

Reading Wodehouse Seriously (!?)

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Why would one do *that*? (i.e., read Wodehouse seriously)

Fair question; first some background.

High-end inequality raises distinctive issues, including qualitative, that literature can help to illuminate.

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

Its ground rules included (1) writing about own society (so not, e.g., *Downton Abbey*); (2) realism (or at least elements thereof); (3) great or very good quality (as judged by me).

“We were now striding out in new directions without a map.” (Paul McCartney

re. the Beatles’ White Album.)

Dangerous Grandiosity

Perspectives on the “feel” & social meaning of high-end inequality, from 3 periods, 3 works from each.

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 *The House of Mirth*; (3) Dreiser’s *The Financier & The Titan*.

On to Part 2?

Let's see what happens with Part 1 first!

And I seem to have issues with the obvious leadoff (*The Great Gatsby*).

Wodehouse – *Right Ho, Jeeves*, possibly with *The Code of the Woosters* – was going to be #2.

May still be that, or a freestanding article (to submit for publication where?), or nothing.

Initial thoughts on Wodehouse here

Decline of the rentier! Bertie Wooster is comfortable but not respected.

We see meritocracy (avant la lettre) moving in – respect for intellect, ability, work, judgment, etc.

Also moving in are American millionaires & other self-made business people.

Status inversion: Bertie can't even pick his own wardrobe when Jeeves dissents.

But what is the period?

Wodehouse's greatest works are from the 1930s. But he invented his main fictional worlds & characters before 1920.

There's definitely some 1920s on display – but no Great Depression, & indeed no World War I (which Wodehouse sat out in America).

Code of the Woosters does have Roderick Spode – an odious 1930s fascist based directly on Oswald Mosley.

Critics mainly view Wodehouse as Victorian / Edwardian (& note the modern-looking intra-elite issues in Forster's *Howards End*).

Or, Bertie just an English stage dude for the Americans? As “timeless as ... *A Midsummer Night's Dream* & *Alice in Wonderland*”?

Waugh on Wodehouse

(1) “Mr. Wodehouse’s idyllic world can never stale He has made a [fantasy] world for us to live in and delight in.”

Agree!

(2) A “world of pristine paradisal innocence ... [N]o Fall of Man.... His characters have never tasted the forbidden fruit. They are still in Eden.”

Disagree! (Although it’s true, no sex or sexual desire. Also, abhorrence of adulthood / seriousness; Peter Pannish aversion to growing up.)

(a) Pervasive selfishness, rivalry, exchanges of disdain.

(b) Their world is a delight for us – but not for them!

(Like watching vs. being high-strung little Sylvester here.)



Wodehouse vs. Bertie Wooster

Wodehouse: Dickensian setback, no university / bank clerk -> entrepreneurial self-creation through talent & hard work.

Bertie: went to university where he learned nothing & did nothing; luckily he needn't be able to do anything.

Complex relationship between author & character HAS to (& does) include a bit of (admittedly bemused) envy.

Right Ho, Jeeves is the supreme example of a book in which Bertie gets soundly punished (by Jeeves as Wodehouse's agent) for presumption.

Right Ho, Jeeves

Like all Wooster books, an anti-romance for Bertie (who aims NOT to get married), unless (with Brian Holcombe in Rea, ed., MIDDLEBROW WODEHOUSE) we see Bertie & Jeeves as the always-restored couple.

“Jeeves,” I said, “may I speak frankly ... “What I have to say may wound you.”

The episode of the mess jacket ... the Scripture knowledge prize ... “mentally negligible.”

Bertie overrules, rebukes & lectures Jeeves – pays humiliatingly in the end, & accepts it.

A “feudal” relationship? ... “Get uppish & treat the young master as a serf or peon”?

Attack on upper classes? No, but ...

Wodehouse is sometimes read by the non-English as ridiculing the rich & (in Blandings Castle novels) the aristocracy.

His work is far too affectionate for that, as well as reliant on non-radical classic comic conventions (from Plautus to Shakespeare to Cervantes to Oscar Wilde), yet –

Right Ho, Jeeves is rife with comedy built on anxiety about personal merit, performance, & the earning of respect.

Written by an author who had been plunged into tireless capitalist striving, while also noting (& resenting) the modernist path to literary prestige.

And the upshot is ...

Unfortunately, this is not (yet??) a paper with a thesis.

Your thoughts & feedback would be much appreciated!

Less contingent is my belief that literary works (whether “great” or not) can be sources of qualitative sociological insight – e.g., about class.

Come in, the water’s warm (if not swarming with publishers).