

"MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN AND HONOURABLE BOARDS"

Narrative Audience and Social Criticism

in Our Mutual Friend

A Thesis

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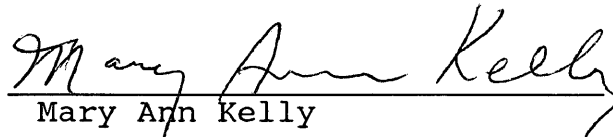
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ABSTRACT

Many Victorian novels assumed the existence of a narrative audience, Jane Eyre's, to whom Charlotte Bronte's narrator, speaking of George Rochester, confides, "Reader, I married him," being perhaps the best-known. This thesis examines the function of the narrative audience of Charles Dickens's Our Mutual Friend.

Through Our Mutual Friend, Dickens wanted to change the manner in which Victorian England treated its pauper class. The Poor Law Amendment of 1834, which established parish workhouses to house them, exemplified society's attitude toward the poor. The harsh practices of the workhouses so intimidated paupers that many died of starvation and exposure rather than enter them. Our Mutual Friend's narrator addresses a narrative audience of Parliamentarians and bureaucrats whom he blames for the Poor Law.

But for Dickens this audience did not represent the novel's readers. Although implicated in many incidents of pauper abuse, the audience does not express regret for its prejudice and misdeeds. Dickens intended actual readers to be spurred by this apathy and by the circumstances of paupers such as Betty Higden to reform the Poor Law and treat the poor humanely.

"MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN AND HONOURABLE BOARDS" \

The reader of Our Mutual Friend quickly realizes that Dickens did not write the novel simply to entertain his reading public. From the first pages of the novel, it is clear that Our Mutual Friend is a critique of Victorian culture. Even the dedication, to Sir James Emerson Tennent, the permanent secretary of England's Poor Law Board from 1852 to 1867, relates the work to a controversial social issue. And the first chapter, with its description of characters dredging the Thames for corpses "in these times of ours," is a dark introduction to Dickens's England. But the urban violence represented by the drowning victims is just one of the social ills to which Our Mutual Friend refers. Among others, it also refers to urban waste, the pretensions of the middle class, Parliamentary election fraud, and Ragged School mismanagement. But Dickens particularly intended the novel as a work of social criticism to influence Victorian readers to reform the Poor Law Amendment of 1834 and to treat the poor with dignity.

To do so, he provides the reader with the negative example of a narrative audience that is unperturbed by the mistreatment of the poor. Asides to this audience, "Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards" (227, 228, 232), are commonly interjected into parts of the narrative which

depict Betty Higden or speak of England's paupers. But the audience is not affected by these diatribes against the Poor Law and the mistreatment of paupers. And it does not initiate the reforms for which the narrator calls. For instance, asked to mark paupers' graves with the names of the deceased, it reportedly responds, "It would be too sentimental" (569). Gerald Prince, in his seminal work on narrative audiences, "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," argues that no narrator directly addresses actual readers, that the interior audience of a narrative, or narratee, is a creation of the author's just as is its narrator (Prince, "Introduction" 7). Dickens created the interior audience of Our Mutual Friend in order to arouse the reader's compassion for the poor. He wanted the reader to distance himself from the nonchalance of the fictional audience and rectify the abuses associated with the Poor Law.

Of course, the narrator is just one of the voices of Our Mutual Friend. The voice which cries out concerning society's lack of charity, "verily, my lords, and gentlemen, and honourable boards...it is a pass impossible of prosperity, impossible of continuance" (556), is that of a social critic. But within the novel there are more conservative voices, such as Podsnap's, which deny the need for social criticism. Podsnap, unlike Dickens, would limit art to that which sanctions the status quo, "descriptive of

getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter-past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven" (152). There are also points of view more hopeful, albeit less practical, than that of the asides. For instance, as she gazes into "'the hollow down by the flare'" (46), Lizzie Hexam envisions a successful future for her brother. But she is not the only character who has visions of better times. Crippled Jenny Wren dreams of angelic visitors, "'long bright slanting rows of children'" (806), who meliorate her pain. Jenny and Lizzie use their imaginations to envision solutions to their problems. Imaginative vision is also the basis for the pleas for reform in the narrative asides. The narrator wants his audience, unlike Podsnap, to recognize the need for social change and to work toward a society which would provide for its poor.

Our Mutual Friend was written near the end of a career in which its author often spoke out on social issues. For Dickens, writing short stories and novels was, among other things, a means of exercising his self-appointed duty of social critic. He was reticent to write about his intentions for his fiction, stating in the preface to the Cheap Edition of his works, for instance, that "it is not for an author to describe his own books. If they cannot speak for themselves, he is likely to do little service by speaking for them" (qtd. in Collins 180).¹ But he did often

express the wish that his books would help reform Victorian society.

In 1841, to the Reverend Thomas Robinson, Dickens boasted, "I will pursue cruelty and oppression, the enemy of all God's creatures of all codes and creeds, so long as I have the energy of thought and the power of giving it utterance" (qtd. in Rantavaara 177). The idea of social reform reoccurs in Oliver Twist's preface, which he wrote in the same year. In the preface, he justifies the depiction of London's criminal class in the novel by arguing that a realistic account of criminals punished for their crimes "would be a service to society" (Oliver Twist xv) by dissuading readers from committing crimes.

