Investigating Social Class Inequality in Malcolm Bradbury’s *Eating People Is Wrong*

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Abstract
Like race and gender, social class continues to engender controversy and to engage political and intellectual debate. As is the case with cultural, historical and socialist studies, fictional works tend to attend to the tensions and pretensions marking social class relations. A case in point is Malcolm Bradbury’s university novel *Eating People Is Wrong* (1952), which, homing in on the intricacies and intimacies of academic life, details the struggle of a working-class student called Louis Bates to gain tolerance and prominence in an inhospitable environment populated by pretentious and allegedly superior characters. While tackling these concerns, the present paper laments the prevalence of base and biased practices. These practices are all the more shameful as they are associated with academics and intellectuals, who should naturally join forces to help establish an inclusive environment which tolerates diversity, to poke away at the clogged channels of communication between people from all walks of life and to signpost the direction for the public. Coming out strongly against discrimination and calling for the advancement of universally welcome values like integrity and integration, the paper concludes that however hard it is for the members of disadvantaged social classes to overcome the shattering and fettering prejudice displayed by so-called arbiters of taste and style, universities can still help attain and maintain equality among their populations and among their respective societies thanks to the continual survival, if in residual form, of liberal humanistic ideas and ideals.

Keywords: affectation, class-consciousness, liberal, social class, working-class

Introduction

General background
The economic, cultural and social changes which came in the wake of World War Two made it possible for working-class people to climb the social ladder. Brooke (2001) contends that the working class enjoyed a higher standard of living in the 1950s thanks to full employment opportunities and “comprehensive welfare provision” (p. 773). This, somehow, led to the erosion of traditional class distinctions and to the appearance of a new sort of consciousness. The decline of gender inequality also brought about a corresponding decline in class-consciousness. As working wives helped improve the family income, working-class families enjoyed better lifestyles and “the working wife and mother became a cipher of the new working classes, a complex symbol tying together domesticity and affluence, worlds of work, home and leisure” (p. 781).

The improvement of educational opportunities was another determining factor in the decrease in class differences. This is particularly true for two major legislative measures. The 1944 Butler Education Act specified that children and young people should have access to free, compulsory and universal schooling between the ages of five and fifteen (Annetts, Law, McNeish & Mooney, 2009). Thanks to this Act, the university system grew by more than 400% between 1945 and 1970, and the number of university students had reached 216,000 by 1963 (Sant, 2006).

No less valuable in this respect was the Robbins Report. Disposed and proposed by the Committee on Higher Education chaired by Lord Robbins on 1 October 1963, it was published on 23 October of the same year after getting the Government’s approval (Howsan, 2011). The Report specified that everybody could have access to courses in higher education, that existing universities would be improved, that new ones would be created and that Colleges of Advanced Technology and some Teacher Training Colleges would be turned into universities. The Report also delineated the major goals to be attained and the major measures to be taken over the subsequent ten years. It was, for example, projected that by the mid-1970s, 22% of the British men and 12% of the women would successfully complete a course in higher education, as against the then existing figures of 13% of the men and six percent of the women. The Report’s architects hoped that the number of university students would rise from 150,000 in 1966-67 to 170,000 in 1967-68 despite the expected attendant rise of expenses on higher education. They also recommended that the university places occupied by overseas students should be maintained.

The changes taking place at that period of rising “liberalism, humanism and intellectual criticism” (Bradbury, 1990, p. 52) carried over into university novels, which “carried a spirit of social and intellectual dissent both from the older forms of scholarship and scholarly life and the spirit in arts and academe that was called Bloomsbury” (p. 51). A case in point is Kingsley Amis’s Lucky Jim (1954), whose leaning towards “the morality of the commonsense” (p. 51) stirred the ire of traditionalist scholars. Jumping onto the bandwagon of “provincialism and realism” (p. 52), Bradbury sets out to “capture the world I had entered, one that hardly shone with the glow of cosmopolitanism or aestheticism, but with critical puritanism” (p. 52). The overarching aim, in other words, is to break with the classical nostalgic view of the university “as an innocent pastoral space” (p. 53) and to look upon it instead as “a battleground of major ideas and ideologies” (p. 53) and as a place where people discuss the social, cultural and intellectual changes sweeping through society.
According to Savage (2016), class analysis in Britain straddles three different generations. The “golden age” (p. 58), or the “heroic age” (p. 60), spans the period between 1950 and the mid-1970s, when the working class was greeted “as a harbinger of progressive social change” (p. 58). As interest in social class bourgeoned, sociology became an established subject in “plateglass” (p. 59) universities like York, Warwick, Lancaster and Essex. The debate was animated by the publication of several books such as T. H. Marshall’s *Citizenship and Social Class* (1951), David Lockwood’s *The Black Coated Worker* (1958), John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood’s *The Affluent Worker* (1968/69) and John Goldthorpe’s *Class Structure and Social Mobility in Modern Britain* (1980).

