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ENGL 3310

11/20/2022

The Social Ladder

In *Evelina*, Frances Burney showcases a woman’s entrance into the public sphere, and Evelina is at the center of the plot. Evelina encounters many situations in which she is not always aware of the best action that could be taken, and more frequently than not she makes blunders. These blunders of Evelina matter because they allow the reader to see that her position in society is not reduced, but rather elevated as Evelina realizes ideas essential to her. So, it is through erring that Evelina gains a greater sense of the social ladder, and to whom she should be acquainted for her own benefit. Thus, Evelina’s successful navigation of the social hierarchy is predicated on the company she keeps.

When Evelina interacts with the middle-class Mirvan family, she speaks and behaves as a member of the middle class. A moment that demonstrates Evelina taking comfort with the Mirvans, in particular is when Evelina shares her close thoughts with Miss Mirvan. These thoughts, specifically, encapsulate her feelings towards the letter she supposedly received from Orville. As Evelina states to Miss Mirvan, “Every hour I regret the secrecy I have observed with my beloved Mr. Villars; I know not what bewitched me, but I felt, at first, a repugnance to publishing this affair that I could not surmount, - and now, I am ashamed of confessing that I have anything to confess!” (290). This quote directly implies that Evelina and Miss Mirvan share an intimate connection similar to sisters or best friends. Specifically, since Evelina uses words like secrecy, bewitched, confess – are all words indicative of the trust she has made with Miss Mirvan. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the Mirvan’s company is quite agreeable with Evelina – and Evelina is comfortable with the middle-class.

Evelina’s interactions with the Branghtons heightens her awareness of her own social class. This awareness comes about from an experience with the Branghtons out in society, where she happens to locate Lord Orville, or rather his coach. The Branghtons embarrass Evelina by insisting on using her name to utilize Lord Orville’s coach, and further embarrass her by crashing it. Young Branghton takes this as an opportunity to defame Evelina further by speaking to Lord Orville on Evelina’s behalf. Evelina states to young Branghton, “‘You’ll drive me wild’, I cried (starting from seat), ‘you have done an irreparable injury; - but I will hear no more!’” (277). Evelina uses the words, “irreparable injury”- this elicits the idea that Evelina’s mere association with the Branghtons is to her detriment, or rather their class distinction is. The liberty young Branghton took in speaking on Evelina’s behalf, with his conduct is the “irreparable injury” to her reputation. Evelina’s company is so important to her reputation, that she cannot afford to have any dents. This point is further expressed when she is forcibly obliged to go to a ball with Mr. Smith and Madam Duval. At this ball, Evelina remarks, “After this, I was addressed, much in the same manner, by several other young men of whom the appearance and language were equally inelegant and low-bred: so that I soon found my situation was both disagreeable and improper” (249). In this quote, Evelina mentions the exact reasons why the Branghtons social station is improper for her: their inelegance and low-breeding, which does not match the reputation she aspires to have for herself, therefore making the Branghtons and like company unsuitable to her.

Evelina’s opinions on and interactions with social class are guided by the instruction of Mr. Villars. Evelina takes the instruction of Mr. Villars with a serious heart and considers him not only as a father-figure, but also a best friend – as he is “the best of men”. Upon returning to Berry Hill, Evelina keeps the letter she supposedly received from Orville a secret from Mr. Villars. However, Mr. Villars is far too perceptive to Evelina’s emotions, and therefore requests as a parent would for disclosure. Mr. Villars states to Evelina, “perhaps you miss their society, and fear you may see them no more? – perhaps Lord Orville? --… I see but too plainly, that though Evelina is returned, - I have lost my child!’ (295). In this quote, Mr. Villars calls Evelina his “child”, which points out his paternal affections for Evelina. Thus, proving how Mr. Villars’ opinions are of great importance to Evelina. To this Evelina states, “‘No, Sir, no,’ cried I, inexpressibly shocked, ‘she is more yours than ever! Without you, the world would be a desart to her, and life a burthen; forgive her, then, and, - if you can – condescend to be, once more, the confidant of all her thoughts’” (295). Evelina uses the word ‘confidant’ in regards to her relationship with Mr. Villars, that expresses how close she is with Mr. Villars. This closeness in relationship is indicative of how Mr. Villars’ guidance is prized by Evelina, and how her perspective of her own worthiness of a higher class is realized.

