

Dickens: Class and Politics

Gilmour, Robin. "Class and Status." *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, edited by Paul Schlicke, Oxford University Press, 1999.

Dickens lived at a time of unprecedented social upheaval, when the impact of the industrial and democratic revolutions on English domestic life was profound and when writers became preoccupied with matters of social class as they had not been before and, arguably, were not to be with quite the same intensity again. There was a loosening of the boundaries and corresponding belief in the possibilities of self-improvement— it was the age of Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859)— with its often implicit assumptions about social advancement. An age of social aspiration is a time of pretension, snobbery, class assertion and class deference, and self-deception; and these are among the central subjects of Victorian fiction. In the early works, up to and including *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4), social class is treated on the whole in a comic manner; from *Dombey and Son* (1846-8) onwards the treatment is more sombre.

Dickens liked to quote some lines from Bulwer-Lytton's play *The Lady of Lyons*, in which the hero speaks of raising himself above 'those twin jailers of the daring heart – low birth and iron fortune.' In fact his own birth was not low, relatively speaking. He came from the lower middle class: his paternal grandmother was Lorde Crewe's housekeeper (reportedly the original for Mrs Rouncewell in *Bleak House*), his father, John Dickens, a minor civil servant, his mother the daughter of a civil servant. In an age when only a tiny minority went on to university, and when there were only three universities in England to go to, there was no particular stigma in leaving school at 15, as he did, although there would have been if knowledge of his blacking-factory experience had emerged during his lifetime. To what extent Dickens felt his interrupted schooling to have been a disadvantage it is difficult to say. There are signs of bitterness in the autobiographical fragment, where he speaks of his resentment at having his 'early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in [his] breast.' But the evidence of both the life and the fiction suggests that he was never greatly interested in learning. Socially, he was more at home in the new middle-class republic of letters represented by Carlyle and Forster than with the grand Whig hostess Lady Holland, who inquired if Boz was 'presentable' before inviting him to one of her soirées at Holland House. It was through his friendship with Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton (after whom he named one of his sons) that he came to know the respectable Gore House circle of Lady Blessington and Count D'Orsay (after whom he named another), where he seems to have felt more comfortable. [...]

In *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) respectability emerges as a central theme,

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and Nicholas himself is the first of Dickens's attempts at the young gentleman hero. He is caught, interestingly, between two classes: the unrespectable, represented by its worse by the schoolmaster Squeers and at its best by the actor-manager Vincent Crummies, and the aristocratic, seen at its least offensive in Lord Frederick Verisopht and at its most predatory in Sir Mulberry Hawk. Here the historical conflict seems sharpest. When Nicholas challenges Sir Mulberry with the assertions that 'I am the son of a country gentleman ... your equal in birth and education, and your superior I trust in everything besides,' one feels the raw edge of the early Victorian middle-class challenge to aristocratic leadership.

Nicholas's assertion of gentlemanliness is decidedly shaky, but it introduces a concept which is at the heart of Dickens's preoccupation with social class. The Victorians were endlessly fascinated by what it meant to be a gentleman (and to a lesser extent, a lady). The attraction of the concept is that it was a category from the older hierarchy of rank which was capable of making the transition to

the new society of class, and it could do so because it was open to penetration from below and held a unique status in British society. A baronet might hold a higher rank than a 'country gentleman,' a wealthy mill-owner might be able to buy him out several times over, but (in theory) both would acknowledge the supremacy of the gentlemanly code. But what went to the making of a gentleman? How socially exclusive was the type (for without exclusion there would be no point)? And what was the relationship between social exclusion and morality, always a difficult and shifting boundary? These questions exercised Dickens and his contemporaries, and he returned to them in successive novels. [...]

'Despite their descents into the lowest class,' Mrs Oliphant wrote in 1855, 'and their occasional flights into the less familiar ground of fashion, it is the air and breath of middle-class respectability which fills the books of Mr Dickens.' [...]

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Dickens was a man of his time to the extent that he believed some social distinctions mattered. Pip in his illness does not bless Joe as a 'Christian gentlemen' but as a 'gentle Christian man,' and Dickens would have considered it humbug to call him a gentleman. But he valued gentlemanliness, just as he valued, even as he lightly mocked it, the best side of the English upper classes represented by Sir Leicester Dedlock. He was interested, as any novelist of his time inevitably was, in the relationship between manners and morals, and therefore in social class. He was also a mimic, and mimicry cannot flourish in a classless society, or at least a society where there are no differences of accent. On the other hand he was always clear that in the last analysis morality is more important than class. It is this that ensures that Dickens' major novels master the subject of class and are not, as those of some of his contemporaries, mastered by it.

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