
Abstracts

Peter Hitchcock, They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation 20

Most studies of working-class culture are based on a content-oriented approach to class. While such a mode of interpretation is useful to an understanding of working-class expression, it often fails to come to terms with the nature of class as a relation. Although hardly a manifesto, this essay argues for a theoretically nuanced reading of class that takes up the challenge of abstraction in a working-class representation. In a series of examples drawn from fiction, poetry, and film, the argument shows the myth of the disappearance of the working class to be a symptom of current problems in representational aesthetics. (PH)

Rita Felski, Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class 33

In contemporary literary and cultural studies, little attention has been paid to the lower middle class, described by one scholar as “the social class with the lowest reputation in the entire history of class theory.” This article discusses the representation of the lower middle class in literature and scholarly writing. George Orwell’s novels of the 1930s and Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* offer some illuminating perspectives on the British lower middle class, though Orwell’s novels also reveal a conspicuous disdain for their subject. This disdain is echoed in much of the scholarly writing on the lower middle class. Decried for its reactionary attitudes by Marxists, the “petite bourgeoisie” also poses problems for a contemporary cultural politics based on the idealization of transgression and on the romance of marginality. Rather than embody an outmoded or anachronistic class formation, however, the lower middle class may offer an important key to the contemporary meaning of class. (RF)

Eric Schocket, “Discovering Some New Race”: Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills” and the Literary Emergence of Working-Class Whiteness 46

Recent readings of Rebecca Harding Davis’s landmark exploration of the emerging industrial working class have been concerned primarily with the connections between class formation and gender relations. By focusing attention instead on the text’s indebtedness to various contemporaneous discourses of racial subjection (which crucially shape and delimit analyses of class and representations of labor during the late antebellum era), I argue that the transcendence, mobility, and salvation that the text allows its working-class characters are subtly but consistently aligned with an emerging racial conception of whiteness. Not only does this alignment link freedom with whiteness and exploitation with blackness, but through these disabling linkages it also establishes a literary precedent for representing (and fictively resolving) class struggles with racial language. (ES)

Jennie A. Kassanoff, Extinction, Taxidermy, Tableaux Vivants: Staging Race and Class in *The House of Mirth* 60

Edith Wharton’s 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* documents a twenty-nine-year-old debutante’s disinheritance—from money, family, power, love, and social position. On a more profound level, however, the novel pursues the opposite end. Although Lily Bart is plainly vulnerable to the whims of what Charlotte Perkins Gilman called the “sexuo-economic relation,” she is nonetheless dramatically resistant to the attritional ravages of racial disintegration. This paper argues that race in *The House of Mirth* is an essentialist—if deeply problematic—answer to the cultural slippages of class and gender. By locating the novel within the diverse range of cultural phenomena that contributed to its racialized logic, this essay connects Wharton’s fears of class mobility, mass production, immigration, and “race

suicide” to the taxidermic aesthetic of racialized stasis. Part of a rare and endangered species, Lily becomes Wharton’s decadent specimen of racial permanence. (JAK)

Cynthia Ward, From the Suwanee to Egypt, There’s No Place like Home 75

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) and Carolyn Chute’s *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* (1985) feature white working-class women negotiating class hierarchies in rural communities. Despite present-day critics’ putative concern with class and demonstrated interest in Hurston’s other works, particularly *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), both novels have been largely ignored by the critical establishment, in part because readers find it difficult to identify with the main characters. Comparing the critical receptions of *Seraph*, *The Beans*, and *Their Eyes* reveals that the mechanism by which readers identify with imaginary characters is constituted by middle-class reading practices. While a sympathetic audience emerged for *Their Eyes*, one is not likely to appear for the other two novels, which expose the class-bound roots of the literary construction of identity, meaning, and reality. In addition, *Seraph* and *The Beans* point, however obliquely, toward a vernacular notion of home that resists middle-class commodification. (CW)

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