

“The Voice of Society”
Dickens’ Surprising Lesson in Diplomacy
Spoken by the “Innocent” Table
in *Our Mutual Friend*

by
Patricia Hernandez

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ABSTRACT

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In *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens plays with the idea of people becoming things and things becoming people. One such person, who is initially introduced as a table, is Melvin Twemlow. This member of the aristocracy plays an almost comical, minor role within one sub-plot of the novel, but over the course of the novel progresses from a “feeble” character into a strong, morally authoritative voice. Dickens concludes his novel with a debate concerning who is, or should be, “the voice of society” and the last word of the debate is given to the mysterious table-man character. Rather than allowing a central protagonist to champion his thoughts, Dickens surprises his readers by making an exemplary moral figure of a mild, minor character from among the ranks of the pompous aristocracy. Twemlow’s speech makes a familiar Dickensian point about the need for social reform in a strange, politically incorrect way.

Sincerest Gratitude is Owed

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Para mis abuelos,

Manuel Nieto, Mercedes Nieto, Severo Hernández, y Mercedes Hernández.

Me enseñaron que si hacemos sacrificios, podemos lograr nuestros sueños.

¡Nunca los olvidaré!

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- Introduction -

Once upon a time, in the 1860s, in the mysterious land of Charles Dickens, there were rich people. Not the kind with lots of land left to them from generations past, but a new kind of rich people: the kind who lived in London with new furniture, new friends, new servants, new plates, and new horses. One of these nouveau riche families is the Veneerings, and as the narrator of *Our Mutual Friend* puts it, “Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new” (Dickens 17). It is important to recognize just how new everything was in the Veneering home, since, “what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings – the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky” (17). An endnote in an edition of the text edited by Adrian Poole explains that the nineteenth century came to be known as “The Age of Veneer” because of the amount of furniture being turned out from workshops, where cheap furniture could be disguised using a thick veneer (Poole 803). The Veneerings, who, we are told, are like

their furniture, come to represent the nouveau riche, with whom they are associated and whom Dickens presents as a series of false surfaces disguising corrupt foundations.

Among this group of the newly rich, there is one man who is not new to wealth at all. Actually, this man, Twemlow, is quite different from the others. The focus of this thesis is Melvin Twemlow, a true aristocrat, a descendant of land-owning nobles, specifically Lord Snigsworth. Twemlow represents the traditional upper class, who do not need to earn their money the way the nouveau riche do. He is the only representative of the values of the highest class in London during the 1860s. Through his heartwarming final speech, the last words spoken on the last page of the last novel in Dickens' career, Twemlow chooses to champion not the aristocrat, but the everyman. Dickens has Twemlow assert that any man may be worthy of being called a gentleman by virtue of his feelings, regardless of his wealth, and in so doing, changes the meaning of the word gentleman from a socio-economic description to one that is suggestive of moral integrity. Putting this shift in meaning in the mouth of an aristocrat is a key move on Dickens' part, since it allows for the simultaneous valuation of both the virtuous pauper (which I will describe in detail in the chapter one) and the well-spoken aristocrat. Twemlow's virtuousness, effectively represented by his heroic final speech, when juxtaposed with the numerous examples of the virtue-less nouveau riche, represented by their insensitive judgements and commentary throughout the book, not only indicates a nostalgia for the noblesse oblige¹ associated with traditional aristocracy, but also speaks to the value of the humility and sincerity that are so often characteristic of Dickensian paupers, who frequently represent some form of moral authority.

¹ "Noblesse oblige" is used here in reference to the noble qualities once considered part of the aristocratic way of life. It describes a sense of duty the rich should have towards the less fortunate.

By understanding the changes Twemlow undergoes before he speaks his last words, the reader can come closer to understanding how the dualistic significance of Twemlow's final speech, which this thesis aims to illustrate, makes sense within the context of the novel. In other words, understanding Twemlow and his final speech will help the reader understand how the at once liberal and conservative² Dickens has managed to simultaneously stand for both extremes (the inherent nobility of the traditional aristocrat and the exemplary virtues of the modest poor), rather than choosing one, the other, or some middle ground. This thesis aims to describe Twemlow's evolution into the nostalgic voice that (with the last words in the novel) implores his contemporaries to *progress backwards*, becoming like the once noble aristocrats or the always virtuous poor and rejecting the newer attitudes of the self important nouveau riche. His evolution differentiates him from other characters (the virtuous and the corrupt alike), giving him the distinction of representing a combination of the ideals of both the rich and the poor. This dualistic representation constitutes Twemlow as the embodiment of what would appear to be a new, Dickensian ideal at the very end of Dickens' career.

The implications of Twemlow's message are at once refreshing and problematic. That is to say, the effect of Twemlow's speech is that an aristocrat denounces the middle class but praises the humility of the poor, all the while having the last word, demonstrating the power of the rich over the rest. Since it points a critical finger at the nouveau riche, who represent middle class London, the message in this final chapter seems harshly politically incorrect. However, Twemlow is also the underdog in the novel in his own right, and his speech actually represents the virtuousness that used to be tied to

² Here, liberal and conservative do not imply Dickens' alliance to any political party; rather, they indicate characteristics of his message delivered through Twemlow's speech in *Our Mutual Friend*.

the nobility and that is observable in the novel's heroines. In this way, Twemlow's speech, despite its loyalty to fading class traditions, is both progressive and refreshing, since it suggests that even for an aristocrat, wealth should be subordinated to the feelings of an individual – in this case, feelings of gratitude, respect, and admiration.

It is crucial to understand who Twemlow is and what he represents, and likewise, who his peers are and what they are like, in order to appreciate the magnitude of Twemlow's last words. Since his progress from a weak, minor character into a booming voice is what produces some of the most moving lines in the novel and makes up the final say for Dickens, he emerges as a hero in the novel. However, my claim that Twemlow's speech makes him a hero is contrary to John Kucich's argument in his article, "Repression and Representation: Dickens' General Economy." He writes that Twemlow's speech means "the feelings of a gentleman are sacred and above exposure, or, to put this inversely, that suppression of one's feelings is a code by which 'gentlemen' might be recognized" (Kucich 77). "[O]stentatious refusal of self" makes a hero in Kucich's interpretation, and "Dickens's heroes exemplify the passion of repression, not the repression of passion" (77). However, Twemlow only starts out as a repressed character and proves himself outspoken, rather than repressed in the final scene. He started out silent, confused, standing back from the action and avoiding his own questions. This refusal of self represents what Kucich deems heroic in Dickens, so surely Twemlow must be heroic. However, the moment he chooses to speak out emotionally, he ceases to be repressed. Therefore, if we consider Twemlow to be the hero of the novel, then we may argue that it is not necessarily pure repression that constitutes

heroicism. In the case of Twemlow, a hero emerges from a once stifled man's eventual purging of the emotion he has repressed all along.

Focusing on the minor character Twemlow, this thesis outlines the roles of other characters in relationship to him, his own progression, his last words, and what they mean for Dickens' readers, today. In chapter one, "Dickens' Moral Universe," I differentiate Twemlow from other characters, explaining how a few others come close to being the heroes or heroines of the novel but how certain characteristics of Twemlow make him the most heroic. I do this by examining, through a close reading of the novel, descriptions of hardness and softness representative of corrupt and virtuous characters, respectively. Also, in this chapter I discuss what critics and Twemlow seem to agree about in terms of legitimizing work in the Victorian era, separating the characters into groups of good and bad according to their means of income, rather than wealth. In the second chapter, "Twemlow's Evolution," I have described how Twemlow changes from the feeble, table-like character he is introduced as into a strong, authoritative character. Chapter three, "The Last Word," explores one interpretation of Twemlow's final speech, which works to redefine the word 'gentleman' and justifies the marriage of Eugene Wrayburn to Lizzie Hexam, which produces such contention among the nouveau riche. Finally, in the conclusion, I work to explain the significance of Twemlow's defense in the last chapter of *Our Mutual Friend* within the context of Dickens' work in general, specifically showing how his last novel seems to represent a new ideal for the Victorian novelist.

