

Candidate 1

Analysis on the themes of immigration and poverty, and the difference between the 'upper' and 'lower class' explored in *Novecento* and *La Leggenda del Pianista sull'Oceano*

Novecento is a theatrical monologue written by Alessandro Baricco in 1994. In 1998, the Italian director Giuseppe Tornatore directed the film *La Leggenda del Pianista sull'Oceano*, which was inspired by the monologue. Both the book and the film narrate the story of Danny Boodman T.D. Lemon Novecento, who was raised by a black sailor after he was abandoned on the piano of the first class of the transatlantic Virginian. Although the themes of immigration and poverty, and the difference between the 'upper' and 'lower class' are not the key themes, they can be explored throughout the text and film.

A difference between the 'upper' and 'lower class' that can be seen is when Baricco describes the band of the Virginian:

*'Suonavamo tre, quattro volte al giorno. Prima per i ricchi della classe lusso...suonavano anche loro, con noi.'*¹

The difference between the two classes is observed as the band first played the music for the 'upper class' and then for the immigrants ('lower class'). When they did so, they did not have to wear their uniform and the immigrants would play the music with them. It is shown that immigrants are not given the same protocols as those of the 'upper class'. In addition, the "upper class" is more familiar with this atmosphere and they prefer to dance to this music. Since it is a "formal" class, it must follow etiquette and behave in a certain way. However, as the immigrants do not receive the same opportunities as them, it might be the first time that they hear music of this sort and they decide to play along with the band, which implies the different behaviours of the classes.

A research on the social class states: The 'upper class' is the highest socioeconomic bracket in the social hierarchy and has members with great wealth and power. And the 'lower class' consists of those at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy who have low education, low income, and low status jobs.² In the 'upper class' the wealth is passed on which means the successor can enjoy all the pleasures of life such as attending elite parties and playing golf. However, as the 'lower class' suffers from unemployment due to the low educational attainment, it cannot afford to live the same life as the 'upper class'. The research shows that the difference between the social classes has always existed and since the 1970s the income inequality has been increasing, the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer.

The difference between the two classes can be further explored through *Novecento*'s extraordinary music and the duel between him and Jelly Roll Morton, the inventor of jazz. Wealthy people were willing to travel on the Virginian just to hear *Novecento* play and the senator Wilson stayed in the third class in order to hear *Novecento*'s music:

*'E rimase di strucco, il senatore Wilson, a sentire quella roba, e a parte quella storia della terza classe, lui, tutto elegante, in mezzo a quella puzza, perche' era puzza vera e propria...gli restavano da vivere'*³

¹*Novecento*, Alessandro Baricco, page 13

²<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-sociology/chapter/the-class-structure-in-the-u-s/>

³*Novecento*, Alessandro Baricco, page 36

The senator, being someone who belonged to the 'upper class' was not used to "the filth of the 'lower class'", however even a reputed person like him was willing to live in those conditions for fabulous music. The comparison is seen as 'upper class' is described as a clean class while the third class is seen as smelly and dirty.

Jelly Roll Morton is a renowned pianist, who started playing in the brothels and gained fame afterwards. Although he started from a 'lower class', he became so famous that he behaves as he belongs to the 'upper class':

*'Tutto vestito di bianco, anche il cappello. E un diamante così' al ditto.*⁴

He shows off just like the 'upper class' by being stylish and displaying a diamond ring. In the book, Baricco only describes the duel between the two, with Novecento winning. However, in the movie we can see that the third class joins the first class' ballroom cheering for Novecento. The film shows the duel as if it a battle between the 'upper' and 'lower class'. When Novecento is the winner, the third class explodes in screams and applauds, once again showing the different behaviours of the two classes.

The theme of poverty is further explored in the scene where Danny finds Novecento:

*'L'avevano lasciato nella sala da ballo della prima classe. Sul pianoforte. Non aveva l'aria però di essere un neonato di prima classe.'*⁵

Although Novecento was found in the first class, he did not look like he belonged to that class. The author further explains how immigrants abandoned their children as they were unable to provide food for them:

*'Per un emigrante e' una bocca in piu' da sfamare'*⁶

Novecento's parents must have left him in the first class in the hope that someone better off might adopt him so he could have a brighter future. In fact, later in the book Novecento is seen to get along with immigrants rather the first class, signifying that he will always belong to his 'own kind'.