As a reformer, Dickens spoke out concerning a number of social issues, but the injustice caused by the Poor Law Amendment was an issue to which he often returned. Humphry House, in his classic analysis of Dickens's social conscience, The Dickens World, says that the novelist was "more consistent and convincing" (House 92) in denouncing the Poor Law than in speaking out on any other issue. Whether or not the legislation was Dickens's most frequent concern, both his first true novel, Oliver Twist, and his last completed novel, Our Mutual Friend, refer to paupers and the pauper legislation. Among the more poignant and well-remembered scenes in Dickens is that of the young Oliver Twist, emboldened by hunger, asking the master of the

pauper orphanage for "More" (Oliver Twist 12). And the scene in Our Mutual Friend depicting the death of Betty Higden as she flees from the public charity administered in parish workhouses so affected A. C. Swinburne that he called it "the most nearly intolerable tragedy in all the tragic work of Dickens" (qtd. in House 103).

Several of Dickens's novels refer to public institutions such as the parish workhouses: Bleak House to the Chancery, Little Dorrit to the civil service and the Marshalsea Prison, David Copperfield to the Doctor's Commons, as well as Oliver Twist and Our Mutual Friend to the workhouses. But despite the political nature or associations of these institutions, some Victorian critics ignored the political criticism of the novels. For instance, Albert Canning, writing in 1880, asserted that the novelist rarely mentioned politics (Canning 283, 307-08). Our Mutual Friend, with its many asides to "My Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards," published fifteen years earlier, contradicts his assertion.

Canning is only a moderate example of those who deny the reformative political aims of the novels. A more extreme Dickens critic, Susan R. Horton, insists that the reformist passages in the novels are emotional and vague. She says the reader of Dickens "is left feeling both aware of a social evil and urged most strongly to do something and yet absolutely bereft of any suggestions of what he might

do" (Horton 36).² Dickens's own statements may have contributed to this misinterpretation. Through his final public appearances, he expressed skepticism about the abilities of politicians to initiate reform and even to govern, saying in a speech given early in 1870, "I have little faith in the people who govern us" (qtd. in Wall 174). But he did not voice doubts about the possibility of reform. In the same speech, he said, "I have great confidence in the People whom they [politicians] govern" (qtd. in Wall 174). And despite his misgivings about politicians, he calls on both them and "the People" in his novels and periodicals to remedy political and social problems.

Between 1858 and 1861, for instance, both Household Words and All The Year Round published articles critical of England's parish pauper tax. The fundamental complaint of the articles was that the tax distributed the financial burden of caring for paupers inequitably. Parishes in which more of the poor resided were taxed more heavily than other parishes, yet were less able to provide for the poor. An 1859 article in All The Year Round, "A Sum in Fair Division," called for a more equitable levying of the tax throughout the country as an 1858 Household Words article, "Parish Poor in London," had for a more equitable levying in the city of London (Cotsell, "Newspapers" 90fn). Dickens later wrote a piece for All The Year Round, which, while

describing a London workhouse, again called for tax reform. The article, "Wapping Workhouse," is a generally favorable account of the workhouse's practices and administration, sympathetically depicting the matron as a "quick little matron--for whose adaptation to her office I [Dickens]...conceived a genuine respect" (Uncommercial Traveller 23). But, Dickens notes, the workhouse buildings need renovating. And since the parish in which the workhouse lies is already over-taxed, tax rates ought to be made more equitable. He continues, "It is only through the equalisation of the Poor Rates that what is left undone in this wise can be done" (Uncommercial Traveller 27).

Among Dickens's last pleas for Poor Law reform are those in Our Mutual Friend. Dickens sometimes addressed the matter of his intentions for, or justified the contents of, a novel in prefaces added to second or later editions. Our Mutual Friend is unique among his novels in that it has a postscript rather than a preface. And it is in the postscript of Our Mutual Friend that the Poor Law is most soundly denounced: "there has been in England since the days of the STUARTS, no law so often infamously administered, no law so openly violated, no law habitually so ill-supervised" (898).

Contrary to the claims of critics such as Horton, Dickens's rhetoric was as factual and specific in his novels as it was in his articles. He objected to social criticism

which caricatured or simplified social issues, protesting in one instance that a series of George Cruikshank sketches, "The Drunkard's Children," oversimplified the causes of drinking (Paroissien 32). And he often defended the factual basis of the characters or issues in his novels (e.g. he says in the preface to Oliver Twist of Nancy Sikes's behavior, "IT IS TRUE" [Oliver Twist xvii]).

Like other Dickens novels, Our Mutual Friend refers to controversial social issues and institutions. However, by dedicating the novel to Tennent and denouncing the Poor Law in the Postscript, Dickens indicated that he intended the novel to spur his readers to reform Victorian England's welfare legislation. Although Tennent was an administrator of the Poor Law, the dedication of the novel to him "As a Memorial of Friendship" (v) is not ironic. Michael Cotsell suggests that Tennent disliked the problems resulting from the legislation as much as Dickens did (Cotsell, Companion 15). Thus, even in the dedication, Dickens criticizes the Poor Law, albeit obliquely.

The final chapter of Our Mutual Friend is a more direct criticism of society's lack of compassion for the lower classes. There are incidents throughout the narrative which illustrate the careless disregard for paupers by the middle-class and aristocrats, such as Podsnap's dismissing the topic of the starving poor "with that flourish of his arm which added more expressively than any words, And I remove

it from the face of the earth" (166). Yet the narrator assumes in "Chapter the Last" that some members of the narrative audience would still like to mingle with the characters at the dinner. The text reads, "The Veneerings have been, as usual, indefatigably dealing dinner cards to Society, and whoever desires to take a hand had best be quick about it" (889). With the second phrase, the narrator satirizes the desire of the audience ("whoever") to attend the dinner in light of the Veneerings' imminent bankruptcy.

