

**Dickens and Class:
Social Mobility in *Our Mutual Friend***

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In *Great Expectations* (1860-1) Dickens had dealt with Pip's individual social mobility. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) Dickens deals with social mobility on a larger social scale. What was, in *Great Expectations*, an individual fantasy becomes, in *Our Mutual Friend*, epidemic. Though social mobility has never been concentrated on in the past studies, it is one of the most important themes of the novel. The purpose of this paper is to reveal Dickens' attitude towards social mobility, the question of which is still open.

1

In the early 1860s, after limited liability was made easier and systematized in the Companies Act of 1862 (Cole & Postgate 334), there was a speculative bubble in the flotation of joint-stock companies. The early 1860s was, in short, the age of speculation. Dickens writes: "As is well known to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world" (114). The expansion of joint-stock enterprise produced a lot of *nouveaux riches*. Having "no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners," and "never of himself achieved success in anything, never originated anything, never produced anything," Veneering succeeds in life by speculations and even squeezes into Parliament.

As Michael Cotsell notes ("Financial Speculation" 128), a series of articles on the financial speculations in the early 1860s by M. R. L. Meason, which were reprinted as *The Bubbles of Finance* (1865), appeared in *All the Year Round* in 1864 and 1865, along with the serial numbers of *Our Mutual Friend*. 'How We "Floated" the Bank' (31 December, 1864), for instance, gives a full account of the fraudulent promotion of a joint-stock bank. A Mr. Spencer, who appears in Meason's article, is the same type as Alfred Lamble represents: he is "a gentleman, whose only trade or calling [is] to become a director of anything that [is] offered him, for the sake of the two guineas a week it yield[s] him in fees" (AYR 12, 496). Affecting to be "a gentleman of property,"

Lammle “goes, in a condescending amateurish way, into the City, attends meetings of Directors, and has to do with traffic in Shares” (114). Lammle is, in short, a speculative ‘gent’ of the early 1860s who seeks to make a fortune at a stroke.

Like Lammle, Fledgeby feigns to be “a young gentleman living on his means” (272). But he is “known secretly to be a kind of outlaw in the bill-broking line, and to put money out at high interest in various ways.” Fledgeby belongs to Lammle’s circle of speculative ‘gents’; they “all [have] a touch of the outlaw, as to their roving in the merry greenwood of Jobbery Forest, lying on the outskirts of the Share Market and Stock Exchange” (272). In Meason’s article, ‘How I Discounted My Bill’ (AYR, 8 July, 1865), the narrator comments: “No wonder that bill discounting is a gainful trade, more particularly in view of the recently adopted device of threatening the non-payer with criminal proceedings” (AYR 13, 561).

In summary, Veneering, Lammle and Fledgeby are the *arrivistes* who seek to climb the social ladder by speculations. But they are, on the whole, frustrated in their upward mobility. The Lammles come to a disastrous end as a result of “their living beyond their means” (626). The Veneerings, who doubt how people can live beyond their means, will find out “the clue to that great mystery” when he “make[s] a resounding smash” in the near future. They will “retire to Calais, there to live on Mrs. Veneering’s diamonds (in which Mr. Veneering, as a good husband, has from time to time invested considerable sums)” (815). Ironically, this seems to be the soundest investment that he has ever made in his life. In the speculative age, ‘men from Nowhere’ could climb the social ladder by speculations. But it was also likely that their upward mobility would be finally frustrated. Dickens was critical of the speculative men of the early 1860s because most of them were morally despicable *arrivistes*.

2

Bradley Headstone, rising from a humble origin, becomes a *petit bourgeois*. He is called by Dickens a “highly certificated stipendiary schoolmaster” (216). The term ‘stipendiary’ is used ironically to suggest a pretension to respectability (Cotsell, *Companion* 132). Respectability is the keyword in his scheme of values. Just like Headstone, Charley Hexam, of humble origin, has a strong desire to cancel his past in order to rise in the world and become “respectable” in the scale of society as a schoolmaster (712). There is no doubt that he is Headstone’s double, and his boyhood complementarily suggests that of Headstone’s. Charley’s career shows one of the typical cases of upward mobility from the lower to the middle class. The one possibility of social advancement was for those who had attended elementary schools to become teachers

themselves within the system (Royle 356).

