Evelina, in Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, and Werther, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Young Werther*, might seem the opposite of one another, for they seek out such opposite company—Evelina, the high-born, Werther, the low-grounded. However, though their eyes are cast in different directions, their inclinations are one and the same: they both seek admiration from whomever most appropriate, to confirm themselves superior to their own particular worst-sort of people.

After Evelina’s first social outing in London, Mrs. Mirvan relates to her, Lovel’s, Lord Orville’s, and Sir Clement’s assessment of her (i.e., Evelina’s) behavior at the party. Since Evelina, as much as Mrs. Mirvan, essentially has been eavesdropping, we know that her desire to know what others think of her is strong enough for it to outduel her concern to be seen as well-bred—and this is saying something, as we shall see. Evelina attends most closely to how Lord Orville judged her. In the letter in which she informs Mr. Villars of how they assessed her—“‘A poor weak girl![,]’ ‘ignorant or mischievous!’” (40), and for good reason, since Lord Orville is characterized as exactly the sort of gentleman whose good opinion mattered most in eighteenth-century English society.

Paul Gordon Scott argues that social order in eighteenth-century England required the cowering presence of superior, singular gentlemen, who, along with ideal manners, possessed a penetrating “voyeuristic gaze that disciplines subjects by observing them” (88). Gordon argues that the ideal gentleman in eighteenth-century English society was, then, someone who both caused and eased social dis-ease. He was someone like Lord Orville, whose own judgmental gaze is employed in ensuring that bad behavior, which according to Orville requires “immediate notice [. . .] for it encroaches when it is tolerated” (113), is policed. Lord Orville’s gaze is ideal for the purpose, for his vision is informed by “the cold eye of unimpassioned philosophy,” which allows him to view, for example, women and art simultaneously without allowing “the heart [. . .] to interfere and make all objects but one (namely, a beautiful woman) insipid and uninteresting” (119).

Sir Clement is the one who makes this assessment of the prowess of Lord Orville’s singularly disinterested “eye,” and in the scene where the three men assess Evelina’s character, he finds the eye focused in on him. Sir Clement calls Evelina an
“angel” (38), but Lord Orville, disliking an inflated assessment of her informed principally by Sir Clement’s desire for mischief, insists she is not a “Helen” (39) but rather a “pretty modest-looking girl” (38). Lovel, having been humiliated by her preference for Lord Orville, eagerly makes use of Sir Clement’ suggestion that Evelina might be a “parson’s daughter” (39) to deem her coarse and lowly. Sir Clement insists she is “too sensible to be ignorant” (39), but Lord Orville will not play along, as he is uninterested in recovering her character for libertine play. He knows she “affront[ed] [Lovel],” probably guesses right that her laughter betrayed her “enjoy[ment] [of] his mortification” (40), and understands that regardless of whether her behavior was born out of ignorance or out of mischief, it remains inexcusable. But simply because the behavior is so unacceptable to Lord Orville he deemed it unnecessary to inquire as to motive, does not mean we should assume both explanations for her behavior are equally damning—for they are in no way that! For if her behavior owed to ignorance, she is doomed: she has no chance of ever judging herself worthy of Lord Orville. But if she is and was mischievous, the novel suggests she may not be so much fallen as she is endowed.

The exchange between Lovel and Sir Clement helps us understand “ignorance” as the opposite of sensible, the opposite of genteel. For Evelina, to be ignorant would mean to be less the country gentleman’s daughter Sir Clement prefers to see her as and more the country bumpkin the likes of Lovel and Madame Duval (75) are convinced her upbringing has made for her. Anyone akin to Madame Duval or to the Branghton family has no chance of becoming sensible. Mr. Villars at one point expresses his wish that he could change Madame Duval’s plans, but argues that “[h]er character, and the violence of her disposition, intimidate me from making the attempt: she is too ignorant for instruction, too obstinate for entreaty, and too weak for reason” (142). We know, too, that Evelina gauges the Branghtons so obstinate their manners cannot be improved upon; in fact, she guesses they probably already consider themselves genteel (195).

