

4. Raymond Williams, "Forms of English Fiction in 1848," in *Writing in Society* (1977; London: Verso, 1985), 150–66; Williams, *Culture*, 99–119.
5. Williams, "Forms of English Fiction," 163.
6. Williams, "Forms of English Fiction," 163–64.
7. Williams, "Forms of English Fiction, 163. The seed of Rosemarie Bodenheimer's *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), as well as of Catherine Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction, 1832–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), was Williams's chapter on the industrial novel in *Culture and Society*.
8. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 100.
9. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (New York: Dover, 1968), 1: 1–2.
10. See Arnold, Chapter 3: "Barbarians, Philistines, Populace."
11. See Book 3, "The Modern Worker," in Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. Richard D. Altick (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).
12. Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 185, 179.
13. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 108, 123.
14. For a similar account of this phenomenon see John Kucich, *Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 12–16.



Class

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DROR Wahrman compares it to a layer cake. Paul Fussell has said it resembles a bus: the structure remains the same, even as individual riders come and go. David Cannadine makes the point that, rather than do away with earlier systems of rank and inheritance, the tripartite distinctions so commonly invoked—upper, middle, and lower—reinforce them.¹ The school system in Victorian England was organized into three "grades," and the same structure (often tripartite) appears throughout social and economic life today: in education, in air and train travel, and in consumer culture. Rather than destroy the old

hierarchy, writes Cannadine, the industrial revolution “created hierarchies of its own with which to reinforce it.”² Indeed, the three-tiered system has an aesthetic, orderly appeal, as if invented by some farsighted and fetishistic architect: “In no other country is society thus beautifully proportioned,” wrote Sarah Stickney Ellis admiringly of England’s layered confection of class.³

As a middle child, I learned early about the living of the hierarchical life: a life in which a different position in the birth order (or, as the story of Jacob and Esau calls it, “birthright”) could be desired even though, to borrow the bus analogy, one could never get off. Social inequality, as every sibling knows, begins in the family, and as Jacob knew the distribution of status was only another name for the distribution of love. Life in the middle means looking both high and low while attempting to steer a safe middle course; the term “parental child” serving as a sop, perhaps, to the child who strives toward a never-open position, no matter how worthy the self-appraising aspirant. Parental love is not (as Jacob also knew) equally distributed, though the fiction, to paraphrase Dickens’s Mr. Bagnet, must be maintained.

It is a truism in Victorian studies of class to say that no one really knows what the term means.⁴ This formulation sometimes indicates that no one knows how many layers the cake has—a proposition often followed by the proposal that it is more a mille-feuille than a triple-decker, and that no one can name its many divisions because they are so numerous and so finely cut. But it also means that people talk about many different things when they talk about class—money, taste, manners, speech—so that class “means” many different things and signifies in different ways. The mille-feuille effect is reinforced by such touches as Victorian middle-class women’s ever-so-subtle distinctions of dress, in which “Every cap, bow, streamer, ruffle, fringe, bustle, glove or other elaboration symbolized some status category for the female wearer.”⁵ The same mystifying rules applied to etiquette, where, in a drama more suggestive of a CIA plot than Victorian Studies, they were always changing, the better to distinguish insiders from outsiders.

The phrase “no one knows what it means,” then—in the case of class as in so many other areas of life—means only that an exact, perhaps scientific definition remains elusive. A set of signs is always changing though its purpose and essence remain the same, including some and excluding others on the basis of an arbitrary assertion of value. Thus, it could make sense to say, in the mode currently fashionable in Victorian Studies, that what is incomprehensibly tied to manner or ruffle is completely understandable as feeling or affect. Ruffles and calling cards were transient

signs of class position, but their emotional meaning remained constant: I am in and you are out; I know the secret and you do not; for me it is effortless, while for you it is work.

Esau, the older son in the Biblical story, sells his birthright to his brother Jacob in exchange for a dish of porridge. Later, their blind father Abraham, wishing to bestow a blessing on his first-born favorite, is tricked by the younger, who, with the help of his mother, covers himself in goat hides so that Abraham will think that he is touching Esau's hairy skin. As a child, I had no idea why I returned obsessively to this story, and indeed have only now recalled my interest in it. Is it because it is a story about class, or about sibling rivalry, or both? Carolyn Steedman has written about the way children map social structures onto familial ones: the child, encountering class hierarchies in life, questions his own parents' status.⁶ But status, again, is a lesson first learned at home. From the middle, the idea of moving up in the hierarchy is of compelling and guilty interest, the latter since it necessarily involves stealing what cannot be stolen: another's birth, another's "right." The topic of class, then, brings to the fore the unstable mixture of displacement and desire, comfort and satisfaction that informs a position that is neither here nor there—a combination captured by A. A. Milne in lines that sit alongside my Jacob/Esau memories:

Halfway down the stairs
Is a stair
Where I sit;
There isn't any
Other stair
Quite like
It. . . . And all sorts of funny thoughts
Run round my head
It isn't really
Anywhere
It's somewhere else
Instead.⁷

NOTES

1. Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 90; David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin, 2000), 89. I have not yet succeeded in locating the Fussell comment.
2. Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, 104.

3. Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England* (1838), Indiana University Victorian Women Writers' Project, <https://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/vwwp/welcome.do;jsessionid=DE6159B41E8EC05F43256581BDC7745F>, 14.
4. Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide through the American Status System* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 24; Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class*, 16.
5. Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Women and Society in Victorian England* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 45; quoted in Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 34.
6. Carolyn Steedman, "True Romances," in Raphael Samuel, *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (London: Routledge, 1989), 30–31.
7. A. A. Milne, *When We Were Very Young* (London: Methuen, 1924), 81. Milne was not a middle child, but he was the youngest of three.



Data

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DATA was not a word that the Victorians used regularly. The British English corpus of the Google NGram viewer, which visualizes word frequency across the corpus of books scanned by Google as of 2012, shows a slow increase in the use of the word “data” in the nineteenth century, with a dramatic spike around 1990 (see [fig. 1](#)). The *Oxford English Dictionary* ties the rise of “data” specifically to the rise of computing and computers in the mid-twentieth century. Data is collective. Now typically used as a mass noun, data signifies related bits of information, usually numbers, considered collectively. Informally, data means any sort of digital information.

In this essay, I use digital humanities methods to collect data about the Victorian novel. Concentrating on Anthony Trollope’s third Chronicle of Barsetshire, *Doctor Thorne*, I examine what social media traces on *Goodreads*, a popular social cataloguing site where users review and recommend books to friends, can tell us about the way we read Victorian literature now. In doing so, I hope to uncover information about a collective everyday Victorianism. While previous work in reader response theory suffered from the difficulty of obtaining data on how people read, for the first