



AT THE CROSSROADS OF POWER: SOCIAL CLASSES IN *CONINGSBY* AND *VANITY FAIR*

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Abstract

Victorian England consisted of three main social classes whose interests were in conflict with each other: the aristocracy, the middle classes and the working class. Industrial Revolution led to rising in production and trade and changing in division of labor in Victorian England. Thus a new kind of social organization came to the fore. Money gained power over inheritance, thereby undermining the former prestige of the hereditary aristocracy. These changing social relations were highly manifested in Victorian novel. *Coningsby* (1844) by Benjamin Disraeli and *Vanity Fair* (1848) by William M. Thackeray are two examples to be studied in this context. In these novels, representations of class structure reflect the existing power relations in the society and also authors' attitudes to these power relations. The conflict between the aristocracy and the upper-middle class implies a power struggle and the importance of money to shape the social structure. The changing economic condition also prompts the social mobility and encourages lower-middle class to climb the social ladder. Different social layers strive to find a proper place in recently developed power relations. This paper aims to analyze structuring of the social classes in Victorian England as reflected in these two novels.

Keywords: Victorian Novel, Benjamin Disraeli, W.M. Thackeray, Class Conflict.

1. Introduction

Social classes develop out of common special interests that are antagonistic to other common special interests of other certain groups (Fischer, 1996, 77). Common and antagonistic interests in this context are chiefly shaped by the economic structure of a society. Based on this argument, it can be stated that Victorian England consisted of three main social classes whose interests were in a constant conflict with each other: the aristocracy, the middle classes and the working class. The aristocracy, so-called the gentle class, included nobility and landed gentry. The middle classes were divided into the upper and the lower middle class. The upper middle class, also referred to as the new gentry, consisted of wealthy London bankers, manufacturers and merchants. The lower middle class, on the other hand, included small manufacturers, shopkeepers, master tailors, innkeepers, clerks, teachers, skilled artisans and so on (Harrison, 1973, 127). The development of modern industry also resulted in the development of the working class which was now characterized as factory workers, the proletariat (Fischer, 1996, 77).

The Industrial Revolution had an enormous effect on the configuration of social classes in England by causing growing production, trade and division of labor. Therefore, a new kind of social organization was to come into being. The hereditary aristocracy was no longer the only source of power and prestige. The power of money began to rise as a determining factor for social priority and superiority as well. As George Cole explains

A hundred years ago, the 'gentle' class still had no doubts about the rightness of its superior claims, though it had no longer anything like the same near monopoly of wealth and power as it has possessed in the eighteenth century. Side by side with it had grown up the new rich, whose position depended on trade and industry...already dominat[ing] the life of the larger towns and industrial districts. (Cole, 1995, 63)

A newly rich middle class was on its way to becoming a dominant power in the socio-economic and political life in Victorian England.

The changing structuring of social classes found its manifestation in Victorian novel as well. As Regina Gagnier puts it, "[h]igh Victorian fiction, variously called the industrial novel, social problem fiction or domestic realism, takes as its grand theme these social relations" (Gagnier, 2005, 56). Two major Victorian novelists, Benjamin Disraeli and William M. Thackeray, are among those who attempted to represent the social relations of their age which were transforming due to the changing economic structure. In *Coningsby* (1844) by Disraeli and in *Vanity Fair* (1848) by Thackeray, the treatment of social classes implies the dynamics

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of the power relations in Victorian society. This paper will analyze the representation of the class structure by focusing on some specific characters in the aforesaid novels, the implications of the class structure in terms of the portrayal of power relations in the society and authors' attitudes to the existing conflicts among certain classes.

