

Hello and welcome to Easy Stories in English, the podcast that will take your English from Okay to Good and from Good to Great! I am Ariel Goodbody, your host for this show. Today's episode is a conversation about class.

This is one of the most particular and touchy aspects of British society and culture. This is the one thing that if you understand it, you will understand how the UK runs. Social class: upper class, middle class, working class. This is something that exists, I think, in all cultures and societies around the world. There are some countries that claim to have eliminated class in their political systems, but it pretty much exists in one form or another in all societies around the world.

However, in the UK class is a very complex, multi-dimensional issue. It's a combination of economic, historical and cultural factors, and that's what I really want to focus on today: the cultural aspects of class.

Now, I'm titling this episode Who is Middle Class? because middle class identity is really where a lot of these questions form. Middle-classness in the UK has such particular associations, it has such particular ideals, tastes, representations, that it's really helpful to focus in on it in order to understand British society as a whole.

Generally, a lot of the outward perceptions of the UK, a lot of the stereotypes about the UK, about our politeness, our way of speaking, are, I would say, like a mishmash, a combination of both middle class and upper class traits. But certainly I think a lot of middle class people secretly aspire to that kind of old worldly Britishness, but they wouldn't necessarily admit it.

So this is gonna get easier, I think, as I start explaining things. So first of all, let me talk about myself.

I grew up in Bath. Bath is an extremely middle class city. It's very unequal in terms of wealth, in the sense that most of the city is very rich and it tends to be very homogenous, very similar culturally and ethnically. It's a very white place to be honest. Growing up, I did not know many people of colour, and I certainly didn't come into contact with a lot of different cultures and races and languages and, even I would say, with many working class people.

When you grow up in that kind of place, it can take you a while to realise how segregated you really are. For example, Bath is next to the city of Bristol, and growing up people would say things like, oh my God, Bristol is so dangerous, it's so dirty. Everyone is doing drugs. And I really bought into that for a long time. And then it was only as an adult, you know, living in Bristol, visiting Bristol a lot that I realised, that I was like, it's just a city. Like yeah, it has drugs and it has crime and you know, it's more diverse, but honestly that's just what a lot of cities are like. And then obviously when you look into the history of it, one of the reasons Bristol, for example, has a big Caribbean community is because of the transatlantic slave trade.

So I grew up being very middle class and not really being aware of that. And I would say that's very common in the UK. People tend to grow up in a class bubble, assuming that their world is normal and kind of making fun of people outside their world, or at the very least being perplexed, being confused by them.

One issue when talking about class, of course, is that it's not uniform and there aren't clear divisions between classes. We use a lot of very confusing terms, like we talk about 'middle middle' versus upper middle class and then the definition of upper class: sometimes people use it to mean landed gentry, as in people who have inherited titles such as Lord, Earl, Baron, and usually the land that comes with that. But then people also use upper class to just mean really, really rich.

Um, there was a meme I saw years ago that I think perfectly encapsulates, it perfectly summarises this, um, misunderstanding that happens a lot. It was talking about Bristol University. Bristol University is one of the, uh, highest ranking universities in the UK and I guess it has a bit of a reputation for having quite posh students.

So I should explain posh. Posh means fancy and rich and expensive and maybe a bit snobby. Poshness isn't necessarily linked to class. This is the confusing thing. Someone can be working class but appear posh compared to other people. Although I would say poshness is mainly associated with upper middle and upper classes. In fact, that's probably the strongest association.

But for example, in London going to Harrod's or Liberty, which are very expensive department stores, might be considered posh, whereas in Manchester, a more working class city, going to Marks and Spencer's would be considered posh, where in London, Marks and Spencer's, it's more expensive, but it's kind of just a supermarket.