Class analysis declined between 1975 and 2000, as more attention was allotted to the topics of gender and racial inequality (Savage, 2016). Another decisive factor was “the dramatic de-industrialisation of Britain from the 1970s alongside the deregulation of economic regulation and marketization of public services” (p. 63). Equally significant was the espousal of a purely scientific approach to social class and social relations. Thus, Goldthorpe, in what amounted to be an irreversible break with precedent, developed class schema with a view to providing precise measurement criteria. The approach was soon adopted in many countries, but social class itself lost its appeal because of the predominance of scientifically determined measurement tools and of the tendency to define class “as a discrete variable” (p. 65).

There was a resurge of interest in social class at the turn of the twenty-first century due to swelling social inequality in Britain and to subsequent public preoccupation with this subject (Savage, 2016). Additionally, sociologists and economists devised more efficient approaches to the study of social classes than Goldthorpe’s class schema. The influence exerted by Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological approach on the British social scene played a key role in this regard:

Indeed, his presumption was rather that the working classes were disorganised and isolated as a result of their lack of capitals, and his emphasis that popular culture was characterised by the “culture of necessity” insisted on the limited horizons of the worst off. By contrast, his focus was on how the dominant classes came to be dominant, unravelling the economic, social and cultural capital which permitted them to acquire, reproduce and convert their privileges. This approach was much more productive in shedding light on Britain in the early 21st century because it could be used to focus on the upper and middle classes who had been the beneficiaries of economic and social change. It transformed what David Lockwood identified as the “problematic of the proletariat” towards a perspective able to critically dissect the more privileged classes. (p. 66)

Canadienne (1997) spots out three main models of analysis with regard to the English social structure over the last three centuries. The first one is “the hierarchical view of society as a seamless web” (p. 100). Based on the medieval and Elizabethan idea of a “great chain of being” (p. 100) and surviving well into the 1950s, it stipulates that individuals had to observe the roles and places assigned to them “in the divinely pre-ordained order of things” (p. 100) and that they
had to obey and respect their seniors on this hierarchy. People are here ranked according to the criteria of status and prestige rather than those of occupation or income.

The second model of analysis observes a triadic version consisting of upper, middle and lower collective groups rather than “the medieval estates of warriors, priests, and workers” (Canadienne, 1997, p. 101). The collectivities constituting this category are defined “in terms of their relation to the means of production (sometimes following Adam Smith, or sometimes following Karl Marx)” (p. 104), with special attention to those in the middle.

The last model adopts an adversarial picture of society as being polarized between the “two large and antagonistic groups” of “us” and “them” (Canadienne, 1997, p. 100) or “haves” and “have-nots” (p. 104). Relationships here are based on social, economic, political and cultural criteria:

By the eighteenth century, it was commonplace to see society as divided between the great, the quality, the nobs, the gentry on the one side, and the poor, the rabble, the mob, the lower orders, or ‘the people’ on the other . . . and it was this same Manichean social vision which lay behind the agitation and the debates surrounding the Great Reform Bill and Chartism”. The struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, or capital and labour, which Marx and Engels mistakenly tried to universalize was but another version of the same dichotomous model, almost the most elaborate and influential. (p. 102)

Finally, Marxist philosophy conventionally analyses social class in relation to concepts like “the economic base” (Wright, 2005, p. 4) and “mode of production” (p. 4) as integral parts of a general theory of history known as “historical materialism” (p. 4). It also yokes the latter concept to the notion of “radical egalitarianism” (p. 6), which is premised on the egalitarian distribution of material resources within society and on the phenomenon of exploitation. While pressing for the political implementation of these principles, Marxists are aware that capitalism impedes the achievement of egalitarianism, hence the need for its destruction through revolution and for the achievement of “classlessness” or at least “less classlessness” (p. 7). The pervasiveness of exploitation in class and production relations is especially remarkable in the social systems of slavery, feudalism and capitalism. It is little wonder “[c]lass struggles are portrayed as battles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, between lords and serfs, between slave masters and slaves” (p. 12). Owning productive resources is the key to getting control over less privileged social classes, which explains why the capital/labour relation constitutes the most important class relation in Marxism.

_Literature Review_

It is not uncommon for academic novels to explore the theme of social class, if only cursorily, by pitting working-class characters against others from higher classes (Amis, 1976; Bradbury 1981; Lodge, 1992, etc.). By way of illustration, Bradbury (1981) raises serious concerns about the persisting phenomenon of class division in England. Watermouth, a city in the south, is said to host a divided society where the rich and the poor occupy extreme poles. While the rich live in the “unreal holiday town around the harbour and the Norman castle” (p. 14) and enjoy several prerogatives of “bourgeois indulgence” (p. 38) such as “luxury flats and expensive bars, gift shops
and pinkwashed Georgian homes” (p. 14), the poor “live in a real town of urban blight and renewal, social tensions, discrimination, landlord and tenant battles” (p. 14). After Howard Kirk and his wife move to Watermouth, they explore and deplore “the areas of deprivation” (p. 41) hidden behind the façade of luxury. Watermouth University’s students will later protest against the rise of the bourgeoisie and capitalism by adopting “full proletarian status” (p. 64) and wearing “work-clothes” (p. 64) to signal their irreversible break with the lifestyle of the elite.