2. The Conflict between the Aristocracy and the upper-middle Class in *Coningsby*

Coningsby is the first novel of a political trilogy by Disraeli. In this novel, Disraeli basically focuses on the power conflict between the old aristocracy and the manufacturing upper- middle class. Coningsby, the protagonist, has some connections with both classes, which enables the reader to identify the conflict existing between them. Coningsby comes from an aristocratic origin, being the grandson of "the wealthiest noble in England" (Disraeli, 1982, 7), Lord Monmouth. Lord Monmouth represents the old aristocracy who has vast estates and a hereditary rank leading to considerable parliamentary and social influence. He is portrayed as a notorious noble man who has a sense of importance and is self-indulgent. Thus he represents the corrupted side of the aristocracy: stingy, selfish and intolerant to adverse opinions. Lord Monmouth values people only when they have material wealth which is to serve his own interests. He resists recognition of the fact that the hereditary aristocracy is not the only center of power any more, and denies the growing influence of the upper-middle class.

Coningsby goes to Eton College where he encounters various students from the upper- middle class. There he comes to realize that socio-political power is not stagnant and it is diffusing into the different layers of the society. Particularly, his intellectual conversations with his Eton friend, Oswald Millbank, brings him to a new kind of enlightenment. Millbank is the son of a rich manufacturer in Lancashire. He enlightens Coningsby about developing centers of power:

Politics had as yet appeared to him a struggle whether the country was to be governed by Whig nobles or Tory nobles; and he thought it very unfortunate that he should probably have to enter life with his friends out of power, and his family boroughs destroyed. But in conversing with Millbank, he heard for the first time of influential classes in the country who were not noble, and were yet determined to acquire power. (Disraeli, 1982, 93)

The new gentry turns out to be an influential social class due to industrial production and trade, and thus gaining a significant share within the balance of power pervading the political and economic establishment. To illustrate, Coningsby visits the factory of Oswald's father in Manchester and is immensely attracted by the majesty of the factory:

In the centre, the principal entrance, a lofty portal of bold and beautiful, surmounted by a statue of Commerce. This building, not without a degree of dignity, is what is technically, and not very felicitously, called a mill...and which really was the principal factory of Oswald Millbank, the father of that youth whom, we trust, our readers have not quite forgotten... The sun was declining when Coningsby arrived at Millbank, and gratification which he experienced on first beholding it, was not little diminished, when, on enquiring at the village, he was informed that the hour was past for seeing the works. (Disraeli, 1982, 141)

The factory has a symbolic importance being central to the power relations in the novel. It is the sign of Millbank's power just as his estate signifies that of Lord Monmouth. Millbank is well aware of the changing power relations and prominence of his own class. While he is having a conversation with Coningsby, he talks about the declining significance of hereditary rank and peerage:

We owe the English peerage to three sources: the spoliation of the Church; the open and flagrant sale of its honours by the elder Stuarts; and the boroughmongering of our own times. Those are the three main sources of the existing peerage of England, and in my opinion disgraceful ones. But I must apologise for my frankness in thus speaking to an aristocrat. (Disraeli, 1982, 149)

Here Millbank is criticizing the degeneration of the aristocracy. He stands for the new, dynamic upper-middle class which defies the monopoly of the landed aristocracy which has been a domineering power for centuries. The emphasis on the rise of the manufacturing class suggests the fact that traditional social relations, which were once determined by ancestry, are renovated by the power of the material wealth.

Millbank's dislike of the old aristocracy is observable in his bringing up his son as well. He sends Oswald to Eton in order to prove that he has as much of a right to do so as aristocrats. He imbues his son with a prejudice against every sentiment or institution of an aristocratic character and induces him "to avoid the slightest semblance of courting the affections or society of any member of the falsely-held superior class" (Disraeli, 1982, 37). On the other hand, Lord Monmouth equally detests the manufacturing class: "There is



nothing in the world that Lord Monmouth dislikes so much as Manchester manufacturers, and particularly if they bear the name of Millbank" (Disraeli, 1982, 53). Moreover, Lord Monmouth evades "being in touch with the complex social currents of an industrial... society" (Disraeli, 1982, 7). The dislike of these two men towards each other, apart from some past familial matters, strikingly reflects the conflict and the power struggle between two classes. The landed aristocracy rejects to turn its long-held power over the new gentry while the latter desires to grow stronger and stronger depending on its great material wealth. As Marx puts forward, "[a] class is born in the class struggle. Only through such struggle does it develop into a social and historical force" (qtd. in Fischer, 1996, 83). In this context, it can be argued that the manufacturing class asserts its identity by being in a power struggle with the aristocracy.