The topic of discussion at the dinner--the propriety of Eugene Wrayburn's marrying Lizzie--is indicative of the unwillingness of much of Victorian society to better the condition of the lower classes. According to Twemlow, Dickens's mouthpiece in the scene, Lizzie Hexam becomes a "'greater lady'" as a result of marrying Wrayburn. As House notes, she becomes "'greater'" only in the sense of bettering her status (House 93), since she is already more virtuous than her husband. (There is uncertainty until his nearly fatal mugging by Bradley Headstone whether Wrayburn will force himself on the young woman.) But this bettering is mostly theoretical since she is ostracized by most of London society. Still, she is one of only a few members of the lower classes in the novel who even theoretically improve their social position because of the compassion of others. Polite society exhibits little concern for the lower-class characters. Cotsell astutely remarks that

there remains a gap between the bearing of [the

novel's] overt and insistent rhetoric and the novel's central deep and tentative exploration of the possibility of a society's rebirth....In the radiance at the novel's end, the 'many, many, many' are somehow forgotten: their condition does not remain at the center of moral preoccupation. (Cotsell, "Newspapers" 89)

The social circle of the Veneerings, the Podsnaps, and Lady Tippins is not disturbed by the conditions of the lower classes. "Chapter the Last" (889) depicts yet another of its exclusive dinner parties. At the dinner, the socialites, with the exception of Twemlow, speak disparagingly of Lizzie. And although Twemlow in commending Lizzie is "The Voice of Society" (889), he does not speak for the other characters. Lightwood recognizes that Twemlow's opinion is unique in that circle: "He had been asking himself, as to every other member of the Committee in turn, "I wonder whether you are the Voice [of Society]!" But he does not ask himself the question after Twemlow has spoken" (895). As a gentleman aristocrat, Twemlow is an anachronism. His is the moral voice of society, not heeded by the nouveaux riches, who predominate in the social circle of "Chapter the Last" (889). Their positions, however, are not as secure as they seemed at the beginning of the novel. The Veneerings, representative nouveaux riches figures with their "bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London" (20), face financial ruin. They will be forced to emigrate to the Calais, where the sea ("Neptune and others" [889]) will be Veneering's only audience, a severe let-down for one who

prides himself on the number of his "dearest and oldest friends" (889). But even the Veneerings' bankruptcy will not alter the constitution or the temperament of polite society. The social circle depicted in the last chapter is generally unsympathetic toward the plights of the workers and the poor. And the narrative audience, which would like to be at the dinner, is not affected by society's lack of concern.

The audience's attitude, however, does not call into question the efficacy of Dickens's intention for the novel. The novel is conducive to reform even though the readers referred to in the text are unaffected by the narrator's pleas. Prince's narrative theory, by differentiating between the interior and exterior audiences of narratives, provides the critical framework for reading the novel as more than a reformist novel manque. Although the audience within the novel is not aroused, Victorian readers were meant to be aroused by the novel to envision a more just society and initiate social change.

Our Mutual Friend alludes to its audiences not only when it addresses politicians but also when it mentions reading and readers. The postscript justifies the plot to "a class of readers and commentators" (897) and excuses "many readers" (897) for not following the subtleties of the plot. Within the story, Eugene Wrayburn speaks to Mortimer Lightwood of interpretation, or "'Reading, in its critical

use'" (597), and Lightwood responds by requesting that Wrayburn "'speak a little more soberly and plainly'" (598), indicating that he does not understand the remark. The remark, which Richard A. Altick calls a "curiously gratuitous digression" (Altick 248), serves to remind the audiences that they are "'Reading,'" or interpreting, the story. The narrator alludes specifically to the readerly role of the interior audience when he speaks to it of newspaper accounts of pauper deaths. Just as they read the accounts, so "my lords and gentlemen and honourable boards" (363) read the narrative.

But the interior audience is not restricted to a readerly role. The narrator sometimes assumes its physical proximity to scenes, and this shift in perspective causes narratees to identify with scenes and characters.³ One means by which the narrator assumes the narratees' proximity is to request that they "behold" somewhat private scenes. For instance, Sloppy, Rokesmith-Harmon, and the Boffins, with whom Higden has not communicated since she began her travels, are unsure of Higden's exact whereabouts, but "you may hear" (557), according to the narrative voice, the soothing sounds of the upper reaches of the Thames, along which she walks. Ironically, Higden interprets the sounds of the river as appeals to drown herself to escape the harsh charity of the parish workhouses. The juxtaposition of the narratees' perception with Higden's reveals the blindness of

the former to the effects of the Poor Law. What to them is an aesthetic experience is to the pauper woman a fancied means of escape from the welfare system which they have established.

By prefacing some remarks with "you may hear," "behold," or "observe," Dickens's narrator violates a general principle of Dickens's poetics. At times Dickens advocated unobtrusive narrators and objective narration, objecting in correspondence with younger authors to introducing characters with phrases such as "'Lo there! See where it comes!'" (qtd. in Paroissien 23-24). But contrary to his own advice, he on occasion introduced characters and actions with similar phrases. There are frequent requests to "hark," "see," or "behold" in stories of his such as Our Mutual Friend which deal with social issues. In "The Chimes," a short story about the poor, the narrator says of two characters, "Hark. They were speaking" (Christmas Books 110), and of another scene: "O Youth and Beauty, happy as ye should be, look at this. O Youth and Beauty, blest and blessing all within your reach, and working out the ends of your Beneficent Creator, look at this!" (Christmas Books 119). Typically an inept means of moving the plot along, the stylistic device in these stories stresses the audience's observer role and assumes its proximity to the action. It persuades the audience of the veracity of the social criticism.