The same applies to Leeds, a working-class city “built on work” (Bradbury, 1981, p. 38), dominated by “vestigial Christianity and inherited social deference” (p. 23) and populated by “a society of sharply striated class distinctions and of great class-consciousness” (p. 23). The Kirks grew there and had “respectable upper working-class cum lower middle-class backgrounds” (p. 18). They have, however, climbed the social ladder and become “new people” (p. 18) thanks to their hard work and to grammar-school and university education.

Redbrick university novels like Bradbury’s are not alone in addressing social concerns. In a chapter entitled “Barbarous Proletarians,” Carter (1990) homes in on the presentation of working-class students in Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge) campus novels by S. Raven, J. P. V. D. Balsdon, M. Innes, J. I. M. Stewart, R. Postgate, W. Sheed, S. Raven, A. Price and A. Fraser. These novelists lament the infiltration of aristocratic and gentlemanly culture by what Balsdon calls “the social rot” (as cited in Carter, 1990, p. 103) and the substitution of birth by meritocracy. The decay afflicting Oxford manifests itself in the fact that new entrance subjects like Chemistry, Chinese, basic Psychology and general Civics have taken the place of Latin and Greek, well-established emblems of “aristocratic virtue” (Carter, 1990, p. 105). The “less cultivated quarters” (p. 120) are also accused of instigating the “virus” (p. 120) of agitation in both Oxford and Cambridge in the 1960s and the 1970s and of subsequently destabilizing “established hierarchies between teachers and taught” (p. 123) as well as the hierarchy among British universities. As these two prestigious universities stand for England itself, they must be shielded from “proletarian and utilitarian attacks” (p. 124).

Oxford’s advocates take their cue from the nineteenth-century scholar Mathew Arnold, whose essays in Culture and Anarchy look upon culture as the only solution to the then swelling social difficulties and warn that it has to be defended against its enemies, namely Philistines (bourgeoisie), Barbarians (aristocracy) and Populace (proletariat) (Carter, 1990). According to Carter (1990), Stewart sets out to defend culture in two ways, the first of which being apartheid. Here aristocratic circles can keep their distance from other classes and preserve their own values through “endogamy” and the “exclusion” of “proletarians and middling folk” (p. 110) from Oxbridge. The other solution “is to induct a narrow stream of proletarian and middle-class barbarians into culture’s citadel” (p. 111), where they “are to be transformed into a higher class of alien” (p. 111).

the British class-ridden society recurs throughout his [Hines’s] works and structures his acceptance of the concept of class-consciousness” (p. 2). By so doing, Hines parts company with the prevailing assumption that the traditional working class has declined thanks to the numerous changes that have taken place. His preoccupation with and sympathy for the cause of the oppressed is traceable to his own working-class background. Unsurprisingly, he lays stress on the characters’ helplessness and vulnerability in the face of changing economic and historical actors and factors.

Analysis

Social Class in Bradbury’s Eating People Is Wrong

It may be legitimate to propose that the relationships among Bradbury’s characters are affected by class considerations and that social status is one of the chief concerns in the novel. There is enough evidence to corroborate this claim. A novelist called Walter Oliver, for instance, intends to start:

> a correspondence course for people who are socially mobile. It’s called Room-At-The-Top, Limited. It’s to enable people to fit easily in any socket in the social scale—what shoes to wear, what books to read, whether to be sado-masochistic or analerotic, whether to know what words like that mean. Things to say for all occasions at different class levels. How to have opinions if you’re a Man in the Street in a television interview—this sort of thing. (Bradbury, 2005, p. 155)

Attending a party given by a teacher named Mirabelle, three German students ask a teacher called Stuart Treece if it is a typical English party and which social class it represents. He replies, “Bottles are great class indicators. If more whisky has gone than gin, I should say upper middle” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 153). So are other things like TV sets and umbrellas. Indeed, Jenkins, a sociologist from Middle Europe, prides himself on being the only one at the University who has a TV set. Equally eloquent class indicators, Jenkins suggests, are clothes, appearance and certain practices like tattooing. Finally, visiting Treece in a working-class hospital, Viola Masefield, an Elizabethan drama teacher, tells a colleague named Ian Merrick, “You come in here with that umbrella as if this were the London Clinic or something” (p. 277).

Merrick, “a public school and Cambridge Adonis” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 59), is presented as a typical representative of the Edwardian period, of “the classical way of life” (p. 59), of “the Old Boy system” (p. 177) and of “the self-engrossed middle classes (the other side of the coin from the civilised liberal middle class that Treece saw as the salt of the earth)” (p. 246). Thus, he has a little red sports car, a life jacket and a dinghy, and he tends to go sailing at the weekend. His obsession with fashion is such that he makes a point of purchasing his clothes, including “his socks and pants” (p. 176), from Cambridge or London so much so he “always looked as though he had just that moment dismounted from a horse; his clothes were always cavalry-twill-y” (p. 176).

