

THE ELIZABETHAN WORLDVIEW: THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

Other than a “class” of students, there are several dictionary definitions of “class” in its social meaning:

- a social stratum sharing basic economic, political, or cultural characteristics, and having the same social position: *Artisans form a distinct class in some societies.*
- the system of dividing society; caste.
- social rank, especially high rank.
- the members of a given group in society, regarded as a single entity.
- any division of persons or things according to rank or grade:

Hotels were listed by class, with the most luxurious ones listed first.

England has been famous for the severe division of its people into very strict social distinctions. The “Great Chain of Being” was a concept that ordered all of the world into higher and lower groups. There was absolutely no allowance to move from one class to another, as it was said to be ordained by God.

God: is pure intelligence.

Angels: have pure intelligence.

Nobles: blessed with higher intelligence.

- King
- Queen
- Prince
- Princess
 - Man
 - Woman
 - Child

Commoners: capable of intelligence.

- Man
- Woman
- Child

Animals: not capable of intelligence.

Plants: not capable of intelligence.

Rocks (minerals): not capable of intelligence.

Imagine, if you were born a commoner, you were considered to be somewhat stupid, and therefore incapable of great things, and not even worthy of being treated well. This was not thought of as an opinion; this was considered fact! Even if you were the smartest “commoner” ever to be born, the social system had you pegged as stupid, and even if you proved it somehow, you probably wouldn’t be believed. For example, Dogberry and his men are the first to know that Hero is innocent, and are initially disbelieved and dismissed by Leonato. Their language is comically confused. They are lower class, and yet they have the knowledge that sorts out the entire play.

Today, a great example of how class systems can, and should, be overcome is the recurring fame of Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was an illegitimate orphan born in the West Indian Islands, who immigrated to America. On the strength of his intelligence and hard work alone, he became one of the most influential leaders of the American Revolution. He shaped the Constitution and our current financial system.

Try This!

- Have you ever heard someone in your family make a negative comment about another person based on their background or ethnic origin?
- Have you ever made a comment or thought something negative about another person based on their background or ethnic origin? Be honest with yourself.
- Write a paragraph explaining where you think negative perceptions of certain groups come from. If you have trouble, ask your family and friends. The answer is not necessarily buried in history; it might be right in front of you at school or in your community.

Reflection: How do you think negative perceptions of people get perpetuated? Do you think you have certain negative perceptions you weren’t aware of before?