But anyway, I'm getting ahead of myself. So this meme I saw about Bristol University said, 'I used to think I knew posh people until I went to Bristol Uni and I realised, I just knew people who ate olives.' As in, where this person was from, they thought they knew, you know, posh people, by which I guess we can say, you know, middle class, upper middle class people. Um, but then they just realised that, uh, their barometer, their way of judging poshness was something as trivial, as simple, as eating olives, right?

And food is an area where class comes into play in a large way. So the kind of foods you eat and the kind of foods you buy has a huge effect on how your class status is perceived.

Now, I would say my parents are much more oblivious about their class status than me in the sense that sometimes they say things that I find quite shocking, even growing up in a really middle class town like Bath. Because to me it suggests that they're very detached from the world outside their kind of liberal middle class bubble. Um, and I don't want to imply that my parents are like really awful or super, super posh. Um, I think like many people of a certain age, especially people working in like academia, where you really are isolated in a bubble, you know, you make assumptions about the world.

But for example, my dad, I've had conversations with him about like kebab shops or McDonald's, and for both of them, he said things like, yeah, but you would never eat at those places. And I was like, yeah I would, and I have. And the fact that he just assumed I would never even eat there, I found really telling.

So aside from, you know, fast food places, I would say middle class people are more worried about health with food. This has become a kind of a global thing, especially in America as well, this obsession with health food. But with the UK it's very interesting. A lot of, uh, foreign tourists come to the UK and they say, oh, we want to try traditional British food. But the truth is, you know, it's not like Italy where everyone eats Italian food. The more posh you are and the more aspirational you are with your class, the less actual like British food you will eat.

So growing up we had fish and chips maybe once a year. And when my parents cooked it was often like Italian food. Right? And this is very common, I would say, especially in London. I mean that's a bit different, I guess, because it's like a metropolitan city, but there is this sense of I want to eat, you know, Italian food and Japanese food. I want to be international. I don't want to be British because that's kind of old fashioned and working class and you know, I wanna show how different and knowledgeable I am about the world. And there are specific foods like pickle spread, for example, which is basically like a jam made of pickled vegetables, which is a very popular British food up north, for example, and maybe more among working class people, but growing up, we never had it.

I'm also aware that maybe some of the experiences I had growing up were just quite peculiar to who my parents were. But I don't know. There are so many things that I took for granted growing up that I realised when I was older, I was like, oh, this really is not the universal experience.

Accent is probably the quickest and clearest indicator of someone's class status in the sense that the middle classes tend to speak with a much more neutral accent. I'm kind of a prime example of that. I come from the West Country and the traditional West Country accent kind of sounds like this. I've talked about it a bit on the podcast before. It's kind of like a pirate or a farmer, but it's certainly not like a prestigious English accent. You know? It's not like something that people aspire to sound like when they're learning English. Um, but Bath is like this island of Received Pronunciation within the West Country, and generally you find that, that people, regardless of where they're born, if they're middle class, they will speak with a more posh standard English.

Now, I said Received Pronunciation, also known as RP. This is the like kind of prestige accent of English, right? The pronunciation that many people want to learn when they learn English, they say, I want to sound like a, a proper Englishman, or something like that.

The truth is proper RP is really only spoken by the upper classes and usually by people who go to private school and boarding school. What I speak would technically be classed as Southern Standard British English. When you hear pure RP, you really notice the difference.

This is kind of the way that Hugh Grant talks in his older films, you know, um, in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and in particular, I associate this accent with very posh people who I've met at, you know, universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, who tend to be very, very annoying and, um, completely oblivious to the level of privilege that they maintain over the, the rest of the country. You know, they think everybody grows up with a maid and going horse riding and going to private school and you know, frankly, going to Majorca. Well, not Majorca, that's where common people would go, but you know, going to their great aunt's castle in the summer. Such things, you know, going skiing, who doesn't go skiing? I mean, you absolutely must go skiing in Austria. If you haven't been skiing in Austria, you haven't lived.