The narrator launches into further exploration of the theme of social class by following Treece and Jenkins as they explore a few places associated with discontent such as the Palais, a building that frequently hosts rock-and-roll sessions and that attests to the prevalence of misery among the unprivileged classes (Bradbury, 2005). “The people all seemed misshapen and ugly,” the narrator reports, “sad victims of the impact of the Industrial Revolution” (p. 205). Treece and Jenkins find Oliver in the bar with a number of bohemians, including pseudo-philosophers,
pseudo-writers and pseudo-painters. Observing this scene, Treece realizes that, contrary to his assumption, the English class system has not been eroded by the post-war rewards.

The problem is that the disappearance of class divisions is not universally welcome. Addressing Treece and Jenkins, a cellist insists that tramps and venues of escape are necessary and that the Welfare State should pay tramps instead of finding jobs for them (Bradbury, 2005). Tramps, according to him, “challenge the assumption that you’ve got to be housed and propertied and well-dressed to live in the modern world” (p. 216). He also confides that he used to work as a butcher and that, after reading Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, he “saw the light” (p. 216), gave up his job and chose “the hard way” (p. 216). An unimpressed Oliver objects that working-class intellectuals, in general, being influenced by Nietzsche, tend to develop a power complex, to purport to be supermen and to identify with Jesus Christ.

**Louis Bates’s Humble Origins**
From the very outset, the student Louis Bates is introduced as a typical representative of working-class people. Indeed, he has holes in his pullover, and as he leaves the classroom after the end of first the tutorial in the academic year, he bows his head under the doorway, offering “a last glimpse of trousers frayed at the bottom and of worn heels” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 22). Due to lack of means, he later wears a “shabby suit” (p. 76) to a tea-party given by Treece. Interestingly, he displays an acute awareness of his situation. “I don’t exactly fit in here,” he tells Treece, because “I’m a lot older than the other students, and I come from a different social class, perhaps” (p. 20). He confides to the same character that his father was a railway-man “in the days when the railways were a form of Puritanism, hard work, honesty, thrift, clean living, self-restraint” (p. 20). In one of his letters to a graduate student called Emma Fielding, he concedes that “with class you need a lot of goodwill” (p. 94). Trying to worm himself into Emma’s favour, he complains that it is difficult for him to get married at his age because he is “working class” (p. 129) and he “needs to be understood” (p. 129). When she refuses to join him in her bedroom, he protests, “What’s wrong with me? . . . Don’t you like my face? Or is it my class?” (p. 133).

Bates complains about his poverty every so often not only to pre-empt potential contemptuous comments but also to win sympathy (Bradbury, 2005). Attending Treece’s tea-party, he wonders whether it is cheaper for him to travel by bus or to walk and get his shoes repaired. He then reveals that he has failed to buy new pyjamas for lack of means. In a letter he sends to Emma, he invites her to cinema or to his room and promises to entertain her but regrets that he does not have enough cakes and cocoa. Again, when he invites her to tea towards the end of the novel, he empties his pockets out to check if he has enough money. His understanding companion, however, spares his blushes by offering to pay for herself. Additionally, having taken a taxi to the train station to meet a poet called Carey Willoughby, he laments that he has only eight pence left. Willoughby expresses his sympathy and assures him that he does not have to give him the train fare as he came on a platform ticket.

**Social Prejudice**
However hard he tries to circumvent people’s scorn for him on class grounds, Bates is fit meat for prejudice. There are several reasons why his appearance comes as “a light shock of surprise” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 15) early in the novel while attending Treece’s tutorial. Observing his student,
Treece notices that he “was seedy, frowsy; he wore ugly and ungainly clothes; he spoke with long sheep-like North-Country a’s (and had, thought Treece, who loved this sort of joke, a long, sheep-like North-Country arse); he did, to some extent, smell” (p. 164).

Predictably, Bates’s allegedly eccentric behaviour seems to be ascribed to his social background. His eccentricity comes into sharp focus on the occasion of the small tea-party given by Treece (Bradbury, 2005). His arrival an hour earlier than the allotted time is referred to as “a major social quandary” (p. 71). Treece, “[a] man who had a fondness for human manners, the local manners of circles and groups that are formed by a traditional accretion of associations” (p. 53), is very annoyed, hence the lukewarm reception he gives his guest as well as his objection that none of the other guests has arrived (p. 71). Bates, however, does not take the hint, throwing Treece into confusion. “It was really the first time he had been confronted by Louis Bates,” the narrator reports, “and confrontation was exactly what it was” (p. 72) because Treece has not expected his guest “to take eccentricity to the point of downright inconvenience” (p. 72). To salvage the situation, he excuses himself on the pretext that he has to prepare the fire, the food and the speech he intends to deliver at the party. Left alone, Bates fears that he will be “nibbled by misfortune” (p. 76) in that he may pull over a bookcase while fishing out a book or be accused of burglary by the housekeeper. Meanwhile, Treece wonders what his guest is doing in the drawing-room, and the narrator supplies the answer:

In fact, Louis passed through all the stages of privation in a strange house—he examined the ornaments on the mantel, looked at the pictures on the walls, noticed the books in the bookcase and read the spicier pages of the medical directory, peered at his teeth in the mirror, made sure his fly buttons were fastened . . . . (p. 77)

Coming back, Treece finds his guest cutting his hair at one side with a pair of scissors he has found in a drawer (Bradbury, 2005). The weird young man also decides to ask the female guests if they are virgins. Even the male guests are alarmed by his conduct throughout the party. Unsurprisingly, Treece warns Emma that there is a “very difficult” (p. 79) man called Bates at the party and that he is terrifying everybody. On the other hand, the narrator describes him as “a tall, ghoulish man, who could be seen bobbing up and down, smiling a great wet smile, interrupting people’s conversation and repeatedly proffering his chair to people who would not have dared to take it from him” (p. 80).

