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## **Capitalizing Culture: Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875) and the Commodification in Victorian Society**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.0324.0725>

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, I will examine the commodified society presented in *The Way We Live Now* in the sense that the author tries to bring economic and cultural aspects together in a united framework allowing the culture of mid-Victorian society to be purely commercialised. Therefore, drawing on many examples from the text, this paper elaborates on the fact that our contemporary world has not changed that much from the mid-Victorian society exhibited in the novel. A society that is obsessed with money to the extent that they perceive of many cultural and social aspects in their life as commodity that has to bring them materialistic profits. These cultural and social aspects are incorporated in: the commodification of intellectual writings and ideas like the case of lady Carberry, the commodification of social and political status, and in the commodification of marriage and how love becomes a mere business and luxury in Victorian society.

*Keywords: Victorian Literature; commodification of Culture; Capitalism; Marxism; Symbolism of Money in Victorian Age, Cultural decay*

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### **Introduction**

Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* is a satirical novel of the mid-Victorian England with its explosive economic growth and capitalist orthodoxy. The advent of global industrial capitalism influenced every aspect of English social, political, and economic regulations. While this expansion brought prosperity and opportunities, it also brought social costs such as pollution, social hierarchy and inequality, commercial fraud and psychological disorder and illnesses, most of which are due to people's obsession with earning money and wealth mainly by means of economic exchanges. Trollope's novel demonstrates economic exchange as interconnected with social practices hence it represents capitalist projects as a social embedded endeavour whose functions are governed by social, cultural and political foundations.

Anthony Trollope's, *The Way We Live Now*, revolves around the Melmotte's fortune and how he builds himself a social and political status by means of forgery, deceit and fraud in the English economic market. Although, Mr. Melmotte is often referred to as a scoundrel in London society, his money and wealth has a social import and a powerful social pull. Thus, it is very intriguing to see how characters in the book are very much motivated by gaining easy money and social recognition, mainly by following Mellmotte's fake plan to build the railway believing him to be a rich and honest tradesman. In the novel's fictitious society, economic, social and cultural markets are very intertwined to the extent that every social and cultural aspect becomes a commodity by which people can exchange for goods or personal services. The process of commodification which refers to the act of rendering moral, social and cultural conventions into a mere commodity and objects of trade for economic purposes, is highly portrayed by means of each character's material aspirations and interests. Since Money is a constant occupation for most characters in the novel, every aspect of their lives has become a contractual exchange and a source of income and gain which results in the embeddedness of all that is social and cultural with the economic market creating thus new markets like the literary market, social market and marriage market. The methodology to be followed in the demystification of this thematic concern consists of the examination of the way in which Trollope showcases the economic and profit-making facet of the three following social and cultural manifestations: literature through Lady Carbury promoting her book as a mere commodity, the social status transaction embodied in the dinner party ticket as a medium of exchange and the economic facet of marriage conventions as business and a luxury.

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### **Commodification of Literature Through Lady Carbury Character:**

The literary market is expounded in Lady Carbury's terms as she promotes her book primarily as a commodity and not as a literary artifact that may confer knowledge and intellect more than it can produce money and material payoff. Trollope's narrator states that Lady Carbury has "no ambition to write a good book, but was painfully anxious to write a book that the critics should say was good" (19- 20). Therefore, in her letters promoting her book, *Criminal Queens*, she exhibits a kind of indifference towards the proclaimed and professed standards of authorship and literary works. However, she is desperate to join the literary community and create a literary career for herself yet by giving a false account of her book and misrepresenting it as a

profound and important historical work. This is what makes her book a mere commodity that she tries to sell despite its weak literary value. The absurdity of her attempt lies in her realization that this literary fraud is not conducive to any contentment in her life.

Trollope denounces lady Carbury's deliberate dishonesty and misrepresentation of her work to the reader by presenting a comically transparent puffing of her work in her letters hence her deceit is explicit to herself, the editors she addresses and her readers as well as Trollope's reader. This lucidity in her aspirations constitutes Trollope's criticism of the capitalist intentions in rendering the literary work a mere commodity without accounting for its aesthetic and literary value. He also highlights the importance of the author's reader's relationship which makes the foundation of a successful and best-selling books in the literary market regardless of its context or its ideas. Therefore, Lady Carbury's book is devalued by editors given the fact that she misleads readers when it comes to her book's conventions and context.