The conflict between Lord Monmouth and Millbank is vividly symbolized in their struggle to possess an estate called Hellingsley and to win an election for a borough called Darlford. Hellingsley has been an ambition of Lord Monmouth for years. It is "one of the few objects of his life, and to secure which he was prepared to pay far beyond its intrinsic value" (Disraeli, 1982, 235). Obviously, Lord Monmouth wants the estate not only for its use value but also to confirm his power and prestige. However, Millbank eventually achieves to possess the estate. What disappoints Lord Monmouth most is that he has lost it to Millbank:

[A] man who had crossed him before in similar enterprises; who was his avowed foe; had lavished treasure to oppose him in elections; raised associations against his interest; established journals to assail him; denounced him in public; agitated against him in private; had declared more than once that he would make 'the country too hot for him'; his personal, inveterate, indomitable foe, Mr. Millbank of Millbank. (Disraeli, 1982, 235)

It is inferred that Millbank declares a war against Lord Monmouth and achieves to prove his power over Lord Monmouth in various areas. In addition to his achievement in Hellingsley, he also wins the election in Darlford. Millbank's success mainly results from the fact that he is more familiar to the people of Darlford. The symbolic significance of this election is that it shows the rivalry between a decadent aristocracy lacking in vitality and also divorced from the people and a new energetic upper-middle class which is in close connection with the people (Schwarz, 1979, 86).

In *Coningsby*, Disraeli also offers his response to the conflict between the aristocracy and the upper middle class. His implied solution is reforming, if not revolutionary. As Parrinder explains, Disraeli is not much concerned with the English class structure in the modern sense of the term. He looks at the function and destiny of what he calls the great national institutions, and he classifies three political institutions, three estates: the clergy, the monarchy and the Commons (Parrinder, 2006, 166). Disraeli is of the opinion that the aristocracy is the pillar of these three estates. Although he criticizes the obvious degeneration of the aristocracy, he never means that it should turn all its power to the upper-middle class. Instead, the aristocracy should assume its responsibility to restore the Monarchy and the Church to their former dignified states. It should also integrate with the common people and the rising upper-middle class. In this respect, Disraeli introduces the father of Lord Henry Sydney who is another friend of Coningsby. Lord Henry is responsible and benevolent unlike Lord Monmouth. When Coningsby visits Lord Henry's estate at Beaumanor, he realizes how he is different in manner than his grandfather:

The noble proprietor of this demesne had many of the virtues of his class; a few of their failings. He had that public spirit which became his station. He was not one of those who avoided the exertions and the sacrifices which should be inseparable from high position, by the hollow pretext of a taste for privacy, and a devotion to domestic joys. He was munificent, tender, and bounteous to the poor, and loved a flowing hospitality. A keen sportsman, he was not untinged by letters, and had indeed a cultivated taste for the fine arts. Though an ardent politician, he was tolerant to adverse opinions, and full of amenity to his opponents. (Disraeli, 1982, 73)

As is seen in this description, Lord Henry stands for Disraeli's ideal of English nobleman as a respectable aristocrat who could repair the problematic relations between classes.

The representation of another character, Sidonia, gives more clues about Disraeli's response to the class conflicts in the society. First of all, the importance of money within the interaction of classes is best exemplified by Sidonia. Sidonia is an authentic character, an outsider to the society depicted in the novel. He is the mysterious Jew who forms the political understanding of Coningsby (Smith, 1996, xviii). He descends from a noble family of Arragon. His father was a significant person in Europe providing Europeans with money. Sidonia is a sophisticated and intellectual person. By means of his knowledge and



money, he is quite influential in a society to which he does not actually belong. Coningsby identifies him as "the greatest capitalist in the kingdom" (Disraeli, 1982, 186). Even Lord Monmouth respects him and admires his material power as well as his intellect, as he says: "Lay yourself out for him if you have the opportunity. He is a man of rare capacity, and enormously rich. No one knows the world like Sidonia. I never met his equal; and 'tis so pleasant to talk with one that can want nothing of you" (Disraeli, 1982, 177).