That's proper RP. And as you can hear, it kind of comes with a certain, um, attitude. And many famous British people, especially actors, talk this way because unfortunately, the British acting industry, uh, it's very difficult to be a working actor generally, but in the UK, if you're not from a very wealthy background, it's particularly hard.

Another thing that middle class people love to do is listen to Radio Four. So the BBC, the British Broadcasting Corporation, has many radio stations and Radio Four is unique in that it's just talk radio. They play no music on Radio Four. So it's a mixture of interviews, panel shows, uh, audio dramas, the news and so on. And in particular, Radio Four has this just completely middle class sense about it. I really recommend, you might be able to listen to it for free in your country, and if not, you can certainly find clips on YouTube, but just listen to Radio Four and you'll hopefully understand what I mean. It's very liberal, left-leaning, it's very educated. It's a bit snobbish. There's a lot of shows about like gardening and literature and poetry and history and things of that nature.

And the show that really sums this up is *The Archers*. So *The Archers* is one of the longest running radio shows in the UK and it originally started, I think, after World War II or maybe during World War II as a way to talk about, um, agricultural techniques. So it was basically farmers talking about how to run a farm. And I'm not sure if it started off doing that as a drama series or it turned into a drama series, but it basically evolved into this drama

series about the life of a village in the West Country where I'm from. So if you really want to hear lots of West Country accents, this is the show to listen to.

But *The Archers* is so boring. Nothing happens. It's a very probably biased portrayal of, um, rural life in the UK. Like, it, it, it kind of probably is like a very middle class portrayal of what they think being a farmer is like. That's not to say it's not well written. Uh, I don't really listen to it, but my parents listen to it. My mum particularly listens to it quite religiously. But it's the kind of thing that middle class people like to listen to. I can't even really explain the appeal because as I said, it's, it's quite boring. And even though my mom listens to it a lot, she complains about it constantly. So I dunno.

All I will say is there's this one character called Linda Snell. And Linda Snell is incredibly posh and she kind of talks like this, and her role in the series is to just be this really socially incompetent woman who's always sticking her foot in things and um, looks down on everyone else. And she kind of represents the like, um, upper class villain, I guess, who is really, really well intentioned, but, you know, secretly probably looks down on everyone, uh, probably doesn't even realise herself. So, yeah.

Finally, I would say that middle class people are defined by an anxiety. Middle class people are anxious to remain at the same level of wealth that they have or to become more wealthy. So, at the same time, they look up to the upper class and envy them, but because of this kind of ingrained liberal set of values that middle class people have, they often, you know, are against the upper classes as a concept, and this is the area where it varies the most. But, um, my parents or my mum represents, I think a very common middle class idea, which is, well, when I grew up, I went to private school, but fundamentally I'm against private schools as an institution, so I'm going to send all of my children to state schools, as in public schools, um, because that's more fair.

But then what do they do? They still want their kids to succeed, so they send them to after-school clubs and they get them private tutors and they all learn to play an instrument and they all go to drama clubs and stuff like that. So it's this kind of anxiety to be equal and progressive, but also still kind of fixing the odds, yeah? Still kind of loading the deck so that your children will succeed.

It comes from this sense that being really, really posh nowadays in British society isn't necessarily super desirable because a lot of people are going to resent you and a lot of people are gonna think you're completely out of touch. So there's a lot of kind of wrangling and fighting over what is the right level of poshness to be, I guess.

So how can you tell like an upper class person from a middle class person, aside from accent? Private school. As I mentioned, they're much more likely to go to private school or boarding school. If they're going to places like Eton, these really, really elite boarding schools then they're like automatically in that category, usually. They love horse riding. They love lacrosse, the sport lacrosse. Um, there's certain shops that are really popular for like really posh people. Like, uh, Jack Wills, I think, is one of them. And there's also a way of dressing. Um, it's often like kind of associated with the countryside because these people often live in big houses in the country, so they often wear chinos, a kind of trousers, collared shirts with sweaters over them. If they have, um, tweed patches on their elbows, then they're like really upper class. They're often wearing Wellington boots or wellies, um, because they're outside a lot. They often have a lot of pets, dogs, horses, and so on. And they, they often kind of have like these really red cheeks. I don't know.