Evelina’s interactions with Lord Orville reinforce her affinity for high society. Evelina is enthralled by Lord Orville, not simply due to his status, but more so because of his emotional and intellectual capacities in conversation. After receiving the supposed letter from Lord Orville, Evelina’s perception of him had been tainted. However, upon meeting again with Lord Orville in person, Evelina responded by stating to Mr. Villars, in her letters, “Oh Sir, Lord Orville is still himself! Still, what from the moment I beheld, I believed him to be – all that is aimable in man! And your happy Evelina, restored at once to spirits and tranquility, is no longer sunk in her own opinion, nor discontented with the world, - no longer dejected eyes…. with revived courage she now looks forward, and expects to meet with goodness, even among mankind…” (308-309). Lord Orville’s company does more than impact Evelina’s reputation; it impacts her heart. Evelina states that after meeting with Lord Orville, and seeing him to be the same gentleman he was and is, she is now revived and, “restored at once to spirits and tranquility”. Without Lord Orville’s congenial presence, Evelina was not in a happy state. Therefore, one may conclude that Lord Orville’s company to Evelina is necessary for her well-being. Understanding that Lord Orville’s company is that of high society, and Evelina is most conducive to being happy around him, it leads to Evelina being the happiest in high society.

Evelina allows Mrs. Selwyn to aid in her ascension up the social hierarchy. Mrs. Selwyn acknowledges and aids in Evelina marrying Lord Orville, but she also helps Evelina in reuniting with her father. The manner in which Mrs. Selwyn becomes thoroughly introduced to the idea of Evelina and Lord Orville is when she states, “But I find the only way to meet with you, - is to enquire for Lord Orville. However, don’t let me disturb your meditations; you are possibly planning some pastoral dialogue” (409). In this quote, the readers see Mrs. Selwyn showcasing motherly affections towards Evelina, by throwing out a sarcastic comment - indicative of how she is surprised at their unprecedented communion. Moreover, this is the moment in which Lord Orville, to save Evelina’s image and reputation, takes the chance to speak with Mrs. Selwyn regarding his real intentions to marry Evelina. In another instance, Mrs. Selwyn is seen to be speaking with Sir John Belmont, on Evelina’s behalf, as she states, “Had you a thousand children, Sir John,’ said Mrs. Selwyn warmly, ‘this only one, of which Lady Belmont was the mother , ought to be most distinguished; and far from avoiding her sight, you should thank your stars, in humble gratitude, that there yet remains in your power the smallest opportunity of doing the injured wife you have destroyed, the poor justice of acknowledging her child!” (412). In this quote, the readers see Mrs. Selwyn speaking with strong indignation, even though she is simply expressing her regard for Evelina. Nonetheless, it is this sort of response that demonstrates Mrs. Selwyn’s inexplicable regard for Evelina in a maternal fashion. Mrs. Selwyn’s maternal instincts and affections towards Evelina encourages Evelina’s ascension up the social hierarchy.

Mr. Villars acts as a fatherly figure for Evelina, constantly providing instruction and care for Evelina’s well-being in society. Mrs. Selwyn takes on a similar maternal role for Evelina, in terms of aiding her in her ascension up the social hierarchy. The Mirvans also enable Evelina to experience the public sphere. In that public sphere, Evelina encounters Lord Orville, who acts in a similar fashion to Mr. Villars by being a friend and a good guide. Lord Orville’s company confirms to Evelina how much she enjoys high society, through the many delightful conversations they share. In this light, we might understand *Evelina* as a conduct book for ladies in the 18th century who are to make their debut in the public sphere. It offers solid advice to 18th century readers on how a lady should act in public – with examples illuminating the pros and cons of each situation.

Works Cited:

Burney, Frances. *Evelina*. Edited by Margaret Anne Doody, Penguin Books, 1994.