Common People Like You: Jarvis, Jekyll and the British Fetishisation of the Working Class.

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According to the 1995 song *Common People* by Sheffield band Pulp, the proposition, 'I wanna sleep with common people like you,' was put to singer Jarvis Cocker by a 'well-to-do' girl 'from Greece [with a] thirst for knowledge [who] studied sculpture at Saint Martin's College.'¹ As the song became Pulp's breakthrough hit this proposition was immortalised into pop culture legend. *Common People* was described by Nick Keppler in the *Financial Times* in 2018 as 'rail[ing] against class tourism [and] the naïve desire of bohemian sons and daughters of fortune to blend into the underclass as some sort of cultural experience.'² For the Greek girl (alongside the other bohemian sons and daughters) the attraction to the eponymous "common people" was, according to Cocker in a 2006 BBC documentary *Pulp: The Story of Common People*, something that 'she found [...] exotic in some way.'³

Class identity itself now exists as a duality, that can be defined along economic or cultural lines, with both the economically rich but culturally poor and the economically poor but culturally rich able to self-identify as working-class. Conversely, both can claim the other is middle-class – largely as a pejorative – and therefore out of touch with the common people. Ironically, neither of these demographics leaves space for those who are both culturally and economically poor. This desire to identify as working- class in Britain stems from a perceived association of authenticity. Furthermore, as Cocker sings in *Common People*, this self-identification of British people as working- class has its roots in an inherent idea in Britain that 'think[s] that poor is cool.'⁴ Whilst the parameters of class identity have been realigned in post-

¹ Common People, written by Pulp: Jarvis Cocker, Russell Senior, Steve Mackay, Nick Banks and Candida Doyle. Produced by Chris Thomas (Island Records, London, 1995); *Pulp: The Story of Common People* dir. Paul Grant & Colin Stone. First broadcast on BBC Three 15 January 2006. [27:37 – 27:41]. www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3wUANrCwmU&t=60s. Accessed 7 May 2024; *Common People*, Ibid.

² Nick Keppler 'Pulp's Common People – railing against class tourism,' *Financial Times*, 11 May 2018.

³ Pulp: The Story of Common People, [28:37 – 28:40]. Accessed on 7 May 2024.

⁴ Common People.

Thatcher Britain this phenomenon of duality is not a new one. Social duality, particularly with the expansion of urban populations, has existed since at least the nineteenth century, and is arguably most famously explored in Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Both *Common People* and *Jekyll* are culturally important texts that are concerned with the disruptive nature of crossing class boundaries. Despite portraying images of Britain separated by more than one hundred years, this essay intends to show that both the song and the novella can be used in parallel to demonstrate both the class tensions in sex and the sexual tensions in class in Britain. Just as sleeping with and living like common people allowed the well-to-do to gain access to a perceived exotic underworld in 1990s Britain, the novella is concerned with homosexuality in nineteenth-century Britain in which any homo-curious gentlemen could slip into an illicit underworld.

With Cocker's compulsively commoving Casiotone riff twinkling in the background, this essay considers the extent to which *Common People* and *Jekyll* explore the dualities of class inherent in British identity. More specifically this essay will explore how sexual sociality was mediated by class through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Next, the aim is to investigate the ways in which class tensions emerged as a result of urbanisation, and how the class duality goes some way to reconcile it. By doing so, this essay aims to examine what is meant by "the common people" in present-day Britain and the socio-political implications of these assumptions.

A pivotal lyric of *Common People* is '[e]verybody hates a tourist, especially one who thinks it's all such a laugh.'⁵ Cocker is clear in recognising that the middle-class have no intention of actually being poor, simply playing at it. For example, whilst they can 'rent a flat above a shop [...] smoke some fags and play some pool,' Cocker states in *Common People* this is always done with the reassurance that 'if [they] call [their] dad, he could stop it all.'⁶ Class tourists who move from the world of the middle class to that of common people are able to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

