

**Article**

Issues of Socioeconomic Class in Barbara Cartland's *A Duel of Hearts* and Catherine Cookson's *The Menagerie*

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**Abstract**

In this paper, we examine the role that socioeconomic class has to play in two novels of romance genre fiction: Barbara Cartland's *A Duel of Hearts* and Catherine Cookson's *The Menagerie*. Published in the years following the Second World War, these novels are written in the style which, while observing the central conventions of romance fiction, additionally depict the experiences of the central characters through the lens of their respective class: aristocracy versus working-class. This article will compare, contrast and analyze the way in which issues of class are presented by the authors in their respective novels.

**Keywords:** Cartland, Cookson, romance, genre fiction, socioeconomic class, historical

**Introduction**

Popular fiction spans a range of genres from American westerns to the gritty, urban, crime thrillers of Dashiell Hammett, continuing through to the futuristic writing of science fiction writer H.G. Wells. While these genres may seemingly have little in common with each other, they are in fact bound by certain conventions both to the genre itself and to commercial considerations including readership, sex, age and so on. Of particular relevance to this article is romance fiction, a genre which enjoys, unsurprisingly, remarkable popularity among female readers, who, according to Romance Writers of America, form 84% of the romance book buying market<sup>1</sup>. Like all genre fiction, romance observes its own specific narrative conventions, central to which is a main love story fused together with an

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<sup>1</sup> Romance Writers of America, 2018. [Online] Available from: <https://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=580> [Accessed 29 January 2018].

emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending (per Romance Writers of America). In this article, however, I will be examining how issues of social class affect the romance narrative in two British romance novels: Barbara Cartland's *A Duel of Hearts*, published in 1949, and Catherine Cookson's *The Menagerie*, published in 1958.

Romance fiction, in keeping with popular fiction as a genre, is generally regarded as having merit in the ability of its more able writers to lure the reader into fantasy and escape rather than in possessing any intrinsic artistic merit. As mentioned, commercial considerations generally place emphasis on the quantity of output rather than quality: both Barbara Cartland and Catherine Cookson boast prolific bibliographies composed of scores of novels and stories (online bookseller Amazon lists no fewer than 644 romance novels for Cartland<sup>2</sup> and Ranker 152 for Cookson<sup>3</sup>). The well-known debate concerning quantity versus quality remains ongoing amongst critics and writers alike, at least ones who seek to ascribe merit to fiction, irrespective of whether it occupies the realms of literature or popular fiction. With this in mind, one of the arguments regarding literary merit concerns the nature of value and how it can be attributed to works of fiction. A reader, or more likely a publisher, might consider the quality of the writing as an arbiter of value, or perhaps the volume of an author's work. Nevertheless, Marxist critic Alick West, in his paper *The Relativity of Literary Value* seeks to define the relationship between the popularity of a literary work and its merit or *value*, in his words, he states that: "... the popularity or unpopularity of a work of literature does not create or destroy its value; it is a sign... [that] the value is operative or non-operative."<sup>4</sup> West's view thus contains the rather generous implication that any and all writing has value, and yet it is nevertheless qualified by the terms *operative* and *non-operative*. According to West, popular works of literature are distinguished by having *operative* value, and within this context it must be inferred that value, to be operative, must reach past the written page and effect a positive impression upon the reader. Thus, within the context of popular fiction and, more specifically, its commercial demands, it is essential that value is operative – which, according to West's definition of value, both Cartland and Cookson succeeded in achieving admirably.

One of the more obvious idiosyncrasies of British society, even to an outsider, is social and economic class: moreover, the divisions of social class pervade the arts, and popular fiction is no exception. Comprehensive biographies of the authors, Barbara Cartland, and Catherine Cookson can be found both in print and on-line; in outline, and while both Cartland and Cookson were born at the turn of the twentieth century, their social backgrounds stood in contrast to each other. Cartland was born in 1901 into an upper middle-class family. Her father was enlisted as a British army officer while her mother kept a boutique selling accessories for fashionable society. Her secure upbringing entitled her to a private

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<sup>2</sup> Amazon, 2018. [Online] Available from: <https://www.amazon.com/Barbara-Cartland/e/B004NBFZG> [Accessed 28 January 2018].

