group, the genres, narrative formulae, and social concerns that held the attention of the genteel reader. Reformist in their impulse and protorealistic in their form, however, these novels are, for the most part, familiar ones, recently “recovered” from historical oblivion of one sort or another and much taught. Commonly understood to belong in one or another of the “alternative” canons structured along the axes of race or gender, they are read accordingly: the plight of the female artist, the problem of marriage, or the tragedy of the mulatto supplanting wage slavery, cross-class community, economic mobility, or “proletarianization” as the subjects of scholarly consideration. Class, that is, is rendered the largely invisible third term in critical discussions that claim race, class, and gender as their heuristic terms. The unevenness of these readings is no accident, nor does it represent a critical failure. On the contrary, as I hope to demonstrate, it mirrors the representational quandary confronted by midcentury writers of “social fiction.”

The title of this study comes from Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Silent Partner*, at the end of which the middle-class narrator observes a “syntax” in the “brown face and bent hands and poor dress and awkward motions”⁹ of Sip, the mill girl. An orderly arrangement of terms indicating mutual relationship, a syntax is, on the one hand, contentless, and on the other, essential to the making of meaning. What follows is a series of experiments in reading, in parsing the syntax of class in midcentury fictions. These experiments are framed on one side by the uneasy attention of midcentury authors to class, and on the other by the equally uneasy elision of class from current critical discourse. My object is not to capture the full range of novelistic expression at midcentury, but rather to explore in close detail the formal negotiation of the complexities of class difference in particular novels written in a period in which the adequacy of social taxonomies and the implications of new class formations were sharply at issue. My aim, that is, is to think about how, precisely, distinctions of class are rendered in midcentury novels, and how, in turn, those renderings circulate in and through a larger cultural discourse about the dangers of class conflict.

I begin from the assumption that social taxonomies and novelistic representation are intimately connected and, moreover, that the instability of the former inflects the latter. Insofar as the conventional characters of a society inhabit its narratives and comprise a body of representations variously embraced, repudiated, debated, and deployed in the actual struggles of historical actors,¹⁰ that body of representations has itself to

be made and has, moreover, to be made, if not out of, at least with reference to, the available discourses of social identity. This is, in one sense, only to suggest the obvious constraints within which the novelist works—even the eccentric must be recognizable as such. It is not, however, to assume that writer and reader are in prior agreement about which of the available social vocabularies is appropriate to the representation of social difference, much less that reader and writer share a set of “common social properties.” Rather, like Gareth Stedman-Jones’s political actors, writer and reader are together engaged in constructing a representation both of those shared social properties and of the social identities of others.¹¹

To say, then, that *The Syntax of Class* concerns the negotiation of class in a set of historically specific narratives that hinge on cross-class encounters is to say two quite different things. First, it is to assert that the contests over the meaning of class I have sketched above—over both the anterior social reality the language of class seeks to capture and the social prospect to which it points—frame the novelistic representation of class difference. But beyond this, it is to argue that the body of representations produced in the novels under discussion here not only shape and are shaped by the experience of class but actively participate in the process of articulating, mediating, and displacing class difference and managing class conflict.

A number of difficulties attend a project of this kind. Perhaps the most obvious one concerns the status of the language of class itself in the culture of the United States. It has been argued that, however “real” the structure of class in America, Americans have no “native discourse” of class in which to render their experience of that structure. Lacking a vocabulary, as it were, in which to express the experience of class—its complacencies as well as its injuries and its struggles—and deeply committed, moreover, to liberal individualism and the promise of open mobility, Americans displace the reality of class into discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, and other similarly “locked-in” categories of individual identity. This displacement, in turn, distorts sexual and racial relationships by redistributing conflicts of class across these other domains.¹² Whether or not the language of class is “native” to Americans—and certainly, elite theorists like Francis Bowen expressed considerable anxiety about the appropriateness of its use in reference to the republican United States, while other midcentury Americans emphatically laid claim to class identities—such patterns of displacement and their concomitant distortions are evident in the construction of social identities and the representation of cross-class engagement in the midcentury novels under discussion here.

