

Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

Volume 5
Number 1 *Spring 2005*

Article 2

Spring 2005

Review of Amy Schrager Lang, *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America.*

Martha L. Sledge
Marymount Manhattan College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl>

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Sledge, Martha L. (2005). Review of "Review of Amy Schrager Lang, *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America.*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 5 : No. 1
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss1/2>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
<https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss1/2>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Amy Schrager Lang, The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 152 pp. ISBN 0691113890 (paper).

**Reviewed by Martha L. Sledge
Marymount Manhattan College**

Class relationships have received scant attention in the criticism of nineteenth-century American literature. Literary studies have generally focused on race or gender as a primary rubric for understanding the mid-nineteenth-century culture of the United States. In *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America*, Amy Lang turns the critical lens fully on class issues, engaging works that have become canonical as well as works that are as yet less well known. In doing so, she writes a fascinating and convincing narrative about the complex relationship between the novel and the middle class, a relationship in which the novels "not only shape and are shaped by the experience of class but actively participate in the process of articulating, mediating, and displacing class difference and managing class conflict" (6).

In her introduction, Lang defines her terms and the limitations of her study, including the time period and the dominant terms in her title: "class" and "syntax." Lang does not define the time frame by particular years (though one can extrapolate that the publication dates of the novels range from 1851 to 1873), nor does she explicitly define it in relationship to the Civil War. Rather, Lang describes the mid-nineteenth-century time frame of her study internally to her class concerns, as "a period in which the adequacy of social taxonomies and the implications of new class formations were sharply at issue" (5). This is not to say that the middle class is easily defined, and it is on this careful definition that her argument rests. Is class, and in particular the middle class, an economic category? Is it a particular set of values?

In answering these questions, Lang asserts that "the relationship between the novel and the middle class in American literary scholarship has, for the most part, arisen independent of and without reference to the ongoing historiographic debate over the existence of the middle class in the United States as a distinct social formation" (9). She then sets out to correct this gap in literary history and lack in methodology. She outlines the dominant historiographic understandings of the middle class: the "consensus school" which defines the "triumphant" middle class by "a possessive individualism so widely embraced as to be the common property of Americans regardless of their place in the scheme of production or, indeed, of consumption" (9); the "classical Marxist" which articulates a class system more closely aligned

to the "means of production" (9); and finally, the most recent scholarship which identifies a middle class that does not function as a political group and yet is both "aware of itself as distinct from both the rich and the poor in its interests, its values, and its styles of life" (10) and paradoxically (and most importantly) unwilling to acknowledge the significance of class. Lang argues that this scholarship, exemplified by Burton J. Bledstein, Mary P. Ryan, and Stuart M. Blumin, is problematic, for it elides the dual role of women and whiteness in creating class. And here Lang's argument really begins: she articulates a new narrative, weaving together the "current narrative of American literary history," which has "carefully charted" gender and race issues, and the current "historical account of the rise of the middle class" (11), which has "skew[ed] . . . the historical account of the rise of the middle class toward a [white] masculine public sphere" (11). She does so through showing how the "characteristic denial of the saliency of class is tightly bound to . . . the rendering of class distinctions through the cultural vocabulary of gender difference" (11). Class, in other words, "collapses into [the language of] gender and race" (12). This "sleight of hand," as Lang calls it, dominated the novels of the mid-nineteenth century, and literary scholarship has until now only reproduced the same trick. While Lang is explicit in the introduction about the "cultural vocabulary of gender" that hides issues of class, she is less explicit in these opening pages about the "cultural vocabulary" of whiteness that equally hides issues of class. Initially, it seems that she engages in her own "sleight of hand" by eliding gender and race in her discussion of the place of "female authors, readers, narrators, and characters" (11), but then as she moves to the trope that will frame her discussion of class -- the home -- she begins to be more explicit about how race works to "extend, reframe, literalize, metaphorize, and challenge" (12) the sense of home at work in the fiction.