Sidonia is like a spokesperson revealing Disraeli's suggestion to the conflicts in the socio-political context of England. Sidonia's implications about a great leader in fact reveal Disraeli's view of the class politics. He asserts to Coningsby that society needs a great man, a leader: "The Age does not believe in Great men, because it does not possess any...The Spirit of the Age is the very thing that a great man changes" (Disraeli, 1982, 104). Thus, Coningsby is implicitly directed by Sidonia to assume his aristocratic responsibility in order to lead the society and to restore the aristocracy to its former respectable position. "Coningsby gradually becomes disillusioned with his expected paradigm of development and gradually reeducated to a new set of values" (Schwarz, 1979, 86).

Disraeli also implies that the aristocracy should become reconciled with the new manufacturing class. For instance, Coningsby decides to get married to Edith Millbank from the upper-middle class. This marriage shows the possibility of a reconciliation between these two conflicting classes. It is a kind of integration with a new and unfamiliar faction of power in order to recognize and control it. Disraeli's proposition of a union between the aristocracy and the upper-middle class reflects Hegelian discussion of the aim of knowledge. Hegel argues that the aim of knowledge is to divest the objective world that stands opposed to us of its strangeness (qtd. in Bivona, 1989, 307). The rising upper-middle class is a challenge for the landed gentry who has been the controlling force of England for a long time. Therefore, the aristocracy needs an assimilation process in order to keep this mutinous class in its own sphere of interest. The marriage between Coningsby and Edith may signify an assimilation process in this respect.

3. The Power of Money and Social Mobility in *Vanity Fair*

Material wealth appears as an influential force that shapes the class relations in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* as well. Money separates or binds different social classes in the novel. The strict border between the aristocracy and the upper-middle class is easier to exceed due to the power of money. The lower-middle class also rises as a significant component within the social context of the novel. The protagonist of the novel, Becky Sharp, comes from the lower-middle class. Her father was a poor artisan and her mother was a French opera singer. Becky feels insecure about her social status since she realizes the power of the money in order to survive in the society. She witnesses even in her early school years at Miss Pinkerton's that the rich are privileged. For instance, her best friend Amelia Sedley is from upper-middle class so that she is one of the favorites of Miss Pinkerton: "Miss Sedley's papa was a merchant in London, and a man of some wealth; whereas Miss Sharp was an artless pupil, for whom Miss Pinkerton had done, as she thought, quite enough, without conferring upon her at parting the high honour of the Dictionary" (Thackeray, 2001, 5). Here it is explained that Miss Pinkerton is unwilling to give Becky the Johnson's Dictionary which is traditionally endowed to the students who graduate from the school. Miss Pinkerton openly despises Becky because of Becky's relatively lower social status.

In Becky's case, class hatred is not only between the aristocracy and the upper-middle class, but it also involves the different layers of the middle class. As Gagnier states the issue is that social relations are organized according to the exchange value of the money. This is the lesson learned dramatically by numerous Victorian heroes and Becky is among them (Gagnier, 2005, 50). In addition to this, Bernard Paris underlines that to climb the social ladder, Becky lies, cheats and turns to hypocrisy (1974, 75). When she realizes the possibility of exceeding her class barriers, she begins to exploit people around her.

In *Vanity Fair*, the aristocracy is usually portrayed negatively. For example, Sir Pitt Crawley is a baronet, as he is described: "Among the most respected of the names beginning in C which the Court-Guide contained, in the year 18-, was that of Crawley, Sir Pitt, Baronet, Great Gaunt Street, and Queen's Crawley, Hants" (Thackeray, 2001, 56). Sir Pitt is said to be vulgar, dirty, notorious and stingy.