It is by now more or less axiomatic in literary critical circles to assert both the reciprocity and the incommensurability of the categories of social identity that have proven most fruitful in literary studies and most salient

in the political arena. Class is understood neither to subsume nor to diminish the impact of race, gender, or ethnicity—in some arenas, it is arguably “defeated” by the material or subjective impact of these others¹³—nor are these others seen consistently to subsume class. Instead, imbued with the determinants of class, these categories of social difference are increasingly regarded as at once mutually constitutive and internally fractured. Class and its consciousness are, to paraphrase Cora Kaplan, more polymorphous and more perverse than we once imagined them, and the language of class less stable.¹⁴

But our willingness to see the displacement of class into the discourses of race and gender or, alternatively, to argue that class permeates representations of racial or gender difference has not led us to recognize the uneven use and the differential effects, the particular distortions and the social—as well as the literary—consequences, of those relocations of class. We acknowledge, for example, that the mutually defining character of the interlocked vocabularies of race, class, and gender is obscured in fiction as social identities come to appear self-evident. But we fail to recognize that, that being so, the production of social identities in novelistic (or political) discourse may nonetheless give precedence to one vocabulary of representation over another in the interest of achieving particular ideological ends—and likewise in literary critical discourse.¹⁵ Writing in inequality, we write out power. Paradoxically, given the broad recognition within literary studies of the complex interconnection of ideologies of race, class, and gender, much literary scholarship elides class and its conflicts and ignores their displacement into other domains of social difference. To parse the syntax of class—to identify the ordering of language that makes apparent the mutual relationship of parts in which meaning inheres—is, then, I hope, to open a discussion of the impact of differentials of wealth, power, and prestige on the representations Americans make of and about themselves, a discussion endlessly deferred both in their literature and in the study of that literature.

The intricacy of that syntax is made evident in the effects apparently discrete vocabularies of social description have on one another. Thus it is that, set against the putatively neutral backdrop of the all-white social world of the domestic novel, the transformation of a barefoot “orphan” into a “girl” both sets the problem of the material inequities of class and sets it aside, producing, through the turn to gender, a woman who by meeting the gendered specifications of the middle class gains its material comforts as well. The whiteness of that penurious avatar of the middle class is hardly incidental to her fate—or that of others. Instead, it helps to accomplish the blackening of those thoroughly proletarianized figures whose gender cannot save them from the ravages of class—the factory operative or the mill girl. And the blackening of the working class, in

turn, inflects the narratives of free blacks, where class position, however lofty, offers no defense against racism.

The uneven displacement of class across discourses of race and gender in the production of social identities in the novel has, then, multiple effects. But so too, in the historical moment with which I am concerned, does this pattern of displacement and the concomitant fracturing of class serve widely different ideological functions. In a novel like Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter*, for example, the pain of poverty and the potential explosiveness of class difference alike are mediated through the figure of the impoverished orphan whose carefully cultivated "womanliness," by apparently springing her loose of class, simultaneously confirms her rightful position in the middle class and locates the promise of social harmony in her well-ordered home. By contrast, the blackening of the wage "slave" in industrial fiction, by underlining the worker's lack of mobility, intensifies the prospect of class conflict—and constrains it too. Insofar as he—or she—is represented as shackled by class and morally disfigured by it as well, the wage slave is, like the chattel slave, at once safely immobilized and deeply threatening. The injuries of class that are naturalized in the "brown" face of the white weaver and the female "sobriquet" of the male millworker are rendered irremediable and their consequences, both social and individual, incalculable. Yet in a novel like Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*, the blackening of the proletariat and the proletarianization of blackness reiterates the effects of racism, heightening, on the one hand, the import of class status in interracial interactions and erasing, on the other, the antagonisms of class within what W.E.B. DuBois called the "community of blood and color prejudice." Framed by the exclusion of African Americans from the social and political, if not always the economic, benefits of class mobility and written against the cultural backdrop of widespread and multiform racist caricature, nineteenth-century narratives of free blacks offer systematic and self-conscious accounts of the production of social difference across the intersecting grids of class and race. My point, perhaps by now obvious, is that the syntax of class structures the kaleidoscopic displacement of terms of social difference and generates the figures—the orphan girl, the free black, the millworker—through whom the experience of class and its antagonisms are managed in American novels.

If the status of the language of class in the United States and the syntactical complexities of fictional representation constitute the first difficulty of a project of this kind, a second difficulty that besets such a project is how to think about the nineteenth-century middle class and, by extension, class itself. Like most novels, those under discussion here must, with perhaps the single exception of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, be characterized as speaking both from and to the middle class. In one sense, that is only