<sup>3</sup> Ranker, 2018. [Online] Available from: <https://www.ranker.com/list/catherine-cookson-books-and-stories-and-written-works/reference> [Accessed 28 January 2018]

<sup>4</sup> West, Alick. 'The Relativity of Literary Value' in Eagleton, T & Milne, D. *Marxist Literary Theory*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). p104.

school education: at Malvern Girl's College, she studied and later prepared for a career in writing, first as a reporter and then as an author<sup>5</sup>. In contrast, Cookson, a self-made woman, was born into illegitimacy in 1906 and raised by her maternal grandparents<sup>6</sup>. Unlike Cartland, who started writing upon completing her formal education, in middle age she began writing at the suggestion of her doctor. As with many writers, history and the author's personal experiences often lend themselves to context and neither Cartland nor Cookson offer any exception in as much as both *A Duel of Hearts* and *The Menagerie*, if not biographical, largely reflect the relative social class of the authors. Regarding these novels, both were published less than fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, sold in volume, and are indeed still in print as of writing. To briefly summarize the plots of these two novels, *A Duel of Hearts* is concerned with the adventures of a seventeen-year-old socialite, Lady Caroline Faye, who through misadventure, witnesses the aftermath of the murder of Isaac Rosenberg, a lawyer of ill-reputation. In doing so, she makes the acquaintance of Lord Vane Brecon, who upon discovering letters of blackmail upon the body of the deceased, realizes that he has been framed as the murderer by persons unknown. In keeping with convention, the two protagonists fall in love, nonetheless, the overriding theme of the novel is that of mystery – Lady Caroline's endeavour to learn more about her troubled and evasive sweetheart and, in addition, to solve the puzzle of who framed him for murder and why. Cookson's the plot of *The Menagerie* forms a social drama which follows the misfortunes of the working-class mining community of Fellburn, in particular, the Broadhurst family and their colleagues and friends. While observing the core conventions of love and a happy ending, *The Menagerie* is primarily character driven rather than plot, contrasting *A Duel of Hearts*. Of the two novels, perhaps it is Cookson's contemporary romance which embodies the cultural and geographical zeitgeist of the period: there are references to actual places located in the north of England (Birtley, Newcastle, Fellburn); the local industry, coal mining; and contemporary political figures including Labour MP Aneurin Bevan, architect of the British National Health Service. Nevertheless, and despite the economic necessity of introducing women into the workplace during the war, the female characters are predominantly domestic workers (Jinny Broadhurst, Mrs. King), buffoonish or idle (Aunt Lot, Lena, Mildred Honeysett) or occupied in retail work and services (Jessie Honeysett, Madam Fonyer). In contrast, Cartland's novel, a historical romance, is set in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (1821 according to the heroine, Caroline Faye), detailing the lifestyles of the landed gentry, most of whom are professionally unemployed.

## Issues of Class

During the post-war period, genre fiction critic, Merja Makinen suggests that, within romance

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<sup>5</sup> Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, 2018. [Online] Available from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20121109225543/http://www.bu.edu/phpbin/archives-cc/app/details.php?id=7540> [Accessed 27 January 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Visit South Tyneside, 2018. [Online] Available from: <http://www.visitsouthtyneside.co.uk/article/12662/catherine-cookson> [Accessed 30 January 2018].