There's even certain like, facial structures. I, I think because of the history of class and British society, the upper classes in particular maybe have less genetic diversity than, um, the general population. So there's something that, um, my ex said. He studied at, uh, Trinity

in Cambridge or St. John's, one of the two. These are the two kind of richest colleges in Cambridge and actually Trinity College in Cambridge owns like a third of all land in the country. It's insane.

Um, but he went to one of them and he said, yeah, I think it was St. John's, and he said, at St. John's you see about three faces. Everyone has one of three faces because they all look the same essentially. So I can kind of clock an upper class person based on their physiognomy, their facial features.

And then finally there's this kind of social attitude, which I would call bullshitting. Especially if you go to private school and boarding school, you're kind of taught that like the world is yours and that if you are not clever or skilled enough for something, you still deserve it. So these people often learn to be very charming and charismatic and to be able to talk themselves out of pretty much any situation and to never kind of feel ashamed.

So an example, I worked just as a technical assistant at Marlborough College, which is this really, really fancy boarding school. It's actually the most expensive boarding school in the country. And there was some student there who just was failing all his exams. He was doing really badly. He was doing no work, but he was always very cheery about it. And basically it was like he knew that, it's like, well, my family's really rich. It doesn't really matter if I keep failing 'cause I'm going to succeed out there in the world. He has the connections, he has the money, and he has the opportunities. So really what grades he gets doesn't, doesn't matter because he's still gonna succeed. He can just bullshit his way through life. So, uh, that's one thing maybe I'm jealous of.

And then if we're talking about particularly working class signifiers, like what makes someone working class? It's difficult, 'cause a lot of the things are stereotypes. And this is something where I don't want to say too much because it would come across as me like looking down on people. And I'm aware that, as I say that, that's a very middle class attitude. Like, oh my God, I don't want to offend anyone. But I think it's, it's kind of true.

It also varies a lot by region because working class culture tends to be a lot more tied to particular areas. Historically, working class people have had less social mobility and as a result they have stayed in the same area for longer and therefore the culture of places like Liverpool and Manchester is predominantly a working class culture.

But there is this image, it's often referred to as like the chav, right? That this stereotype of like a working class person who wears a tracksuit, like a sports outfit, sports clothes, spends a lot of money on alcohol and cigarettes, wears a hoodie. These people do exist. You might have seen pictures of it online as like a representation of like British culture. Um, but I would say it's not this omnipresent thing.

I don't know. I feel like there's a lot of like memes online about this side of British culture. It used to be something that people only really knew about within the UK and now it's become more well known internationally. But it really depends where you are. I don't see it very much at all in London, to be honest. But then keep in mind, I grew up in Bath. I've lived in Bath, Oxford, Cambridge, London, and, okay, I did live in the middle of nowhere in Devon, so that was like my like kind of taste of working class life, I guess. Um. But it, it's not my experience, you know?

And then even supermarkets are really stratified by class. So at the bottom we have Aldi and Lidl, then we have Morrison's and Asda, which are maybe like a step above Aldi and Lidl. Tesco's is this like grey area where pretty much anyone of any class can shop at Tesco's comfortably. It's a budget supermarket, but it's also not like really, really cheap like Aldi or Lidl.

Sainsbury's is the quintessential middle class supermarket. You go to Sainsbury's and you think, oh, well I'm not going to M&S or Waitrose, so I'm not super, super posh. But actually Sainsbury's is relatively quite posh compared to some of the ones I just mentioned. I grew up going to Sainsbury's with my family, thinking it was the normal supermarket, right? And then I realised at a certain point that uh, for a lot of people, Sainsbury's is quite posh.