exist to in both worlds. But this class tourism does not work both ways. Whilst Jekyll is able to indulge his vices in a transgressive class tourism that turns him into a monster, the appearance of Mr Hyde in the middle-class environment gives fellow gentlemen an unspecified 'strong feeling of deformity.'⁷ What the gentlemen in *Jekyll* recognise as the 'deformity' in Hyde is his working-class body, which does not fit inside Dr Jekyll's clothes.⁸ Similarly, whilst the Greek girl can enjoy her dalliances with the underclass there seems to be no suggestion that Cocker, or any of those same common people, will be invited or welcomed into the Greek girl's world of the well-to-do. Indeed, Cocker has to make do with a 'rum and coca cola.' This duality represents a larger, broader duality in class across cities in Britain that began with mass-urbanisation in the eighteenth-century and is now manifested in the gentrification of previously working-class neighbourhoods.

Dr Jekyll is described as a 'decent' gentleman who transforms into what Martin Danahay describes in *Dr Jekyll's Two Bodies* (2013) as the "indecent" body of a working-class man.⁹ Quite what Jekyll does with Hyde's 'indecent body' is never disclosed, but the reader is led to believe that it is both deviant and perhaps even criminal. It is initially implied that Hyde's main malfeasance is the transgression of class boundaries, however, there are heavy homosexual overtones in *Jekyll*. Consensual male homosexuality remained a crime in England until 1967 and Hyde's most criminal act that the viewer observes appears to be an attempted homosexual solicitation gone awry.

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (1985), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coined the term 'homosexual panic', where a homosexual rendezvous is at first invited, then violently and brutally rejected.¹⁰ In *Dr Jekyll's Closet* (1990), Elaine Showalter writes that *Jekyll* 'can be most persuasively read as a fable of fin-de-siecle homosexual panic.'¹¹ Hyde's murder of an elderly, wealthy MP Sir Danvers Carew after what

⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Reprint (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

⁸ Stevenson, Jekyll, 15.

⁹ Martin Danahay, 'Dr Jekyll's Two Bodies,' *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, Vol. 35 (1) (Taylor & Francis, 2013), 23.

¹⁰ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

¹¹ Elaine Showalter, 'Dr Jekyll's Closet,' *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle,* (New York: Viking, 1990), 4.

can be seen as an attempted sexual solicitation can be read as an incident of 'homosexual panic.' The pair meet on a street that is overlooked by a maid's window – indicating it is a backstreet – at around midnight. That a Member of Parliament was walking down a backstreet at midnight, stopping to talk to a working- class looking man – we do not know whether Hyde and Carew are strangers or if they have shared previous encounters – elicits some suspicion as to Carew's intentions. Carew, who is described as 'an aged and beautiful gentleman,' speaks to Hyde but Hyde does not respond.¹² Instead, Hyde attacks him, beating him to death with his cane. The murder of Carew resembles the incidents of inter-class homosexual solicitation and 'homosexual panic' in 1920s London as described by Matthew Houlbrook in his essay *Soldier Heroes and Rent Boys* (2003).

Although none of the incidents described in *Soldier Heroes* are fatal, there are multiple similarities between Carew and Hyde's encounter and some of the solicitations between guardsmen sex-workers and gentlemen in Piccadilly in the 1920s. Particularly the case of Roland B. in 1929, in which he pleaded self-defence for robbery with violence, and described how 'walking along Piccadilly, he had passed [his victim]' who 'looked very hard at [him].' On being invited to the gentleman's flat 'overtures were made which sent him mad.' Through this madness Roland then proceeded to beat the gentleman with 'punches and the blows of a chair leg.'¹³ The chain of events described is remarkably similar to the encounter between Hyde and Carew.

In *Dr Jekyll's Closet*, Showalter states that 'homosexuality had been a topic of considerable scientific and legal interest in 1886' and 'by the 1880s [...] the Victorian homosexual world had evolved into a secret but active subculture [therefore] for most middleclass inhabitants of this world, homosexuality represented a double life.'¹⁴ This double life is, Showalter implies, the one that Jekyll is living through Hyde. Showalter goes on to imply that Stevenson himself was bisexual or homosexual. That is not for this essay to discuss further, but

¹² Stevenson, *Jekyll*, 20.