However, since we cannot read Lady Carbury's *Criminal Queens*, we can only evaluate her books literary quality on the basis of her letters and Trollope's narrator. Thus, as we read Carbury letters we sense that she is not confident about her writing and she might be lying about her book's contextual nature and literary value. Trollope's ambivalent representation of Lady Carbury's character as both a honest and dishonest about her books may reverberate his ambivalent regards towards the economic aspect and aesthetic or literary value of literature hence regarding literature as a product that need to be sold. Indeed lady carbury may be telling the truth about her financial and personal situation and she may also be true about her book's value, however, Trollope does not inscribe her within the literary community and since her book does not meet his model of literary value which is based on a shared conviction and generic conventions of authorship that support the literary market as well.

Lady Carbury shows her indifference to the generic authorship conventions that her books should be endowed with when she says: "I have striven so hard to be proper; but when girls read everything, why should not an old woman write anything?" This saying reveals that her book does not sell well because she writes anything and she also alludes to use of sexual content in her books and how she intends to make no effort to write all of which, present to the reader that her book does not sell well because it is a bad book and it does not appeal to English society. Her failure to start a literary career with her work *Criminal Queens* suggest that, For Trollope, the problem of aesthetics and question whether *Criminal Queens* is a bad book or not is not determined by transcendent and absolute criterion, but rather the literary value as well as economic value of a book is significant only within a socioeconomic context that authorize and legitimize the literary work on the basis of its shared notions of authorship and genre.

In fact, Lady Carbury, herself, does not perceive of her work as valued by readers for the story and narrative style it offers. Therefore, she conceals the conventions by which it may be assessed and valued, so she rather chooses other means by which she tries to market herself and her books to the editors and convince them to review her book. She makes use of her femininity and sexual appearance to attract Mr. Broune along with using intimate words like 'my friend'. She also tries to generate sympathy by explaining her financial needs. In this sense, Trollope presents to us her character as a conventional woman who cares only for money and social status more than to believe in herself and in her writing.

The novel does not indicate that literature is free of economic constraints and value but rather it negotiates that literature does not rests only on high aesthetic and literary standards but also on its economic forms and value which are imbedded in the social context of literary market as a result of the capitalist profitmaking system. Accordingly, "In *The Way We Live Now*, literary value is as much a social construct as it is an economic value: both are produced within dynamic social contexts in which generic and authorship conventions structure the process through which texts are valued." (295, *Denise Lovett Marie*, 2011)

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### **Dinner Party Ticket as a Symbol of Social Status Transaction**

The system of commodification of social status creates a social market where social image and position are manifested both as a currency and commodity. This notion is very explicit in the use and symbolism of the Dinner party ticket by which some characters of the novel may be able to satisfy their need of belonging to a high class ranking in society and buy the ticket.

Melmotte's dinner party with the emperor of china is a major social event before it can be considered as an affair of state. Purportedly, they intend to "to show to the emperor by this banquet what an English merchant-citizen of London could do" (270, *The WWLN*), thus the event is very prestigious since it will be attended by the high representatives of English culture, mainly nobility, royalty and the people from the higher classes in London Society. As a matter of fact, the objective behind such event is to represent the English culture, assert the state's international authority and influence hence exhibiting the city of London as a global economic center. Melmote plays a major role in fulfilling the event's purpose given the fact that he stands for the seemingly success of political, economic and social intersections. His performance and persona is supposed to enact the epitome of the English gentleman who embodies modern capitalism, social success and London's political revolution.

Indeed, Melmotte seems to have built political authority, major finance, and social network to create his own name and reputation in London society a place where only rich people have the right to guarantee social, political powers for themselves and for their family. "The world knew that Mr. Melmotte was to be member for Westminster, that Mr. Melmotte was to entertain the Emperor of China that Mr. Melmotte carried the South Central Pacific and Mexican Railway in his pocket - and the world worshipped Mr. Melmotte." (272, *The WWLN*) The dinner party enables Melmotte to proclaim his economic, political and social vigour so he has been selected to host the entertaining events in his house "under the condition that he spend £10,000 on the banquet," in exchange, he and his family would be invited to the Emperor's "grand entertainment" at Windsor Park (246, *The WWLN*). As a result, Melmotte buys the luxury of hosting the dinner, which takes place the day before the election, putting him to the test but still benefiting him socially. His endorsement to spend £10,000 on a state banquet offers him the chance to show at Windsor Park event that he is able to carry out the character entrusted

upon him. In fact, Melmotte's wealth is essential for hosting the event, but the social and political reputation he would gain from the dinner party will rest on his willingness to represent the state's concerns and profits and well-being, thus he must adhere to the social requirements of the event.