fiction, the symbolic dynamic between the lead protagonists changes. Makinen argues that the hero and heroine are defined in opposition to each other, the hero being "...a man of the world, thirty-five, sardonic, and wealthy, in contrast to the heroine in her early twenties, a virgin and with few protective relations."<sup>7</sup> Within the context of the historical romance, *A Duel of Hearts*, this position is largely correct – the heroine, Lady Caroline Faye is seventeen years old, her chastity guarded by her both her wits and her chaperone, Maria, and the hero, Lord Vane Brecon, is twenty-seven and is the proprietor of a large estate, Brecon Castle. Cartland's protagonists, 19<sup>th</sup> century aristocrats, can be separated into villains and cads (Gervase Warlingham, with accomplices, and the philandering Sir Montague Reversby), paternal or maternal figures (Lord Vulcan, Caroline's father; Lady Brecon), the Byronic hero and strong-willed "fighting Faye" heroine. Makinen's description of the heroine does indeed fit Caroline Faye, whose prevailing desire to please is not unlike the relationship between a co-dependent and a narcissist. Nevertheless, it is she who drives the plot forwards – specifically, in her quest to rescue Vane Brecon not only from a mysterious assailant but also from himself. Contemporary gender roles are reaffirmed by the working-class characters; the female housekeeper and maids at Brecon Castle, the male groom in Lord Vulcan's stable and the ostler at The Dog and Duck in Sevenoaks, whose occupations are suitable for their sex in accordance with 19<sup>th</sup> century social conventions. *A Duel of Hearts* thus reaffirms traditional gender roles by virtue of its retrospectivity, nostalgia and deference to rigid social customs. Published in the years after the war, *Duel* looks back upon an age when Britain was prosperous and economically and culturally successful, a so-called golden age during which Britain knew nothing of the hardships resulting from mechanized warfare. In fact, there are few references to developments from the Industrial Revolution save macadam, an early form of turnpike road surface, and the Lord Vulcan's mention of steamboats being used to ferry passengers across the English Channel to Calais. In this respect, Barbara Cartland achieved some degree of historical accuracy in her writing (macadam roads started being constructed in 1810<sup>8</sup> and steamboat ferry crossings from Dover to Calais in 1818<sup>9</sup>). Thus, for the contemporary reader, *A Duel of Hearts* is a novel which denies the present to invite the reader to make fantasy in a prosperous, historical representation of England, and, furthermore, also of an assertive cultural identity which stands in contrast to the poverty, both relative and absolute, of post-war Britain. Given the Pyrrhic victory of the war, writers of popular romance fiction either had to redefine the relationship between the heroine and hero for a contemporary audience, as did Cookson in *The Menagerie*, or revert to older romantic ideals and motifs set in the past. *A Duel of Hearts* thus reconstructs the older ideals of courtly love, that of nobility and chivalry, and can therefore be read as a narrative of optimism, and the triumph of hope and virtue over the immoral and unworthy. Given the

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<sup>7</sup> Makinen, Merja. *Feminist Popular Fiction*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). p27.

<sup>8</sup> The Open Door Web Site, 2018. [Online] Available from: <http://www.saburchill.com/history/chapters/IR/024.html> [Accessed 26 January 2018].

<sup>9</sup> Bolen, Cheryl: *Crossing the English Channel Before 1820*, 2016. [Online] Available from: [http://historicalhussies.blogspot.jp/2016/06/crossing-english-channel-before-1820\\_24.html](http://historicalhussies.blogspot.jp/2016/06/crossing-english-channel-before-1820_24.html) [Accessed 30 January 2018].

date of publication, it is seductive to view this triumph as, in part, a corollary to the trials and tribulations of the war, fresh in the memory of the reader, whereas Cartland is in fact inviting optimism and the hope of recovering something which has been lost.