In *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens appears to be antagonistic to the upward mobility of the poor. Jack Linsay, among other critics, states that in *Our Mutual Friend* the boy who has educated himself and risen in the world is no longer a figure of admiration, that what Dickens sees in him is the distortion of human nature, and that Headstone and Charley might have had a chance of salvation if they had remained at the level of Jenny Wren and Betty Higden. Linsay concludes that “by bettering themselves they have destroyed themselves” (383). James M. Brown also notes that Headstone and Charley are both successful in rising in the world but in both cases “self-improvement” is seen as a problematic gain leading to extreme social uncertainty and a neurotic anxiety over the stability of their vulnerable and fragile social achievement (46). Yet the question remains: can we regard Headstone’s and Charley’s social advancement as “self-improvement” or “bettering themselves,” as they assert?

In *Hard Times* (1854) Dickens criticises the teachers from training colleges for their excessive memory work. He writes, “[M’Choakumchild] and some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters, [have] been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs” (8). Likewise, Headstone “[has] acquired mechanically a great store of teacher’s knowledge” (217). In the first place, then, the institution and its “mechanical” educational practices deserve adverse criticism. Yet it is important to notice that Dickens gives one positive example of the trained teacher in *Our Mutual Friend*. Lizzie Hexam’s and Jenny Wren’s teacher, who “comes from an institution where teachers are regularly brought up,” is “very able and very patient, and ... takes great pains with [them],” so that they can go on learning by themselves “in a very little while” (345). Thus there seems to be something wrong not in the institution but in Headstone himself.

What is criticised in Headstone is his commercialistic way of dealing in a stock of knowledge which constitutes, as it were, his ‘commodities.’ As Deirdre David points out, Headstone is a product of the commercial world described in the language of commerce and money (57). He has used his own head as a “mental warehouse,” for he had no capital to invest in some equipment with which he could have started his business (217). He is, in essence, a mercenary dealer rather than an educator.

A further point to make is that Headstone has strong class consciousness. He looks down on the lower class from which he parted, while he feels jealousy towards the upper class into which he will never be accepted. His class consciousness becomes most apparent in the love triangle involving him, Lizzie and Eugene. On the one hand, Headstone holds Lizzie, by whom he is attracted, in contempt. After his selfish, one-

sided confession of love, he asks her to marry him in quite a patronizing way (397). Charley also speaks for him: "As Mr. Headstone's wife you would be occupying a most respectable station, and you would be holding a far better place in society than you hold now" (402). Thus, as Jenny Wren suspects, the relationship between Headstone and Lizzie is not "mutual" at all (342). On the other hand, Headstone feels a sense of inferiority towards Eugene. He is fiercely jealous of Eugene's advantageous position both in society and in rivalry in love. On one occasion they confront each other (288). As Grahame Smith notes, a microcosm of class struggle seems to be shown there (186). But class-antagonism is expressed rather one-sidedly by Headstone.

Finally, as I mentioned above, Headstone and Charley have too strong a desire for respectability. They are so selfish as to discard their 'friends.' Arnold Kettle says that "in a class-divided society education itself has a double tendency, to corrupt as well as liberate" (216). Charley and Headstone are morally corrupted because of their paranoid concern for respectability. "I am determined that after I have climbed up out of the mire, you shall not pull me down," Charley says to his motherly sister who devotedly helped him to get out of it (403). Ironically, Headstone hears Charley (his double) say exactly the same words to himself when he becomes useless for him and stands in Charley's way to respectability. According to the narrator, there is "no softening old time" in Charley's, as well as Headstone's, "hollow empty heart" (712). After their social advancement, Charley and Headstone become *déracinés* who ruthlessly throw off their past to be higher in the social scale.

Philip Collins states that Dickens is too harsh towards the trained teachers and that the limits of Dickens' insight are surprisingly apparent in his refusal to sympathize with Headstone and Charley (167). But, as we have seen, what is shown in them is not the negation of upward mobility of the poor but the difficulties of rising socially without incurring moral corruption. Dickens is not negative in principle towards the upward mobility of the poor. For the affirmation of upward mobility is shown in John Harmon, who starts in life with no money, like Headstone and Charley, but rises socially only through his own resources. It is true that his origin is not so lowly as Headstone's or Charley's; but he grew up below the borderline of respectability as the son of a working-class dust-contractor.

