

# Social Stratification Issues in English and American Literature

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**Abstract:** Sociologists use the term social stratification to describe the system of social standing. **Social stratification** refers to a society's categorization of its people into rankings of socioeconomic tiers based on factors like wealth, income, race, education, and power.

You may remember the word “stratification” from geology class. The distinct vertical layers found in rock, called stratification, are a good way to visualize social structure. Society's layers are made of people, and society's resources are distributed unevenly throughout the layers. The people who have more resources represent the top layer of the social structure of stratification. Other groups of people, with progressively fewer and fewer resources, represent the lower layers of our society.

**Key Words:** Sociologist, literature, stratification, Projects Method, Case Study Technology, Technology.

## Introduction

In the United States, people like to believe everyone has an equal chance at success. To a certain extent, Aaron illustrates the belief that hard work and talent—not

prejudicial treatment or societal values—determine social rank. This emphasis on self-effort perpetuates the belief that people control their own social standing.

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However, sociologists recognize that social stratification is a society-wide system that makes inequalities apparent. While there are always inequalities between individuals, sociologists are interested in larger social patterns. Stratification is not about individual inequalities, but about systematic inequalities based on group membership, classes, and the like. No individual, rich or poor, can be blamed for social inequalities. The structure of society affects a person's social standing. Although individuals may support or fight inequalities, social stratification is created and supported by society as a whole. Factors that define stratification vary in different societies. In most societies, stratification is an economic system, based on **wealth**, the net value of money and assets a person has, and **income**, a person's wages or investment dividends. While people are regularly categorized based on how rich or poor they are, other important factors influence social standing. For example, in some cultures, wisdom and charisma are valued, and people who have them are revered more than those who don't. In some cultures, the elderly are esteemed; in others, the elderly are disparaged or overlooked. Societies' cultural beliefs often reinforce the inequalities of stratification.

One key determinant of social standing is the social standing of our parents. Parents tend to

pass their social position on to their children. People inherit not only social standing but also the cultural norms that accompany a certain lifestyle. They share these with a network of friends and family members. Social standing becomes a comfort zone, a familiar lifestyle, and an identity. This is one of the reasons first-generation college students do not fare as well as other students.

Other determinants are found in a society's occupational structure. Teachers, for example, often have high levels of education but receive relatively low pay. Many believe that teaching is a noble profession, so teachers should do their jobs for love of their profession and the good of their students—not for money. Yet no successful executive or entrepreneur would embrace that attitude in the business world, where profits are valued as a driving force. Cultural attitudes and beliefs like these support and perpetuate social inequalities.

As a result of the Great Recession that rocked our nation's economy in the last few years, many families and individuals found themselves struggling like never before. The nation fell into a period of prolonged and exceptionally high unemployment. While no one was completely insulated from the recession, perhaps those in the lower classes felt the impact most profoundly. Before the recession, many were living paycheck to paycheck or even had been living comfortably.

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As the recession hit, they were often among the first to lose their jobs. Unable to find replacement employment, they faced more than loss of income. Their homes were foreclosed, their cars were repossessed, and their ability to afford healthcare was taken away. This put many in the position of deciding whether to put food on the table or fill a needed prescription.

While we're not completely out of the woods economically, there are several signs that we're on the road to recovery. Many of those who suffered during the recession are back to work and are busy rebuilding their lives. The Affordable Health Care Act has provided health insurance to millions who lost or never had it.

But the Great Recession, like the Great Depression, has changed social attitudes. Where once it was important to demonstrate wealth by wearing expensive clothing items like Calvin Klein shirts and Louis Vuitton shoes, now there's a new, thriftier way of thinking. In many circles, it has become hip to be frugal. It's no longer about how much we spend, but about how much we don't spend. Think of shows like *Extreme Couponing* on TLC and songs like Macklemore's "Thrift Shop."

Sociologists distinguish between two types of systems of stratification. Closed systems

accommodate little change in social position. They do not allow people to shift levels and do not permit social relationships between levels. Open systems, which are based on achievement, allow movement and interaction between layers and classes. Different systems reflect, emphasize, and foster certain cultural values and shape individual beliefs. Stratification systems include class systems and caste systems, as well as meritocracy. Caste systems are closed stratification systems in which people can do little or nothing to change their social standing. A **caste system** is one in which people are born into their social standing and will remain in it their whole lives. People are assigned occupations regardless of their talents, interests, or potential. There are virtually no opportunities to improve a person's social position.

In the Hindu caste tradition, people were expected to work in the occupation of their caste and to enter into marriage according to their caste. Accepting this social standing was considered a moral duty. Cultural values reinforced the system. Caste systems promote beliefs in fate, destiny, and the will of a higher power, rather than promoting individual freedom as a value. A person who lived in a caste society was socialized to accept his or her social standing.

Although the caste system in India has been officially dismantled, its residual presence in

Indian society is deeply embedded. In rural areas, aspects of the tradition are more likely to remain, while urban centers show less evidence of this past. In India's larger cities, people now have more opportunities to choose their own career paths and marriage partners. As a global center of employment, corporations have introduced merit-based hiring and employment to the nation.

A **class system** is based on both social factors and individual achievement. A **class** consists of a set of people who share similar status with regard to factors like wealth, income, education, and occupation. Unlike caste systems, class systems are open. People are free to gain a different level of education or employment than their parents. They can also socialize with and marry members of other classes, which allows people to move from one class to another.