The Byronic hero, Cartland's depiction of an idealized masculinity is, while flattering, an inaccurate representation within the context of the social upheaval of the post-war years. Lord Vane Brecon, as the rich and powerful (if youthful) patriarch is an ambassador of chivalry and virtue in respect of his desire to protect Lady Caroline from the intrigue ever present in Brecon Castle. Brecon functions as the focal point for the narrative: Caroline, able to access Lord Brecon by way of employment as Lady Brecon's lady in waiting, struggles to reveal the intrigue surrounding the hero. Caroline, through the pursuit of Brecon, is presented with the opportunity to escape the threat posed to her virginity by her many suitors, not least the cunning Sir Montague Reversby. This overwhelming need to reach need protect Brecon also permits her freedom from her social obligations, such as attending school in London or attending her parents at their estate, Mandrake. Thus empowered, Caroline becomes ever more wilful, impertinent, individualistic and decisive – indeed more so than the hero – which she credits to her father's blood. It is in reference to these aristocratic heroes that the social hierarchy is constructed: Catherine, in disguise, is able to move, albeit with some reluctance, within different social classes. On two occasions she assumes the fictional identity of Catherine Fry, firstly, to avoid being associated with Sir Montague Reversby, later, to conceal her identity in the aftermath of a murder, and finally, to gain admission to Brecon Castle without rousing her parents' suspicions as to her involvement with Lord Brecon. Her social mobility and disguise is part of a theme of deceit which runs through the aristocracy, such as Sir Montague Reversby's clandestine attempt at seduction by suggesting Caroline participate in a phaeton race with him, only to have the vehicle suffer a mechanical fault outside an inn conveniently located for seduction. We, the reader witness further deceit regarding the identity of the murdered lawyer Isaac Rosenberg's assailants. There is also, of course the deceit which Caroline perpetuates against Vane Brecon, when she invents her alter-ego, Catherine Fry. In addition to deceit, we also witness another mystery trope: that of uncertainty for the future and of identity. While Caroline is principally concerned, and is indeed anxious with obtaining her hero, the reader wishes to witness the fulfilment of desire (both that of Caroline, and vicariously, that of their own). In this sense the narrative defines itself in opposition to reality: it provides a resolution and fulfilment that can only occupy the realm of fantasy and escape. Perhaps Brecon's appeal as the ideal hero and object of female desire lies within the fact that he offers security and stability, both financial and emotional, and furthermore presents something of a challenge. Brecon is equally strong and vulnerable, which we learn from Caroline's unerring desire to rescue him from peril, perceived or immediate. This juxtaposition, of robustness and helplessness contributes a sense of realism and enables him to become a plausible figure of adoration and human fallibility, without which we the reader would struggle to empathize with Caroline Faye's infatuation. Similarly, in conjunction with disguise, Caroline's passion for fine dress and appearing her best irrespective of the occasion marks an

indulgence which would not be permitted in the aftermath of the war (for historical reference, rationing, begun during the war, did not officially end until 1954 – five years after *A Duel of Hearts* was published<sup>10</sup>). To illustrate: when masquerading as Caroline Fry and employed in the capacity of lady in waiting to Lady Brecon, she seems heedless of her station as a member of the household staff: “She would have worn one of her more elaborate ball gowns had not Maria protested... Caroline chose in the end a more simple dress of embroidered tulle...”<sup>11</sup> This is not a unique example for Caroline is frequently presented selecting dresses for practically every occasion, whether in preparation for dinner, to greet guests or even while playing matchmaker to her friend Harriet Wantage in her awkward attempts to court Brecon’s friend Thomas Stratton. For the reader lurid descriptions of opulence and fashion serve not only to articulate Caroline’s good breeding and immaculate dress sense, it additionally functions as a display of hedonistic consumerism, thus demonstrating a form of conspicuous consumption,<sup>12</sup> a term which had been introduced half a century before the publication of *A Duel of Hearts*. Considering that wartime rationing continued until 1954, Caroline’s descriptions of her wardrobe can be described teasingly as a verbal form of window shopping, inviting the reader to share in Caroline’s delight over her choice of clothes. There is however, an additional function, which is to say that Lady Faye’s clothing functions as a symbol or a marker to distinguish her from hoi-polloi; specifically, the chambermaids and other household staff. This distinction also asserts her superiority over not only servants but also Harriet Wantage, who is “merely” a vicar’s daughter by demonstrating her greater breeding and in this way to make her special and unique. Cartland thus signifies to the reader that she needs to identify with Caroline as the heroine and modal of feminine ideals.

If *A Duel of Hearts* establishes a narrative of a prosperous, rustic, bygone age hosting an idealized imagining of 19<sup>th</sup> century English aristocrats, Catherine Cookson’s romance novel *The Menagerie* can perhaps make a claim to be a more realistic representation of contemporary working-class ardour in post-war Britain. Cartland focuses her narrative in the wealthy home counties around London, more precisely the town of Sevenoaks in Kent. This is important because London was, and still is, England’s cultural centre, which thereby endorses the aristocrats with not only financial means but in addition, cultural currency and values which include education, taste for opulence, and generous amounts of leisure time. In contrast, published in 1958, only four years after the end of war rationing, and nine years after *A Duel of Hearts*, *The Menagerie* is a fictional narrative which chronicles a chapter in the lives of the working-class Broadhurst family living not in or around the capital but in the north-west of England. By maintaining this divide, Cookson’s narrative establishes several oppositions to Cartland’s: firstly, in location – *The Menagerie* is set in County Durham; secondly, unlike the indefatigable Caroline Faye the

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<sup>10</sup> BBC, 2008. [Online] Available from: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/4/newsid\\_3818000/3818563.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/4/newsid_3818000/3818563.stm) [Accessed 30 January 2018].