¹³ Matthew Houlbrook, 'Soldier Heroes and Rent Boys: Homosex, Masculinities and Britishness in the Brigade of Guards, circa 1900-1960,'*Journal of British Studies* Vol. 42 (3) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 382.

¹⁴ Showalter, Dr Jekyll's Closet, 4.

one can assume that Stevenson was at the very least aware of these secret homosexual encounters happening when he was writing *Jekyll*.

It is never explicitly stated that Jekyll, or indeed Hyde, are homosexual. However, there is a large body of work that has applied queer theory to *Jekyll*, including Showalter and Kosofsky Sedgwick. There are also very clear homosexual undertones in Jekyll assuming the working-class body of Hyde in order to live a secret nocturnal double life. It is notable though, that the conflict in Jekyll's double life does not come from the contrast between being a respectable bachelor and being a homosexual, but instead that of being a gentleman and that of being a working-class man.

Carew is not the only character in Jekyll who can be read as queer. Indeed Dr Jekyll, and many of the novella's gentlemen characters, are all portrayed as bachelors. Utterson, the novella's protagonist is described as a man who 'is austere with himself.¹⁵ These austere bachelors live lives with temperance and repress their feelings in order to appear proper. This is further confounded by the fact that Utterson and Enfield walk along a street with 'shop fronts [that had] an air of invitation.¹⁶ Catching another man's eyes in the reflection in a shop window was a form of homosexual solicitation and whilst the shop fronts are 'inviting' Utterson does not stop to look. Utterson and Enfield know the practice but are able to resist. Furthermore, at first Utterson seems to assume that Hyde is a former scorned lover of Jekyll's. Perhaps Hyde is Jekyll's 'bit of rough' in the same way Cocker is to his Greek girl.¹⁷ According to Robert Luckhurst in his introduction to the OUP edition of Jekyll, there are 'half- uttered fears of Jekyll's friends over his relationship with Hyde' which 'allow the possibility of sexual dissidence to emerge.'¹⁸ It is precisely because they understand the homosexual relationship between gentleman Jekyll and working-class Hyde that they initially remain discreet. Early in the novella, Utterson suspects that Hyde is blackmailing Jekyll for 'some capers of his youth,' which also parallels the trials for blackmail against guardsmen recounted in Soldier Heroes.¹⁹

¹⁵ Stevenson, *Jekyll*, 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁷ Robert Luckhurst, 'Introduction,' *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) xxvi.

¹⁸ Luckhurst, 'Introduction,' xxvi.

¹⁹ Stevenson, *Jekyll*, 8.

Houlbrook describes the various accounts of blackmail as a way in which guardsmen sex workers were able to 'maintain [the] lifestyle' having 'become used to a life of luxury beyond their means' once their gentlemen companions 'got tired of [them].'²⁰ Whilst the upperclass gentleman may hold all the financial and social power in these relationships, the risk of having a double life disclosed left them exposed to corruption. Houlbrook notes that corruption 'provided a space within which guardsmen could justify their actions.'²¹ In both *Soldier Heroes* and *Jekyll* it is the working-class blackmailer that is seen as the accused guilty party, and in each case the blackmailed gentleman that must be pitied. The physicality of Roland B and the 'apelike' Hyde turn them from the victim of a socially powerful and predatory queer man into the perpetrators of savage and 'indecent' attacks.²²

In *Common People*, Cocker laments that common people 'drink and dance and screw because there's nothing else to do.'²³ That Jekyll only becomes Hyde after drinking a potion – to which he then becomes addicted – suggests that Stevenson had similar ideas about the pre-occupations and vices of the common people. In many of the cases referred to in *Soldier Heroes*, the guardsmen are invited up to a gentleman's apartment and plied with drinks by their prospective lovers, which allows them, like Jekyll, to surrender their agency and fall 'under evil influence.'²⁴ In order to – even temporarily – improve their prospects, the guardsmen seem to have 'nothing else to do [but to] drink and dance and screw.'²⁵

This duality was lived throughout the cities of Victorian Britain, particularly London and Stevenson's native Edinburgh. Whilst London is the setting for *Jekyll*, it is an unrecognisable and unnavigable London. For example, the East End of London and the West End can be separated by a single house. For Luckhurst, the disconcerting duality of Jekyll's house 'an imposing town house in a West End square that seems to have a back door that leads directly into a disreputable, lower-class area of the kind usually associated with slums,'

²⁰ Houlbrook, *Soldier Heroes*, 381.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Stevenson, Jekyll, 20; Danahay, Dr Jekyll's Two Bodies, 23.