- Chapter One -

Dickens' Moral Universe
"Legitimation"³ and Hardness vs. Softness
in *Our Mutual Friend*

This chapter is dedicated to exploring textual evidence that could help readers decide who the "good" and "bad" characters are in *Our Mutual Friend*. In order to defend my claim that Twemlow is the hero in the novel, it is useful to look first at other characters, virtuous and villainous alike, who fail to earn the distinction. As we will see, Twemlow stands out from among the exclusive group of socialites described in this chapter, making them into examples of what one ought not to become. The narrator employs a motif of hard and soft imagery that vividly demonstrates the contempt Dickens had for certain subsections of upper-middle class individuals. An essay by Cathy Shuman serves to help the reader distinguish the favorable middle class workers from the appalling nouveau riche, who are the subject of Dickens' scathing social commentary in *Our Mutual Friend*. This chapter recognizes that Twemlow is not the only character that represents some kind of opposition to this clearly negative group. In fact, critics often

³ "Legitimation" mimics the title from Cathy Shuman's essay, "Invigilating *Our Mutual Friend*: Gender and the Legitimation of Professional Authority," cited in this chapter.

refer to a few other characters as the heroines of the novel. However, as I will demonstrate, Twemlow's social status in the novel makes him even greater than these "good" characters, ultimately making *him* the over-arching hero. His position in society allows him access to an audience of pompous nouveau riche families, before whom he can present a case for the other "good" characters, championing their virtuousness in a setting where their voices might otherwise be mute, and their "goodness" go unnoticed.

Part One: Legitimate Occupation or Thievery: Work in *Our Mutual Friend*

Cathy Shuman provides us with one reason Dickens would chastise the nouveau riche in this novel, who are represented by families like the Veneerings and their friends, the Podsnaps. These families make money from "shares" and not from working. Part of what makes the making of money from shares dubious is that the narrator is unclear (probably on purpose) about what these shares are shares of and what they produce. In the text, Dickens dedicated a great deal of description to the "shares," however he seems to be purposely vague in his description of the occupation that provides the nouveau riche with income. The reader is not given information about what the shares are shares of, nor about where the shares come from or even what they produce. Dickens' vague description only leads the reader to the mysterious conclusion that the shares owned by the Veneerings and their friends come only from other shares and produce more shares. The mysterious nature of the narrator's description of shares makes the nouveau riche shareholders an all the more questionable group. Regenia Gagnier mentions Dickens' "diatribe on shares" in her essay, "Money, the Economy, and Social Class." During a discussion of Marx's theories of demand as "unreal" and "objectless," she explains that

the idea of money associated with shares is like an “imagined object,” whereas physical money that comes from doing work is the “real object.” According to Gagnier, the “circulation” of money implied in the discussion of shares, “is a power of awesome creativity, capable of the creative destruction of all social relations: all that was solid was melting into air.” She writes, “Dickens said [this] less analytically but no less forcefully in the diatribe on shares in *Our Mutual Friend*” (Gagnier 52). Men like Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn, for example, do not come under attack the way the nouveau riche do because they are professionals; they have been educated as attorneys and work, however nominally, at this occupation for their money. Before the mid to late 1800s, nobility were expected to uphold the noblesse oblige, and the poor worked hard to survive. Even after the middle class began to materialize from the ranks of the educated poor, there were basically different classes that did different kinds of work to earn a living. The nouveau riche’s participation in the buying and selling of shares cheated the established system that existed before shareholding became an occupation; they did not study or practice a profession, but rather were stockbrokers, essentially making money without working and without contributing anything to society (not even participating in philanthropy, the way the old aristocracy did). In fact, according to Linda K. Hughes, it was not until the 1870s that reform bills were passed, providing and “mandating schooling for all children five to twelve years old within their districts” (35). This means that in the 1860s, when Dickens was writing *Our Mutual Friend*, schooling had not been fully implemented; therefore, the shareholders were gaining status without necessarily even having been educated. Since education was marginally gaining popularity among the poor during the time when the novel was written, it makes sense that educated

professionals, such as the attorneys in the novel, Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood, would be treated more favorably by Dickens than the mysterious shareholders, whose occupations have no origin.

Working for a living, be it physically for the poorest people, intellectually for the educated, or philanthropically as was expected from the traditional aristocrats, is part of what constitutes virtue in *Our Mutual Friend*. Also, in the case of the aristocrats, philanthropy was not their only purpose, though it was likely their only work. These individuals however, were valuable to society for what they represented as well. In his essay, "The Aristocratic Idea," Douglas Woodruff writes that "The aristocratic element in [the Victorians] represented pre-eminently the land, and life on the land – the landed interest [in England]" (284). Therefore, the aristocracy serves the purpose of preserving a way of life and the interests of England and of the English. In *Our Mutual Friend*, which Woodruff alludes to in his essay, the people who do not have honest jobs or purposes are villainized. Cathy Shuman comments on the difference between masculine and feminine work in the novel. Her analysis, however attests the value of intellectual work in *Our Mutual Friend*, such as that done by Wrayburn and Lightwood, the attorneys in the novel. In the following excerpt, Shuman refers to Wegg and Boffin, who are characters interested in education the sort of education to which Wrayburn and Lightwood would have had access:

Wegg and Boffin classify intellectual work as both production and consumption, capitalist and precapitalist, valuable and invaluable, by invoking the doctrine of separate spheres: one masculine, public, market-dominated (the historical reading Wegg does for Boffin at an hourly wage), one feminine, domestic, devoted to

leisure (Wegg "dropping into poetry" for "me and Mrs. Boffin," not as an employee, but as a friend) (Shuman 156).

Shuman, herself, explains how her assertion suggests the value of intellectual work during the Victorian era. She clarifies the quote above: "The valuing of intellectual work in the context of mid-nineteenth-century capitalism was a crucial task for the emerging British professional at the time of the writing of *Our Mutual Friend*" (155). Shuman's comments pertaining to the value of intellectual work and of its significance during the time period when Dickens is writing *Our Mutual Friend* serve to demonstrate Dickens' own praise of those who work, intellectually or otherwise, over those who do not.

The novel reaffirms Shuman's assertions about the value of intellectual work, when it demonstrates just how much disdain Dickens has for the stockbrokers. In the following scene from chapter 10, "A Marriage Contract," the narrator sarcastically rants about the Veneerings and their friends, and likens them to "vermin" because they make their living off shares, asking rhetorical questions that serve to characterize shares and shareholders as questionable at best:

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. Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have Shares. Have Shares enough to be on Boards of Directors in capital letters, oscillate on mysterious business between London and Paris, and be great. Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going to? Shares. What are his tastes? Shares. Has he any principles? Shares. What squeezes him into Parliament? Shares. Perhaps he never of himself achieved success in anything, never originated anything, never produced anything?

Sufficient answer to all; Shares. O mighty Shares! To set those blaring images so high, and to cause us smaller vermin, as under the influence of henbane or opium, to cry out, night and day, "Relieve us of our money, scatter it for us, buy us and sell us, ruin us, only we beseech ye take rank among the powers of the earth, and fatten on us!" (Dickens 118)

The excerpt truly gets at the heart of what seems to be Dickens' problem with shareholders in London; they live off of something that is bought with and only produces more of itself: "shares!" The final phrase, "fatten on us," points to the way in which shareholders take advantage of those who do actual work in the novel. They literally feed off of the income produced from buying shares in other people's work, hence, their "fatten[ing]" on others. Outside of an exchange of shares between shareholders, there is no product to show for participation in share exchange, and there is seemingly no origin or end to the shareholders' trading. The only things gained by their exchanges are the cheaply made plated and painted furniture and décor in their new homes that give the illusion of aristocratic wealth. Yet, as the narrator explains, their investments in shares make people like the Veneerings able to serve on committees and even "squeeze into Parliament" (119). The power of the Veneerings derives from nothingness, and they have nothing concrete to show for it, the way land or an estate are concrete. They have enough to buy things that make others perceive them as wealthy, but they have no sense of duty to an occupation, to education, or even to those burdened by a low social status; therefore, they contribute nothing to society, but rather, they take and take all that their "shares" have to offer.