[I]n a word, the whole baronetage, peerage, commonage of England, did not contain a more cunning, mean, selfish, foolish, disreputable old man. That blood-red hand of Sir Pitt Crawley's would be in anybody's pocket except his own; and it is with grief and pain, that, as admirers of the British aristocracy, we find ourselves obliged to admit the existence of so many ill qualities in a person whose name is in Debrett. (Thackeray, 2001, 77)



Sir Pitt's characterization is in contradiction with the image of the ideal man of gentility. The aristocratic class is supposed to be distinguished from the middle classes with the refined manners of its members. However, Sir Pitt's manners challenge this view. "Sir Pitt Crawley was a philosopher with a taste for what is called low life" (Thackeray, 2001, 72).

In spite of the adverse portrayal of the aristocracy, it is seen that most upper-middle class characters emulate the aristocratic way of life. For example, George Osborne who is a rich stockbroker has a high opinion of aristocratic life. "The old gentleman pronounced these aristocratic names with the greatest gusto. Whenever he met a great man he grovelled before him, and my-lorded him as only a free-born Briton can do" (Thackeray, 2001, 114). He encourages his son to get acquainted with noble people: "There's no pride in me. I was a humbly born man--but you have had advantages. Make a good use of 'em. Mix with the young nobility. There's many of 'em who can't spend a dollar to your guinea, my boy" (Thackeray, 2001, 114). Although Mr. Osborne is aware of his economic advantage, he still wants to reinforce his social position by mixing with the nobility.

Osborne's struggle to be integrated with the upper class implies the significance and influence of a respectful family. Becky is also aware of this fact, and for this reason she tries to hide that her mother had once been on the stage. Instead, she fabricates some respectful familial ties for her mother and tells everyone that she is a Montmorency: "Indeed it was from this famous family, as it appears, that Miss Sharp, by the mother's side, was descended. Of course she did not say that her mother had been on the stage...She had several stories about her ancestors" (Thackeray, 2001, 81).

Becky becomes a governess at George Osborne's house. Mr. Osborne's son, Jos, takes a fancy to Becky but Mr. Osborne disapproves Jos's interest for Becky since she is from the lower- middle class.

He had been revolving in his mind the marriage question pending between Jos and Rebecca, and was not over well pleased that a member of a family into which he, George Osborne, of the --th, was going to marry, should make a mesalliance with a little nobody --a little upstart governess... Who's this little schoolgirl that is ogling and making love to him? Hang it, the family's low enough already, without HER. A governess is all very well, but I'd rather have a lady for my sister-in-law. I'm a liberal man; but I've proper pride, and know my own station: let her know hers. (Thackeray, 2001, 52-3)

Similarly, although Sir Pitt's sister, Miss Crawley, enjoys Becky's company, she is quite disappointed when she learns that Rawdon, her favorite nephew, has got married to Becky because this marriage is a violation of tacit class barriers.

Despite these examples, there is still a class mobility in *Vanity Fair*. Characters are not always confined to a certain social situation. William Dobbin's case is an example of this. He is despised and scorned by his schoolmates since his father was a retail grocer. Like Becky, he has been in an unsafe social position as a member of the lower-middle class. Yet, he succeeds to become a rich and respectful man as a result of his personal qualities. Thus, the possibility of social climbing encourages various characters to climb the social ladder. Paris argues that realizing the significance of money as a means of social power, individuals struggle to gain it, which results in the sacrifice of integrity and meaningful interpersonal relationships (Paris, 1974, 75). Therefore, even between the members of the same class appear resentment and conflict. For instance, when Mr. Sedley goes bankrupt and falls into poverty, his close friend Mr. Osborne turns away from him even though, Mr. Sedley had supported him in business life in earlier times.