If "class" is a difficult term to define, "syntax" initially seems less so. As a grammatical term, "syntax" is not unfamiliar to literary scholars, and Lang offers this brief definition: "An orderly arrangement of terms indicating mutual relationship, syntax is, on the one hand, contentless, and on the other, essential to the making of meaning" (5). Syntax (in its more inclusive sense), she suggests, has a more complex definition, creating what it proposes merely to articulate, and Lang sees herself as a type of grammarian, "parsing" "in close detail" the relationship between the content and the syntax of class (5). Lang acknowledges that she takes the term "syntax" from the end of *The Silent Partner*, one of the novels she analyzes in her study, and quotes the "middle-class narrator" who "observes a 'syntax' in the 'brown face and bent hands and poor dress and awkward motions' of Sip, the mill girl" (5). Although Lang does not here diagram the "syntax" of this very telling sentence, the reader will note even in this sentence the elision of the vocabulary of race, femininity, and class.

If the goal of diagramming sentences is to clarify the relationship among the parts of the sentences so that students can then use language more effectively, for Lang the goal is the opposite. Lang wants to lay bare the structure of the language of class in the novels in order to expose the active role of novels in managing class conflict and thereby subvert their power to continue to do so, a project that takes Lang's scholarship out of the ivory tower of literary criticism. The same "displacement and deferral" that elides class with gender and race in the mid-nineteenth-century novel, Lang claims, "supports an ongoing political culture in which the all but universal claim to membership in the middle class is exploited by those in power to void the necessity of addressing the appalling extremes of wealth and poverty that characterize twenty-first-century America" (13). Ending the introduction with this sentence, Lang thereby plunges into the close readings of the novels, exposing in intricate detail the complex workings of the nineteenth-century "cultural vocabulary," and by implication invites readers to draw conclusions about the cultural discourse of class, gender, race, and values in the twenty-first century.

Lang's method, as she parses the syntax of class in particular novels, is to work with a pair of novels in each chapter (and three novels in Chapter Three). The novels are primarily those one would find in an expanded canon, but in some cases they are less well-known: perhaps the most well-known texts are Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* and Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* on the opposite end of the canonical spectrum. Lang refrains from making the chapters evenly balanced -- some novels receive more attention than others, and non-canonical novels are just as likely to be paired with other non-canonical novels as they are with more well-known novels; part of Lang's analytical strength actually comes from her pairing of texts, both texts that are similar on the surface and then parsed to show the different (though not oppositional) manifestations of class within them, and texts that seem to have little in common yet are shown to mark out the same class ideology. What is surprising (but perhaps shouldn't be) is how clear the issues of class are in the novels. And while Lang herself does not make an explicit argument connecting the concern with class and the novels' exclusion from a narrow canon, the argument seems implicit when one realizes the obviousness of the class issue. Finally, Lang's close reading of passages and characters is far from simplistic; yet it is easy to read, her arguments fully developed and free from distracting language.

I do not intend to explore each nuance of Lang's argument in the chapters, but merely to lay out the basic premise of each chapter. In Chapter One, Lang addresses Maria Cummins's novel *The Lamplighter* (1854) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). Her dominant

metaphor in this chapter is, as its title announces, "Home, in the Better Sense." In these novels, she argues, "the well-regulated home served not merely as a refuge from the fluctuations of men and markets but as a bulwark against social strife" (15). The individual, in other words, is the focus rather than the system. These novels "rely ... upon the myth that the sentimental domestic project is undertaken in the interest of individual self-control, not the control of others, and certainly not those classed and racialized others..." (17). But not just any individual: because the "well-regulated home" is a feminized space, it is the language of gender that works to "obviate the necessity of class consciousness" (17). In *The Lamplighter*, this elision of gender and class occurs most obviously in "the shift in the terms of Gerty's identity from poor to female" (20). The narrative "shifts seamlessly from an incipient concern with social justice to the apparently more urgent need for the reform of individual character, the fulfillment of which will, in turn, yield a more perfect justice" (20). In *The House of the Seven Gables*, "the historical conflict between rich and poor ... is disguised as the ongoing consequence of individual crime" (40). And the solution is equally private, domesticated, and feminine: the romance of heterosexual love.

Chapter Two discusses Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) through the controlling metaphor of the orphan. Lang uses the metaphor both in its microcosmic sense within the novels -- the main characters are orphaned -- but also in its macrocosmic meaning: these novels are concerned with articulating the meaning of home for free blacks in the nineteenth century, or as Lang puts it, articulating "a home for those without a home in the nation" (43). In examining these novels, she unmasks the "associative chain" that links "working-class status," "moral corruption" and "blackness," and shows how the novels resist this "social logic" by revealing the contradiction between what white Americans believe about their own independence from a social logic binding class, race, and character, and how they "ascribe ignorance and degeneracy to the non-white and the working class" (63). The difference in the two novels lies in the way they unmask the problem. Webb, Lang argues, establishes the positive meanings of home for free blacks, while Wilson shows the steps through which the collapse of class, race, and character creates a "homeless 'nigger'" (65).