Although Dickens praises intellectual and physical work and denounces the

shareholders, his apparent appreciation for those with more traditional means of living does not imply that there were not people who made money corruptly before the existence of the nouveau riche. In fact, Dickens accounts for the existence of corrupt individuals who were present even before shareholders existed, villains who were part of the traditional class system, which included only the poor and rich. He creates characters who are perfect representatives of these undesirable menaces. One such example in *Our Mutual Friend* is Roger Riderhood, who is poor and not virtuous, but villainous, and a thief. He is essentially a cheater from the ranks of the poor. Riderhood is a Dickensian “bad guy” trying to avoid working, and he is an important example in the text more because of the kind of person he gets compared to than for the villain that he is. As is the case with Twemlow, it is the juxtaposition of Riderhood’s character to other characters (namely to Gaffer) that reveals something about what Dickens deemed appropriate in society: working for your money is “good” and honest and cheating those who do work to make your living is “bad.”

Jesse “Gaffer” Hexam, exchanges words with Riderhood in the opening chapter of the novel, in which he vocalizes what Dickens seems to think about working for your money rather than cheating the system and avoiding work. We know Dickens values Gaffer over Riderhood by his characterization of each throughout the book, as he repeatedly describes Gaffer as “an innocent” with “high moralities,” despite his low social status as a waterman (16). After Gaffer shuns Riderhood⁴ on the river, Riderhood implies that Gaffer is as guilty of stealing from men as he is, to which Gaffer, who takes money only from dead bodies floating in the Thames, replies:

⁴ Riderhood incessantly instigates Gaffer, calling him “pardonner” repeatedly, but Gaffer avoids Riderhood as long as he can.

How can money be a corpse's? Can a corpse own it, want it, spend it, claim it, miss it? Don't try to go confounding the rights and wrongs of things in that way. [...] You've got off with a short time of it for putting your hand in the pocket of a sailor, a live sailor. Make the most of it and think yourself lucky, but don't think after that to come over me with your pardners. We have worked together in the past, but we work together no more in time present nor yet the future (16).

Gaffer's distaste for Riderhood in this passage mimics the narrator's distaste for the shareholders, who make money without working, yet there is a key difference. The narrator seems to be defending old money, since those who have it have something to show for their wealth, and Gaffer is the voice of the hard-laboring poor, who do whatever they must, even scavenging through dead, waterlogged bodies, to barely make a living. In either scenario, however the speaker detests the notion of making money from nothing (not through work or even with the help of a good name, but through nothing, shares, stealing, which are more closely linked than one would think). Comparing Gaffer's words to the narrator's assessment of the shareholders makes the stockbrokers appear to be cheaters, and possibly even thieves!

These examples of vice in Dickens, which the reader is compelled to go back and reinterpret after reading Twemlow's final speech, serve as support for my interpretation of the speech. In it, Dickens suggests it is better to either be like the old aristocrats, who were expected to behave like nobility, taking care of the less fortunate, and did, or like the poor, who were expected to be humble and work to survive and did, or even like what some might consider to be the lower-middle class, who could afford an education, and became educated but still never reached the affluence of the aristocracy. In this way, the

old system allows for everyone to *earn* his or her position in the system — the poor and middle class through their labor and the nobility through their virtuous philanthropic work. Everyone “works” to “earn” in the sense of deserving their money. For Dickens, the issue is not necessarily making money, but rather about working in such a way as to be worthy of a reward that is beyond money.

One scene which epitomizes the idea of “deserving” one’s money is the scene in which Fascination Fledgeby, the banker who wants no one to know his position, reminds Riah, his assistant, that he must never reveal Fledgeby’s identity. In it, Riah is described as a “grateful servant,” although he is employed by Pubsey and Co, Fledgeby’s collections establishment. The description of Riah shows a humility and mildness in stark opposition to the characterizations of the nouveau riche, described later in this chapter:

"If they ask it, say it's Pubsey, or say it's Co, or say it's anything you like, but what it is." His grateful servant – in whose race gratitude is deep, strong, and enduring – bowed his head, and actually did now put the hem of his coat to his lips: though so lightly that the wearer knew nothing of it (280).

Although Riah works for a man who does not appreciate him, Riah is humble and diligent, and always grateful for his job, even when his employer, Fledgeby is undeserving of Riah’s loyalty and hard work. Even when Riah must play the part of collector in order to spare Fledgeby the mortification of doing his own job, Riah does it, and is grateful for the job, which makes him deserving of the position⁵. Despite its

⁵ That is to say, his gratitude makes him deserving of any position in which he can earn a living, not necessarily deserving of the negative qualities of his job as a collections agent.

harshness, Riah knows his place and works accordingly, as an explanation of Twemlow's speech seems to indicate everyone should do.

Part Two: Poor, Hard-Working Gentlemen: Twemlow's Heroic Ideas

The previous section in this chapter discusses the ways in which the poor and the hard - working characters represent virtue in *Our Mutual Friend*. Citing these examples was an essential step towards illustrating one of the "good" implications (discussed in *this* section) of Twemlow's final speech, which works to change the meaning of the word "gentleman," making it a title attainable by every man by virtue of his feelings. After Twemlow's last words, all of the working-class men, too, can be considered gentlemen. Terry Eagleton captures the number one reason why Twemlow should be regarded as a Dickensian hero: "Dickens had a very English weakness for the English gentleman" (157). Although, this statement is not proof of Twemlow's heroicism, the seemingly endless references to Twemlow as a "gentleman" in the novel, paired with Eagleton's observation of Dickens' acute interest in the idea of "gentleman," make Twemlow at the very least a character who should be scrutinized and closely observed, in an effort to understand why Dickens might have created such a character. Armed with an interest in the man Dickens described in terms the author himself was so fond of, the final speech in the novel takes on a new and exciting significance, much more indicative of Twemlow's greatness and heroicism than the mere words might have suggested, had the reader not been focused on the gentleman, whose virtuousness Dickens has subtly emphasized throughout the novel. In his final speech, Twemlow knocks down the boundaries surrounding the word "gentleman," teaches the nouveau riche how they have abused the

term, using it wrongly, and speaks for the working class, who should be called “gentlemen,” regardless of their social status⁶. According to Twemlow’s final speech, since a gentlemen should be identified by virtue of his feelings, Twemlow, by speaking up in defense of all gentlemen, becomes an example of what the aristocracy ought to return to, since the characters closest to serving as representatives of aristocrats in the novel, Snigsworth and Harmon, are actually perfect examples of inadequate, contemporary aristocrats. Snigsworth has the wrong attitude, which the reader is repeatedly exposed to, seeing him putting on airs and speaking self righteously about how he deserves his money because he has made connections within the ranks of the very rich, while his cousin Twemlow, has not. Harmon is another good example of an inadequate aristocrat; although he is well meaning in his efforts to better Bella, Harmon owns an estate, but it is in the city; his family was wealthy, but they became wealthy through garbage management; he is technically an heir to his parents’ fortune, yet he disguises who he is, playing the role of a penniless wanderer for most of the novel. Since he works at different jobs and his money comes from land and, essentially, from work his father did, Harmon’s money is not suspect, the way the Veneerings are with their shares. There is something else that makes Harmon a more redeemable character than Snigsworth, even if he is not a true aristocrat. Harmon’s primary goal is to expose the virtue he believes Bella has in a similar way to how Twemlow insists on every individual’s potential for virtuousness.

While I suggest (and explain further in chapter three of this thesis) that because of the positive implications of his final speech, which states that all men are potential

⁶ By “working class,” I mean the members of the working class who do not cheat the system the way Riderhood and the Veneerings have done.

gentlemen, Twemlow is the hero of the novel, critics such as Eagleton, who have studied trends in Dickensian novels, would disagree, arguing that Twemlow cannot be a Dickensian hero, since Dickens always makes his most virtuous characters female. As Eagleton explains, the moral is tied to the physical in Dickens's work. This is because, as he points out, in bustling city it is hard to make distinctions between people. In order to help the reader differentiate characters from one another, Dickens translates the "moral self" of his characters into physical terms. Eagleton writes, quite frankly:

Dickens' crooks are fascinating, but his virtuous characters are generally insipid. [...] This rift between the [insipid] moral and the vivacious [immoral characters] is to some extent a gender gap as well. Put crudely, the women in Dickens have the morality, whereas the men have the life" (Eagleton 149,151).