Headstone and Charley throw off their past to climb the social ladder, as Pip does in *Great Expectations*. When one cancels one's past, deserting one's "friends," one is likely to lose sight of one's sense of humanity as well. Unlike Charley and Headstone, John prizes his early memory — the memory of the Boffins who have always stood his "friend" against his mercenary father (90). Whereas Charley and Headstone are, like

Veneering, 'men from Nowhere' who have no past, he is called, symbolically, "a man from Somewhere" who has a sense of the past (12). He is not a *déraciné* in this sense. The importance of the hero John Harmon, called "Our Mutual Friend" by Boffin (111), lies in his role as a 'self-made man.' John rises socially without incurring moral corruption. It is this kind of upward mobility that is to be approved.

3

The morally respectable lower-class characters such as Lizzie Hexam, Pleasant Riderhood, Betty Higden, Sloppy and Jenny Wren live independently without losing their moral virtues and remain in their spheres. By contrast, Silas Wegg, a socially dissatisfied lower-class character, tries to climb the social ladder, though he is only frustrated in his social ambition. Does Wegg's social dissatisfaction mean class disloyalty? Or should he remain in his allotted place in society? Here, again, Dickens appears to be negative towards the upward mobility of the poor. Still we should examine the meanness of Wegg's social ambition emphasized time and again, which is shared by the morally despicable members of Society.

First of all, Wegg is a social parasite. In his peculiar way, Wegg, like Lady Tippins, sponges on the new money, i.e. the upper-middle-class family living in a corner house over against which he keeps his stall as a street-seller (44). Secondly, he is a speculative *arriviste*, like Veneering or Lammle; he rises in the world by chance: "Are you in independent circumstances, or is it wasting the motions of a bow on you? Come! I'll speculate! I'll invest a bow in you" (46-7). The speculation turns out successful and the semi-literate Wegg is employed as a reader of books by Boffin. Thirdly, Wegg is a perfect snob. He is as snobbish as Lady Tippins and other members of Society; as soon as he has good prospects of rising in the world, he wants to buy back his leg, lost in an accident, from Venus (a taxidermist) in order to be "respectable" (77). Lastly, Wegg is a mammonist, like Fledgeby or Old Harmon; after he is promoted to keeper of the Bower and the Harmon mounds, Wegg pokes around the mounds in a miserly fashion for anything valuable. He finds a will left by old Harmon, with which he blackmails Boffin, trying in vain to deprive him of his fortune. As a result, he falls to his former social position. In this way his upward mobility is frustrated. It is clear that his failure is caused by the meanness of his social ambition. Thus Wegg's frustrated social mobility does not necessarily suggest that Dickens is negative towards any sort of social advancement of the poor. As is illustrated in John Harmon's case, if one who rises socially does not incur moral corruption, one's upward mobility would be positively depicted and realized in *Our Mutual Friend*.

This is also illustrated in the Boffins, whose upward mobility is realized. They rise socially from the lower to the upper class not by their own social ambition but by their unexpectedly inheriting fortune left by Old Harmon as whose servants they have worked hard for many years. Mrs. Boffin wishes to go in for “Fashion” after they receive a fortune (55). She appears to be a snob; yet she is not, partly because her courting of “Fashion” is done with a comical, “child”-like *naïveté*; but more importantly because she is aware of the duty of the rich: “... we must do what’s right by our fortune; we must act up to it”; “It’s never been acted up to yet, and, consequently, no good has come of it” (99). As John Harmon observes, if one is rich, one has “a great power of doing good to others” (680).

The Boffins are set against Podsnap who represents the self-centered bourgeois. It is interesting that in *Our Mutual Friend* the representative of the “good” rich come from the lower class. The following is the reason that the Boffins have inherited a large fortune in Old Harmon’s will:

These two ignorant and unpolished people had guided themselves so far on in their journey of life, by a religious sense of duty and desire to do right ... the hard wrathful and sordid nature[Old Harmon] ... had never been so warped but that it knew their moral straightness and respected it. (101)

Their upward mobility is realized because their “moral straightness” was truly “respect”-able, and it is to be approved because they rise socially without incurring moral corruption. Dickens believed that true respectability consists in morality. In *Our Mutual Friend* he radically tried to invert the established social values (true respectability against social respectability), which is seen more clearly in his notion of the true lady and gentleman that is embodied in Lizzie Hexam and Eugene Wrayburn. Dickens was not a socialist but a reformer who wished to change his contemporaries’ views on ‘respectability.’