²³ Common People.

²⁴ Houlbrook, *Soldier Heroes*, 381.

²⁵ Common People.

represents an urban London with a 'physical split [that] reinforces the division of personality.²⁶ This duality also existed in Edinburgh where the city is split between the New Town, with its geometric design and spacious, leafy Georgian townhouses, and the medieval Old Town, a crowded labyrinth of dingy alleyways. Edinburgh serves as a much better inspiration for *Jekyll*'s London, which exists in a mysterious duality of its own, almost London but not quite as anyone would recognise it, almost Edinburgh but not called as such.

Jekyll's London, therefore, represents the duality of urban Britain in the nineteenth century, where multiple identities occupied spaces, although these spaces were not necessarily shared harmoniously. With the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884 enfranchising working-class men and urban Britain expanding at a rapid pace, there were growing anxieties about a violent class war. To the gentlemen of *Jekyll*'s London, Hyde represents the ever-invasive 'Savage of Civilisation' which the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1888 warned 'we are raising by the hundred thousand in our slums.'²⁷ Whilst rich West Enders could indulge their vices in the East End, there was a great fear that the criminality of the East End was moving westward. The inhabitants of the East End were growing ever more resentful of West Enders travelling into the East End to indulge, Jekyll-like, in their sexual and/or criminal deviancies.

Even today, for example, the Victorian East End is remembered for the crimes of Jack the Ripper. That these brutal murders were committed by someone with some medical training against working-class sex workers suggests that this is another example of an educated West Ender carrying out their wanton depravities on (and in) the East End. More widely the ensuing scandal around the unsolved murders helped perpetuate in the press the idea of the East End as a feral, dangerous place, and therefore also somewhere salacious, exotic and exciting. Even in the 1880s, there was something exhilarating about the lives of the common people.

This is similar to how Cocker's Greek girl sees common people. She seeks to live amongst the common people in Hackney in order to indulge in her exotic fantasies, to live what Cocker reminds the listener is somewhat of an indulgent fantasy. Most crucially, just as Dr

²⁶ Luckhurst, Introduction, xxviii

²⁷ Pall Mall Gazette (08 September 1888), cited in L. Perry Curtis Jr., *Jack the Ripper and the London Press* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 126.

Jekyll only needs to revert to using the front entrance of his house rather than the back door in order to escape Hyde's world, the Greek girl can always wash off the grease and escape the life of the common people. Cocker's lover can 'rent a flat above a shop, cut [her] hair and get a job' but does not need to worry about 'watching [her] life slide out of view' like common people do.²⁸ There are no worries of having a double life exposed for Cocker's well-to-do Greek lover. When transformed into Hyde, Jekyll is able to establish an entire separate life in Hyde's London. However, whilst Jekyll's absence is not noted at all by his fellow gentlemen, the moment Hyde begins to appear in Jekyll's London the relationship becomes indiscreet and therefore disruptive.

But who are the common people? As a lot of traditional working-class jobs in manufacturing have disappeared from Britain, the idea of who is working-class, and what makes them working-class, has become less and less tangible. With the manufacturing jobs gone, a rising number of homeowners, thanks to right-to-buy and Britain in the midst of a boom in the 1990s, Geoffrey Evans and Jonathan Mellon note in 'Social Class' in the British Social Attitudes Survey (2016), that following the 1997 election, John Prescott 'supposedly announced "we're all middle class now.""²⁹ The old metrics by which class was measured had become blurred and Blair intended to 'liberate Britain from old class divisions.'30 In Music, politics and identity: from Cool Britannia to Grime4Corbyn (2017) Rhian E. Jones notes that in the mid-1990s 'working-class identity was linked with sexism, chauvinism and hedonistic excess, while middle-class was associated with education and experimentation.³¹ Jones says that New Labour's aspiration to make sure 'we're all middle-class now' meant that 'the existence of working-class identities could be overlooked or denied.'32 However, when Prescott and Blair had assumed that blurred class boundaries would mean more people would embrace their new economic middle-class identity, they did not anticipate the extent to which the British people would, as Cocker sings, 'think that poor is cool.'³³

²⁸ Common People.