Several characters characterized as libertines (with the exception of Lord Merton), on the other hand, are not only redeemable—witness what happens to Evelina’s true father at the end of the novel—but possess positive qualities which make them more similar to than different from the novel’s most sensible characters. Sir Clement is a libertine. He, unlike Lord Orville, takes pleasure in hearing how Evelina humiliated Lovel. But he is also someone whose own status as genteel is not compromised in doing so. In this, Sir Clement bears resemblance to the restoration libertines who
engaged in “shaming rituals [which bore resemblance to that] of non-urbane and impolite society” (24) to “enforce rather than dissolve social hierarchy” (James Grantham Turner 247). And we note that throughout the novel he involves himself in activities that help distinguish the genteel from the lowly, which seem designed, intended, to remind the lowly of their looming inadequacies. If we understand Sir Clement and Lord Orville as representing two different sorts of gentlemen, both of whom had their time as socially sanctioned embodiments of moral righteousness, then we can understand Evelina’s decision to twice establish how exactly their seemingly similar or even identical social behavior actually do actually differ, seem but an appropriate thing for her to do.

The very fact that Evelina compares the two makes them similar, for according to Evelina it is “unjust” (199) to compare people who are fundamentally different from one another. Owing to the fact that Sir Clement alone possesses superior “address and manners” (199), she will not, for example, compare him to Mr. Smith. She will however liken herself to Sir Clement. Though Evelina overtly refuses Sir Clement’s suggestion that they possess a similarly “frank [. . .] disposition” (49), we note that she actually makes the link she more overtly avows herself uninterested in forging. We know Evelina is aware of every key word used by the three men who judged her merits at the private ball. Lord Orville’s assessment commanded her keenest interest, but she shows later in her letters a remembrance for a word—“Nobody” (320)—used by, appropriately enough, the least of the three men, by Lovel. We have reason to conclude, then, that she knew that by calling Sir Clement a “genius” (52) in a letter so soon after he used that word to describe her (40), she was herself facilitating the connection between them that Sir Clement had already begun to create. She actually makes them seem perfectly complimentary, writing in the letter, “[a]nd thus was my deviation from truth punished; and thus did this man’s determined boldness conquer” (48).

Evelina calls Sir Clement her “champion” (39)—which is but fair, for though Evelina is surrounded by the base, through crowds of coarse Sir Clement still seeks her out. So doing, he does her an enormous favor; for though we might normally be prepared to understand his attentions as a threat, since her biological and physical closeness to the base put her status as “a lady” into question, his attentions reinforce her self-understanding as someone who actually has something “high” to lose. Early in her association with Madame Duval and Captain Mirvan, Evelina says “the[ir] continual wrangling and ill-breeding [. . .] made [her] [. . .] blush that [she] [. . .]
belonged to them” (65). Fortunate for her, then, that Sir Clement’s persistent interest in her, and lack of interest in her companions, makes it seem as if he is competing to have her all to his own. “Sir Clement takes interest in the Captain; he “stud[ies] all [his] [. . .] humours” (83)—but only so as to ensure his access to Evelina. He tells her he “pa[id] court to the gross Captain Mirvan, and the virago Madame Duval,” only to “procure [for] [him]self” (381) her company. And though he comes within reach of the coarse but for her finery, the times when he fixes more squarely on them helps her out as well.

The significant example of this good service occurs when Sir Clement helps Captain Mirvan “sport” with Madame Duval. Madame Duval ends up on the ground, covered with dirt, disassembled and inarticulate, while Evelina remains unharmed, still subject to Sir Clement’s keen interest. Clement detaches her from Evelina and literally brings Madame Duval down to earth: he helps create a memorable moment for Evelina to use to help understand herself as surely not at all to be compared to her horrid grandmother.

Though in one sense Evelina was not dirtied by her involvement, in another, not so much. For though she voices her dissatisfaction with the plot, we know Evelina failed to warn Madame Duval about the danger she was in. And we have reason to believe Evelina actually enjoyed the sport, but would not admit this to herself in her letters, because when Sir Clement targets someone (a non-family member—Mr. Smith) that permits her a more open laugh, so to speak, she does not let the opportunity go by unwasted.

