

1-2018

# Keeping Up with the Lammles: The Impact of Wealth and Identity on Victorians in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*

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## Recommended Citation

Jeffers, Haydn, "Keeping Up with the Lammles: The Impact of Wealth and Identity on Victorians in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*" (2018). *English Class Publications*. 43.  
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English Literature III

13 November 2017

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But, hark! A carriage at the gate, and Mortimer's man arrives, looking rather like a spurious Mephistopheles and an unacknowledged member of that gentleman's family. Whom Lady Tippins, surveying through her eye-glass, considers a fine man, and quite a catch; and of whom Mortimer remarks, in the lowest spirits, as he approaches, 'I believe this is my fellow, confound him!' More carriages at the gate, and lo, the rest of the characters. Whom Lady Tippins, standing on a cushion, surveying through the eye-glass, thus checks off: 'Bride, five-and-forty if a day, thirty shillings a yard, veil fifteen pounds, pocket-handkerchief a present. Bridesmaids; kept down for fear of outshining bride, consequently not girls, twelve and sixpence a yard, Veneering's flowers, snub-nosed one rather pretty but too conscious of her stockings, bonnets three pound ten. Twemlow; blessed release for the dear man if she really was his daughter, nervous even under the [pretense] that she is, well he may be. Mrs. Veneering; never saw such velvet, say two thousand pounds as she stands, absolute [jeweler's] window, father must have been a pawnbroker, or how could these people do it? Attendant unknowns; pokey.' (Dickens 115)

These lines, taken from Part III of Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, come from a chapter entitled "A Marriage Contract." Dickens named the chapter very well, as the marriage that takes place in it is indeed a contract between two people who, while not in love with each other, are in love with the idea of gaining wealth and improving their social status. Alfred and Sophronia Lamble are both led to believe that the other is rich by their so-called dear friend, Mr. Veneering, who believes himself to be a matchmaker. The illusion of wealth is the driving force toward the couple's marriage, and they grow to loathe each other the moment they realize that neither of them actually married into money. The lines mark not only the marriage ceremony of these two lovelessbirds, but the monetary value of their marriage as well. The primary concern of the passage, in fact, is not the coming together of two souls in holy matrimony, but rather the coming together of two thirsty wallets. More than that, Lady Tippins's appraisal of the characters in this scene depicts just how important the apparent worth of people and things was to the Victorians. Dickens was well aware of this fact when he wrote *Our Mutual Friend*, as is made clear by the fall of the Lambles and their monetary marriage, and the rise of Lizzie Hexam and Eugene Wrayburn, who marry for love. Money, status, and appearance were the main concerns of Victorians, as this was a time when people were just beginning to realize that they had the power to change their social standing. The Lambles, like many Victorians, take their financial identity very seriously and choose to marry for money as a result. Marriage for anything but love is an important theme in *Our Mutual Friend* that Dickens uses to illustrate the impact that appearances have on Victorians, as well as the lengths to which they will go in order to achieve their greedy desires. Dickens seems to have used this novel to illustrate the problem he has with Victorian consumerism and the Victorian belief that marriage is little more than a contract between two people who wish to gain social standing by commodifying their entire lives.

The Lammles are spokespersons for the very idea of greed. They lie about their social status in an attempt to gain better footing among their peers, but they unknowingly deceive each other in the process. They put so much stake into their identity that they very nearly ruin each other through marriage and must desperately try to save themselves from their own self-consumerism. As Rosemary Mundhenk aptly states in “The Education of the Reader in *Our Mutual Friend*,” Alfred and Sophronia “mistake the appearance of wealth for wealth, realize their error only after marriage, and resolve to use appearances to prey on others” (51). The two get along only when they are conspiring for their own gain, and are not even able to speak directly to each other otherwise. The narrator notes that in their dialogues they never speak directly to one another, opting instead to speak to a so-called skeleton in the closet:

‘I have never seen any money in the house,’ said Mrs. Lamble to the skeleton, ‘except my own annuity. That I swear.’