 ²⁹ Geoffrey Evans & Jonathan Mellon, 'Social Class,' *British Social Attitudes Survey*. Vol. 33 (NatCen, 2016), 2.
³⁰ Tony Blair, *Leader's Speech at the Labour Party Centenary Conference in Bournemouth*, 27 September 1999. http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=205. Accessed 7 May 2024.

³¹ Rhian E. Jones 'Music, Politics and Identity: from Cool Britannia to Grime4Corbyn,' *Soundings*, Vol. 2017 (67) (Chadwell Heath: Lawrence & Wishart, 2017), 55.

³² Jones, *Music, Politics and Identity*.

³³ Common People.

As a result, rather than embracing their middle-class economic status, the British instead held on to their working-class roots. Class could now be constructed, or identified, along not just economic but also cultural lines. As *Jekyll* had shown, poor was dangerous, illicit and therefore also exciting. But poor was also honest. Crucially, poor was cool. Evans and Mellon found that 47% of respondents in managerial and professional roles, that they define as 'objectively middle-class,' self-identified as working-class.³⁴ Furthermore, almost a quarter (24%) of respondents who held these 'objectively middle-class' roles and whose father had also held a managerial or professional role still identified as working-class. So, there are bank managers and even bank managers who are the sons of fellow bank managers who still define themselves as being amongst Cocker's common people, despite being 'objectively middle-class.'

Take for example Baby Boomers who work or worked in managerial or professional occupations without a university education but with a mortgaged home, living economically middle-class lives but claiming to be working-class common people. Mellon and Evans call these 'the working class of the mind.'³⁵ Their university educated millennial children, however, might live in Hackney, rent flats above shops, cut their hair and get (low paying) jobs and watch their prospects of home ownership 'slide out of view.'³⁶ They may have grown up lower middle-class but now live within working-class economic lines.

Who is, and who is not, among the common people is explicitly defined in economic terms in Pulp's song. The Greek girl is studying sculpture at Saint Martins and has a thirst for knowledge. That is all we are ever told about her, and yet we know she is not one of the common people. But Cocker, despite being one of the common people, is also studying at Saint Martins, and presumably also 'has a thirst for knowledge.'³⁷ Therefore, whilst there is an economic barrier between Cocker and his Greek girl, their mutual access to cultural capital and thirst for knowledge seems to transcend that barrier.

³⁴ Evans & Mellon, *Social Class*, 7.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Common People.

³⁷ Ibid.

In *Split: Class Divides Uncovered* (2020), Ben Tippet states that 'a rigid distinction that says class is just about economics or culture is clearly a false binary.'³⁸ Class, Tippet states, 'is about global power and the vast economic inequalities it produces.'³⁹ So whilst the *Social Class* survey shows that in the face of evidence to the contrary, many Brits consider themselves to be common people, Tippet suggests that this is rooted in a sense of powerlessness rather than a desire to define oneself as working class. In a post-Thatcher, post-New Labour Britain where everyone feels powerless, everyone feels like they belong to the common people. Much like the gentlemen in *Soldier Heroes* and *Jekyll*, Cocker's Greek girl is aware of the power that her money gives her over Cocker and the other common people. Surrounded by anxious shoppers, she laughs at the idea of 'pretend[ing she's] got no money,' whilst Cocker mentions that he 'can't see anyone else smiling.'⁴⁰