He then cites Bella Wilfer (one of the subjects of section three in this chapter) as an example of one of Dickens' "insipid" but virtuous characters. While both Bella and Lizzie are considered heroines of the novel by numerous critics, Eagleton (one such critic) would be wrong to dismiss Twemlow (whom he never mentions in his discussion of virtue and vice in Dickens) as a surprising hero in *Our Mutual Friend*, which chapter three of this thesis proves him to be. Although he is not a woman, Twemlow's position gives him the power to represent and vocalize virtuousness in the novel, challenging the nouveau riche, which is something the virtuous women cannot do, since they do not have to status to be present among the aristocrats in order to speak up in their own defense.

Part Three: Virtuous Paupers and “Hideous” Tableware

On its own, Twemlow’s evolution (discussed in chapter two) means nothing without an understanding of how he is better than other virtuous characters and how his evolution makes him different than the virtue-less nouveau riche. Essentially, Dickens creates characters that can be juxtaposed to Twemlow and scenarios that demonstrate an existing contradiction to the expectations he has of society. The effect of these juxtapositions is that, through comparisons to the ideal Twemlow, Dickens creates a series of examples of what society ought not to be. By contrast, Twemlow fits into the novel as an example of what Dickens seems to want to see in society. That is not to say, however, that there are not other virtuous characters in the novel who represent opposition to the virtue-less nouveau riche.

As I briefly mentioned in the first section of this thesis, Bella and Lizzie might also be said to represent virtue in this novel. While I will explain the ways in which the girls contribute to the ideals which Twemlow proposes, they are not able to represent a moral authority in the novel because they lack the social status to make their voices heard and the motivation to speak up in defense of their own virtue. In fact, their neglecting to speak up in their own defense adds to their humility, which, juxtaposed to the arrogance of the nouveau riche families, emerges as a one of the more favorable virtues in the novel. Recognition of their virtue should come from another virtuous character, only it must be one with the power to represent them among the ranks of elites to whom they do not have access. Perhaps if Twemlow’s observations of what society ought to be like were realized, the ladies could speak for themselves. The reform Twemlow calls for in his speech would grant them the authority they lack, since according to Twemlow,

anyone can be a lady or a gentleman. However, while these changes are what Twemlow would like to see in society, the girls are not yet seen as proper ladies worthy of a say among the ranks of the nouveau riche; for this reason, Dickens allows Twemlow, the least likely representative of moral authority, or of any authority for that matter, to develop a voice capable of speaking up for the virtuous young women.

Since I have stated that humility is virtuous for Dickens in his novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, it is useful to look at what one critic, John Kucich, has to say about the repression of one's self, since this "self repression" as he calls it, seems to be tied to the humility to both Twemlow and the other potential heroines. Kucich notes the irony of putting the last words spoken on behalf of the poor, virtuous women in the novel in the mouth of a privileged aristocratic gentleman. While Kucich's "Repression and Representation: Dickens' General Economy" focuses mainly on self repression amid constraints of social expectation, he also explains that Bella and Lizzie are virtuous since they are repressed by society and that Twemlow is needed to represent their positions, since, as I stated earlier, he has the social status that warrants attention in the novel and that they do not possess. Kucich's commentary add irony to my own claim as well, since according to this thesis, Twemlow seems to gain a heroic status when he ceases to repress himself, rather than through the self-repression he engages in throughout the book. While the potential heroines are repressed by society, Twemlow often stifles himself and keeps quiet, only allowing himself to reveal his feelings fully in the very end of the novel. Kucich describes the psycho-social background that leads to Twemlow's last words, writing:

The gap between public society and personal quest in *Our Mutual Friend* fulfills [a] pattern [... by which] Dickensian repression, whatever its mythological qualities, constitutes in its symbolic freedom a claim to cultural status, a claim that asserts the privileges of a certain personality type over those of money or blood. (76)

Kucich thinks differences between what society wants to see in an individual and what the individual wants for itself result in the repression of self, which, “constitutes [...] a claim to cultural status,” by which the individual can be acknowledged as valuable for his or her “type” rather than according to his or her wealth, and/or whether or not his or her surname is an aristocratic one. He points to the “gentleman” as one such type, referencing the final speech in the novel, which is the focus of this thesis, explaining:

In the final chapter of *Our Mutual Friend* Lightwood's search for "the voice of society" and its authoritative response to Wrayburn's marriage finally turns up an odd formula, which is articulated by the marginal aristocrat Twemlow, of all people – namely, that the feelings of a gentleman are sacred and above exposure, or, to put this inversely, that suppression of one's feelings is a code by which "gentlemen" might be recognized.

Kucich interprets Twemlow's speech to mean that repression of the individual (of the “personality type”) is what constitutes a “gentleman.” And, finally,

The final victory of one cluster of characters in the novel over the illegitimate society of the Veneerings and Podsnaps hinges not so much on the virtue of the heroes' self-sacrifice as on a certain precise analogy between repression and radically liberating passion – that is, on an affirmation of the transcending

freedom implicit in the general economy, a freedom signified by an ostentatious refusal of self. To put it simply, Dickens's heroes exemplify the passion of repression, not the repression of passion (Kucich 77).

Here, Kucich concludes his thought, explaining that freedom, in *Our Mutual Friend*, comes from the “ostentatious refusal of self” and that “Dickens’ heroes exemplify the passion of repression.” However, it is their out-spoken demeanors that make Lizzie, Bella, and Twemlow seem like the heroes of the novel. In fact, Twemlow seems weak and unimpressive until he stops repressing his feelings and calls for everyone else to act on theirs. Since, as I argue, Twemlow is the hero of the novel, then Kucich’s article represents the opposite of my own understanding of Dickens’ intentions in this novel. When he claims that Dickens’ heroes exemplify the passion of repression, he ignores the fact that Lizzie, Bella, and Twemlow, are all humble and repressed for much of the novel, however eventually, they are also outspoken, virtuous characters, two of whom Eagleton would say represent moral authority by virtue of their sex, and the last of which seems to be a hero, according to Eagleton, because of his “zeal for reform.” However, Twemlow continues to be the most heroic, since not even society can repress him (the way it does Lizzie and Bella). When he stands and speaks up for the *virtues* Lizzie and Bella have embodied: humility, self denial, and strength (none of which are mutually exclusive), he also stands for *them*, on their behalf, where they otherwise would have no voice and be repressed by the Veneerings and their friends. While there are problematic gender politics involved in the potential heroines’ need for a man to speak up on their behalf, this is something not uncommon for the mid-Victorian era. According to Antony H. Harrison, “married women...had been defined legally (by the doctrine of coverture) as

objects rather than subjects with rights; a husband was responsible for his wife's actions , and he controlled her property" (31). This is crucial for the reader to understand, since within this context, it makes sense that these women would have to be represented by a man who defends *them* through a defense of their husbands. I have explained Twemlow's defence of them in more detail in the chapter, "The Final Speech," explaining how Twemlow champions the virtue of these women by championing the feelings of their "gentlemen" husbands.

Kucich is not the only critic who has noticed trends of self-repression as virtuous in *Our Mutual Friend*. In *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England*, George Levine notes a similar self-repression in the character John Harmon, who essentially fakes his own death and adopts the persona, Rokesmith, takes Kucich's concept of self-repression to an extreme. In order to get to know certain individuals fully, Levine explains, Harmon denies them acquaintance with any part of his actual self, observing them from behind a disguise. As Rokesmith, he denies himself, the wealthy Harmon, any interaction with those who come to mean the most to him in order to discover truth and to inspire favorable changes in his wife to be, Bella. Levine writes:

it is the perfect experimental condition: from the position of death, Harmon remains invisible. As he sees, he must deceive. His experimental life allows Harmon to see the real fidelity of the Boffins, certain that it is not an obsequious disguise for greed; from the position as living dead, he can learn "the revolting truth" that he would have purchased Bella, with her caring nothing for him, "as a Sultan buys a slave" (158).

While this seems deceptive and manipulative, there is a great deal of virtue in Harmon's character and in his efforts. Some argue that he, too, might be the hero of the novel. Kucich's argument about the virtuousness of self-repression makes Levine's observation in *Dying to Know* seem like a case for Harmon as the most virtuous character, since he represses himself to the point of staging his own death, however, as follows in this chapter, I will explain how neither Harmon (who mirrors Twemlow's self-repression), nor other potential heroines in the novel achieve the level of heroics Twemlow achieves in the final chapter.