As a financial expert and political strategist, Melmotte makes use of the £10,000 generated by his railway business so that he can buy the privilege to host the occasion and profit from the social and political reputation that such events offer; however, Melmotte could not meet the social norms of the party which alludes to the fact that money and wealth cannot buy us prestige and social esteem unless it is a fake one. Yet still in *the way we live now*, belonging to a higher social class and earning more social recognition has become a commodity that you need to buy or may exchange. This notion can be seen from the tickets to attend the dinner party. As a matter of fact, the 200 dinner party tickets are mainly distributed among Chinese visitors, royalty and the British higher classes people like ambassadors, politicians, and other people who are endowed with too much leverage to be excluded. While the 800 tickets for the evening event are discretionary which results in a burning desire to fight for them. Thus, this request and urge for the party tickets engender an unexpected market that not only Melmotte, but also others can be part of it.

Melmotte's tickets bear certain value just like lady Carbury's book, or railway shares and any other exchange or commodity in the novel. Thence, each text holds a value based on what the text represents in the market and how people evaluate it. The worth of the party tickets arises from a common conviction that Melmotte is a business visionary, or at least a large number of known people think so, and that the party would reinforce and celebrate both his and his guests' social capital. If the concept of the text's representative feature is not widely and socially accepted—for example, if certain market participants suspect Melmotte's forgery and that's what happens at the end—the market will become uncertain, and as trust declines, the market will crash. Consequently, later on, Melmotte's narrative and reputation ceases to possess any social value mainly when the he public realizes that he cannot embody the English gentlemen nor a tradesman.

The exchanging of tickets and the party itself demonstrate how exchange is based on a mutual understanding of representation. Therefore, the ticket's market and the party indicate that, like the other textual goods in the book, each market is governed by particular social practices that regulate the structure and role of representation basically for the particular purpose that the market serves. Thus, the demand for party tickets reveals that the importance of attending is determined by both Melmotte's and the ticketholders' status. Therefore, the market for party tickets serves as a barometer of Melmotte's popularity, as demand is fuelled in part by his celebrity, but also by ticketholders' impressions of their own and others' social capital. At the most intense level, the demand for party tickets exemplifies the socially ingrained value of trade.

The ticket market is literary a form of marketing the buyer and the seller's social identities and relationships, as well as Melmotte's. The tickets are a commodity that provides a social payoff rather than an economic payoff like that of the railway shares, or personal use, mainly reading a book. Thus, this social payoff is reflected in both the luxury of basking in "Melmotte's Glory" as well as a public declaration and announcement of the ticket holder's social status and esteem as attending the same event with royalty, prime minister of England. Since holding a party ticket entails a well-publicized affirmation of the holder's social capital, the holder cannot actually offer the ticket for cash, since this would be dreadfully vulgar and equivalent to acknowledging one's reduced social value. Therefore, the means of exchange used to trade the party ticket with is one's own social capital for instance, Georgiana Longestaffe exchanges her two extra tickets with Lady Monogram and in turn she "was to undertake to chaperon Miss Longestaffe at the entertainment, to take Miss Longestaffe as a visitor for three days, and to have one party at her own house during the time" (458)

The price of a ticket is negotiated by calculating the worth of each party's social capital in relation to the other. Lady Monogram's desire to be in Georgiana's presence, as well as the esteem Georgiana feels towards Lady Monogram, are reflected in Georgiana's three days and house party with her. Although we can also see it from a pragmatic point thus this exchange is also due to Georgiana's quest for a husband and Lady Monogram's longing to attend the party and boost her social connexion and esteem. However such negotiations are very personal since each one's social capital might change according to the circumstances like the case of Marie Melmotte's ticket as her social status and value is reduced due to her failed elopement with sir Felix. Similarly to his daughter, Melmotte's reputation is growing dim because of the rumours of his forgery accusations. The market of tickets crashes as rumours spread and the partially-attended dinner begins. "Gradually the prices [of the tickets] fell - not at first from any doubt in Melmotte, but through that customary reaction which may be expected on such occasions. But at eight or nine o'clock on the evening of the party the tickets were worth nothing" (465, *The WWLN*). Besides the ticket's market which embodies the literal commodification of social capital since the latter constitutes its currency, there is the marriage market which resembles to the social one because it is based on social and economic connexions and status as well. As a result, the party ticket market is similar to the marriage market because any transaction cannot work without disguising the fact that it is a transaction, hence each transaction is an exclusive deal between the two families.