In an interview with Q in 1996, Cocker described *Common People* as a song 'in the right place at the right time' tapping into social anxieties in the air, 'that kind of social voyeurism, slumming it, the idea that there's a glamour about low-rent, low-life.'⁴¹ In much the same way as Evans and Mellon identified a demographic that is 'the working class of the mind,' being "common" was glamourised as a simple, honest way of living.⁴² In the mid-90s there was what Christoph Singer calls in *"Poor Is Cool"* (2018) 'a pop-cultural movement towards a more naturalistic and gritty aesthetic' and a 'social (faux-)realism' which gave 'the white, well-off listener [...] a specific way of "slumming" and consuming the social Other.'⁴³ Cocker singles out *Parklife* (1994) by Britpop band Blur, in which middle-class singer Damon Albarn adopts a mockney accent to boisterously chant the chorus, as a particular example of this 'patronising social voyeurism.'⁴⁴

Pulp and their song *Common People* were co-opted by the Britpop and Cool Britannia movements that they neither claimed to nor aspired to belong to. In their 1996 rock music encyclopaedia *Rock: The Rough Guide*, Jonathan Buckley and Mark Ellingham describe Pulp

³⁸ Ben Tippet Split: Class Divides Uncovered (Pluto Press, London, 2020), 67.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Common People.

⁴¹ Phil Sutcliffe, 'Common As Muck!,' Q, March 1996.

⁴² Evans & Mellon, Social Class, 2.

⁴³ Christoph Singer "Poor Is Cool": The Working Class Myth in Pulp's "Common People"." *Resistance and the City* (Boston: Brill, 2018), 86.

⁴⁴ Sutcliffe, Common As Muck!

as '[s]tripping away the glamour from Britpop's idealisation of the working class.⁴⁵ For example, fellow Britpoppers Oasis, snarling with Hyde-like gristle, were keen to stress their working-class background, growing up both economically and culturally poor, but their songs did little to provide any social commentary on the working-class experience. In *Music, politics & identity* Jones notes that whilst Blur engaged in 'what they imagined to be edgy and exciting boorishness [...] of the lower orders' Oasis 'characterised ["working-class" music] as traditional white guitar rock' whose success was in its 'authenticity and accessibility.⁴⁶

But for Cocker, poor was not cool, nor was the life of the common people a simple one, nor was it to be idealised or coveted, nor something that could be play-acted. For Cocker common is defined as 'vulgar, coarse and rough-arsed,' descriptions that would fit Hyde.⁴⁷ In fact, Hyde's rampant savagery comes closer to Cocker's view of common people. 'There is that noble savage notion,' he explained of *Parklife* and the patronising social voyeurism, 'but if you walk round a council estate, there's plenty of savagery and not much nobility going on.'⁴⁸

To conclude, the image of the working class as portrayed in both *Common People* and *Jekyll* is one that is both pitied and desired, both exciting and intimidating. In both the reaction of the gentlemen of *Jekyll*'s London to Hyde and Cocker's Greek lover's proposition there is a notion of 'patronising social voyeurism' in which the power dynamics across the class boundaries are both exotic and erotic.⁴⁹ These titillating dualities are played out in modern urban Britain, as traditionally working-class neighbourhoods have been gentrified by the middle-class bohemian children that Keppler claims Cocker had 'railed against.'⁵⁰ The west/east, rich/poor borders that had historically defined London have been blurred, as have the traditional cultural and economic markers of class. This has led to a post-class delusion in which many people identify as working-class common people in order to either denounce their privilege or recognise their powerlessness, a phenomenon Jones calls 'a kind of class drag.'⁵¹ Because whilst the sentimental idea of a 'noble savage' had existed since the eighteenth

⁴⁵ Jonathan Buckley & Mark Ellingham eds. *Rock: The Rough Guide* (1st ed., Rough Guide, 1996), 699.

⁴⁶ Jones, Music, Politics and Identity, 55.

⁴⁷ Sutcliffe, Common As Muck!

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Keppler, *Pulp's Common People – railing against class tourism*.

⁵¹ Jones, *Music, Politics and Identity*, 54.

century, the dystopian image of common man portrayed by Cocker and Stevenson showed that there was little nobility to be found in, and little to be sentimental about, the savagery common people lived in, and absolutely no invitation for that noble savage to enter the civilised wellto-do middle-class world.

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