Twemlow and Harmon are not the only virtuous character in the novel; there are virtuous women as well. However, only Twemlow is the hero of the novel. When I refer to the virtuous women in *Our Mutual Friend*, I am referring to Lizzie Hexam and Bella Wilfer. I do not choose to call these women true heroines of the novel, but at least one critic argues they are exemplary because they represent a domestic ideal, and they *save* the men they marry⁷. Cathy Shuman writes that in the novel,

the domestic woman's special influence is depicted as illusory or futile. [...] Bella Wilfer and Lizzie Hexam do provide their eventual husbands with certification as the novel's normative voices – but not by embodying domestic power. In fact, the counterfeit secretary John Rokesmith/Harmon and the reluctant barrister Eugene Wrayburn – the men who will turn out to be "truly qualified" at novel's end – gain their qualifications through the demystification of domestic power and its replacement by pedagogic authority (157-8).

⁷ Bella cannot save Harmon, since no matter how virtuous she has become by the end of the novel, he has most definitely saved her from her former selfish self. However, she can make his entire plan to disguise himself and save her worth it, and she does, by becoming the kind of woman he was hoping she would become. On the other hand, looking at her as virtuous for changing who she is and becoming who her husband wants her to be is also problematic. These are the principle reasons I have a problem with Shuman's essay.

According to Shuman, rather than lending power to the women for effectively running their households well, the novel, essentially, gives power to the men, their husbands, who assert their pedagogic authority over the women. The women basically *save* the men by providing themselves as individuals over which the men can exercise their authority.

While Shuman's article describes an unconventional and problematic way for Dickens to have made the women virtuous, the novel's plot does a much better job of securing their titles as virtuous without as making as many problematic insinuations about the roles of women during the 1860s in London. In a simplistic summary, Bella learns to be selfless and to value Rokesmith/Harmon whom she thinks has no money, because of the strong feelings she develops for him. Lizzie, likewise is a virtuous girl, only her virtuousness comes from her humble acceptance of her position in life, working hard to help her father in his detestable business in the first chapter, doing what she can to get an education, and being virtuous enough that a "gentleman," Eugene Wrayburn, falls in love with her and proposes marriage.

According to Twemlow, "the feelings of a gentleman" towards a woman are enough to "make her the greater lady." Therefore, if Twemlow's final speech is being used as an example of some final Dickensian message, then by Dickens' own definition, both Bella and Lizzie are the "greater" ladies, since they are proposed to by "gentlemen." The idea that they have feelings from which they act and to which they are loyal also makes them virtuous, according to Twemlow, who believes value comes from feelings, not from wealth.

Contrary to these virtuous, but not-quite-heroic women, the nouveau riche, who associate with Twemlow at the dinner parties represent the virtue-less individuals that

make up the growing middle class. They are characterized as hard, hideous things. Like their plates, the narrator explains, the Podsnaps, Veneerings, and company are heavy, solid, and hard. They never cease to offer their opinions, endlessly chattering away and always on only one topic: money. They do not consider opinions that might differ from their own and persistently pursue their own interests. Their busy, self-centered attitudes are epitomized in a scene that takes place at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Podsnap, when a foreign guest joins them for dinner. Beginning with the dinnerware, the narrator describes the scenario, graphically representing the dinner guests as the silver plated dinnerware they are using. Once again, the narrator indicates the false covering associated with this group of characters. Like the Veneerings with their furniture, the Podsnaps are likened to their plates and spoons, covered in metal, but not actually worth what they *appear* to be worth. If, perchance, the narrator explains, the dinnerware could be melted down, the poor quality and little worth of the plates and spoons could be exposed. Figuratively speaking, the following quote compares the melting down of the cheap, expensive-looking plates and spoons, to the melting down of the Podsnaps themselves, which would expose how little they are actually worth, regardless of appearances. The narrator says:

Hideous solidity was characteristic of the Podsnap plate. Everything was made to look as heavy as it could, and to take up as much room as possible. Everything said boastfully, 'here you have as much of me in my ugliness as if it were only lead; but I am so many ounces of precious metal worth so much an ounce; - wouldn't you like to melt me down?'...All the big silver spoons widened the mouths of the company expressly for the purpose of thrusting the sentiment down their throats with every morsel they ate. [...]The majority of the guests were like

the plate, and included several heavy articles weighing ever so much (Dickens 135).

This passage beautifully captures the hideousness of the dinner party hosts and their guests. After emphasizing the worthlessness of these seemingly wealthy people, with talk of melting them down to discover their worth (or worthlessness in the case of the Podsnaps), the words, “hideous solidity,” used to describe the “Podsnap plate” become an indicative of how negative hardness, or rigidity, is for Dickens in this novel. If the plates speak boastfully, then the guests, who are like the plates, are also boastful in speech. The spoons also are indicative of the ways of speaking employed by the guests. The spoons are said to “[thrust] sentiments down their throats,” which is precisely what the guests do to one another, regardless of whether or not their audience is willing to swallow what the exclusive, self-important group has to say. The characterization of the Podsnaps and company as heavy, solid, ugly, and thing-like in this scene clarifies how Twemlow’s evolution away from hard and thing-like is a form of progress. In this scene, Dickens clearly establishes the concept of hard as negative, and soft, or changeable, as favorable.

The scene involving a foreign gentleman demonstrates further the hard-headed and self important attitudes of the despicable nouveau riche. Their treatment of the gentleman demonstrates their arrogance and lack of social etiquette. In the scene, a European, who is very much unlike the nouveau riche, arrives. Immediately, Mr. Podsnap and the others treat him “like a child who was hard of hearing” (D, 135). The dinner party guests rudely assume that this European gentleman, who appears superior in contrast to the negative characterization of the other guests, is not as intelligent as they are, solely by virtue of the fact that he is foreign. They act accordingly, thinking

themselves kind as they shout and talk down to the man. Their actions, however, actually work against them, depicting the extreme lows to which they are capable of sinking due to their self-centered attitudes, which they seem to be unable to shed.

- Chapter Two -

Twemlow's Evolution
The Making of a Hero

In order to comprehend the magnitude of the significance of Twemlow's final speech, it is important to understand how he came to earn the distinction of having the last words in the last novel in Dickens' career. After discussing the other characters, the "good" and the "bad" among them, we can now take note of Twemlow's role in relationship to the others, and describe his progression from a weak and unimpressive character into the new Dickensian hero in *Our Mutual Friend*.

Twemlow, who starts out as a table, seems to break away from this "hardened" characterization, making him better, or at least more reasonable, than his peers, because his brain can "soften." This softening often occurs during times when Twemlow is contemplative. Although Dickens explicitly refers to the hardening and softening of Twemlow's brain, the hard/soft metaphor extends beyond the direct description of his brain to include Twemlow's overall character. Since the author represents the unappealing attitudes of the new money as hardened and the more rational, thoughtful characters as softened, by likening their personalities to the "things" that resemble them,

when Twemlow breaks free of his table-like description, Dickens is suggesting that this is the sort of change the nouveau riche should experience, leaving behind their hardened, unreasonable opinionated chatter. One way the “innocent piece of dinner furniture” initiates this change is by staying out of the way, although he is central to the Veneering dinner party scenes. He finds himself ostracized from the others often, and is constantly disheartened by what he sees, but never takes issue with the way others treat him. After he has been used to gather guests (“guests are added to [him]”), he is ignored and plays the role of a passive observer, taking mental notes of all he witnesses: people’s gestures, words, and what these imply about their relationships with one another. He is, however, unable (or possibly just unwilling) to voice his own thoughts and opinions the way the others do. Furthermore, it is only after the reader is exposed to this distasteful characterization of the other rich, thing-like, obnoxious, and “[hideously solid]” people, illustrated in the excerpt above, that all of the images of the “soft brained” Twemlow seem positive. Where a softened brain might have seemed like a weakness before the Podsnaps’ dinner party scene, after it, Twemlow seems to be coming alive, thinking, reasoning, and feeling when his brain softens, and this is a very good thing according to the juxtaposition of these to the hardened characters, which Dickens sets up in this novel.

