

Satirizing Society: The Dangers of Dressing the Part by Tia Hensley

The eighteenth century in England conjures up stately images of high society, gay balls, frequent entertainment, and a heavy emphasis upon social conduct and propriety. In reality, however, the people of that time lived much varied degrees of this lifestyle, dependant greatly upon the social standing into which they were born. Not surprisingly, those writing in the eighteenth century often dealt with issues regarding the social classes. One such writer was the eighteenth century female novelist, **Frances Burney**. As a woman writing in a time strongly characterized by its patriarchal nature, Burney also offers a uniquely feminine critique of her life and times. Burney utilizes the device of satire to create absurd moments that highlight societal short-comings or failures across class and gender structures in an attempt to analyze society. In doing so she also examines her own position in that society, which she represents in the title character of her first novel *Evelina*.

“Frances Burney” (1752 – 1840)

Frances “Fanny” Burney was born on June 13, 1752 to Esther Sleepe and Charles Burney in King’s Lynn, Norfolk. Burney showed an early disposition towards writing and composed numerous odes, songs, plays, farces, and poems.

At age fifteen, however, fearing her father’s disapproval, she burned those works, which included an early version of *Evelina*. Burney later rewrote the novel and had it published under her brother’s name to retain her anonymity. Partly due to the novel’s success, when her father later discovered the ruse, he granted Burney his approval.

“Evelina’s Story”

Upon her first encounters with society, Evelina, a sheltered and inexperienced girl from the country, meets a number of individuals who begin to establish for her the rules of propriety and behavior appropriate to social class. The cut-throat environment in which she encounters these personalities intends to ensure that only the best (that is, the wealthiest, most powerful, or most cunning) rise to the top of the social ladder. However, what these individuals profess and what they practice are so disproportional that Evelina struggles to find her own steady footing in the ever-shifting social realm.

“The Staged Robbery”

Captain Mirvan, the obnoxious husband of Evelina’s host and good friend Mrs. Mirvan, incessantly harasses the French female fop, Madame Duvall, and her faithful servant Dupree. However, Mirvan’s breach in conduct escalates quickly from mere harshness of words, to actual physical violence against others. At one point, he physically batters and assaults Madame Duvall when he executes a fake robbery as a joke. Evelina quickly recognizes that the Captain’s high social class far from ensures propriety in his behavior. In her consequential evaluation his behavior, she moves one step closer to establishing her own social and moral identity by confronting the Captain and requesting that he cease with his mistreatment of Madame Duvall.

“Family Troubles”

The liberties taken by Evelina’s tacky and annoying cousins, the Branghtons further develop Evelina’s opinions concerning social class and decency. Their crude living conditions and behaviors are the source of much embarrassment for Evelina. While Evelina’s social standing is certainly at this point no better than the Branghton’s, her embarrassment with their situation and mistreatment of others, including herself, suggests that she considers their behaviors to be beneath her. As a result, Evelina defies the established authorities and asserts her own opinion regarding what is, and is not, considered civil and socially acceptable behavior.

“Monkey Business”

Toward the end of the novel, Burney introduces a monkey, of all things, into Evelina’s story when the ever-ready-to-ridicule Captain Mirvan returns with a clothed monkey and claims to have found the foppish Mr. Lovell’s twin brother. As a comical minor character who tends to take himself far too seriously, Mr. Lovell is unfortunately slow at catching the jest, adding immensely to the humor of the situation. When he does finally realize the Captain’s intent to ridicule him, Mr. Lovell becomes angry and irrationally strikes the poor monkey, which consequently causes the monkey to attack and bite his ear. Burney uses the absurdity of the situation to satirize those whose actions neither befit their social standing, nor their humanity.

“The Great Race”

Evelina’s visits the upper class resort town of Clifton Heights and here she witnesses one of the most cruel and critical social interactions of the novel on the day of the great race. This day, two corrupt young aristocrats, agree to settle a wager by racing two elderly women some twenty yards across gravel. The race itself results from the gamblers’ petty desires to win a bet and to do so in such a manner as to not risk their own safety. Evelina’s instinctive attempts to intervene speak strongly of her courage and innate goodness and symbolically oppose her to the gamblers and the bystanders. Through this event, Evelina’s negative opinion of social inequity and abuse of the powerless is clear and contrasts powerfully with the other involved parties’ apparent indifference.