<sup>11</sup> Cartland, Barbara. *A Duel of Hearts*, (London: M-Y Books, 2012). p150.

<sup>12</sup> Macrone, Michael. *A Little Knowledge*, (London: Edbury Press, 1998). p218.

hero and heroine, Larry Broadhurst and Jessie Honeysett are reluctant occupiers of the roles, and finally, in education; they have received only basic state education, and indeed at least one of the characters is illiterate (Aunt Lot). Like Cartland, Cookson introduces physical and mental disability, and exposes the additional difficulties it presents. Whereas Cartland's representation of Lord Brecon's disabled and therefore concealed sister Cassie is much in the vein of Mr. Rochester's concealed wife (*Jane Eyre*), Cookson treats her disabled characters more sympathetically (Betty, daughter of Jack Broadhurst and Lena, is kept within the family instead of being sent away into social care or banished like Cassie). The effect of this is to create a more authentic and less idealised narrative; without doubt *The Menagerie* does not appeal to the saccharine, escapist narrative of *A Duel of Hearts*. The relocation of narratives from southern to northern England heralds a change and difference in values, most of which are pertaining to social class. As Cookson set the narrative close to her place of birth, it could be suggested it has a certain biographical representation of Cookson's past and that she is using her personal experiences within the working-class community to illustrate the Broadhursts' life experience. Indeed, there are obvious parallels between the implied rape of Aunt Lot by the fiddler and Cookson's own mother's encounter with Cookson's father: both resulted in an unwanted pregnancy and absent fathers, and, like baby Betty, Cookson was raised by her grandparents. Those oppositions which are evident within the narrative can be interpreted as a rejection of the conventions of the aristocratic historical romances of Cartland. Further juxtapositions of opposites are equally evident, and can be exemplified by the following pairings: employment (coal mining, shop keeping<sup>13</sup>) / leisure (gambling, sports), interdependence (the Broadhursts overcoming personal tragedy) / independence (Caroline Faye's plot-driving ambitions), financial insecurity / obscene wealth, taking responsibility (Jinny Broadhurst providing for Aunt Lot, disabled infant Betty) / delegation of obligations (a small army of attendants ever present to assist Caroline), and community versus individualism. These pairings follow almost exclusively along class lines, the former being working-class and the latter being aristocratic.

Additionally, with regards to Cookson, transgression is a matter of significance. In *A Duel of Hearts*, Vane Brecon, is defined not so much by his personal qualities (other than being handsome and wealthy), but by his taciturn and mercurial behaviour. In fact, it is difficult to feel sympathetic for such a brooding figure let alone comprehend why Caroline should be so enamoured to pursue him fiercely. Cookson thus rejects, the hero of the aristocratic historical romance as unrealistic and improbable; instead, he is replaced by Larry Broadhurst, a far more vulnerable and heroic in the sense that he feels obliged to familial duty. Naturally, the reader is not being asked to identify with the hero of a working-class romance in the same way she would of the aristocratic hero of a historical, romance, therefore by identifying with Larry the reader likens him to a rogue husband or wayward son – someone with whom the reader may already be familiar. However, within Vane Brecon, the Byronic hero, the reader, via

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<sup>13</sup> Cookson, Catherine. *The Menagerie*, (London: Corgi, 1971). p78.