Of all Sedley's opponents in his debates with his creditors which now ensued, and harassed the feelings of the humiliated old gentleman so severely, that in six weeks he oldened more than he had done for fifteen years before-- the most determined and obstinate seemed to be John Osborne, his old friend and neighbour--John Osborne, whom he had set up in life--who was under a hundred obligations to him--and whose son was to marry Sedley's daughter. Any one of these circumstances would account for the bitterness of Osborne's opposition. (Thackeray, 2001, 159)

This reveals that not only money improves the social status but also it shapes the power relations within the society. "One is courted or cut according to his place or market value. The rich are fawned upon and served" (Paris, 1974, 74).

Miss Crawley who had inherited her mother's great fortune is fawned upon and served by her relatives and her friends since they expect to get some share from her fortune. "What a dignity it gives an old lady, that balance at the banker's! How tenderly we look at her faults if she is a relative (and may every reader have a score of such), what a kind good-natured old creature we find her!" (Thackeray, 2001, 78). This



situation is a good example of the transformative power of the money. In another case in the novel, Mr. Osborne does not consent to his son George's marriage with Amelia since Amelia's father has lost his wealth and position in the society. George explains this to Amelia in the following way:

My dear child, they would have loved you if you had had two hundred thousand pounds... That is the way in which they have been brought up. Ours is a ready-money society. We live among bankers and City big-wigs, and be hanged to them, and every man, as he talks to you, is jingling his guineas in his pocket. (Thackeray, 2001, 184).

As Marx argues, "[t]he extent of the power of the money is the extent of my power. Money's properties are my properties and essential powers - the properties and powers of its possessor. Thus, what I am and am capable of is by no means determined by my individuality" (Marx, 2012, 128). In line with this argument, one's position both in the social establishment and within the limits of his/her own class is determined by money in the universe of *Vanity Fair*.

Although Thackeray satirizes a society shaped by material values, it is not that he suggests an egalitarian society. In other words, he does not offer the equality of social classes but restoration of moral values. In this context, the restoration of Crawley's family house implies the possible improvement of the old aristocracy. Sir Pitt's elder son Mr. Pitt gets married to aristocratic Lady Jane and achieves to restore his family estate at Queen's Crawley to its former brilliant state:

Our old friends the Crawleys' family house, in Great Gaunt Street, still bore over its front the hatchment which had been placed there as a token of mourning for Sir Pitt Crawley's demise, yet this heraldic emblem was in itself a very splendid and gaudy piece of furniture, and all the rest of the mansion became more brilliant than it had ever been during the late baronet's reign. The black outer-coating of the bricks was removed, and they appeared with a cheerful, blushing face streaked with white: the old bronze lions of the knocker were gilt handsomely, the railings painted, and the dismallest house in Great Gaunt Street became the smartest in the whole quarter, before the green leaves in Hampshire had replaced those yellowing ones which were on the trees in Queen's Crawley Avenue when old Sir Pitt Crawley passed under them for the last time. (Thackeray, 2001, 416)

As in *Coningsby*, there is an implication for the need of the restoration for the aristocratic class whose members are expected to become aware of their responsibilities and ready to integrate with the upper-middle class by accepting its rising power.

Conclusion

To sum up, *Coningsby* and *Vanity Fair* disclose the changing power relations among different social classes based on the changing economic condition with the arrival of the Industrial Revolution. The conflict between the landed gentry, the aristocracy and the upper-middle class implies a power struggle and the importance of money to shape the social structure. The changing economic condition also gives a way to the social mobility and encourages lower-middle class to climb the social ladder. Therefore, it appears that different social layers are in a struggle to find a proper place in recently developed power relations. The responses of Disraeli and Thackeray to these power relations confirm their limited upper-class viewpoints. Disraeli puts emphasis on the leadership of the aristocracy which is revealed in his portrayal of *Coningsby* as a potential leader. Thackeray satirizes a society which is built upon materialistic values rather than moral ones. Like Disraeli, he does not attack the aristocracy as a class but satirizes some individual characters. He does not offer a clear solution to the class conflict but his implied response may be regarded as the improvement of the aristocratic class.

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