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## City Kin

Much of the crucial plot advancement of Frances Burney's novel *Evelina* occurs while, or as a result of, Evelina's visit with her city cousins, The Branghtons. Evelina's visit during London's summer or "off season" which is, "not at all the fashion," illuminates issues about Evelina's and the Branghton's class differences (170). The events that occur during Evelina's short stay at the home of "Mr. Dawkins's, a hosier in High Holborn" advance important themes of the novel regarding class shifting (173). The Branghtons are primarily facilitators of Evelina's entertainment experiences. These mixed-class experiences further illustrate the differences of class status of different members of Evelina's social circle. Her extended kin, the London dwelling Branghtons, inadvertently assist Evelina in securing her future class ascension. The Branghton family develops into integral, rich characters that are revealed to be much more than a surface annoyance to Evelina. Their role in the novel facilitates a discussion of class shifting and increased class mobility for Evelina, made possible through the utilization of the power of the kinship system.

Evelina's trajectory of class movement first goes downward in order to move upward. Unlike the higher social class companions Evelina has recently been used to, manners are not the most valuable form of social currency with the Branghtons. Making money, accumulating wealth, and being frugal are Mr. Branghton's most valuable currency. He is a middle class

tradesman. Evelina describes to Villars her cousin's combination home and storefront writing, "Mr Branghton's house is small and inconvenient, though his shop, which takes in all the ground floor, is large and commodious" (169). This shows that the Branghtons are focused on money making and commerce. They put their business first and foremost by spending much of their time, money, and resources in the shop area downstairs, while their living quarters remain sparse and poor. Their social graces are also lacking and poor, in Evelina's estimation, due to their lower class status, and their focus on wealth as the only marker of good taste. She states the reason for her dislike of the young sisters' manners as an, "extreme want of affection and good nature" (172). The focus in this family has been placed on working and acquiring wealth, while lacking in the cultivation of better manners. The Branghtons neglect to practice good manners as one means to ascend to a higher class. Evelina, in contrast, primarily uses her social manners to advance to a higher class, even though she is biologically a gentleman's daughter.

Mr. Branghton considers money before he makes any decision. These money concerns are another way of clarifying the differences between upper and lower classes. The upper classes do not need to think of money in this same way. Branghton expresses surprise at Madame Duvall's exclamations of emotional loss during the fake robbery. She says, "the villain would have robbed me if he could, only I'd secured all my money." Mr. Branghton replies with "Why then, Cousin, I think your loss can't have been very great" (168). This statement furthers the frugal business man's perspective. He does not see that any loss is possible if it did not involve money. Evelina delivers further evidence of Mr. Branghton's focus on saving money by providing his reasons for not evicting and suing Macartney. Not because of sympathy or pity for

his situation, as sensible manners might dictate, but because he knows he would not get the money owed to him if Macartney goes to jail. Evelina records Mr. Branghton's statements, "I would put him in prison, - but what should I get by that? He could not earn any thing there to pay me" (186). This act accomplishes the same goal of helping Mr. Macartney as Evelina's gift of money does. However, Mr. Branghton helps him inadvertently by thinking only of his own monetary end goals, in contrast to the compassionate, generous, and sensible help of upper class born Evelina. This again shows the class differences between Evelina and her family through their conflicting attitudes about charity to others.

Mr. Branghton does not seem to care about the appearances of wealth in their living quarters, but his daughters do. The father focuses on the accrual of wealth, not on the spending of it to improve appearances in their living space. His daughters are hoping to advance to a higher class level, and they are conscious of their own current lower status to Evelina. This becomes clear when Miss Polly Branghton and her sister converse about Evelina's arrival saying, "'well, I'm sure I should never have dreamed of Miss's [Evelina's] coming.' 'Nor I neither, I'm sure,' cried Miss Branghton, 'or else I would not have been in this room to see her; I'm quite ashamed about it, ...'" (169-170). The girls show shame of their living quarters, try repeatedly to make excuses, and even use the lodger's nicer quarters. Evelina is not ashamed of her cousins' appearances, but mostly their bad manners. The girls are ashamed not of their bad manners, but of the lackluster surroundings where they are forced to entertain their higher class cousin.