The chapter on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) and Elizabeth Phelps's *The Silent Partner* (1871) embodies perhaps the most complex of Lang's ideas as she works to illuminate the novels' class distinctions as well as Davis's and Phelps's awareness of their complicity in the class system, an awareness that was in contrast to Stowe's position and subsequently "rendered the disinterested, the 'innocent,' sentimental narrative impossible" (71). Lang begins her analysis with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, showing how it was the most

successful of the novels that sentimentalized the representation of chattel slavery and racialized domestic fiction as well. The form that Stowe perfected, however, does not translate well to include the class issues as the novels move from the "cabin" to the "mill" (83). While art works to establish chattel slavery as "an anachronism and an aberration" that can be abolished (83), what is the responsibility of art in the class system? For Lang, it is not just the upper- and middle-class characters within the novels who are implicated in the class system, but the novels, the authors, and even the readers. The "artless sentimentalists and the erudite literati" -- readers and writers alike -- are "members of the possessing class" (84). Lang ultimately shows how the two industrial novels are unable to deal successfully with their own complicity in the system. She is careful to clarify that she does not deem the novels "failures," but rather shows how they deal with the "literary impasse" (71) that becomes as much a part of the story as the industrial narrative. For *Life in the Iron Mills*, "the questionable capacity of art -- suspect from the first -- to represent, much less to redeem, the iron puddler becomes itself the story's subject" (85). And for *The Silent Partner*, "spiritual renovation turns out to be the *raison d'être* of the novel" (97). In both "resolutions" to the problem, the middle class is more firmly established by the form itself.

In her final chapter, "Beginning Again," Lang returns to novels that "reclaim the narrative of ascent" (104) from the "irremediable conditions of industry [that] blocks the forward motion of narrative" (103). These novels, however, also shift the rhetoric of class: "the promise of mobility, widely touted as the foundation of class harmony, is reconfigured instead as the catalyst of class conflict" (100) -- unless the promise is realized. Rather than being content with a promise, people are demanding its fulfillment. The manner of its fulfillment, however, equally elides class. In Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* (1867), Lang argues, the class conflict pervading the urban world is first of all "accidental, not structural" (107) and the blight is "redeemed" not by any structural or social change, but by "the affection of men" (101). This homoerotic engagement of men is part of the "idealized urban market-world" in which "affection and profit circulate in tandem, the latter proving the innocence of the former" (122). For females, homoerotic engagement is not part of the exchange system, precisely because women's role in the market place is limited to their position in the industrial workplace; in the world of waged work, they cannot rise above this class and its interest in the profit of their labor. A woman caught in this system, in other words, "sells her soul for a wage in a marketplace in which she is neither competitor nor victim but, worse still, lackey" (123). Christie, the main character of Louisa May Alcott's novel *Work* (1873), functions as a working "everywoman," going through several positions in the marketplace before finding her "true calling" as a mediator between working women and women of leisure. She is, therefore, to use Lang's terminology, the true "beginning again" as she

"displays the unique social competence of the white middle-class woman. Eluding the strictures of class by assimilating all class experience to herself, she embodies the prospect of class harmony even as she demands justice for those disabled by class" (127).

As Lang shows, these novels are part of the discourse of the nineteenth century that struggles to define class in the United States. By analyzing these novels, Lang unpacks the gendered and sentimentalized definitions of home and class. Yet in the "Epilogue" Lang also shows how home acquired a new meaning that moved it from the private realm to the public realm of citizenry: "to be without a home in America ... is to be without 'a country'" (129). This refiguring of the syntax of class and its corollary of home returns Lang to the ending of the "Introduction" in which she invites us to see the current political importance of these novels in understanding the role of the literary in the political. This movement also suggests and invites the next phase of the study of class in the literature of the United States. Lang's project is clearly to show how novels simultaneously constructed and were constructed by the concept of class, particularly class in relationship to the lower and middle classes. Does the literary syntax of class equally shape the syntax of the upper class in mid-nineteenth century United States? I, for one, eagerly await this analysis.