to say that the view they offer across the lines of class is mediated, shaped, and constrained by the material conditions of authorship and literacy in the nineteenth-century United States. But as the continuing debate over the ideological work of the novel in constituting, expressing, debating, subverting, or policing middle-class hegemony and the more recent recognition of the internal fracturing of class along the lines of race, gender, and ethnicity alike suggest,¹⁶ to describe the novel as embedded in the middle class is neither to fix the relationship *between* the novel and the middle class nor, for that matter, to locate in any very precise way what we mean by the middle class. In fact, in literary discussions of the ideological work of the novel, the term “middle class” is most often used as a kind of shorthand to point to the privatistic and entrepreneurial values of a historically—and often geographically—unsituated bourgeoisie, or, in the American case, to a broad national culture of liberalism. Despite the varying stances of novelist or narrative, the competing social views expressed in fiction, and its sometimes subtle subversions of the claims of liberal individualism, the novel is generally taken to be the definitive literary genre of the “middle class” by virtue of its focus on individual self-making in the fluid social universe generated by a market economy, even in those American narratives where that enterprise is thwarted by the impact of racial and gender inequality. This assumption of the intimate, if politically unpredictable, relationship between the novel and the middle class in American literary scholarship has, for the most part, arisen independent of and without reference to the ongoing historiographic debate over the existence of the middle class in the United States as a distinct social formation.

Most closely resembling the view propounded by the “consensus school” of American historians typified by the work of Louis Hartz, the understanding of the middle class that predominates in scholarship on American literature posits a middle class so “triumphant” that it not only “[takes] itself for granted” but frames and articulates a possessive individualism so widely embraced as to be the common property of Americans regardless of their place in the scheme of production or, indeed, of consumption.¹⁷ But if the liberalism of the “consensus” historian’s middle class so thoroughly infiltrates American culture as to be indistinguishable from it, the incoherence of a class bearing no stable or definable relationship to the means of production has rendered the middle class at best transitional and at worst artificial from the vantage point of the classical Marxist. To those historians focused on the persistent framing of conflict—especially political conflict—along the deep divides of race, ethnicity, and religion, the force of class divisions in the United States has appeared sufficiently diminished as to be of little explanatory value. Nonetheless, recent historical scholarship on working-class and patrician

culture in the United States as well as the work of those like Burton J. Bledstein, Mary P. Ryan, and Stuart M. Blumin on the emergence of the middle class have made it increasingly evident that the deep economic inequalities of the mid-nineteenth century produced not only widely divergent life circumstances but a middle class whose beliefs, aspirations, and ways of living and working were definitive, a bounded middle class aware of itself as distinct from both the rich and the poor in its interests, its values, and its styles of life. In this scholarship, the “middle class” identifies neither the horizon of American culture—the commonly held and widely diffused system of conduct and belief that delimits a national community—nor a grouping so economically incoherent or politically incidental as to obviate the possibility of its coming to consciousness. Rather, it points to a social formation whose coherence lies not in the consistency of its productive relations but in a complex of economic circumstances and cultural convictions delimited enough to produce among its members a self-awareness sufficient to reinforce class boundaries, not erase them.¹⁸

A class paradoxically bound together by its “common embrace of an ideology of social atomism” and prone to “express its awareness of its common attitudes and beliefs as a denial of the significance of class,”¹⁹ the nineteenth-century middle class that emerges from the work of Blumin and others neither insists on its identity as a class nor does it, for the most part, function politically—and antagonistically—as an interest group. In the absence of the usual evidence of class consciousness and of the significance of class affiliation in political conflict, historians have turned to demonstrable changes in the character and experience of work, in family strategies and organization, in customs of deference and styles of self-presentation, in residential patterns, and in patterns of consumption at midcentury to argue for middle-class formation. The characteristic, even definitive, denial of class by the nineteenth-century middle class and its concomitant unwillingness to admit the existence of the values, interests, beliefs, and ways of living embraced by those of other classes, much less to credit these, might be seen, not surprisingly, to inform the work of those like Francis Bowen who invoked the language of class only to deny its force as well as those who repudiated it. Certainly it informs the fiction of this period. And as the range of novels to which literary critics devote their attention has expanded to include not only the narratives of promising young men but those of women, workers, and nonwhites, the effects of middle-class denial of the impact, if not the existence, of class has become peculiarly problematic for the literary scholar.

Despite the loosening of the narrative of middle-class formation from the exclusive realm of productive relations by Blumin and others, the historians’ account of the emergence of the middle class shares the masculinist

tendencies characteristic of historical (and sociological) discussions of class and, it must be said, of most genre-based discussions of the novel and the middle class. Just as, until quite recently, the study of “race” meant the study of African Americans and the study of “gender” meant the study of white women, so in the study of class the “real” subject has been, almost without exception, white working-class men. The shift of focus to the middle class has not significantly altered that gender bias, and neither, interestingly, has E. P. Thompson’s crucial insight into the “making” of class in historical relationships that exceed the workplace in their form and their expression.²⁰ The exclusion of the mental and productive lives of working women has, Carolyn Kay Steedman forcefully argues, distorted the “monolithic story of wage-labor and capital”;²¹ likewise, for all their apparent centrality to the story of middle-class formation in the United States, the experiences and the subjectivities of middle-class women have been generalized into relative insignificance in the historical account of class—or split off into a history framed around the imperatives of gender.²² Engaged as women are in “making” gender, their participation in the “making” of class is regarded, it seems, as incidental. Thus despite Blumin’s acknowledgment that the formation of the middle class and the concomitant production of new social identities entailed not only the realignment of work and workplace relations but “events. . . in the ‘separate sphere’ of domestic womanhood,” and even that “to this extent, middle-class formation was women’s work,”²³ the activities and experiences of men remain at the center of his analysis of the urban middle class in the nineteenth century.

