

## **Adoption and Class in Victorian England**

**Claudia Nelson**  
**English and Women's Studies,**  
**Texas A and M University**

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In Victorian England, foster care arranged by impoverished biological parents was typically labeled “baby farming” and viewed as infanticide waiting to happen, while care arranged by the state or by a philanthropic organization might be viewed much more positively. There was a widespread belief among the middle and upper classes that society would benefit if their emissaries could take charge of the children of the poor, even (especially?) if this meant severing existing ties between child and biological parents. Indeed, the trend over the century was increasingly to remove children from birth families and transfer them to the more “responsible” care of the institution or the financially solvent colonial or rural employer. If workhouses, say, with their high child-mortality rates and inadequate food, were not necessarily a physical improvement on the child’s original environment, they were officially regarded as /morally/ healthier than life with an improvident parent.

Notice that the third leg of this “adoption triangle” is not the adoptive parent, but rather the state or charity. While middle-class adoptions of working-class children sometimes occurred, they were unusual, and not infrequently failed. This paper will examine the tension between the belief that an environment shaped by middle-class principles could overcome the defects often assumed to accompany working-class heredity, and the belief that the barriers between proletariat and bourgeoisie were sufficiently great that adoption, in the modern sense of the term, was best confined to the more affluent reaches of society. Although Victorian England enacted no adoption law, Victorian fiction and nonfiction tends to approve the idea of adoption in principle—but only within certain parameters.