According to Prince, narrative distance is minimal for an audience which participates in the incidents of a narrative (Prince, "Introduction" 19-20). On occasion, Dickens's narrator conflates his audience with a character or characters to minimize the distance between the two. The narratees then experience the story at first-hand, as if without mediation. Being incorporated into the story, in Duncan's words, "effectively closes perceptual distance" (Duncan 38) between the audience and the narrative. For instance, Silas Wegg, hoping to become an object of Boffin's benevolence, considers confronting him after the death of the orphan Johnnie. But Wegg's thoughts are reported as if he were speaking to the narratees instead of to Boffin:

...why go beating about Brentford bushes, seeking orphans forsooth who had established no claims upon you and made no sacrifices for you, when here was an orphan [Wegg] ready to your hand, who had given up in your cause Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker? (370)

The narrator blurs the line between Boffin and the narratees in the character's imagination, causing the narratees to consider more closely the motives of those who seek patronage or charity. Wegg's desire contrasts with Higden's later refusal of Boffin's benevolence. Justifying her action, the pauper tells Rokesmith-Harmon, "'I want to be...helpful of myself right through to my death'" (426). Paradoxically in Our Mutual Friend, the deserving poor strive to be self-supporting while those who ask for charity do not deserve it. The narratees directly experience Wegg's

greed and learn the necessity of selective charity as a result of their conflation with Wegg's imagined audience.⁴

A narratee may function as the "spokesman for the moral of the work" (Prince, "Introduction" 23), according to Prince. But Dickens's narrator implicates the narratees of Our Mutual Friend in the social problems of the narrative. The narratees are implicated for their lack of compassion as well as for specific misdeeds, although more often for the latter than the former. In one scene, they respond inquisitively to Lady Tippins's influence-peddling although told that "we are carrying on this little farce to keep up appearances" (281). "Say who shall meet you" (281) is Lady Tippins's reported response to their implied interest in her vote-buying scheme. In another incident, Wegg considers blackmailing Boffin with Venus as his accomplice for the Harmon estate, but checks his avarice with the thought that Boffin would lose the estate anyway "'if he didn't buy us up. We should get nothing by that'" (555). The narrator continues, "We so judge others by ourselves that it had never come into his head before that he might not buy us up" (555), identifying the narratees and himself with the miscreant characters. The "us" with whom Boffin might not deal is the narrator and the narrative audience as well as Wegg and Venus.

Further incriminating the narratees are their reprehensible social attitudes. The midsection of the

narrative repeatedly castigates "My Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards" (227) for neglecting or mistreating England's paupers. Once the men are chastised for speaking disparagingly of Higden's loathing for workhouses, but otherwise they are chastised for failing paupers as a class. After the Reverend Frank Milvey reads from the Order for the Burial of Dead in the Book of Common Prayer during Higden's funeral, the narrator, subjectively narrating the character's thoughts, states that his audience fails paupers because it does not treat them as siblings. The Poor Law regulations dehumanize the relations between the upper and the lowest classes. With understatement, the narrator says that "all was not right between us and our sister--or say our sister in Law--Poor Law--and...we sometimes read these words in an awful manner over our Sister and our Brother, too" (568). The narratees have no fraternal concern for the poor. And their apathy manifests itself in their inhumane legislature and economics.

After Higden rails against the parish workhouses in Book I, Chapter Sixteen, the narratees are reminded that their legislation cannot alter the thinking of the poor regarding England's system of social welfare. The narrator says, "Absolutely impossible, my Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards, by any stretch of legislative wisdom to set these perverse people right in their logic" (228), implying that the "legislative wisdom" (228) is intended to

dupe the poor regarding the benefits of the Poor Law. While Dickens was writing Our Mutual Friend, journalists and Parliament were engaged in debates about the Poor Law (Cotsell, "Newspapers" 81-90). Echoing the extratextual debates, the narrator of Our Mutual Friend reminds the narratees that minor alterations to the welfare legislation would be deceptive and unfruitful.

The economics of Victorian England are as blameworthy for the condition of the poor as is its government. Its economic system ought to be reformed, according to the narrator, because it does not provide for needy Englishmen. The industrialization of England enables aristocrats and bourgeois to acquire fortunes, but the ancillary public charity is taken advantage of by con men while true paupers suffer as a result of the harsh methods governing its distribution. The narrator states,

This boastful handiwork of ours, which fails in its terrors for the professional pauper, the sturdy breaker of windows and the rampant tearer of clothes, strikes with a cruel and a wicked stab at the stricken sufferer, and is a horror to the deserving and unfortunate. (556)

As he does of Victorian economics, the narrator often speaks disapprovingly of other institutions and of weak human nature. There are approximately thirty ethical generalizations in Our Mutual Friend, in the Signet edition, about one every three pages (e.g. "the incompetent servant, by whomever employed, is always against his employer" [331]; "a multitude of weak, imitative natures are always lying by,

ready to go mad upon the next wrong idea that may be broached" [380]; "Power...has ever the greatest attraction for the lowest natures" [554]). The narrator intends the narrative to prick the social conscience of his audience.