Yet it would seem, in no small measure, that if the distinctively middle-class embrace of liberal individualism is best captured through an examination of the public lives of men, so the equally characteristic denial of the saliency of class is tightly bound to a cultural preference on the part of the emerging middle class for the rendering of class distinctions through the cultural vocabulary of gender difference. I do not, of course, mean to suggest that these two aspects of middle-class formation belong exclusively to one sex or the other. Rather, I want to suggest that the elision of class in the literary critical discussion of American fiction is not unrelated to the skewing of the historical account of the rise of the middle class toward a masculine public sphere.

Though largely excluded from the historical narrative of middle-class formation, women—particularly white, middle-class women—figure prominently, by contrast, in the current narrative of American literary history. Yet the female authors, readers, narrators, and characters of mid-nineteenth-century American novels whose positions on the grids of race and gender are so carefully charted by literary scholars appear in the narratives those scholars produce to be free of class, to be transcendent fig-

ures whose middle-classness is a consequence of—or at least inseparable from—their womanliness and their whiteness. Class, that is, collapses into gender and race in the literary discussion of these novels, and, more important for my purposes, the middle class appears there not as a specific or bounded class formation but as a blur of spiritual or religious ideals, domestic virtues, and standards of comportment more readily ascribable and more regularly attributed to gender ideology than to class position. By setting aside a historical narrative of middle-class formation in which women figure only incidentally, late-twentieth-century literary critics succumb to the sleight of hand of mid-nineteenth-century novelists, reproducing in their analyses the cultural logic of the novels themselves.

That “home” has emerged as a central term in the discussion that follows is a trace effect of the central role of the middle-class woman in the negotiation of class and the mediation of class conflict in midcentury novels. But precisely insofar as middle-class homes—“homes, in the better sense”—figure as the loci of social harmony, the meaning of home reaches far beyond the domestic setting to capture what is lacking and what is to be desired, what has been lost and what is to be gained in the navigation of class. In the public discourse of midcentury America, as now, home signifies refuge from the exigencies of the market-world. It stands as the antidote to history, a utopian site in which “changes never come,” in which the deeply conservative values—the “family values”—ascribed to women rightfully hold sway, in which heterosexual union figures a larger social harmony. In this sense it stands, too, as a figure for a racially homogeneous and putatively classless national community from which African Americans are excluded and in which the interests of women need not be represented, so clearly are they “daguerreotyped” on the hearts of men.

But in the heterogeneous discourse of fiction, these senses of home are joined to others that extend, reframe, literalize, metaphorize, and challenge them. The claims of African Americans to a “home” in America, like their representation of the racial community as home, stand in defiance of a nation that would leave them orphaned and homeless. The “orphaning” of the child of the street is made evident by the disorder of the tenement in which she lives, even as her whiteness and her femininity secure her inheritance of a home of the very best kind and a respectable genealogy as well. The anti-homes of the proletariat, the dank cellars and dirty hovels into which factory operatives and millworkers retreat at night, like the lineage houses of the would-be aristocracy in which the value of real estate is absolute and domestic art has no scope, portend their doom. In the circle of “friends” separately established by men and women, the antagonisms of class that inflect heterosexuality are resolved through the creation of homes founded on the harmonious ground of gender solidarity.

Figured, then, through the home, within the home, between homes, in the absence of homes, and in the creation of new homes, engagement across the boundaries of class in the novels under discussion here is as thoroughly domesticated as it is conflicted.

By looking at the novelistic rendering of cross-class encounters in a historical period characterized by the emergence of a public discourse of class and the simultaneous consolidation of a middle class inclined to deny the efficacy of class itself—and likewise its threat to social harmony—I intend to bring the specificity of middle-class formation to bear on the formal consideration of mid-nineteenth-century American novels. My object is to argue for the value of a nuanced and historically informed use of class as a category of analysis in literary studies. But it is also, and more importantly, to propose that the same structure of displacement and deferral that organizes—and problematizes—the literary representation of class supports an ongoing political culture in which the all but universal claim to membership in the middle class is exploited by those in power to void the necessity of addressing the appalling extremes of wealth and poverty that characterize twenty-first-century America.