‘You needn’t take the trouble of swearing,’ said Mr. Lamble to the skeleton; ‘once more, it doesn’t matter. You never turned your annuity to so good an account.’

‘Good an account! In what way?’ asked Mrs. Lamble.

‘In the way of getting credit, and living well,’ said Mr. Lamble.

Perhaps the skeleton laughed scornfully on being intrusted with this question and this answer; certainly Mrs. Lamble did, and Mr. Lamble did.

(Dickens 542)

This illustrates not only the farcical marriage of the Lammles, but the stubbornness of Alfred and Sophronia as well. Their marriage is a complete and utter fraud, but they keep up the charade because they believe it will eventually help them establish a stronger foothold in the society they

so strongly desire to be a part of. Unlike characters such as the Boffins and John Harmon, who “use deception as a vessel of transformation and rebirth, the Lammles maintain the fraud of their marriage to continue to defraud others” (Coyoy). More specifically, the Lammles use their marriage to deceive other Dickensian characters like Georgiana and Fledgeby. Georgiana is a sweet girl with whom Mrs. Lammle becomes fast friends not because of her personality, but instead because of her family’s status and money. Fledgeby, while the narrator believes he is “the meanest cur existing, with a single pair of legs” (Dickens 260) and wholeheartedly deserves the poor treatment Lammle offers him, is a victim nonetheless. He is targeted not because of his abhorrible character, but rather because his money-lending business makes him an ideal candidate for the Lammles to attempt to take advantage of. The only discrimination the Lammles show when choosing their victims is how much they can be valued at in terms of financial and social worth.

The Lammles’ marriage serves as a foil to that of the Boffins or the Harmons or the Wrayburns, who all married for love rather than worth. In fact, the Boffins and Harmons and Wrayburns all receive a happy ending by the novel’s conclusion, while the Lammles must continue their scheming in order to feel any sense of purpose in life. Their fate serves as a clear image of what Dickens thinks marriage should never be—an investment. It seems that, in Dickens’s eyes, marriage should not be a choice made out of necessity. Mona Caird, a Victorian feminist, does an excellent job detailing ideas that Dickens likely shared in her 1888 essay “Marriage,” in which she states that a woman “ought not to be tempted to marry, or to remain married, for the sake of bread and butter” (1631). For Dickens, this means that no man or woman should be pushed into marriage for the sake of financial security, let alone appearances. It is clear

that Dickens took issue with the Victorian idea that marriage is a tool by which to further one's social standing, as he wrote ruin into the lives of the Lammles for doing just that.

Victorians are consumers to a fault, and *Our Mutual Friend* offers stark examples of just how skewed this fault is. The novel is primarily focused on consumerism, so much so that even the marriages that take place are connected in some way to that consumerism. The Lammles' marriage is little more than a failed investment, and their interactions represent the consequences of viewing matrimony in such a cold and unfeeling light. They fail as a couple—and as individuals—because they put far too much stake into their identity as they wish it to be perceived by others. Dickens's novel commentates wholeheartedly on the misuse of matrimony and identity in such self-serving ways, and his issues with greed and self-consumerism are apparent. In writing *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens created the opportunity for a striking dialogue to take place between social classes. He is not the only author to have done so with the Victorians, but he is one of the most important, and his Victorian audience can undoubtedly see the issues of class identity and cold marriage in the pages of his books. This is perhaps the very reason *Our Mutual Friend* failed upon its initial publication, as his commentary on consumerism undoubtedly struck a chord with his Victorian readers. According to Peter Gurney, author of "The Age of Veneer," "sales fell off rapidly, dropping 5,000 between the first and second numbers, and by the final double number sales were down to 19,000 from 35,000" (243). While there was much at stake for Dickens in writing so satirically on the issues of Victorian society, and while he undoubtedly knew that his novel might receive backlash for its treatment of the higher class, Dickens understood the necessity of a commentary like *Our Mutual Friend*, and he was unafraid to scold his class-minded readers when he saw that their perceived identities had become too precious to them.

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