And as a social conscience novel, Our Mutual Friend calls for compassion for the poor and the reform of England's welfare system. Although implicated in other social wrongs, the narratees are chiefly charged with abuses stemming from the Poor Law. The legislation is the only social issue referred to in the narrative which the narrator demands be rectified. The Poor Law Amendment of 1834 stipulated that parishes tax themselves in order to establish workhouses with neighboring parishes for the poor (Cotsell, "Newspapers" 84). Elected officials, the "Honourable Boards" of the text, administered Poor Law regulations in each union of parishes (Cotsell, Companion 121). But since the lower classes tended to work in parishes in which they did not reside, money remained in upper class parishes while paupers congregated in the parishes of the lower class (Cotsell, "Newspapers" 84). The welfare system of the narrative corresponds to the extratextual situation.

Dickens's narrator calls for specific reforms of Victorian society's treatment of paupers. Since its economic system does not better the conditions of paupers, he requests that the narratees restructure it: "We must mend

it, lords and gentlemen and honourable boards, or in its own evil hour it will mar every one of us" (556). But the narratees cannot imagine a restructured economy. "The Gospel according to Podsnappery" (556) might not endorse it. The narrator also asks that paupers' graves be marked with the names of the deceased. He reports the callous response of the narratees, "It would be sentimental" (569), but then counters by querying, "But how say ye, my lords and gentlemen and honourable boards, shall we not find standing-room left for a little sentiment, if we look into our crowds?" (569). That the narratees object to his request further demonstrates their lack of compassion.

Our Mutual Friend was issued during widespread discussions about England's poor. The postscript mentions journalistic exposes of pauper conditions, in particular, "the late exposure by THE LANCET" (898), a series of articles in 1865 on conditions in workhouse hospitals (Cotsell, Companion 284). Dickens probably considered the novel his contribution to the public debate. Our Mutual Friend's function as a reformist novel becomes evident after one differentiates between its interior and actual readers.

At least some Victorians understood that Dickens intended the novel's rhetoric to persuade them to initiate social reform. Canning suggests that Dickens hoped to eradicate the vestiges of the harmful side-effects of the Industrial Revolution from England by "arous[ing] those

feelings of Christian charity, which he found were professed by so many, yet which actuated comparatively so few" (Canning 329-30). Illustrating his point, the critic quotes Dickens's denunciation of the Poor Law in the postscript.

Yet Dickens does more than alert his readers in the postscript and narrative asides to problems resulting from the Poor Law. He also depicts a relationship within the narrative (that of Noddy Boffin and Bella Wilfer) which is akin to that of the narrator and the audience. Boffin decides to reform Bella, to educate her morally, teaching her the despotism of greed and eliciting her underlying good nature, by acting the part of a miser. She is his audience. Boffin notes that Bella has been slightly spoiled as a result of the vagaries of fortune but says that "'that's only on the surface and I lay my life...that she's the true golden gold at heart'" (844). He wants to cure her of her avaricious marital ambitions and arouse her love for Rokesmith-Harmon. But the working notes for Book III, Chapter Four indicate that Boffin's act is also meant to curb the readers' avarice (Mundhenk 43-44). Dickens reminded himself in the notes, "Work up to Bella's account of the change in Mr. Boffin--broken to the reader through her (qtd. in Mundhenk 44) [Dickens's emphasis]. Thus, Bella is the first character to comment on the apparent change in her patron, telling her father that "'Mr. Boffin is being spoilt by prosperity and is changing every day'" (509).

Since the change is intended to improve Bella, it follows that it is also meant to improve the readers, since it is described for them from Bella's point of view. But only Bella is reformed. After she becomes Mrs. John Harmon, her husband describes her as "'unselfish and contented...such a cheerful, glorious housewife...[and] so much better than she ever was'" (845). Of course, Boffin is not the only character who assists in Bella's reformation. Lizzie's expression of faith in Bella also prompts Bella to reform. Significantly, Lizzie discerns Bella's potential goodness, as she had foreseen a possible future for her brother, while gazing at a fire. Fire in Our Mutual Friend is a symbol of the imagination. Bella reforms, among other reasons, because Lizzie imagines that she will. Imaginative vision is a prerequisite for both individual and social reform in the novel.

Because she can reform, Bella differs from the wealth-conscious socialites in whose ranks her marriage places her. Podsnap epitomizes the socialite mentality. Backed by "the heads of tribes" (164), the old guard of Victorian society, Podsnap once dismisses the topic of pauper troubles by blaming the paupers for their condition, then, misquoting the words of Christ, asserting that "'you shall have the poor always with you'" (165). A series of articles in Fraser's Magazine had satirized the Anglophile stereotype fifteen years prior to the publication of Our Mutual Friend

(Knowles 89-96). In the third article, the writer juxtaposes the smug self-satisfaction of the Anglophile with the reality of England's many poor, whose plight he calls "an utter disgrace to humanity" (qtd. in Knowles 94). Like Fraser's writer, Dickens also uses the stereotype, embodied by Podsnap, to suggest that the narrow perspective of patriotic chauvinism allowed the problems of Victorian society, such as the plight of its poor, to be overlooked.

However, Podsnap is not the only character who disregards the poor. It is the general opinion of the socialites, for instance, that Wrayburn's marriage to Lizzie is a travesty of decorum. Like other Dickens novels, the characters of Our Mutual Friend are from all levels of society, from the aristocratic Lady Tippins and Lord Snigsworth to the "'waterside character'" (175) Rough Riderhood. But Lady Tippins and her circle tend to distance themselves from the desires and difficulties of the lower classes. Carl Dennis rightly notes that "although Dickens believes in the unity of man [as evidenced by the inclusion of characters from all ranks of society in his plots], a great many of his characters do not" (Dennis 1244). The upper-class characters in Our Mutual Friend often concern themselves solely with the obligations of polite society.