As I just mentioned, Marks and Spencer's, or M&S, and Waitrose are kind of considered the posh fancy supermarkets. And then I think just within London, they might exist elsewhere, there are these department stores which also have supermarkets. So there's Selfridges and Harrod's, which are very nice, very expensive.

And then at the very top, there's Fortnum & Mason's and Liberty. And I put them in a separate category because Saudis, people from Saudi Arabia, rich Saudis come to London and they go and spend all their money at Selfridges and Harrod's. But to British people, if you are really posh, if you are really fancy, you don't go to Selfridges or Harrod's, you go to Fortnum & Mason's or Liberty. So it's like even a step above that.

As an example, I've explored Liberty out of curiosity 'cause it's a beautiful old building. There's lots of interesting products there. I found a life-sized animatronic tiger there. So a, a fake tiger, the size of a real tiger, that moved around and made noises, and it cost over 13,000 pounds. One, three, oh, oh, oh. It cost about, I think, 13,497 pounds. That I just, it's just impossible to even understand or comprehend who would buy such an, an animatronic tiger, why such an animatronic tiger even exists. But there we go. That's the world of Liberty.

So I will say London, you end up shopping, I think, more at a variety of supermarkets, 'cause you often go food shopping when you're out and about. And also, it's not like people never go into one shop if they're of a certain class status. In my lifetime, I've shopped regularly at Aldi, Lidl, Tesco's, Sainsbury's, M&S and Waitrose. So I've like kind of been all over the place. I've never shopped regularly at Fortnum & Mason's or Liberty because my wallet would not recover.

But to be fair, I think middle class people shopping at Lidl and Aldi has mainly become more popular since the cost of living crisis. And there's still often this kind of sense of like, ooh, I'm undercover here. Like I'm just here to get a cheap deal, but this isn't where I belong. Or you'll mix and match, right? Like you'll go to Aldi and Lidl for the basics, but then you might go to Waitrose to get some really nice vegetables or like a nice bottle of champagne. That's the kind of stuff that middle class people do.

Now there is one area where the upper and middle classes really come together and form a united front, and that is looking down on the working class. I know that sounds awful, but there are specific practices that I would say are frowned upon, that are looked down upon.

So one is tanning and I think, mmm, maybe specifically fake tanning. And then in general, there's this whole kind of aesthetic of very heavy makeup bleached hair, fake tan, lip fillers, cosmetic surgery, plastic surgery, that's associated with a kind of working class party girl, especially from areas such as Essex and Leeds, and this is really looked down upon by like middle and upper classes.

And it's interesting 'cause the public discourse around plastic surgery has changed a lot in the past 10 years. And now there's generally this idea through social media that like, oh, your body is your body. If you wanna get plastic surgery, that's your decision. And I'm like, fair enough, but I still think plastic surgery looks awful on most people and I don't think people should do it, so, maybe that's just my middle class status coming out.

Another thing that they look down upon is ultra-processed food. I've kind of talked about McDonald's and stuff like that, but there's this idea of, you know, you shouldn't fill your body

with that crap and what's considered like junk food or cheat food that's okay to eat varies hugely in this category.

Another thing that's quite specific is package holidays. So you know, these holidays where you pay for the flights, the hotels all in one. That's really looked down upon, to the extent that I've never been on a package holiday, and I actually don't know many people who have been on package holidays. I mean, on these holidays, often you're just, as far as I can tell, sitting by a pool in a hotel, drinking cheap alcohol, and I really don't see the appeal of that. But yeah, there's this thing middle class people really have of like, I need to plan my own holiday and I'm not going to a hotel, I'm going to a villa, and we're gonna go do something a bit different, you know? And we're gonna, we are gonna sample the authentic culture.

And then really generally, now this is especially looked down upon by the upper classes, but also a lot by the middle classes, is coming across as new money or nouveau riche. So new money or nouveau riche means your family came into money relatively recently and therefore you spend your money on things like designer clothes, sports cars, designer watches, massive mansions, eating out at really fancy but not particularly well-cultured restaurants, getting things like gold flakes on your food, all of this weird kind of stuff that has been invented for rich people.