Twemlow’s characterizations progress from the once feeble man, to an “estimable,” “self dependant,” “peaceable” man on the anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Lamble (Dickens 401). This is another way in which he is differentiated from those who partake in the wild conversation exchanges at the anniversary. The others depend upon each other for authority, yet are never really peaceable at all since they often find themselves in some sort of discord with each other.

Twemlow stands for progress from the stiff, unsympathetic ideas of the pompous aristocracy, evident in their discussion of marriage in the final chapter, towards the more liberal belief that virtue matters above wealth, which means that Twemlow is capable of something the others are not: fluid thinking. The most significant thing about Twemlow, however, is that in this chapter, he begins to learn how to think logically and objectively. He begins making assertions to himself, and the narrator says he could “reason” to himself. The man, whose brain softens when he considers things, “reasons” that “to meet a man is not to know him” (Dickens 401). Mr. Veneering, who by this point in the novel has conceded to Twemlow being his oldest and dearest friend, has essentially admitted that his newest friend is, ironically, his oldest and dearest friend. This seems in stark contrast to what Twemlow has reasoned in his mind, which also seems to be a much more cautious and fair observation. To meet a man, in fact, is not necessarily to know him, let alone enough to name him your dearest and oldest friend. The presence of these cautionary thoughts in Twemlow’s mind and the passive way he considers them, without forcing every one of his thoughts down the throats of his peers, is what starts to set him apart from the naïve, but forceful nouveau riche.

When we are first introduced Twemlow, we are not sure what to make of him. He has fallen on hard times and is residing in a stable.⁸ Melvin Twemlow, the feeble⁹ gentleman “in frequent requisition” at the home of the Veneerings, is introduced to the

⁸ It seems at least possible that Dickens intends for Twemlow’s stable-yard residence to be a reference to Christianity, where Christ lies in a manger. Twemlow, who comes to incite changes to the unjust world in *Our Mutual Friend* might here be linked to the Christ child: the innocent savior of humankind.

⁹ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, feeble meant (1.) “Of person’s or animals, their limbs or organs: Lacking strength, weak, infirm. [...] implying an extreme degree of weakness, and suggesting either pity or contempt,” until 1844, and (3.) “Lacking intellectual or moral strength,” until about 1859. However, Dickens’ use of “feeble” alternately implies either of these definitions throughout *Our Mutual Friend* in reference to the literally weak-framed and figuratively weak-spirited Melvin Twemlow. The description is discussed in detail later in this thesis.

reader as an unimpressive, barely human character (Dickens 17). In fact, after the very first paragraphs dedicated to his description, the reader might doubt whether he is a person at all, and might instead mistake him for a piece of furniture which can somehow think and become confused. Dickens writes:

There was an innocent piece of dinner-furniture that went upon easy castors and was kept over a livery stable-yard in Duke Street, Saint James's, when not in use, to whom the Veneerings were a source of blind confusion. The name of this article was Twemlow. [...H]e was in frequent requisition, and at many houses might be said to represent the dining-table in its normal state. Mr. and Mrs. Veneering, for example, arranging a dinner, habitually started with Twemlow, and then put leaves in him, or added guests to him. Sometimes the table consisted of Twemlow and a half a dozen leaves; sometimes Twemlow and a dozen leaves; sometimes, Twemlow was pulled out to his utmost extent of twenty leaves (Dickens 17).

After removing only one phrase, "Being first cousin to Lord Snigsworth," from the third sentence, no evidence remains in this excerpt of Twemlow's human identity. He is literally objectified as the central structure at the Veneerings' dinner parties. Although the excised phrase linking Twemlow to his role in the novel as a well-connected aristocrat will prove to be of great significance, as we will see below, it has been removed in this case to emphasize Dickens' objectifying technique. The first sentence of the passage is especially indicative of Twemlow's object-like quality. He is "kept" in the livery stable-yard when not "in use," and he is described as a "piece of dinner-furniture" into which leaves may be put to make room for more guests. A piece of furniture that may be used,

stored, and altered does not seem like a man. A few paragraphs later, after it has been established that Twemlow is in fact a man, the author writes, “[t]his evening, the Veneerings give a banquet. Fourteen leaves in the Twemlow” (18). Using the word “the” before Twemlow, rather than “Mr.,” “Melvin,” or even “dear,” as he is often referred to by Mrs. Veneering, works to continue the objectification of the man in question.

On the other hand, there are equally clear indications of Twemlow’s human qualities. These descriptions bring the character to life, but they indicate neither an interesting, nor a particularly impressive personality. From other early descriptions, we learn that Twemlow is weak and marginalized by his peers, reducing him to a man barely noticeable at all. When mistaken for Mr. Veneering by Mr. Podsnap, irritated as Twemlow is at what he considers to be an insulting error, he cannot summon the voice to speak up and correct the man. Instead, he keeps his thoughts to himself, as he often does, and the author gives us a glimpse into them. As Dickens describes him, “[Twemlow] is so sensible of being a much better bred man than Veneering, that he considers the large [Mr. Podsnap] an offensive ass” (19). And while Mr. Veneering quickly moves to correct the man’s error, Twemlow “holds back with all his feeble might” (20). While this experience serves to illustrate Twemlow’s sensitivity, it also serves to show the passive nature of this mild man. I call him passive because, as I will explain later in this chapter, Twemlow usually avoids confrontations; however, the fact that Dickens tells us he “holds back” suggests that he has that in him which could lead to speaking out, as we see him do in the end. This actively holding back is significant because it shows Twemlow is capable of developing strong feelings but is not yet compelled strongly enough to convey

his emotion. It is this same, feeble man who eventually gains strength enough to challenge the entire dinner party in the final chapter.

The word, feeble, is essential to the characterization of Twemlow's character. Dickens uses it to describe Twemlow's physical and psychological states alternately throughout the novel. Almost every physical description of him, conversation he participates in, and contemplative processes he experiences, revealed to the reader through the narrator, are similarly characterized as feeble. At dinner, his reflection in the mirror shows him in his "collar and cravat, cheeks drawn in as if he had made a great effort to retire into himself years ago and had got so far and had never gotten any farther" (21). He is thin and dressed for the occasion, but looks to be folding into himself and away from what surrounds him. Perhaps while Twemlow is irritated by the unending chatter at the dinner parties, he is unable to extract himself from the scenarios, since, as we will see, he is inextricably related to these people who represent his opposite.

The narrator describes Twemlow's frail frame on his way to the Lammles in the following quote, which is significant because, as Eagleton points out¹⁰ in one section of his summary of Dickensian trends, physical characterizations in Dickens often imitate personalities and/or psychological states:

Twemlow trips, with not a little stiffness across Piccadilly, sensible of having once been more upright in figure and less in danger of being knocked down by swift vehicles (401).

Twemlow is stiff, vulnerable, and can no longer stand upright. Later, on the same page, the narrator refers to Twemlow as a "little feeble gray personage." The word "gray"

¹⁰ The idea of physical tied to the moral was discussed earlier in the thesis, in reference to the virtuousness associated with women in Dickens.

implies a sickly appearance; “little” and “feeble” emphasize the small, weak condition of his frame, which resembles, or represents, his inner weaknesses.

Descriptions of Twemlow’s emotions as he contemplates his relationship to Mr. Veneering accentuate his status as a “feeble” man. One way the narrator addresses his psychological state is by depicting the physical expressions of his inner grief. When deliberating in his mind whether he is Veneering’s oldest and dearest friend, the narrator explains that the issue “steeped the feeble soul of Twemlow,” who is obsessed for most of the novel with what the answer to the question could be (18). “To the excogitation of this problem,” the narrator explains, “the harmless gentleman devoted many anxious hours” (18). These scenes in which Twemlow becomes frustrated by his confusion are relevant to the characterization of Twemlow as feeble-minded, but more importantly, they illustrate just how the Veneerings use Twemlow as a pawn, linking themselves to the true aristocracy by trying to convince him he is their dearest and oldest friend even though he is in fact their newest friend. These scenes make Twemlow appear absurd, but his confusion is actually well-founded. Twemlow is aware that it would be odd for him to call himself Veneering’s oldest friend. Instead of confronting Mr. Veneering with this question in order to come to a decision about it once and for all, however, Twemlow merely demonstrates his frustration with not knowing the answer by repeatedly putting his hand to his forehead, as he often does in situations that cause him to consider something of which he is unsure. When Lady Tippins seems to have Mr. Veneering’s attention, “poor Twemlow’s hand approaches his forehead,” because he thinks that perhaps “Lady Tippins is going to be the oldest friend” (22). On another occasion, after one of Mrs. Veneerings’ emotional outbreaks, Twemlow returns to his home and, apart

from the commotion of the dinner party, “having paced the room in distress of mind, with his hand to his forehead, the innocent Twemlow returns to his sofa and moans” (254). Twemlow continues this way for much of the novel, however, what appears to be a weakness, in the end, turns out to be what distinguishes Twemlow from the others and gives him authority over the others: his tendency to be confused and to contemplate what he has observed.