There are exceptions, however. The fundamental misconception of the wealthy characters is that social position and financial worth determine a person's value.

The aside which criticizes "my lords and gentlemen and honourable boards" (556) for making public charity unappealing to the deserving poor illustrates the effect of the misconception on the interior audience. But the Boffins reject this idea and try to improve the circumstances of a few of the paupers and the working class. When the couple discuss their intentions for their inheritance, a "'great fortune'" (120), Noddy Boffin speaks of it as if it were not primarily monetary. In Boffin's eyes, his "fortune" is a matter of good luck, which ought to be shared with the needy. He assumes that the inheritance carries with it a moral obligation, saying to Mrs. Boffin that "'we must do what's right by our fortune'" (120). Her sympathies aroused, Mrs. Boffin proposes that they care for Bella, the death of whose fiance, John Harmon, has allowed them to inherit the Harmon estate, and adopt an orphan in memory of the dead man.

The Boffins' first attempt at adoption, an act of compassion toward Betty Higden's grandson, is in marked contrast to another character's dealings with Higden. Rough Riderhood confronts the pauper, who hopes to die free of the parish system of pauper relief (she tells him, "'I've fought against the Parish and fled from it all my life, and I want to die free of it!'" [563]), just prior to her death. He blackmails her, taking her earnings, by threatening to report her to the parish authorities as a casual pauper, a

pauper in a parish other than that in which he or she resides. Ironically, to justify his action, he says, "'I'm a man...as earns his living by the sweat of his brow'" (563). Unlike the Boffins, Riderhood takes the pauper's few coins from her rather than using his finances to meliorate her condition.

Since, like Riderhood, the interior audience of the narrative is motivated by greed, it also treats paupers inconsiderately. As the narrator reports, it says, "we are all alike in death" (569) but does not want to mark pauper graves as it does its own with the names of the deceased, in effect denying the humanity of the dead paupers. In contrast, Mrs. Boffin assumes the humanity of paupers, as when she delays her adoption of Johnny out of consideration for the emotional bond between the orphan and his grandmother. Her empathy and desire "to make everybody happy" (230) during the adoption process is indicative of the disparity between her motives and those of the narratees and the other characters.

The narrative at times voices the prevailing attitudes of Victorian society through the opinions of minor characters. One such character is the Contractor, "Providence for five hundred thousand men" (890), who considers members of the working class machinery. During the dinner party of the final chapter, he speaks of Lizzie as if she were a female waterman automaton: "Those beef-

steaks and that porter are the fuel to that young woman's engine. She derives therefrom a certain amount of power to row the boat; that power will produce so much money" (893). Since the Contractor's comments are subjectively narrated, the narrator wants the interior audience to consider treating Lizzie as if she were an object. He addresses it in the character's idiom ("You buy the young woman a boat! You buy her, at the same time, a small annuity." [893]). But instead of disagreeing with the comments, the audience signifies its agreement, as Boffin does to his wife's statement that he is "'the best of men'" (515), by its silence. Thus, it aligns itself with a character whose suppositions about the lower classes are the opposite of Boffin's.

Because they are so often mistreated by those like the Contractor, the poor lack food and adequate health care. Dozens of paupers die of starvation each week on London's streets according to a character at the Podsnaps' dinner party. Podsnap's indifference typifies the response of polite society to the paupers' tragic circumstances. Even characters who recognize the paupers' need for medical care, such as the "well-meaning bystander, yellow-legged and purple-faced" (560-61), whom Higden encounters on her travels, assume that it should be provided by the dehumanizing parish charity system. After Higden faints, the bystander insists that a parish-doctor should be called

for to care for her. Noddy Boffin and his wife respond to Higden and her kind more kindly. Hearing of the orphan Johnny's illness, the Boffins go down to Brentford with Rokesmith-Harmon and Bella and tactfully persuade Betty Higden to place her grandson in a children's hospital. The couple's motives are good. Mrs. Boffin describes the hospital in laudatory terms as "'a place set up on purpose for sick children; where the good doctors and nurses pass their lives with children, talk to none but children, teach none but children, comfort and cure none but children'" (366), and on the way down to Brentford, she and her husband buy toys for Johnny. The only reason the child dies is that he receives medical care too late, for which the Boffins are not at fault.

The Boffins' provisions for Johnny prefigure Lizzie Hexam's nursing of his grandmother. Lizzie is, as the daughter of a waterman, hardly of higher social status than the paupers. But when she comes upon Betty Higden, she tends the dying woman compassionately although crudely, with brandy. The scene illustrates Dickens's belief that there is no correlation between social and moral status, that, in fact, morality and high social position are likely to be mutually exclusive. Dickens's narrator regards Lizzie's actions favorably, as his description of her last act for Higden indicates: "Lizzie Hexam very softly raised the weather-stained grey head and lifted her as high as Heaven"

(568). Lizzie's care, uncommon in a society motivated by financial concerns, assists in Higden's apotheosis.

Dickens often prefaced appeals for better treatment for the poor with pathetic stories such as Higden's.⁵ It is in the anticlimactic moments after Higden's death that the narrator of Our Mutual Friend asks "my lords and gentlemen and honourable boards" (569) to mark the graves of the poor. The text arouses the sympathy of its readers, then suggests a practical means for its catharsis. The problem with this method is that the readers to which the novel refers are not sufficiently motivated to follow through with the means which the text suggests. They hesitate to act because of the sentimentality of the suggested response.