4

In the last chapter of *Our Mutual Friend*, “the Voice of Society” discusses the question, “whether a young man of very fair family, good appearance, and some talent[Eugene], makes a fool or a wise man of himself in marrying a female waterman, turned factory girl[Lizzie]” (817). Snobbish Tippins is most scornful of Lizzie (816). ‘Philistine’ Podsnap says, “... all I have to say is ... that my gorge rises against such a marriage ... and that I desire to know no more about it” (818). He does not admit anything but socially accepted values: the shallow views of respectability. Nor does his faithful ‘instrument,’ Mrs. Podsnap, who says that “a man accustomed to Society should

look out for a woman accustomed to Society.” Then the railway Contractor, who looks at everything from the capitalistic viewpoint, offers his utterly materialistic opinion (818). He cannot evaluate anything unquantifiable. Finally, the fraudulent speculator who earned £ 375,000 only by market manipulation says, “Madness and moonshine ... A man may do anything lawful for money. But for no money! Bosh!” (819). After all, money is everything in Society. Their values are decided by monetary worth and they cannot admit anything that lies outside it.

But Twemlow voices his opinion last. He repudiates Podsnap and the others:

‘If this gentleman’s feelings of gratitude, of respect, of admiration, and affection ... if such feelings on the part of this gentleman induced this gentleman to marry this lady, I think he is the greater gentleman for the action, and makes her the greater lady. I beg to say that when I use the word gentleman, I use it in the sense in which the degree may be attained by any man.’ (820, emphasis added)

Twemlow speaks here for Dickens. This statement is a kind of conclusion to the novel. To use Twemlow’s words, Lizzie is a “lady” in the sense in which the degree may be attained by any woman. In other words, she is truly “respect”-able. On the other hand, Eugene becomes the true gentleman through his manly action for his beloved. Robin Gilmour notes that there existed five types of gentleman in Victorian society (109). Dickens mentions all of them in the novel: the gent (Lammle), the dandy (Twemlow), the traditional gentleman by birth (Eugene), the self-made man (John) and the manly Victorian gentleman. It is the last type of gentleman that Eugene becomes at the end of the novel.

Dickens’ handling all these types of gentleman shows his concern with the idea of ‘gentleman.’ Twemlow’s manifestation is the most radical in all Dickens’ works. In *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), for example, Dickens depicts a hero, an orphan brought up in the workhouse, who finally becomes a socially recognized “gentleman” simply because he is found out to be a boy of gentle birth. In *David Copperfield* (1849-50) the hero, having once worked in the warehouse among working-class children, becomes a self-made “gentleman”; but his social identity is, from beginning to end, derived from his middle-class background. Then, in *Great Expectations* Dickens, for the first time, depicts a hero who, with a working-class background, tries to become a “gentleman.” Pip is, in the end, frustrated in his ambition, though he ends up as a ‘white-collar’ clerk. But Dickens’ classless notion of gentlemanliness is hinted in penitent Pip (the narrator) and the blacksmith Joe. Finally, in *Our Mutual Friend*, through Twemlow’s voice, Dickens entirely reconstitutes the idea of ‘gentleman.’ He denies any conventional view that ‘gentleman’ equals ‘a man of gentle birth,’ ‘a man of money and leisure’ or ‘a man of

noble appearance,' and accepts only 'a man of morality' as the true gentleman.

The person who tries to climb the social ladder with the sole aim of becoming socially respectable or a conventional gentleman or lady is disapproved of by Dickens. But, in *Our Mutual Friend*, the corrupting force is snobbish social ambition. Thus the moral corruption is, as we have seen above, not necessarily related to social advancement itself. Dickens is critical only of the social advancement motivated, or followed, by snobbery or respectability worship. He is not at all negative in principle towards upward mobility of the people of any class; his attitude totally depends on the question of morality.

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