Caroline, is projecting an ideal that is more unrealistic than attainable yet remains an appealing fantasy. Among the characters presented in *The Menagerie*, the reader is primarily being asked to identify with the heroine, the maternal figure of Jessie Honeysett. Jessie is described as having "...the build that acknowledged as being complimentary to this difficult-to-define elusive quality. She had a fine bust and broad hips." By this description alone, Jessie would never satisfy the requirements of an aristocratic heroine like Caroline, who is described as beautiful, pale-skinned and slight in build. Jessie's appearance alone would relegate her to the status of maid or scullion in an aristocratic romance, and yet Caroline is defined far more acutely by her choice of clothing rather than a detailed assessment of her form. Indeed, of the characters, it is the villains who are described in some detail, such as Gervase Warlingham's confidant, Mrs. Miller, who Caroline frequently describes with reference to her physical form: "Caroline had time to note that Mrs. Miller was not unattractive. Her dark hair... was arranged in fashionable curls and tier dress... made no attempts to conceal the charms of her ample bosom."<sup>14</sup> Writer Judy Giles in *Romance Revisited* argues that working class women during the 1920s and 1930s, were "...constructing stories which made sense of their lives the women also used cultural myths and archetypes, the most powerful of which were the good, nurturing mother and the demonised 'gold-digging whore'."<sup>15</sup> Cookson, though writing some twenty years later was, by the end of the Second World War, thirty-nine years old, and had evidently appropriated some of Giles' cultural myths in her depictions of Jessie Honeysett, Jinny Broadhurst (nurturing) and Pam Turnbull (gold-digging). If Cartland can be seen to exploit middle-class aspirations, (less charitably, snobbery) and genre-mandated depictions of a 'virtuous' hero and heroine, then Cookson legitimizes certain prejudices both of and by the working-class. She achieves this by encouraging the reader to identify positively with the aforementioned negative stereotypes of women in romance fiction. Cookson's County Durham dwelling depiction of working-class society and people is intolerant and exclusive of those who can be said to pose a threat to the status quo, that is to say, Pam Turnbull, Giles' "gold-digging whore".

As mentioned earlier, transgression, or punishment for going against social norms, is a theme that presents itself within *The Menagerie*. A parallel to this is also presented by Cartland, whose protagonists are under a perpetual cloud of dishonour, or the threat thereof. Caroline is repeatedly blighted by her assumed impropriety with Sir Montague Reversby and the disgrace the loss of her virginity, or, worse still, the threat of her paramour's execution having been falsely convicted of the murder of Rosenberg, and later a fourteen-year-old livery boy, the tiger. For Cookson, forsaking one's family for self-interest is a cardinal sin, as Larry does when he elopes with Pam to the continent. Even though his actions are a direct result of his love for Pam and the dream she represents to him (escape from the coal mine and its community), he is punished when, in his absence, his father Frank and best friend, Willie Macintyre, are

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<sup>14</sup> Cartland, Barbara. p144.

<sup>15</sup> Giles, J. 'You Meet 'Em and That's It': Working Class Women's Refusal of Romance Between the Wars in Britain', in Pearce, L. & Stacey, A. (eds.) *Romance Revisited*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 1995). p280.

killed in a coalmine explosion. Larry is punished for acting on behalf of his self-interest, without considering the implications for those who are close to him. He is, however, given the opportunity to redeem himself by forsaking his sweetheart Pam and his dreams of bettering himself to return to the community in which he was raised. In effect, Larry's predicament could be interpreted to mean that he is being tested precisely because he has tried to better himself, met the "wrong woman" and attempted to leave his family behind. Cartland and Cookson together regard social mobility as an impossibility, unless it means moving down the social scale: after hearing of the disaster at Venus coalmine, Larry, with resignation, and knowing that he is a trained rescuer, returns to the mine in the attempt to save the trapped workers. Having become the head of the Broadhurst family through the misfortune of the disaster, he resumes work at the mine to provide for his now shattered family. Pam, for her part, resumes her marriage to the affluent older American and once again relocates to the United States. Pam Turnbull, the one character who receives a good education succeeds in ascending the social ladder, if only by marriage, enjoys the trappings of her new-found wealth and yet misses Larry and her home. Cookson's sense of class identity is strong, and yet problematic as it castigates those members who seek social mobility, instead suggesting they should be "happy with their lot in life". Cookson only identifies with the kind of wealth gained through family ties or through hard work within one's class, Jessie for instance, benefits from an unexpected windfall upon the death of her sick, but nevertheless parsimonious mother; she is also, later, invited into a partnership with Miss Barrington, proprietor of Barrington's clothing store. Within *The Menagerie*, dedication to one's station is seen as virtuous, and a strong education and ambition are not seen as valuable to this station. Conversely, in *A Duel of Hearts*, social status is constantly vulnerable to loss of wealth or unworthy family members. Status needs to be reaffirmed, implicitly by Caroline's dress and manners, and more explicitly by the revelations of Vane Brecon's illegitimacy to the title of Brecon Castle. It is revealed that Gervase Warlington is in fact the rightful heir to Brecon Castle, nevertheless the treat to the status of Caroline and Vane is assuaged by another revelation that in fact Vane is the son of Lady Brecon and Vulcan family acquaintance Lord Milborne, and thereby retains his aristocratic link, if not his claim to the title of Brecon Castle.