Neither are the readers motivated by Boffin's acting to renounce their avarice, the cause of the hardships of the Victorian poor. Yet, as noted, Dickens intended Boffin's role-playing to affect the audience as well as Bella. Bella becomes so angered by Boffin's moral deterioration that she breaks with him to side with Rokesmith-Harmon in an argument. Richard A. Lanham describes her behavior as sentimental (Lanham 7). Unlike the female character, however, the interior audience does not respond emotionally to Boffin's ploy.

Bella ultimately responds to Boffin's moral decline by denouncing him and expressing penitence for her greed. First, however, she politely tries to ignore his immoral

behavior. While he abuses his secretary, she pretends to be preoccupied with other matters. "A deceiving Bella she was,...with that pensively abstracted air, as if her mind were full of her book and she had not heard a single word!" (515). Then, when Boffin advises her about marriage, she acknowledges her greed to herself, questioning her inconsistency in thinking critically of Boffin for his miserly advice when she had often expressed the same mercenary motives for marriage. It is then that she judges that he has become "morally uglier" (526).

Although she acts in line with her good nature when she judges Boffin, Bella is not completely reformed until she publicly demonstrates her penitence and remorse. Thus, during the scene in which Boffin fires Rokesmith-Harmon, she gradually assumes the posture of a penitent fallen woman. When Boffin says that she "'was lying in wait'" for a wealthy husband, she hangs her head, covers her face with her hands, and "had sunk upon a chair with her hands resting upon the back of it" (653). The pose resembles those of the fallen women in David Copperfield: Martha Endell, sunk before Mr. Peggotty and David "a prostrate image of humiliation and ruin" (David Copperfield 556) on the bank of the Thames, and Emily Peggotty, "'kneeled down...humbled, as it might be in the dust our Saviour wrote in with his blessed hand'" (David Copperfield 592). Although Bella has not fallen sexually, her assumption of the posture of a

penitent fallen woman implies that as a result of her greed she has indeed fallen.

Dickens's contemporary readers expected that his stories would arouse their sentiment on behalf of various causes. House has termed Dickens's social ideology "Benevolent Sentimentality" (House 63). It is not surprising, then, that within Dickens's novel the character whom Boffin wants to reform "dissolve[s] into sentimentality" (Lanham 7) as she renounces her avarice. Bella's effusiveness in the scene contrasts with the wit and sauciness which characterize her elsewhere in the narrative. She

...shrank from his [Boffin's] hand and from the chair, and starting up in an incoherent passion of tears and stretching out her arms, cried, 'Oh, Mr. Rokesmith, before you go, if you could but make me poor again! Oh! Make me poor again, Somebody, I beg and pray, or my heart will break if this goes on! Pa, dear, make me poor again and take me home! I was bad enough there, but I have been so much worse here. Don't give me money, Mr. Boffin, I won't have money. Keep it away from me, and only let me speak to good little Pa, and lay my head upon his shoulder, and tell him all my griefs. Nobody else can understand me, nobody else can comfort me, nobody else knows how unworthy I am, and yet can love me like a little child. I am better with Pa than any one--more innocent, more sorry, more glad!' So, crying out in a wild way that she could not bear this, Bella dropped her head on Mrs. Boffin's ready breast.
(655)

The melodramatic outburst associates Bella with Dickens's depictions of fallen women. She responds melodramatically to that which Boffin's acting reveals to her of her own nature. It is then that she denounces him and apologizes to

Rokesmith-Harmon for her haughtiness, responding as Boffin had intended. In contrast, the interior audience is silent. Their earlier response to the suggestion about pauper graves suggests that they have rejected sentimentality as a motive for reform.

Although Boffin's acting has the effect on Bella which the narrator wishes his story would have on the narratees, it differs substantially from the conditions with which the narrator deals as he attempts to bring about reform. Other than Boffin, the characters represented as greedy in the narrative are truly greedy. "It is well known" (136) to Lammle and Fledgeby that trading shares is a sure means to acquire wealth. Financial transactions, "by representing somebody's ruin or somebody's loss, acquired a peculiar charm" (304) for Fledgeby. Then, Wegg works for Boffin in order to extort as much of the Harmon estate as he can from him, as his blackmailing scheme illustrates. The interior audience is also truly greedy. "My lords and gentlemen and honourable boards" (556) regard the Victorian economic system, "this beautiful handiwork of ours" (556), with approval, considering it "an enormous treasure" (556). And they are implicated with various characters in acts of financial wrongdoing, as in Wegg's scheme against Boffin.

Boffin, on the other hand, only plays a part, the role of the "Golden Dustman" (510), when he acts greedily. And although superficially avaricious, Bella Wilfer is "'the

true golden gold at heart"" (844). The relationship of the two characters differs significantly from that of the narrator and the narratees. To influence the narratees to renounce their greed and reform the Poor Law, the narrator of Our Mutual Friend describes the actions of truly avaricious characters. But Boffin acts contrary to his nature in order to influence a character who is "'a little spoilt and nat'rally spoilt...but that's only on the surface'" (844). Boffin's ploy is an inadequate simulacrum of the narrative. His acting is a whitewashed version of the story that the narrator tells the narratees. There is no example within the narrative of the reformation of characters who are truly avaricious.

However, Dickens meant for the narrative and the negative example of the narratees to reform his actual readers, to persuade them to remedy the evils of the Poor Law. And some of them discerned this. In the opinion of Charles Forster, Dickens's friend and biographer, Dickens had not engaged in "more eloquent or generous pleading for the poor and neglected" (Forster 3:345) since Oliver Twist. And Swinburne spoke of "those who have been so tenderly and so powerfully compelled to love and to reverence" Betty Higden (qtd. in House 103) as a result of the incidents which precede her death.