The sisters hope to ascend to a higher class level, but unlike Evelina who was born into a higher class and educated in the manners of the upper class by Villars, the Branghton girls will

need to marry to change their status. Evelina thinks their lack of good manners might keep them from ascending to a higher status. Their father may be extremely successful at business, but not being able to successfully navigate the social niceties will disadvantage their progress. Riches accrued do not equal class status gained in this society. One sister, Polly is interested in Mr. Brown, the haberdasher who is another tradesman like her father, so she seems to have less interest in gaining status by marrying above her own class level. Evelina recounts in her letter to Villars, that in contrast the other Branghton sister said of Polly's attraction to a tradesman that, "she would ten times rather die an old maid, than marry any person but a gentleman" (171). This illustrates two points; first that Mr. Brown is not considered a gentleman because he is a tradesman, and he may not ever be a gentleman. No matter how much wealth he may accumulate, he will never have been born to a family that is pedigreed and skilled in the appearances of wealth and manners.

Evelina recaptures her rightful place in the upper class world by marriage, and eventually by virtue of her birth with the assistance of her city kin. She waits and circulates through other classes to gain experience. She comments on her cousin's aims to appear of a higher class than they really are. She writes about the dinner they prepare for her, "Had they been without *pretensions*, all this would have seemed of no consequence; but they aimed at appearing to advantage, and even fancied they succeeded" (176). This illustrates the Branghtons struggle to emulate a higher class. They are also unaware that they have not succeeded (mostly due to their bad manners), so they aspire to an ideal they may never attain. Evelina floats above their pretensions because she belongs to a higher class by birth, and her command of good manners.

She dislikes being seen with them because she fears that people like Sir Clement Willoughby will get the wrong impression of her class status and think that an “alteration in [my] companions authorizes and alteration in manners” (203). Evelina doesn’t want those bad manners to rub off on her. She does not want to be companioned with the lower class members and manners of her family. This illustrates the precarious nature of class shifting, and how important other people’s perceptions could be in allowing people to cross class boundaries.

The Branghtons, city dwelling cousins, are accustomed to a life of fun and cheap entertainments. Evelina has been exposed to relatively few forms of big city attractions. Those are upper class diversions, like the opera and private balls. When Evelina accompanies the Branghtons to the pleasure gardens at Marylebone, it provides a good opportunity to highlight Evelina’s ability to cross nebulous and dangerous class boundaries. She enjoys some of the lower class entertainments. She writes, “the firework was really beautiful,” and “I had the pleasure of hearing a concerto on the violin ...” (233). Evelina’s letter to Villars also delivers the frugal, working class counterpoint to those amusements writing, “Mr. Branghton having declared he would have all he could get for his money, which, at best, was only fooled away, at such silly and idle places” (233). Again, Mr. Branghton’s thrifty merchant class attitude, and focus on saving money. Still, they go, gain more chances to mix classes, whether with those above or below their own stations in society. This facilitates more opportunities for advancement and demotion within the complex class hierarchy.

The meeting with Lord Orville in the gardens, while Evelina is in company of the prostitutes, clearly shows that Evelina’s class status is still in question. She recounts, “Good God,

with what expressive eyes did he regard me! ... he looked greatly concerned ...” (236). This highlights Orville’s acknowledgement of the unusual companions, and the possibility that Evelina’s reputation may be damaged because of her association with them. This class challenging contact with Lord Orville does eventually lead to a further relationship with the gentleman, and ultimately her marriage to him.

The Branghtons reveal the kinship system in action. Without her biological kin, the Branghton’s, Evelina likely would not have found the other branches of her family tree, and been reunited with them. They facilitate much of her future prospects, and they are family. She judges them so harshly because she wants to disassociate herself from these people and rise to a higher class, but she realizes her own hereditary connections will never be severed. Evelina’s kinship system extends outward from the Branghtons to Maccartney - her close kin, her brother. While young brother Branghton is teasing his sisters upstairs, it provides the opportunity for Macartney and Evelina to speak for the first time since the incident with the pistols. She “heard him move from his chair, and walk slowly after me. Believing that he wished to speak to me ...” (215). The novel places Evelina with her extended family to connect with her biological brother, and eventually her biological father.

This kinship system works, and allows Evelina to eventually be reunited with her upper class family. The Branghtons also expedite Evelina’s future class movement as they provide more opportunity to meet with Lord Orville. The subsequent meeting and falling in love are made possible by her descent in class that allows her to experience the less than desirable summer season, which leads to her future upward class shift. Because Lord Orville accepts her

even though he has seen her low class relations and company, it shows that he is truly in love with Evelina's personality and manners, and not her just the appearance of her class status.

## **Works Cited**

Burney, Frances. *Evelina*. Ed. Edward Bloom. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.