Paying a visit to Emma, Bates pushes the door and steps inside as soon as Mrs Bishop, Emma’s landlady, opens the door a crack (Bradbury, 2005). He also dries his clothes in Emma’s room while waiting for her lest his pneumonia should get worse. When she rushes to the room to rebuke him for having come uninvited and for having annoyed Mrs Bishop, the latter warns her that he may be naked. However, an infuriated Emma bursts into the room and shouts, “Coming storming into the house like that, and waiting in my room when I’m not here. You simply don’t do things like that” (p. 129). In the same vein, fearing that Bates will overstep the boundaries of good taste at Mirabelle’s upcoming party, Emma warns him, “I should never forgive myself if I allowed people to come in and break up a tea-party in this way. We’re civilised people, aren’t we? At least I know I am” (p. 147). Soon later, reflecting on his rudeness to some of Mirabelle’s guests, she decides that he will never “behave like a civilised person” (p. 157).
Bates knows full well that marrying on his level is bound to tie him down. Accordingly, he hopes that marrying an “intelligent and sophisticated” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 170) woman like Emma will help him “flourish as an individual” (p. 130), climb the social ladder, mix with “finer society” (p. 170) and acquire refined manners pertinent to daily life such as what food to eat and what clothes to wear. He does not, however, live up to Emma’s romantic expectations because of the unbridgeable social gap between them:

She was of another status and another class. She would want to eat in expensive places and he wouldn’t. She would want their children to go to public school and he would not. . . . How could he say they were alike? They were at opposite poles of the world. As she watched his lips moving, close to her, there seemed an immensity of distance between them, as though he stood at the far end of some long but distorted perspective. (p. 131)

Priding herself on being “upstart middle class” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 125), Emma resents Bates’s “lack of normality” (p. 134); “the prospect of darning his seedy socks, washing his great socks, ministering to his weak chest, producing his snotty brats” (p. 134); and being involved in other day-to-day banalities. Although she initially thinks better of telling him he has offended her lest he should “take it as a slight to his face, to his class, to his lack of normality” (p. 134), she finally dismisses him. A complicit narrator, trying to absolve her and to relieve her of the obligation to take care of Bates, sees and says why the latter cannot be loved:

But Louis was hardly normal, hardly real. With his great, balding head and cadaverous body, his shabby, shapeless clothes and that immensely long, unbelted raincoat that hung down close to his feet, those large, knuckled simian arms that dangled from sleeves always too short, he looked an absurdity; in him there was something of the butt. How could one offer him anything but pity? (p. 134)

Emma later warns her unyielding suitor that she has her limitations, just like other women, and that she is not ready to “live in some mean little house” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 159) for the rest of her life. “If you marry me,” she goes on, “you do it to make me happy, to take me away from the things that depress me, not to make life harder to bear” (p. 159). She sends him a letter before long, apologizing for having treated him cruelly but reminds him that “we’re completely unsuited to each other, and that to take things any further would be a mistake” (p. 166).

In view of the social difference between them and of her indifference to him, what pity she sometimes shows for him seems to border on mockery. For instance, when they drink tea together towards the end of the novel, she hands him some money to pay the bill (Bradbury, 2005). Soon later, she offers him twenty pounds so that he can buy a new suit. “I said it was the least the world could do for him,” she reports to Treece, “at least if the world made its artists suffer there ought to be a levy. At least the whipping-boy got paid, and fed, and clothed” (p. 289). By so doing, she trivializes his love for her, implying that all a working-class individual can aspire to is financial assistance.
Like the other characters, Viola shows contempt for Bates’s conduct and social background (Bradbury, 2005). She is annoyed by the fact that he keeps calling her and calling on her on the pretext of needing her help. She also asks him if he does embroidery, wonders if she has confused him with Ivy Compton-Burnett and makes derisive comments about his clothes and his previous job. Taking offence, he retorts that he does not have enough money to buy new clothes and that Lawrence, the famous writer, made a living by working in a factory. Unstirred and undeterred, Viola orders him to fetch a taxi for her and the other guests and gives him some money because she knows he is always broke. Soon later, deducing that Emma has a relationship with him, she warns her that he has no charm and urges her to break with him:

You have this saint complex. You always want to help lame dogs over stiles. You should keep away from people like that. They drag you down. You have to stay away from people who can’t give you anything, or otherwise you destroy your own potential. . . . Life is catalysed by knowing interesting people. That’s where the vivid moments come from. And there just isn’t time for bores and fools. (p. 193)

What is more, Viola considers Bates a “sexually unpleasant” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 116) person and “a walking phallic symbol” (p. 116). Alluding to Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper,” perhaps, she refers to him as “The Solitary Raper” (p. 116). By so doing, she may be said to contrast her feelings of disgust with those felt by Wordsworth’s entranced speaker. She winds up by attacking Treece for pleading with her to give Bates another chance and for accusing women of being cruel: “You know nothing about it. They [women]’re pursued with offers . . . It’s the hardest thing in life for a woman to face, but she has to do it; she has to hurt, hurt, hurt people all the time. She can’t afford to feel sorry for them” (p. 117).