In a class system, occupation is not fixed at birth. Though family and other societal models help guide a person toward a career, personal choice plays a role.

In class systems, people have the option to form **exogamous marriages**, unions of spouses from different social categories. Marriage in these circumstances is based on values such as love and compatibility rather than on social standing or economics. Though social conformities still exist that encourage

people to choose partners within their own class, people are not as pressured to choose marriage partners based solely on those elements. Marriage to a partner from the same social background is an **endogamous union**.

Social stratification systems determine social position based on factors like income, education, and occupation. Sociologists use the term **status consistency** to describe the consistency, or lack thereof, of an individual's rank across these factors. Caste systems correlate with high status consistency, whereas the more flexible class system has lower status consistency.

To illustrate, let's consider Susan. Susan earned her high school degree but did not go to college. That factor is a trait of the lower-middle class. She began doing landscaping work, which, as manual labor, is also a trait of lower-middle class or even lower class. However, over time, Susan started her own company. She hired employees. She won larger contracts. She became a business owner and earned a lot of money. Those traits represent the upper-middle class. There are inconsistencies between Susan's educational level, her occupation, and her income. In a class system, a person can work hard and have little education and still be in middle or upper class, whereas in a caste system that would not be possible. In a class system, low status

consistency correlates with having more choices and opportunities.

One of the first accounts of social variation in language, this groundbreaking study founded the discipline of sociolinguistics, providing the model on which thousands of studies have been based. In this second edition, Labov looks back on forty years of sociolinguistic research, bringing the reader up to date on its methods, findings and achievements. In over thirty pages of new material, he explores the unforeseen implications of his earlier work, addresses the political issues involved, and evaluates the success of newer approaches to sociolinguistic investigation. In doing so, he reveals the outstanding accomplishments of sociolinguistics since his original study, which laid the foundations for studying language variation, introduced the crucial concept of the linguistic variable, and showed how variation across age groups is an indicator of language change. Bringing Labov's pioneering study into the 21st century, this classic volume will remain the benchmark in the field for years to come.

The technological advances that followed the Civil War, particularly in the areas of American transportation and communication, also contributed mightily to the emergence of this new, more unified cultural awareness. In

1860, for example, fewer than thirty thousand miles of railroad existed in the United States, and major sections of the country remained essentially unconnected to each other. By May 1869, however, less than a decade later, as the last rail spike was being driven into the line linking the East and the West at Promontory Point, Utah, the number of miles of railroad crisscrossing the United States had almost tripled to nearly ninety thousand. The expansion of the railroads into every corner of the Union of course made travel throughout the country much easier (thus removing a major impediment to personal mobility that would tend to promote a regional—as opposed to a national—sensibility), but it also had the equally important effect of opening up commerce and communication between different geographical regions to a much larger degree. Advances in publishing technology after the Civil War also worked to open contact between sections of the United States. Subscriptions to major newspapers and magazines skyrocketed in the 1870s and 1880s as Americans from all over the country grew hungrier for information from beyond their local borders. Already existing periodicals such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Monthly* widened their circulations dramatically in the last few decades of the nineteenth century as telegraph and transportation improvements made it possible for them to reach those more distant readers

longing for access to these now more broadly focused national publications. Hoping to capitalize on newly opened markets and the increased readership among the American public, hundreds of new magazines appeared for the first time in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, including *Galaxy*, *Overland Monthly*, *Scribner's Monthly*, and *Century Magazine*, to name a few of the most prominent.

Though late-nineteenth-century improvements in transportation and communication helped to foster a larger, more unified conception of an American culture, these advancements also had a simultaneous and somewhat paradoxical effect on the nation's consciousness. Ironically, as Americans seemed to be dismantling sectional boundaries in the 1870s and 1880s by traveling farther from home and by reading a wider variety of publications from across the United States, they were at the same time made newly aware of regional differences in speech and manners through contact with those people and places beyond their immediate milieus. This rediscovery of regional diversity in the context of a budding national culture would prove to have profound implications for the establishment of an indigenous American voice in literature in the decades following the Civil War.

By 1870 a new generation of American authors, committed to the tenets of literary

realism, had begun to emerge. The realist artistic vision, though expressed in a variety of ways by hundreds of writers in the late nineteenth century, was, at least in principle, relatively uncomplicated: portray people, places, and things as they actually appear in everyday life. Realism as an aesthetic movement was in large part a reaction against the idealizing (if universalizing) tendencies of literary romanticism, which had dominated literary expression in the United States since the early decades of the 1800s. The major novelists of the post-Civil War period, Mark Twain (1835–1910), William Dean Howells (1837–1920), and Henry James (1843–1916), self-avowed realists all, emphasized in their writing a fidelity to actual experience, particularly by focusing on the development of "common" characters confronting complex ethical issues.

Although Twain, Howells, and James as well as other American writers produced novels of the highest quality in the final decades of the nineteenth century, none of these works could be said to have truly achieved the status of the Great American Novel insofar as any of them alone represented the fullness of the American cultural experience. In fact, Howells himself famously argued that it would be impossible because of the regional diversity of the country for any one book to capture completely the American experience.

American realist writers generally focused on the particular details of the geographical area of the country they knew best, recording the distinctive manners, colloquial speech patterns, and distinguishing traditions of its inhabitants. Of course the ways people talk and behave tend to be sectional in nature. And so the particular brand of realist literature produced by Americans in the late nineteenth century came to be known as regionalism.

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