Evelina does not actually laugh, as it would unbecoming to do so, but she does admit that after seeing the results of his (i.e., Mr. Smith’s) sudden awareness of Sir Clement’s interest in her, she “could almost have laughed” (225). As before with Madame Duval, Sir Clement makes Mr. Smith decompose—“he seemed to lose at once all his happy self-sufficiency and conceit” (225). In a way, he also makes Mr. Smith physically low—“he [. . .] seemed himself, with conscious inferiority, to shrink into nothing” (225)—as well as physically distant: “[he] again retir[ed] to an humble distance” (227). Of course, Sir Clement is frequently described as someone who when he doses in on Evelina, causes her significant distress. But we notice that Evelina seems to so need being likened to Sir Clement that she risks doing so physically, and just after Sir Clement had discovered her in a situation that legitimizes an even more predatory stance toward her. After listening to Mr. Smith lecture about a painting, she writes, she “saw Sir Clement bite his lips; and indeed, so did I mine” (227).
Sir Clement also helps Evelina by providing her with good reasons for reproving him; and until she meets Mr. Macartney, it is primarily through these reproofs that she keeps some claim to the lady-like—on being high, and therefore at all like Orville. But it is the fortuitous discovery of Mr. Macartney that is key for a more deeply sourced display of highborn conduct. She saves his life, an act that required courage. It make her seem great-souled, but note, not unladylike or manly, for “courage was not a masculine prerogative in the early modern period [read 16-18th century]” (Carolyn Williams, “Women Behaving Well,” 72; emphasis added).

But though Mr. McCartney proves highly useful for her ascension, she actually achieves Lord Orville heights as much by others’ shrinkage as from their boost. That is, Lord Orville lowers his standing some as the text proceeds. She portrays her involvement with both Sir Clement and Mr. Macartney as making Lord Orville jealous. He shows social unease—“he look[s] away” (369) while at a social gathering, when Evelina looked upon him—and demonstrates a further slip in social grace: “Lord Orville’s reception of us was grave and cold: far from distinguishing me, as usual, by particular civilities, Lady Louise herself could not have seen me enter the room with more frigid unconcern” (372). Evelina portrays him here as de-evolving in precisely the way she feels vulnerable to, that is, she describes him so he as well seems susceptible to being compromised by unflattering relations.

Evelina conceives of herself, then, as someone who manages what her own beloved Orville could not: she never devolves; she never allows her initial burst of laughter at Lovel’s ridiculousness to make herself seem lowly or bumpkinish. Instead, she portrays herself so that she—much as an earth-bound angel might—ascends. In contrast, Werther devolves. Though he does not consider them “equal” (Goethe 28) to him, he associates with the lowly, and he plots his narrative so that he moves from being relatively happy to being a perpetually tormented person. Yet since in his imagination the heavenly can be found as much amongst the low as it can the highly placed, devolution, finding himself amongst lowlifes, the ostensible dregs, is actually his means to purity.

The sort of people Werther doesn’t want to be associated with are those like Evelina—the “sensible” (61) “who devote their creative energies […] to moving one place higher up a table” (77). Werther suggests that sensible types often secure for themselves the kind of security Evelina hopes marriage to Lord Orville will afford her. But he also believes that since they are interested primarily in placement and not in love, though sweetly “housed” they “will [nevertheless] be done for” (33). He relates
the fate of a wealthy woman who, like Evelina, was concerned to insinuate herself within Property and barricade herself before barbarians: she had “no pleasure apart from looking down on middle-class citizens from the heights of an upper-storey window” (76).

Werther would surely question the soundness of Evelina’s assessment of Lord Orville as the best of men, for in some respects Arthur possesses similar character traits to Lord Orville’s, only they aren’t anywhere near so flatteringly portrayed. Admittedly, just as Evelina judges Lord Orville “the most amiable man in the world” (Evelina 41), Werther actually writes that Albert is “the best fellow on earth” (59). However, Werther dooms him in his own estimation by associating him with all other “sensible people” (61). In the letter in which he does so, Albert makes a declaration concerning bad behavior that is easy to imagine Lord Orville making. Albert says, “[b]ut you will grant that certain actions are wrongful [. . .] no matter what their motives” (60). Werther tries, just as Sir Clement once did with Lord Orville, to suggest that motives do in fact matter, and can and should affect our estimation of what truly is wrong, but Albert won’t budge. Indeed, Werther portrays Albert as inflexible and unimaginative, someone whose coldness, someone whose fundamental belief in the rightness of his opinion, along with his desire to preach, make him worthy of mockery not praise (61). (Werther again mocks “cool, respectable gentlemen” [33] elsewhere in his letters.)