Additionally, the theme of immigration is explored as many immigrants travel to America looking for a better life. Baricco does not directly write about the immigrants interacting with Novecento but we can assume this because although Novecento never set foot on land, he knew about several places as if he has really been there. When the immigrants travelled, they brought stories of their places with them and narrated them to Novecento:

*'Negli occhi di qualcuno, nelle parole di qualcuno, lui quell'aria, l'aveva respirata davvero.'*⁷

The fact that Novecento knew about so many places of the world, suggests that he met a lot of immigrants that were travelling to the other side of the world in search of better opportunities and for a better future.

⁴Novecento, Alessandro Baricco, page 34

⁵Novecento, Alessandro Baricco, page 18

⁶Novecento, Alessandro Baricco, page 19

⁷Novecento, Alessandro Baricco, page 33

One of the key scenes is when Novecento decides to leave the ship, which was inspired after he met an ordinary farmer, Lynn Baster. In the book, the description of the farmer is a true visualisation of poverty:

*'Uno di quelli che vivono quarant'anni lavorando come muli e tutto quelli che hanno visto e' il loro campo...tutt'e due.'*⁸

Baricco compares him to a mule implying that he worked intensively all his life, and, in the end, his wife flew away, and both of his children died due to a drought, leaving him empty handed. The quote suggests that once poverty sets in, it takes away everything from a person. Novecento met Lynn while he was travelling in the hope of finding new opportunities as life is "immense". In the film, the scene is shown slightly differently. A few years after Novecento met Lynn, he bumps into his daughter, who is moving to be with him now that he is settled. This suggests that after people move to America, they can settle down and provide a better future for their families. Poverty and immigration are seen to be linked, when the source of income is lost, a person is forced to leave and migrate, to look for new opportunities.

Further research on immigration rates in America, shows that the immigration population increased from about 300,000 in the 1960s to 900,000 in the 1990s.⁹ The report also shows that in the first ten years of the 1900s, the percentage of immigrants living in the United States grew by 0.9%.¹⁰ During this period, more and more immigrants moved to America looking for jobs. In the book, Baricco gives a list of places which we assume is the route taken by the ship:

*'Liverpool New York Liverpool Rio de Janeiro... Oceano, proprio in mezzo'*¹¹

This long list emphasises that the ship has been moving back and forth carrying with it many immigrants, which further indicates that many immigrants constantly move from place to place in search for a better living standard. In the last chapter, when Novecento explains why he could not leave the ship, he gives a statistic of the people that travel during each journey:

*'E qui il mondo passava, ma a duemila persone per volta'*¹²

Two thousand people travel on the ship each time which implies the continuous immigration. The reason immigrants travel to America is explained both in the book and the film. In the film, Novecento says:

'Tutta quella citta'...non si riusciva a vederne la fine...la fine del mondo'

⁸Novecento, Alessandro Baricco, page 46

⁹<https://cis.org/Report/Immigrants-United-States-1998>

¹⁰<https://cis.org/Report/Immigrants-United-States-1998>

¹¹Novecento, Alessandro Baricco, page 44

¹²Novecento, Alessandro Baricco, page 57

Movie: La Leggenda del Pianista sull'Oceano, Giuseppe Tornatore

America is seen as vast with high skyscrapers and for Novecento it did not have an end. The fact that Novecento describes New York as a massive city indicates that it can provide a better future for anyone for which reason the number of immigrants kept increasing during the 1900s. Overall, many immigrants moved to America between the 1900 and 1998 which reinforced the workforce, however, the immigrants' pay was lower than the natives, which again shows the difference between the two classes. In addition, as many of the immigrants belonged to a 'lower class' they did not have the opportunity to attend a school for which reason they were unqualified, and they remained in poverty.

In conclusion, I think that Baricco has portrayed the themes of immigration and poverty through a number of scenes even though he did not discuss these themes openly. The immigrants are shown as disadvantaged and they often travel to other parts of the world looking for better opportunities. In some cases, they abandoned their children as they could not afford to feed another mouth, and the same happened with Novecento. Both the 'upper' and 'lower class' travel on the Virginian however they are shown to be very different from one another due to their backgrounds. Novecento interacts better with the immigrants rather than the rich which shows that the two classes can struggle to mix, and a person tends to remain in the class they were born in. Novecento's character is pivotal in exploring the key themes as he acts as a conduct between the upper and working class.

Word count (without quotations): 1,489

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