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.

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.

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.

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, urge 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.

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 that the Branghtons', 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.