Other than Albert, most of those Werther identifies as sensible ostensibly do him a favor by treating him with disdain. For instance, he describes a doctor who “considered [his] [. . .] conduct beneath the dignity of sensible people” (45). This assessment would be embraced by Werther, however, for he despises the “officially” dignified and finds fabulous things “close to the earth” (27). He says he prefers to associate with those most frequently accused of lacking dignity: the “rabble,” “[t]he common people” (28). Though there are exceptions—for example, the foul youth who ruin others’ moods, and the grumpy lady who cut down the walnut tree (mind you, she is one with pretensions to be respectable [94])—it is dear to Werther that common people are a rather fine lot. They have not lost their capacity to love, something the sensible have in fact done, and they possess an intrinsic awareness and (however unlearned) appreciation of the truly noble (they can’t help but love Werther). “The common people,” he says, “already know and love [him], the children in particular” (28). He is particularly apt to identify himself with children—those who are, in one sense at least, the lowest of the low. He describes his encounters with
them in some detail, and in each case they are described as possessed of an inherent “harmony” (35) and soulfulness—that is, as if they share the same passion and “aliveness” he himself is ostensibly in the possession of (and draws our attention to in his letters, in part by likening himself to a child).

Since associating himself with the lowly better demonstrates his gentility, we have reason to wonder if he thinks being “interred in the cold earth” (127) would somehow show just how great he really is. Considering he conceives of Nature as something always grand and noble (if not always beneficent), and that he longs to merge himself within its oneness, perhaps he imagines his decomposition—i.e., his decline from being healthy and happy to being despondent and depressed—as preparing him for atomic integration within it. But we note that Werther for the most part imagines himself in his after-life as, so to speak, in the clouds, alongside God. And we should suspect that Werther makes use of the low for the same reason Evelina makes use of Sir Clement: they are not to them really the best of people, but because barriers exist which prevent them from long-associating with those they truly want to be with, they yet remain the best at hand. Werther writes that, in death, he is bound to be by his Father’s (i.e., God’s) side, and that his Father will “comfort” (128) and value him. We know he has glimpses of this reality while counting himself amongst the living, that is, that he has for a time associated with the truly high and noble—worthy Baronesses, Counts, and Princes—and that he portrays them as prizing his presence above all others, but also that he could not for long associate himself with them in peace. Just as Evelina’s coarse relatives work against her effort to associate herself with Lord Orville, those Werther abhors succeed in frustrating his ability to stay long at court.

Both Evelina and Werther, then, are similar in that both are characterized so that they portray the kind of artfulness and cunning they pretend to abhor. They differ in that Evelina can admit to being somewhat sinister (as she essentially does when she says, without self-reproof, that “she will take “some pleasure in cutting up” “fools and ooxombs” [326]) because there is a still-contested understanding of the duties of the genteel that legitimates and even commends their policing through ridicule (note that even Lord Orville calls Lovel a “coxcomb” [37]), while Werther needs to claim more straightforward purity to distinguish himself from sour aristocrats, those who “g[ive] [. . .] [looks] [. . .] in their [. . .] oh-so aristocratic way” (81). That is, for a time, it actually serves Evelina’s intentions to portray herself as nasty, while Werther is the one who must take care not to appear the least bit a rogue. Both of them are,
however, at the very least incidentally beneficent, in that they each provide readers means to conceive of their own character flaws and current lack of placement as signs of their inherent worth. If you are regularly dismissed as ignorant and uncouth, Werther’s sure to be your guy, and if you have a tendency to make others your sport but still know, which fork, which spoon, Evelina is surely your lady. But there is no doubt that associating with either of them has its (self-consoling) benefits. No wonder many of the trod-upon but still aspiring, once did.

Works Cited