

How to Use Class in Historical Settings, Part 1

Before our modern era of democratic equality, before school children growing up were routinely taught that "we are all equal", quite a different calculus of social standing prevailed.¹ There was a time when class and status created strict boundaries in a person's life, as is still the case in parts of the world today. The strictures imposed by these forgotten frameworks had a far greater impact on historical lives than most contemporary writers are aware of.

Game designers who are ignorant of these limitations may unintentionally create worlds that mirror modern times and social equalities. Authors who give only passing attention to class and status in their fictional settings short-change the layers of interaction that can have a vital impact on characters and events. But when writers have a better understanding of these social factors, a great deal of dramatic tension and challenges for characters can be introduced to the setting, and in a way that makes cultural sense.

I don't want to wax academic on the subject, but do want to examine some of the historical issues around class and status, and suggest some sensible ways to play up these factors in fictional settings.²

Class and Status

Class (socioeconomic standing) and status (prestige associated with one's position, or the lack thereof) have colored human societies throughout history. For most of that history, distinctive classes with various levels of social standing were recognized to exist, with differences between them often enforced by law. In day-to-day life people might not have paid a lot of conscious attention to class and status, but a person's "place" in society was much more sharply defined than ours (generally) are today in the modern western world. If someone tried to step outside their expected place, there was much harsher backlash than a person would normally experience today. This served to reinforce the expectation that everyone had a given station in society and would pretty much stick to it for most of their lives.

Today, class is associated almost exclusively with a person's socioeconomic standing, and in our "land of opportunity" we have an underlying expectation that an enterprising individual can change that status if they work at it. It has not always been so. In past times the implications of class went far beyond socioeconomics. Each person was born into a social niche which itself conveyed a certain status, and this place in society determined pretty much everything about that person's life.

Education, employment opportunities, marital connections, voice (or lack thereof) in politics, even down to details such as what clothing one could wear and what adornments were forbidden: all these factors and more became dictated not only by custom and common usage but also by codification in law, such as the [sumptuary laws](#) that dictated permissible attire depending upon one's class.

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It was much more difficult in the past to change class and status than it is today. Marriage, inheritance, success in trade (hence gaining wealth), and elevation to a notable position were perhaps the most commonplace ways of doing so, but beyond those methods the opportunities for changing social standing were fewer than in modern times. Many who hoped to alter their standing had to defy convention and possibly even the law in order to step outside the station society had fixed for them.

When we fail to reflect these layers of nuance in our representations of the past, we risk producing generic, essentially democratic, "everyone has equal rights"-hued interactions that bear a vague resemblance to present times. Another common pitfall lies in choosing just one or two factors from the past to stand as tokens for a class-based society: nobility are unsympathetic to the plight of the common man (unless they are our heroes); our always-literate adventurers do not stem from the lowest classes of society; we call one group lords and another group ladies and they always bow or curtsy and are very mannered.

While this shorthand representation of class factors succeeds in signalling "class plays an important role here", this tokenism both misrepresents the reality, and gives a shallow and skewed impression of the real dynamics that existed in a more class-conscious era.

For writers who want more verisimilitude in historical settings, or who want to play with a multi-layered and rich set of social dynamics, here are some things to consider about class and status. (For convenience I may use these terms interchangeably. In doing so I am referring to the combination of both which was more restrictive historically than in modern times.)



“Learn your place in this town. Or soon enough you won't be in it.”

Regina Mills (the Evil Queen) to Emma Swan in “Once Upon a Time”

"Know Your Place"

Throughout most of western history, most people had a sense of "place". This awareness corresponded in part to geographical location, but even more so to where they fit in society: in family, clan, village, in the larger community and realm of obedience to authority.

In the Middle Ages this was exemplified with "the estates of the realm": a representation of the presumably heavenly ordained classes that a man could occupy during his lifetime. An example can be seen in this Renaissance-era (1488) woodcut by Jacob Meydenbach, which shows Christ on a rainbow blessing the three estates. Those groups are clerics, nobles, and peasants. The Latin captions say to the respective groups, "You pray humbly; you protect; you work."

Governments were structured along these lines. Throughout Europe, evolving parliaments were arranged in ways to [reflect the divisions](#) of the lords spiritual, temporal, and commoners. Laws - or how they were administered - reflected these divisions, with multi-tiered justice systems often meting out different punishments and penalties depending upon one's station of birth. Not everyone was considered "equal before the law" - that was a much later invention. For a long time it was considered important to support and reinforce the divinely determined differences in station of birth, and this was reflected in law and custom.

This notion of "knowing your place" lasted for centuries in Europe and the colonized Americas, and, it could be argued, continues to exist (in a diluted manner) today. For generations people were made aware that they had obligations to meet that coincided with their station in life - and even more pointedly, that to imagine themselves filling another's place was an unacceptable flight of fancy. While a nobleman might choose (or be compelled, if a younger son) to dedicate his life to the church, it was only a minority who became churchmen, and it was highly unlikely for that process to happen in reverse (for someone to leave the church and live as lay nobility again). As to commoners and peasants, their lot in life was set: while an orphan taken in or the son of a well-off tradesman might gain entry to the clergy, by and large people born "to the land" would remain "on the land" for the rest of their lives.

In later times as economies diversified and cities grew, more opportunity opened up and economic mobility began to erode this restrictive estate structure. The habit of thinking of people as born into a place, though, continued for centuries. The last hurrah of this outlook in broad society probably came with the outbreak of World War I in 1914. The Great War caused social upheaval and adjustments in many regards, but domestic service provides a case in point. About 13% of women in England were in domestic service in the 19th century, and service work was the single largest employment sector for women on the eve of World War I. To aspire to a

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lifetime of service to one family was an honorable goal, and completely in keeping with having a sense of place and knowing one's place. As a result, commoners from a lower-born class routinely took service with the higher-born. It seemed like a time-tested and nearly inevitable arrangement for a large chunk of the work force.

However, the needs of war opened up clerical employment and women filled industrial jobs by the tens of thousands, to take the place of men who went to the battle front. This forever changed the nature of women's work and also dealt a fatal blow to the centuries-long definition of appropriate endeavors for men and women born into a certain class. The servant culture of the western world never recovered from this tectonic shift. The nobility and well-to-do had to adjust accordingly, and this all gave a huge impetus to the long slide into egalitarian relationships that dominated the 20th century. We have notable portrayals of this era and this groundswell of change in some entertainment media, most notably in the groundbreaking TV series [Upstairs Downstairs](#), over the course of which the family and servants underwent great changes with the outbreak of WWI, and in the more recent production [Downton Abbey](#).

In part 1 of the documentary *Maid in Britain* (embedded below), you can see an installment of a great program about class and status and domestic service in the U.K.. It's a very insightful production (the other installments are online at YouTube). Although focused strictly on domestic service, it delves into a microcosm that is a good example of the class consciousness and status I've discussed here.

In [Part 2](#) of this post, I look at some guidelines for class-conscious behavior, their origins, and how to use them in fictional settings.

1 "We are all equal" may not be the reality, but it is certainly an ideal today, and is commonly presented as such in school and cultural indoctrination in most ostensibly democratic nations.

2 Class and status have their outworkings in every society in the world throughout history. For purposes of this post I am focusing my remarks on America and western Europe over the last 1000 years, since this geography and time span plays a dominant role in our fiction.

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