The descriptions of Twemlow as feeble seem to gain importance when a second motif arises pertaining to Twemlow. The first time it appears, Twemlow is deliberating over the degree of his friendship with Veneering again: Twemlow’s mind “softens” as he contemplates a situation and then “hardens” when he makes up his mind about it. The motif is repeated almost every time Twemlow finds himself deliberating over one thing or another. When Dickens comments on the “hideous solidity” of Twemlow’s peers in the scene where they are characterized as ugly, solid, heavy, plates and spoons, he is emphasizing the negative quality of hard, thing-like people, making Twemlow’s evolution from a hard, unfeeling table to a soft-brained contemplative gentleman especially significant and his softness a definite plus. Basically, it is the “softening” that allows Twemlow to break away from his pompous peers. Observation of this motif reveals that “softness” comes to be associated with contemplation and reasoning and “hardness” with stubbornness and inability to reconsider. Therefore, the feebleness that sets Twemlow apart from his assertive, forceful, “heavy” peers, also becomes a good thing, rather than a weakness. Because, as the narrator describes, he is susceptible to everything including the wind, he is changeable, a trait synonymous with reasonable in the *Our Mutual Friend*.

The reason Twemlow's progression towards a softened, reasoning man should be thought of as an evolution is that the narrator reveals stories of Twemlow's past, which suggest the "dry, polite," and "innocent" man has always been so (21, 17). In other words, Twemlow was not once expressive as a young man, then quiet and passive in middle age, and then suddenly expressive again in the end. Twice, the movement of the plot is interrupted by an explanation of the feeble man's youthful heartbreak, which serves to illustrate, through Twemlow's reactions (or lack thereof) to love, his early passivity. Perhaps his lack of resolve not only prohibits him from speaking up for himself now, but also caused him to suffer the loss of the ill-fated love he once had. Remembering Kucich's argument about Dickens' heroes and heroines repressing themselves and, likewise, what I have proposed as an alternative: that a hero is not merely one who is self-repressed, but one who is initially repressed and eventually becomes empowered enough to speak up with authority. Twemlow's initial lack of resolve, his feeble nature, and his softness, which distinguishes him from among the hardened nouveau riche, all serve to emphasize the mildness of his character, making him all the more victorious as a hero in the end. All of his characterizations as weak, reserved or repressed, and soft, make his final speech all the more dramatic and significant, since he is finally able to overcome the obstacles that have kept him from expressing what I have suggested is a new Dickensian ideal, a new societal goal in the final words of the novel.

The first example the narrator provides for the reader of Twemlow's passive attempts at love is during the first anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Lamble's wedding. The narrator interrupts the plot, reflecting upon Twemlow. The cousin of the wealthy

Snigsworth never endeavored to “distinguish himself,” and is therefore, in the words of his cousin, “a poor gentleman pensioner” (401). Because of Twemlow’s hesitant, indecisive nature, which he exhibits repeatedly in the novel, he becomes a pensioner, living off of the wealth of his cousin, and therefore, fails to win over “the Fancy,” whom he once loved. Turning to Twemlow, the narrator asks:

Ah! my Twemlow! Say, little feeble grey personage, what thoughts are in thy breast to-day, of the Fancy---so still to call her who bruised thy heart when it was green and thy head brown---and whether it be better or worse, more painful or less, to believe in the Fancy to this hour, than to know her for a greedy armour-plated crocodile, with no more capacity of imagining the delicate and sensitive and tender spot behind thy waistcoat, than of going straight at it with a knitting-needle. (401)

Here, the narrator’s digression from the plot reveals that Twemlow has feelings about the love he never really had and yet lost to his own lack of expression. The excerpt shows how Twemlow has never been expressive about even his deepest feelings, so that even his “Fancy,” who certainly would not have knowingly “[gone] at” the “delicate and sensitive and tender spot behind [Twemlow’s] waistcoat [...] with a knitting needle,” would as likely not have been able to even imagine that Twemlow had feelings for her. The subverted feelings Twemlow is described as having in this quote seem to mirror those of Eugene Wrayburn, the ones Twemlow so adamantly defends in his final speech. Twemlow never does speak of his own love, just as he never voices most things which concern him. We only know about the woman because the narrator surreptitiously tells us that Twemlow is thinking of in this chapter. It appears that because Twemlow did not

have the resolve to make something of himself, even for love, he lost this woman, this “greedy armour-plated crocodile,” to someone with a higher income than he.

The reader is only aware that Twemlow has experienced heartbreak over this woman since, earlier in the novel, the narrator explains his sad state:

He is low, and feels it dull over the livery stable-yard, and is distinctly aware of a dint in his heart, made by the most adorable of the adorable bridesmaids. For the poor little harmless gentleman once had his fancy, like the rest of us, and she didn't answer [...], and he thinks the adorable bridesmaid is like the fancy as she was back then [...], and that if the fancy had not married someone else for money, but had married him for love, he and she would have been happy [...], and that she had a tenderness for him still [...]" (123).

It appears that not even love can motivate the feeble man to act on his feelings. While these two examples of his early passivity help to characterize Twemlow as we first see him in the novel, this last quote is especially significant since it offers the reader a possible motivation for Twemlow's final speech, defending the feelings which induce Eugene to marry Lizzie, as I will explain in chapter four. It is possible that because he thinks “if the fancy had [...] married him for love, he and she would have been happy,” that he is adamant about the negative effects of ignoring the feelings of a gentleman; after all, it appears he has ignored his own and wound up forever contemplating and never satisfied with his fate.

How, then, does a passive man like the young Twemlow become an authoritative hero in the final scene in the novel? Twemlow's thoughts and interactions with others throughout the novel demonstrate a progression, as he becomes increasingly assertive

first in matters involving himself, and, later (in the very end), in matters concerning others. One reason to think that Twemlow has progressed into an authoritative character is that he has spent so much time observing everyone and everything passively and struggling to make decisions, that when he does speak up or confront people, it is only after he has considered the options carefully. Another reason might be that Twemlow's authority comes from his plasticity of thought, because while the pompous elites speak up before they have some any foundation for their opinions, Twemlow waits and gathers all the information he can before making a decision and speaking up. He seems to be able to change his mind while considering new factors that affect what he thinks, as he does when trying to decide whether he is Veneering's oldest and dearest friend. Since Twemlow's commentaries are based on a foundation of reasoning through all the possibilities, Twemlow's fluid thinking serves him well, when at last he chooses to speak on behalf of the poor, virtuous girl, Lizzie Hexam, and her controversial marriage to the lawyer gentleman, Eugene Wrayburn. Since he recognizes that his lack of resolve caused him to lose his own love, empowered by his strong feelings on the particular issue of marriage, he finally feels compelled enough to act and, championing virtue over money, he defies the nouveau riche and becomes a hero.

- Chapter Three -

The Last Word: Redefining “Gentleman”

In his final speech, Twemlow reveals himself; he allies himself to poor, virtuous characters like Bella and Lizzie. Twemlow’s evolution and final speech suggest that Dickens seems to want individuals in society to be virtuous like the poor and noble like the nobility used to be. The suggested combination of these characteristics leads to a redefining of the word “gentleman” in the climactic final scene of the novel. Before I explain the significance of the speech, let us take a look at what leads up to the event.