And I talked about before, Saudis coming, rich Saudis coming to London and going shopping in Harrod's and Selfridges, and that kind of, um, encapsulates a lot of, uh, this like new-money-phobia, I guess, that the middle and upper classes have. I'd say it's often seen a lot with like rich Chinese tourists, um, and then you see it from the working class people who, you know, pull themselves up, right?

There's even a word. It's, it's a bit of a fancy word, but you can say parvenus, right? Parvenus. It comes from French. It means like just arrived. And it's these people who, they've just arrived at wealth, they've not gained wealth and like this idea of passing down the knowledge and culture of being rich and not just the actual money. They haven't earned that over several generations. So they spend their money very lavishly. They display their wealth, whereas a lot of upper class people really hide their wealth. If they have a lovely house, they'll keep it far out of sight. They'll buy a mixture of both designer and then normal clothes from places like H&M. They will speak with an accent, but they'll avoid talking really openly about huge expenses in certain spaces. So they're very tactical about how they display their wealth. When they're among their own kind, they'll say lots of things that they wouldn't say elsewhere.

There are ways to display your wealth when you're middle class, but you're not allowed to do it overtly. You kind of have to do it in a subtle way. So pretty much all of these markers I've talked about, like the place you shop at, your attitude towards child rearing, tastes in clothing and things like that, these are subtle ways of showing wealth without outright saying it.

So this is all very interesting for me to consider, given that I'm about to move to China, which allegedly is a classless society. I actually don't know if people in China still make that claim. Uh, I know certainly a lot of communist countries historically have claimed to have abolished class, that they got rid of class. But I think this is rarely the case. And the thing with human culture is that, no matter what we do, um, we are always gonna develop these ways of showing we belong to a certain group and we're excluding another group. So it's, I think, pretty much impossible to completely eradicate class.

Interestingly enough, within recent years, because of the economic situation of the world, the actual number of middle class by economic levels has shrunk. There are far fewer

people who are in this comfortable category of middle class in the West, but I think culturally in the UK it's still very relevant and a lot of the issues with British politics, a lot of the issues with things like Brexit, are because we live in these bubbles and we don't really understand other classes, people from different backgrounds. We still kind of see the world in quite an antiquated way.

I would say London is very much a place where many people arrive here and kind of, whether consciously or subconsciously, try to climb up the class ladder, because London gives you a lot of access to culture, job opportunities, and just experiencing a rich mixture of life that allows you to kind of move beyond your class status, if that makes sense.

And there is a very common phenomenon of working class people going to university, often being the first in their family to go to university, and then when they come home everyone's like, you've changed. We can't relate to you anymore. You've got ideas above your station. You've become too fancy.

Um, anyway, that's enough to go into for now. Um, I have to literally run now to my hot yoga class. It's like 28 degrees today. We're having a heat wave and I'm off to do hot bloody yoga and I'm going to sweat so much I might actually die. So that's fun.

Um, but yeah. Anyway, thanks for listening to this episode of Easy Stories in English. And if you would like even more stories from me, you should buy my books. Look, I've blabbed on enough in this episode and generally in life about self-promotion and things. So I'm just gonna leave. I need to get to my hot yoga class.

You know me, you love me. Subscribe to the podcast. Buy me a coffee on Kofi. Go to the website. Join my email newsletter. Tell all your friends about Easy Stories in English. Um, dream about me at night. Write my name in your diary. Put hearts around it. Go to Fortnum & Mason's and buy me - no, even better! Go to Liberty and buy me a 13,000 pound animatronic tiger and send it to me here in London. Oh, I can't wait! Uh, actually, maybe send it to China 'cause it's gonna be very expensive to ship a 13,000 pound animatronic tiger.

Alright, that's enough of me. Bye!