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### Marriage and Love as a Luxury

Despite the fact that the novel refuses to limit marriage to a contract agreement through the happy ending of Hetta Curbury and Paul Montague as the two main characters who do not care about money and their marriage is mainly a result of a reciprocal love, the aspect of financial necessity is always present. This idea can be seen through Paul Montague's success to re-join the railway shares and build real railways this time, so it has to be this way because if Hetta Curbury did marry a broke unemployed man their story would never be considered a happy ending in the eyes of the reader or viewer hence the importance of love and the social and economic capital to make a happy marriage. In this context, it is true that Trollope criticize the act of rendering marriage a sheer business that is empty of any feelings, yet by closely reading the novel, the author alludes that courtship and marriage are socially rooted transactions, similar to economic exchanges, though their aims and epistemologies vary.

In *The Way We Live Now*, Lady Curbury says to her daughter Hetta "love is any other luxury you have no right to it unless you can afford it". This suggestion that love is only a luxury and that marriage is for most people is about business not about love is very interestingly explored in the novel. In

*the way we love*, Trollope tries to criticise the fact that marriage in capitalist society is a mere transaction and that it is founded on exchanging money, social status and family title more than it is about exchanging love and moral attitudes. Trollope presents the theme of marriage and money through most characters of the novel who exhibit different attitudes and stance towards marriage. Therefore, their attitudes is twofold; one that celebrate love and marriage and the other cheers for marriage as an economic transaction or agreement.

In the novel, we have Hetta Curbury who completely disagrees with her mother since she does not believe that love is a mere luxury that you do not have the right to unless you can afford it and she wishes to marry Paul for love regardless of the great wealth and comfort she and her family would probably have with Roger. For her, marriage is mainly about love and not money or social status. On the other hand, we have Georgiana Longestaffe's character whose only desire is to marry a rich man for an establishment even if she may not love him hence money and settlement are what she longs for in marriage. It is also worth noting that she is not exactly mercenary in the same way as Felix Curbury, but she also needs to be married to ensure her future as a woman. Therefore, she was furious about Mr. Breght's bankruptcy. Therefore, when she writes to Mr. Breght to tell him how annoyed she is that he no longer has the money to give her the house she wanted, he writes her back and breaks the engagement with her stating: "I had hoped that you had looked to your happiness to another source", so, unlike her, for him marriage is not just a business deal.

Another interesting character presenting the theme of marriage in *the way we live now* is Marie Melmotte. As a daughter of Mr Melmotte she has a fast fortune thus she becomes a sort of prey to most men who desire to marry her for her money, mainly sir Felix and Lord Nidderdale. This latter treats his kind of courting with Marie Melmotte as a business transaction from the beginning and it is mainly arranged by his father, so when Mellmot's went bankrupt and he no longer has neither the money nor the social status Lord Nidderdale 's father decided to retreat from this marriage proposal. As for Felix, he pretends to love Miss Melmotte because he believes that is the best way to marry her to gain money and social recognition, thus he can rebuild his family's title and wealth. Marie first wants to marry Felix because she loves him, but later after she realizes his fake love towards her she becomes disillusioned with him and begins to view marriage as a business transaction as she end up with Mr fisker.

The comedic and tragic results of unsuccessful courtships demonstrate the near link between economic and social interests, as well as the value of knowing the game's rules. Treating social ties as a game that simply hides economic interest in *The Way We Live Now* is to undermine the very object of trade, which is the convergence of social networks. Economic considerations enable, but do not supplant, this aim. The portrayal of the economy of party tickets in *The Way We Live Now* dramatizes the dynamics of the marriage market by demonstrating that its economic dimensions must be subordinated to its social intent in order for a union to take place.

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## Conclusion:

To conclude, the economic embeddedness into the social and cultural manifestations in capitalist society is an inevitable consequence of cultural industry and capitalist projects which leads to the commodification of most social and cultural experiences, mainly marriage, intellectual writing and social connexions and position. Thus, Trollope's narrative *The Way We Live Now* is considered as an attempt to criticise this capitalist system, and how cherished values and traditions become a product of an economic market. Indeed, Trollope elucidates the unsuccessful ending of each of the aforementioned markets, Lady's Curbury book, Mallmotte's social market and the marriage founded on business and profit making, due the process of transforming what is social and cultural to what is material and money generator. Yet, there are some instances where the author expresses a sort of ambivalence towards this establishment of economic exchanges on the basis of human's social and cultural norms and convictions, especially in the case of Lady's Curbury's book market, confirming thus that accounting for the importance of social and cultural principles and convention is a must in any economic transaction.

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