Mrs Bishop, who takes pride in being “top people” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 142) and in being “upper middle class and civilised” (p. 189), joins the chorus of protest against Bates’s manners. An organization, we are told, has been formed by people to protest against the demolition of the Bishops’ house, a “Georgian, civilised, spacious and dense” “collectors’ piece” (p. 121) and “a citadel of the old guard—frondy, ornate, bubbling with flowers” (p. 124). Chief among the signs of historical glamour marking the Bishops’ home and lifestyle are stairs with “faded tiles” (p. 124) and a collection of “Edwardian hats, with great brims, and ostrich plumes” (p. 124). As representatives of the old world, namely the Edwardian period, the Bishops believe in “Keeping Yourself to Yourself, having Nice Things, Getting On in the World, Keeping Decent, Settling Down, Having a Bit of Property Behind You” (p. 125). Predictably, they are supporters of the Conservative Party, which, they hope, “would have Britain back on the Gold Standard by 1960” (p. 126).

Given her lifestyle and attitudes, Mrs Bishop makes it clear to Emma that she detests “vulgarity” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 124) and that she will not tolerate it in her house. When Bates comes to her house on a rainy day to visit Emma, she is thrown into “a state of considerable upset” (p. 126) as she is obliged to deal with him until Emma’s arrival. She, therefore, tries to throw him off by vainly shouting, “Fire!” (p. 127). She also refers to him as “a nasty man” (p. 126) and as being “frightening and very ugly” (p. 127) because he is, among other things, wearing “a foreign
black beret” (p. 127) and a coat with a turned-up collar. It is little wonder that she does not believe him when he introduces himself as a friend of Emma’s.

When Treece visits Emma to make her present of a dress, having spilled tea on hers earlier while sitting in a café, no one answers the door for him, given the loud sound of piano inside (Bradbury, 2005). Finding it unlocked, however, he walks in. A scared Mrs Bishop, mistaking him for Bates, cries, “He’s back, he’s back” (p. 141) and threatens to hit him with a small statue. No sooner does she learn that her guest is Emma’s professor than she is “all smiles” (p. 141) because she and her husband are “very deferential to education” (p. 141). She also asks him what social class he belongs to and boasts, “I’m always interested in people. Most of my friends seem to prefer animals, but I stick to people” (p. 141). The plausible implication here is that she considers Treece a person and Bates an animal. Let us not forget that before initially allowing Emma to lodge with them, the Bishops warned her against bringing children and animals in. Not unexpectedly, Mrs Bishop thinks that there is “so clearly nothing vulgar” (p. 189) about the relationship between Emma and Treece, given their good social status.

Discussion

There are two grounds on which the characters can be criticized for their contempt for Bates, namely affectation and shaky liberalism. To start with, Emma’s rejection of allegedly unsuitable suitors like Bates confirms her faithfulness to a deep-rooted “tradition of snobbery” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 126), her “personal detestation” (p. 160) of “awful” (p. 160) people and her inability, or rather unwillingness, to get “rid of that murderous, inhibiting, civilized pause that always came before the act of action” (p. 188).

As for Treece, although he looks down on working-class individuals like Bates, he himself is not a member of a prestigious class as he purports to be but rather has a working-class background (Bradbury, 2005). People mistakenly believe that he went to Oxford or Cambridge and that his family “would be a sound one, his father an artist, or a bibliophile, his mother at home on a horse” (p. 55) when he actually studied at the University of London and his father owned a wallpaper shop. Treece, we are informed, was not ashamed of his background “but he was surprised by it; it was not what he would, if he had met himself as a stranger, have expected” (p. 55). When he was a research student “with holes in his underpants and not a change of socks to call his own” (p. 55), he lived with his girlfriend, Fay. Being unable to support himself, he was obliged to return to her soon after leaving her in the wake of a quarrel.

Given his inability to adapt middle-class manners thoroughly, Treece can only resort to affectation, hence Willoughby’s objection, “How modern can you get?” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 244). The rebellious poet, having refused to have lunch with Treece in a restaurant and insisted that they cook something in the latter’s house, wonders why his host cannot cook for himself and likens him to “some old spinster” (p. 244). “All that front,” he exclaims, “and then at home you don’t eat anything. You’re what I call flabby genteel” (p. 245). He also considers him a typical representative of “protocol boys” (p. 245), who observe several “bastions of tired morality” (p. 245) and keep reading books on Housman. “Some day,” he warns, “the big bang’s going to come, and you’ll all wonder what hit you. But you’ll just look at one another and say nothing, because it sounds rather like the toilet flushing and no one mentions that” (p. 245).
The same applies to Viola, whose attention to detail, is detailed in the following description of her flat, which:

was not a place where you simply lived; you proved something. It was a showpiece of the unendurably modern—when you saw the modern like that, it looked so dated that you couldn’t believe it. When you went there, you always discussed things as they discuss things in *Vogue*: What does one do with dustbins to make them look interesting? What goes with *shishkebab*? How often do you water succulents? How high up do you put your bosom this month? What is the best make of motor-scooter? What do you do with a mobile when it isn’t? What is the best way of renovating old skis? . . . Viola felt at home in the world. She seemed to have boyfriends because they could make bookcases, or transplant cacti, or cook *wiener schnitzel* . . . and they really were boyfriends, like the ones in the women’s magazines. (Bradbury, 2005, p. 99)

