

Can Works of Great Literature Help Us to Understand Inequality?

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Two kinds of inequality

The statistician joke (perhaps you've heard it before) ...

Not just misplaced averaging – 2 distinct problems (head burning, feet freezing).

Cf. poverty (low-end inequality) and plutocracy (high-end inequality).

Address poverty -> raise the poor (beneficence).

But, address plutocracy -> push the rich down (malice???)

No – concern for human welfare underlies both.

Empirical work re. high-end inequality

Hard to measure, part 1: limited information.

Hard to measure, part 2: conceptual issues.

But a fairly consistent picture overall. Over time: Gilded Age, Great Easing, Second Gilded Age.

Last 30 years: top 0.1%'s wealth share has tripled (7 → 22%).

Mainly from returns to labor – & excludes PV of human capital that matters on the ground.

Rising fractal inequality!

But so what?

Standard econ models: utility just from own consumption, leaving room only for declining marginal utility.

E.g., consider the richest 26 people in the world having the same wealth poorest 3.8B.

Or, David Koch's \$50B vs. 40M+ Americans currently in poverty.

But DMU falls far short of capturing the full picture.

And the rest isn't just discreditable "envy."

We're an intensely social species, & at times a rivalrous / competitive one.

Explaining “so what” in a fuller picture

Deep-seated psychological responses to inequality & hierarchy may have evolutionary roots.

Dominance & subordination; “keeping up with the Joneses;” context-based satisfaction & consumption cascades; malign political influence.

Wilkinson & Pickett (2009): greater inequality -> lower self-reported happiness, social trust, economic mobility, children’s educational performance.

And, greater inequality -> greater social gradient ills.

E.g., teenage births, homicide, other violence, imprisonment rates, mental illness, drug & alcohol addiction, & obesity.

But context matters

The negative externalities may vary w/ time & place, rather than having constant relationship to any statistical measure.

Need both hard & soft social sciences, as well as cultural studies.

Especial value to comparative work, across time & place. E.g., US vs. our cross-Atlantic peers; Gilded Ages vs. adjoining periods.

Who are the elites? How do they relate to each other & those below?
How is inequality rationalized? How is status defined & contested?

Literature is one place to look for qualitative & sociological insight.

(Also, if you enjoy literature, it's a fun place to look.)

How I've spent some summer vacations (& other parts of the last 5 years)

My prior books mainly discuss tax policy, deficits, entitlements, fiscal language, etc. ...

Although I have published a novel: *Getting It*, a Wodehousean (but nastier) satire, set in a law firm amidst anxious & odious drudges.

But now for something completely different.

Dangerous Grandiosity: Literary Perspectives on High-End Inequality Through the First Gilded Age.

Forthcoming Anthem Press, 2020.

Dangerous Grandiosity

Initial idea: take 6 periods, 3 works from each that may shed interesting (if selective & anecdotal) light on the contemporary feel & social meaning of high-end inequality.

My choice! No claim that these are the “right” or “best” works to use – only that they’re worth using.

Some ground rules I happened to follow:

- (1) aesthetic preference for using great / very good literature;
- (2) strong elements of at least attempted realism & close social observation;
- (3) set in the author’s own society, at a personally experienced time & place.

“Book 1”?

Part 1: England and France During the Age of Revolution: (1) Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*; (2) Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et Le Noir*; (3) Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot & La Maison Nucingen*.

Part 2: England, 1840s → Pre-WW I: (1) Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, (2) Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*; (3) Forster’s *Howards End*.

Part 3, Gilded Age America: (1) Twain/Warner’s *The Gilded Age*; (2) Wharton’s *House of Mirth*; (3) Dreiser’s *The Financier & The Titan*.

At this point, simple math said stop – luckily, at a good place for it.

Book 2 to come??

Cue the violins

This was not an easy book to write.

No models for it. “Heading out in new directions without a map.”

The “Hegel problem” – need the parts for the whole, & vice versa.

Expositional challenge: readers don’t know all the books!

Research challenge: lots of diverse literatures relevant.

I’d find a main through line, then string everything on it. (Vs. standard social science writing that needs to be more linear.)

I’ll close by discussing a few chapters on better-known works.

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Need to peel away the varnish first!

This is no mere rom-com, however foundational to the genre.

Darcy keeps his shirt on, isn't Heathcliff (much less Christian Grey).
The prize isn't (just) him, but Elizabeth's high-end social validation.

A story about tense dignitary conflict between the great & the not quite so great, in which the "mere stateliness of money & rank" loses out to the claims of personal merit.

What's at stake

Status conflicts are bitter enough to prompt asking: Why aren't things better than this?

E.g., no French Revolution here; Bennets are (if barely) in the top 1%; societal consensus re. ordinal rankings.