The most important consideration for readers of romance, according to the statistics provided by Janice Radway, is a reconciliation or 'a happy ending' (this is also emphasized by Romance Writers of America). She suggests that this is effective because 'happy endings' succeed "... by involving that reader vicariously in the gradual evolution of a loving relationship whose culmination she [the reader] is later permitted to enjoy..."<sup>16</sup> According to Radway's findings, both *The Menagerie* and *A Duel of Hearts* fulfil the reader's wish requirement in respect to genre convention and ending, as both offer a reconciliation between hero and heroine, whether it is Caroline Faye's submission to Vane Brecon or Larry Broadhurst's restoration of affection with Jessy Honeysett. Undoubtedly, the social class of the

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<sup>16</sup> Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance*, (The University of North Carolina Press, 1991). p66-67.

protagonists has little significance when considering the effectiveness of resolution (which is necessary if the narrative is to observe convention), though it could be suggested that the social class of reader would affect their ability to empathise with the hero and heroine. Furthermore, it could be argued that a reader who was accustomed to the romantic ideals of a Byronic hero would find the deeply flawed Larry Broadhurst a somewhat less than satisfying, perhaps even inadequate hero. Radway conducts another survey which shows that a substantial number of women read romance novels because they are uplifting and not forlorn (hence the happy ending mandated by the genre). However, Cookson addresses issues like birth defects, disability and infidelity and death realistically and without reverting to type or exaggerating for effect. These issues, within an everyday context would unquestionably be profoundly melancholic<sup>17</sup>, and therefore by Radway's findings would detract from the romantic experience. However, these problems function enable the reader to relate on a personal level, perhaps that to which they have also experienced, without trivializing or sentimentalizing that experience. Cookson, by way of her own life experiences, is inviting the reader to share her own sense of injustice and pathos with the protagonists. Contrary to Radway's analysis, Cookson wishes to involve her conscience and her sympathy whilst rejecting notions of escapist fantasy. Working class narratives thus mould the reader to be involved with "real life" family and societal issues, rather than passively consume fairy-tale aristocratic romances.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it can be suggested that issues of class have a profound impact on the narrative of romance literature. The most distinctive differences are located in the construction of the system of values; generally speaking, the working-class romance will reward the community whilst the aristocratic romance favours individualism. This is of course in deference to the core conventions of romance fiction, that is a central love story and a happy ending. At risk of oversimplification, the working-class romance can be said to be an authentic representation of the kinds of people who inhabit that stratum of society, whilst the aristocratic romance is representative of fantasy and escapism. In as far as *The Menagerie* is typical of working-class romance literature, the traditional family roles remain: the father, or elder sons, are the breadwinners and the mother and attendant female roles tend to domestic chores and raise children. However, for Cookson, true responsibility rests with the female protagonists whose adhesive influences control the family unit, and furthermore in the community. Cookson works against the historical definition of hero and heroine, of the kind written by Cartland. In fact, Cookson redefines hero and heroine to be those who honour their duty to others, not the individualistic and iconic identities of Cartland's who honour their role in society instead. Working-class narratives introduce difficult and authentic themes like bereavement and disability, something that the Cartland narrative would find

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<sup>17</sup> Radway, Janice. p61.

distasteful. In summary, social class constructs oppositions in terms of values, the definition of hero/heroine, and societal identity. Nevertheless, both aristocratic and working-class narratives seek to draw in their readers by identification with the characters they portray.

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