These critics were among the few who spoke well of the sentimentality of Dickens's novels during the latter part of

his career. Another was Canning, who approvingly states in his The Philosophy of Charles Dickens that Dickens increased the sentimentality of his novels as he became more aware of the problems of England's lower classes (Canning 329-30). However, by the time Our Mutual Friend was published, most critics objected to the novelist's references to social ills. The Westminster Review, for instance, criticized Dickens for incorporating a critique of the Poor Law into Our Mutual Friend:

True art has nothing to do with such ephemeral and local affairs as Poor Laws and Poor Law Boards...a novel is not the place for discussions on the Poor Law. If Mr. Dickens has anything to say about the Poor Law, let him say it in a pamphlet or go into Parliament. Who is to separate in a novel fiction from fact, romance from reality? If Mr. Dickens knows anything of human nature, he must know that the practical English mind is as a rule, repelled by any advocacy in the shape of fiction. And to attempt to alter the Poor Law by a novel is about as absurd as it would be to call out the militia to stop the cattle disease. (qtd. in House 223).

The reviewer gives Dickens a bad review because of the specificity of his satire. The critic and the novelist disagreed about the propriety of rhetoric in fiction. But in writing Our Mutual Friend, Dickens's intention was the same as that which he had written to Thomas Robinson over two decades earlier, to expose acts of human cruelty.

Like the Westminster reviewer, Henry James also objected, albeit indirectly, to the critique of Victorian social problems in Our Mutual Friend. In his well-known review in the Nation of an early American edition of the

novel, the young novelist of manners decries the fact that the characters lack a social code. He notes that they are incapable of forming a civil society.

The people...have nothing in common with each other, except the fact that they have nothing in common with mankind at large....But a community of eccentrics is impossible....Society is maintained by natural sense and natural feeling. We cannot conceive a society in which these principles are not in some manner represented. Where in these pages are the depositories of that intelligence without which the movement of life would cease? Who represents nature? (James 787)

James misses the point when he attacks the characters on account of their eccentricity. Dickens assumed that men ought to act according to a social code of fraternity and compassion. The narrator of Our Mutual Friend reminds members of Parliament and Poor Law officials that they are responsible for the condition of England's paupers. Yet they and, as Dennis notes, many of the characters do not act as if they were responsible (Dennis 1244). The characters about whom James complains people Dickens's version of Victorian England, a largely dysfunctional society of selfish individuals.

Whether vaguely, like James, or more clearly, like the Westminster reviewer, many Victorians disapproved of the social commentary of Dickens's novels. Some, often aristocrats, did not even want to be reminded of the existence of England's lower classes. Referring to the criminal characters of Oliver Twist, Lady Carlisle said, "'I do not much want to hear what they say to one another" (qtd.

in Collins 168). Note that she assumes that their conversation resembles that of actual criminals. Lord Melbourne said something similar about the characters, "I don't like those things; I wish to avoid them; I don't like them in reality and therefore I don't wish them represented" (qtd. in Collins 168) [Melbourne's emphasis]. As Philip Collins notes, there is a Podsnap-like quality to the lord's assertion (Collins 168). It also resembles the attitude of Our Mutual Friend's narratees. They are unaffected by "the shameful accounts we read, every week in the Christian year[,]...the infamous records of small official inhumanity" (363) toward paupers.

The response of the narratees to the accounts in the papers reveals their apathy toward the poor. Like Carlisle and Melbourne, they do not want to think about England's lower classes. The accounts "pass by" (363) them without much thought. As noted, Dickens created the narrative audience of Our Mutual Friend to arouse his readers' compassion. But the audience also illustrates the link between imagination, or imaginative vision, and reform in the novel. For instance, Lizzie's vision of Bella's potential prompts Bella to reform. But the narrative audience does not have the ability to envision or implement the potential improvements for which the narrator calls. Dickens hoped, however, that actual readers of Our Mutual Friend would, like Forster and Swinburne, sympathetically

envision the better society called for by the narrative asides and the example of Betty Higden and work to bring it about. In the postscript to the novel, he recognizes that some of them, whom he calls "circumlocutional champions" (898), would object to the proposed reforms. But he wanted the story to engross its readers and persuade them of the necessity of the reforms. Our Mutual Friend suggests that the reader may be persuaded to initiate social reform in much the same way that he experiences the novel, by engaging his imagination. amdg

Notes

¹Elsewhere, Dickens wrote that a work of fiction "should explain itself; rest manfully and calmly on its knowledge of itself; and express whatever intention and purpose" it has (qtd. in Paroissien 22).

²Horton was not the first critic to question Dickens's proficiency as a social critic. George Lewes, for instance, described Dickens as "merely an animal intelligence" (qtd. in Lanham 10) in comparison to satirical novelists Henry Fielding and William Thackeray.

³According to Duncan 36, this manipulation of narrative distance causes the reader to identify himself with the scene. I would argue that the narrator is manipulating the position of the created, interior audience and not that of the actual reader.

⁴Dickens suggests in various articles also that not all members of the lower classes deserve charity. He is not indignant about the circumstances of the young pauper women in "Wapping Workhouse," for instance, because while complaining about their circumstances and wishing for domestic positions, they shirk the work given them by the parish authorities (Uncommercial Traveller 23-25). One senses that Dickens felt that they, like Wegg, did not deserve better.

⁵I am indebted to House 62-63 for this insight into Dickens's fictional treatment of the poor.

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