Also: play in the joints; aristocratic model (aid <-> deference).

But with cardinal disputes, battle between the metrics (birth & wealth vs. personal merit).

And roiled by the society's briskly competitive ethos & pervasive personal entrepreneurship.

The upshot

Lady Catherine is exposed & discomfited; Darcy is “properly humbled” & must “obtain ... forgiveness.”

It's good for the established order (& very English, a la the relatively inclusive “gentleman” concept) to accept invigorating fresh blood.

But if the intelligent, tasteful, & well-mannered are to be celebrated, are those lacking these graces to be despised & mocked?

Consider Mr. Bennet's attitudes - & those of the unsparing narrator.

Left for the future are a personal merit standard's possible implications for those whom it leaves behind.

Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

Beloved tale of lead character's harsh serial humiliation.

That we buy in so fully (despite Scrooge's campy charm) reflects Dickens' skillful sugar-coating.

Yet the force of the dignitary attack on a self-made businessman's Horatio Alger-like rise* has not escaped all notice.

Consider those whom I call the “Scrooge truthers” – Ayn Randites to whom (pre-conversion) he's the true hero, & “the one character in the book who acts responsibl[y] & treats his fellow men justly.”

*Leaving aside the point that Horatio Alger heroes don't actually fit the “Horatio Alger model.”

Still early in the Industrial Revolution

Jane Austen could have read *A Christmas Carol* had she lived just to age 68(!) – yet we're in a very different era.

Not quite high finance, but also not just discreet off-screen “trade” like the Bingleys’.

Scrooge might almost be a purse-proud arriviste, except, where exactly has he arrived?

In a chilly, ill-lit office & a gloomy set of rooms, where one day his corpse will be stripped within minutes of his solitary death.

The dignitary slap

Scrooge truthers find the book's pity for its protagonist even more hurtful than its blaming him for poor people's hardships.

Yet it condemns neither business success nor capitalism.

One thing it *does* reject is viewing business success as *in itself* proof of either moral desert or true good fortune.

Rising to the top is great – but only if one honors connective obligations.

These might be derived from a patriarchal family model, &/or from an aristocratic one – but, if just the former, why does it feel so very English, & not at all American?

Crossing the Great Pond

Part 3 (America in the Gilded Age) uses Parts 1 & 2 as sources of contrast, to help focus on American exceptionalism.

Written after 11/8/16, it finds little cause there for either celebration or delight.

And this is even without race's being much on-stage!

Paradox of egalitarianism: since extreme inequality isn't self-evidently natural, it must be rationalized all the more harshly & vehemently.

The rich must deserve their success, and must owe the poor nothing. It isn't the great vs. the humble, but winners vs. losers – the worthy vs. the worthless who have only themselves to blame.

Early vs. late Gilded Age

In *The Gilded Age* (1873), society is still remarkably open & porous.

The quest for wealth may induce self-delusion & fraud, but (even from the bottom) achieving it isn't always wholly unrealistic.

By the era of *The House of Mirth* & *The Titan*, a myriad of great fortunes have been made, & the doors are slamming shut.

In some ways, the great rise poisons the well, both within the top and between it & the bottom.

For decades in the 20th Century, these late-Gilded Age works seemed quaintly dated.

Not any more.

Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

Gilded Age “Invaders” have conquered the previously exclusive NYC social heights with the eager compliance of the “Invaded” – yielding a toxically competitive war of all against all at the top.

Society “destroys” Lily Bart – i.e., she is induced to destroy herself, despite innumerable chances to succeed by its terms – because ... ??

The price of her deploying her one great asset – herself – would include sexual subordination & forfeiting all inner pride.

But the price of failure, in a society that so valorizes success, is fully unshackled self-hatred.

Dreiser's *The Financier* & *The Titan*

Tale of Frank Cowperwood, a ruthlessly immoral Gilded Age financier & builder, based closely on the actual Charles Yerkes.

“Ayn Rand novel written by a socialist” – w/ FC strutting through scenes that bring to mind Gandalf fighting the Balrog or Saruman (albeit, stripped of Gandalf’s moral valence).

“Dangerous Grandiosity”: his emotional needs and self-conception, no less than his material interests, make him a deadly foe of democracy.*

While FC ultimately loses, *The Titan* seems to leave us on the railroad tracks. But then came history’s next great turn.

*But, thank goodness, for *his* reasons, which are nothing like Trump’s.

Some takeaways we can discuss

--Why use literature, does it have to be “great” literature, might books’ flaws & missteps be as illuminating as their virtues?

--Aristocracy vs. meritocracy? Democracy & egalitarianism vs. meritocracy?

--Importance of race? Of gender?

--What does the First Gilded Age teach us about the second one?

--What did I learn from writing it? (Unexpectedly, a lot.)