Merrick, among others, is not unaware of Viola’s obsession with fashion. He once tells her that “the last cry in *Vogue* is to have the hair done *en bouffon*” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 175), but she replies that this style does not suit her because she has a round face. No matter how hard she tries to impress people, however, she only excites their derision. Treece, for example, finds her appearance “affected and annoying” (p. 173).

As far as Mrs Bishop is concerned, when Bates, speaking to her on the phone, insists that she put him through to Emma and asks if the latter is in the bathroom, she answers, “Certainly not . . . as if nothing like that ever happened in her house” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 139). It is worth adding that while her name is suggestive of piety, Mrs Bishop is depicted as a hypocrite. Indeed, being “a true provincial Nonconformist” (p. 123) and a member of “one of those small vestigial Christian sects that meet in rooms over teashops” (p. 123), she is not concerned about sin itself but about subsequent confession and repentance. Naturally, she does not agree with Emma’s view that it is more Christian to avoid committing sin in the first place than to commit it and repent later.

The second ground on which the characters, especially Treece and Emma, can be criticized is their failure to abide by their professed liberal principles and to behave as educated and dedicated people who are expected to side with the oppressed, not to let the side down. As Wilson (1990) claims, “Of all the British writers of academic novels, Bradbury is the one who has most consistently engaged with the anomalies of the liberal humanist position and of those university disciplines traditionally protective of it” (p. 59). Treece is convinced that one of “the depressing things” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 20) about Bates “was a kind of hideous juxtaposition of taste and vulgarity, a native product for the self-made man” (p. 20). When this student arrives in his home much earlier than the appointed time on the occasion of the tea-party he is throwing, Treece “realised with shame just how hard he had been on Viola’s viewpoint up until now, when he was actually sharing the experiences that formed it” (p. 75) and concedes that “I can be liberal spirited about the whole thing; but it doesn’t make me like it” (p. 76).

In a similar vein, Emma’s cruelty to Bates clashes with her “good nature” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 35, p 65) and with her being “a sensitive and mature woman, careful of the feelings of others” (p. 67) and a “scrupulous, liberal-minded” (p. 67) person who “placed the highest regard on
personal relationships . . . .” (p. 134) and who is expected to “shepherd Louis, and control his extravagances” (p. 87) rather than being “a hard person” (p. 134) who makes “quick dismissals of unwanted people” (p. 134). It is shameful on her part, one would suggest, to console herself with the thought that as Bates is a “whipping-boy” (p. 289) and a “scapegoat” (p. 289), there is no harm in mistreating him. She confides to Treece:

The trouble is that he is the sort of person, too, that you do play off. I’ve done it, without wanting to. Someone once said about him to me, ‘That young man is the sort of person everyone wants to use.’ There are people like that, that you use but don’t want. (p. 185)

Treece is not unaware of the demise of the doctrine of liberalism as a whole. Casting a retrospective look at the 1930s, an era when one “had a kind of Rousseau-esque belief in the perfectibility of man” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 144) and in the possibility of improving “the social order” (p. 144) and mending “the human condition” (p. 144), he concedes that one no longer has hope of achieving these goals (p. 144).

This accounts for the sense of guilt which haunts both Emma and him subsequent to their cruel treatment of Bates: “On him their guilt focussed, and with him their civilised pretensions—one hoped that it was not true, one feared that it was—fell down” (Bradbury, 2005, p. 197). Emma’s guilty feeling is fanned by a song called “Eating People Is Wrong” (p. 121), and it reaches its peak towards the end of the novel. The money she gives Bates, one may surmise, is only meant to expunge the guilt gnawing at her soul. While Emma, in a last-ditch effort to salvage her liberal leftover, has tried to make up to her suitor for the suffering she has caused to him, Treece seems to be irretrievably trapped in his guilt and to have slid into a slough of misery. Indeed, as Emma prepares to leave after visiting him in hospital and tells him, through her tears, “It’s like Hayden’s ‘Farewell’ Symphony in reverse,” he answers, “I feel guilty about him too. Guilty’s all you can feel. I suppose all you can say for us is, at least we can feel guilty” (p. 290).