Twemlow has continued in his passive way, to watch and listen quietly from the sidelines at gathering after gathering, until the plate-like people meet again over a meal and strike up a new conversation. Mr. Podsnap, one of those newly rich men is there with his wife Mrs. Podsnap, as are the Veneerings, and others. A debate is sparked as to who the “voice of society” is, and what this voice would say concerning the marriage of a very poor, but virtuous girl to a man, whom these people would normally call a *gentleman*. They take turns scoffing at the union, voicing their disapproval one by one, until finally, Twemlow finds his own voice and speaks up, defending every man as a potential

gentleman and every woman, a potential lady, based on his or her feelings. Twemlow begins, “I am disposed to think that this is a question of the feelings of a gentleman.” Podsnap replies, “A gentleman can have no feelings who contracts such a marriage [...]” (Dickens 796). Before Twemlow defends his notion of what constitutes a lady and a gentleman, Podsnap, with his retort, has shown that the conceptions these men have dictating whether an individual is a gentleman or a lady are quite different. In his answer to Podsnap, Twemlow specifically outlines the feelings that might signal who is a gentleman:

“Pardon me, sir,” says Twemlow, rather less mildly than usual, “I don’t agree with you. If this gentleman’s feelings of gratitude, of respect, of admiration, and affection, induced him (as I presume they did) to marry this lady” –

“This lady!” echoes Podsnap.

“Sir,” returns Twemlow, with his wristbands bristling a little, “*you* repeat the word; I repeat the word. This lady. What else would you call her if the gentleman were present?” [...] ‘I say, [...] 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 same sense in which the degree may be obtained by any man. The feelings of a gentleman I hold sacred, and I confess I am not comfortable when they are made the subject of sport or general discussion” (Dickens 796).

Perhaps the most important thing to take from Twemlow’s speech is the idea that “feelings” – in this case, of “gratitude,” “respect,” “admiration,” and “affection” – should

determine who is a “lady” or a “gentleman” rather than allowing wealth being the deciding factor. The words “lady” and “gentleman” get used all the time, but they are more meaningful words than they have been reduced to by individuals who overuse them or use them incorrectly. As was mentioned earlier in this thesis, Twemlow, a gentleman, has had his own feelings about a lady, and has never stopped thinking about how unhappy he is that she married for money and not for feelings she might have shared with him. His loss of the “Fancy” could have been what caused Twemlow’s heartfelt contribution to the conversation in the novel’s final, climactic scene. In other words, his own experience is what makes this a sensitive issue for him and what gives him the drive to speak up in the end.

As was briefly discussed in previous sections, Twemlow’s claim that feelings, rather than money, determine who might be a lady or a gentleman brings with it numerous implications. First, it changes the word, “gentleman” from being an indication of socio-economic position to a term implying moral worth. The significance of putting this concept into Twemlow’s mouth is embedded in the contradiction it sets up. On the one hand, the true aristocrat champions the underdog, Lizzie, that frequently unfortunate, yet virtuous victim of the pompous nouveau riche, who even refer to her as the “waterway girl.” This would be the progressive side of the idea. On the other hand, by giving Twemlow the last word, and with it, authority over who should be called a lady or a gentleman, Dickens is also championing the traditional aristocrat. Twemlow, representing old money, beats out the voices of the Podsnaps and the Veneerings, or new money. The aristocrat has the final say, even if what he is saying works to defend the potential for the everyman (virtuous poor included) to be worthy of the title, gentlemen,

by virtue of his feelings. Therefore, Dickens seems to be allying the aristocracy with the poor, and leaving no place of distinction for the greedy, very rich middle class shareholders, discussed in the first chapter of this thesis.

- Conclusion -

From the implications of his final speech, it is clear that Twemlow vocalizes a “zeal for social reform” that Eagleton asserts is explicitly Dickensian, yet in many ways, he represents a contradiction to parts of Eagleton’s claims about Dickens. Eagleton observes:

There is a good deal of brisk modernizer about Dickens, with his impatience with red tape, his scorn for traditionalism and aristocratic privilege, his zeal for social reform, practical skills and industrial enterprise. [...] Dickens was a fairly middle of the road, progressively minded, middle class Victorian [...] with an] animus against the gentry (Eagleton 157).

While the implications of Twemlow’s speech, which I have described, are certainly progressive, they also stand against Eagleton’s blanket assertion about Dickens’ “scorn for traditionalism and aristocratic privilege,” since he fails to acknowledge a key distinction that exists at the time when Dickens writes *Our Mutual Friend* and which separates the traditional aristocrats from the upper-middle class nouveau riche. Scorn for aristocratic privilege and scorn for traditionalism are not necessarily synonymous. One aim of this thesis was to prove that Dickens is actually a fan of the traditionalism,

including aristocrats with a sense of noblesse oblige, and a system in which shareholders, who Dickens considers cheaters, do not exist and are therefore unable to hold positions of power over the society for which they produce nothing. This nostalgia for fading traditions does not depend upon a celebration of aristocratic privilege.

While Eagleton might have been correct had he said that Dickens usually presents the aristocracy in a negative light, his statement that Dickens has no patience for “traditionalism” seems to seriously overlook the implications of Twemlow’s climactic speech in *Our Mutual Friend*. The uncharacteristic message suggested by Twemlow’s ascendance in the novel is problematic for readers today, who might be outraged at the suggestion that moving backwards towards the time when there were well-defined class lines to be drawn between the lower and upper classes, minimizing if not nullifying the middle class, would be a good thing. Moreover, the underlying message seems to be that keeping a book of names of people who are entitled to a high social standing in society just because of who their parents were and what land they owned might be better than allowing the nouveau riche to gain status. Also, it might appear that Dickens favors returning to a time when the nouveau riche did not have the positions usually reserved for the aristocrats and that what would appear to be movement backwards in time could mean progress from the state of things at the Veneering dinner parties, before Twemlow’s big speech. The idea that someone would defend a class structure in which the poor have no way out and the rich are entitled to wealth just by virtue of their name, and not because they actually earned any money sounds crazy to us today in America. Those politically incorrect implications of Twemlow’s final speech however, are what might

arise from a shallow interpretation of his final speech by individuals highly opposed to the concept of entitlement associated with the aristocracy.

In Dickens' defense, the seemingly politically incorrect implications of Twemlow's speech, as many critics have found, appear to be incongruous with Dickens' earlier works, such as *Great Expectations* or *Oliver Twist*, which present their readers with entirely different themes, encouraging the rise of the middle class and in many ways, denouncing the rich and powerful for their elitist ways. These critics are not exactly wrong, since, as George Gissing explains, many of Dickens' friends and/or fans, such as Forster and Carlyle have called his latter works "deplorable mistakes" and, according to Gissing, "did their utmost in the way of protest" (181). However, while Dickens' latter novels such as *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* seem a far cry from his earlier novels, referred to by Gissing as his "triumphs," Dickens never spoke of them or any of his works as failures. He "enjoyed" reading them for an audience and said that "he had satisfied himself" with his work (Gissing 181). Therefore, while championing the aristocracy might be unconventional and out of the ordinary for Dickens, he defended these later works, voicing his own satisfaction with them; therefore, as readers, we may consider Dickens' departure from his initial objective – to champion the middle class – not as a mistake in judgement, or as the shortcomings of a once great writer, but rather as a progression from his original thoughts, the integration of new ideals and concepts that came with changing social and political circumstances of his time.

On the most fundamental, literal level, Twemlow is neither arguing for aristocratic entitlement nor for the subjugation of the poor, and he should still be regarded as a hero for his progressive ideals. At the time that *Our Mutual Friend* was written

(1864-5), his speech is, more than anything, a challenge to those obsessed with gaining a high social position to seek the value of the individual by virtue of his or her feelings rather than measuring his or her wealth. Twemlow implicitly implores his friends to strive to imitate the original, noble attitudes of the poor and the traditional aristocrats alike, rather than saying specifically that there should be no middle class, and that no one should be able to cross class lines through work (of which, as I have explained, Dickens is always in favor), be it philanthropic, scholarly, or physical. The novel's message has more to do with recognizing the value of virtuous people and rejecting those who would gain position through "cheating," later deeming themselves more worthy of esteem than the humble poor. Therefore, even if some extreme interpretation of Twemlow's speech makes readers feel uncomfortable, the basic message is that the virtues of the rich and the poor should be our focus and example, since the shareholders in no way represent exemplary virtues for Dickens. For that reason, Twemlow is a commonly overlooked, but a worthy character to study, since he rises at the end of the novel to speak up, heroically, as the "voice of society," the champion of virtue.

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