The narrator, on the other hand, seems to suggest that Treece’s and Emma’s treatment of Bates falls within the framework of a universal practice that tolerates and accelerates the victimization of marginal groups and perpetuates class divisions. On the occasion of the annual Departmental Trip to the Stratford Memorial Theatre at Stratford-on-Avon, he comments on the landscape in the following terms:

The parkland and the grazing cattle were a fundamental part of one’s Englishness. It was the high civilisation of a liberal and refined race that was commemorated in this parkland and this house and this tamed country. There were two ways of being civilised; that way, which the world no longer permitted, and the way that one hoped would emerge when a whole race shared the benefits that once went only to a special few. For this way, someone had to suffer; a whipping boy had to be found. Humanity is hung around everyone’s neck, but we seek ourselves to live in a kind of moral and human suspension; we appoint other people to be victims. One never quite comes to care entirely for others, for they haven’t you inside them, and you are a special case. (Bradbury, 2005, p. 264)

Conclusion
In the light of the above, it seems that the theme of class holds centre stage in Bradbury’s *Eating People Is Wrong* and that the representatives of disadvantaged social groups are not granted due care and respect. Bates’s humiliating expulsion from the narrow academic circle of his university, one may conjecture, is a punishment for his attempt to mix with his social superiors and to climb the social ladder. This underscores the impossibility of bridging the gap between the haves and the have-nots. It also articulates society’s disinclination to treat these victims on the same footing as its other members. The result is that each group continues to revolve in a different orbit and that mutual distrust and antipathy keep hovering beneath the threshold of any potential contact or contract between them. Biased attitudes of this kind are likely not only to hamper the mental and moral growth of the concerned victims but also to generate animosities between members of different social classes to the detriment of society’s unity and welfare and of inalienable universal human rights. Be this as it may, it is still hoped that some academics’ faith in liberal humanist values at universities, faltering as it may seem, may still help set the stage for the victory over victimization and social discrimination. Doubtless, the sense of guilt haunting both Treece and Emma is redolent of the possibility of rescuing certain priceless principles from the wreckage of liberal humanism.

Endnotes
1 Casting a nostalgic backward look at the time when he went to University College, Leicester, in the early 1950s, Bradbury (1990) boasts, “I was the first of my family to aspire to such educational heights” (p. 49). He also admits that it was a “strange world” (p. 49) to him and that he had “little confidence in my right to be there” (p. 49). Similarly, this piece of legislation is credited with helping Lodge (1985) climb the social ladder: “I was a classic product of the 1944 Education Act, the first generation who got free secondary schooling. A state-aided Catholic grammar school propelled me out of my class into the professional middle classes, and I went to read English at University College London.” (p. 148)
2 For an informative elucidation of Bourdieu’s approach to social class, see Weininger (2005).
3 The term *redbrick* was coined by Edgar Allison Peers, a professor of Spanish at the University of Liverpool, who wrote a book entitled *Redbrick University* in 1943 under the pseudonym ‘Bruce Truscott’ (Silver, 2004). Here he delineates a few features typical to institutions of this kind. First, they are not taken seriously by the public. Second, as they are poorly funded, they suffer from drab conditions and lack residential facilities. Finally, there are weaknesses regarding both organization and the conduct of the academic staff.
4 Bates’s state of poverty applies to a number of other academics in Bradbury’s fiction. James Walker, for example, can barely scratch a living (Bradbury, 1966). In effect, he uses what money he earns to buy papers to write on and cigarettes. It is little wonder his novels’ heroes are “sensitive provincial types to whom fate dealt a cruel blow, for whom life was too plain and ordinary to be worth much at all. In the last pages, the heroes, trapped by their remoteness from history, died or made loud perorations about social corruption” (pp. 24-25).
5 We are here reminded of the social distance between Charles Dickens’s memorable characters Pip and Estella. The former reveals that: “The lady whom I had never seen before, lifted up her eyes and looked archly at me, and then I saw that the eyes were Estella’s eyes. But she was so much changed, was so much more beautiful, so much more womanly, in all things winning admiration, had made such wonderful advance, that I seemed to have made none. I fancied, as I looked at her, that I slipped hopelessly back into the coarse and common boy again. O the sense of distance and disparity that came upon me, and the inaccessibility that came about her!” (Dickens, 1998, p. 232)
6 By not marrying Emma, Bates may be said to have avoided suffering the same fate as Henry Beamish, one of the chief characters in another novel by Bradbury (1981). As Howard Kirk tells Flora Beniform, Henry, whose father was a railway clerk, made a blunder by marrying his social superior, Myra, who was aspiring to join bourgeois circles in the fifties: “Before he knew where he was he was into goods and chattels. He stopped thinking, he was caught up in this fancy, pseudo-bourgeois rural life-style, he lost his social conscience. He became repressed and a repressor. As Marx says, the more you have, the less you are. Henry’s got and he isn’t. And since he’s a serious person, he feels guilty. He knows he’s in a context of no value, but he just can’t break out.” (119)
In this poem, the speaker is mesmerized by the song of a maiden who is busy cutting and binding grain (Wordsworth, 1958). Neither the nightingale nor the cuckoo-bird, the speaker admits, can sing such “welcome notes” (p. 95). Although he fails to grasp the theme of the song, he “listened, motionless and still” (p. 95) and is pleased to bear the music in his heart as he departs.

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