

Satire of the  
nouveaux-riches in  
our mutual friend



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Within Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* exist several separate worlds. The lives of the Boffinses are separate from that of Mr. and Mrs. Podsnap, which in turn is separate from the lives of the different members of the Hexam family. The most self-aware world that exists within the novel is that of the Veneerings, the nouveaux-riches couple introduced in Chapter II whose sole aim in life is to rise within the London social scene. In Chapter X the reader is introduced, through the Veneerings, to the soon-to-be-married Alfred Lamble and his bride Sophronia. Coupled with the Veneerings, the Lambls, respectively named within the extract as 'the mature young gentleman' and 'mature young lady', act as satirical symbols of high society within Victorian London and the emphasis that they placed on wealth, property and title.

Dickens uses the Veneerings as a satirical device for the nouveaux-riches, using wit and hyperbole in chapters that include the couple to create an emotionally empty and materialistic image of the upper class. The name 'Veneering' itself suggests superficiality, a veneering being something used to cover over and improve the appearance of an object, whether that be furniture, the surfaces of a building or a person's teeth. By naming the family Veneering, Dickens insinuates that they are covering up a flawed character or overcompensating for a sense of inferiority, possibly stemming from their nouveaux-riches status. In the extract this overcompensation can be seen through Dickens using decadent imagery for the breakfast the Veneerings are hosting to celebrate the marriage of the Lambls. The physical building that the Veneerings live in is called 'the Veneering mansion', a more grandiose word than house, and Sophronia is 'to be married from the

Veneering house', a much more formal and regal way to describe that Mr. Veneering is giving her away. The breakfast is described as a 'feast ... crowned with flowers', continuing the regal aesthetic that the Veneerings are trying to impose upon themselves. This regality is the metaphorical veneering, covering up the fact that neither of the Veneerings come from a heritage of wealth and prestige. Dickens shows that the couple are conscious of their position as new wealth and attempt to create the illusion of status. The Veneerings are a parody of the upper class, focussed on how they appear to the outside world and totally aware of how they lack what cannot be bought, the respect an old family name bestows.

The title of Chapter X, 'A Marriage Contract', (pg. 107) is the first satirical element within the extract itself that is separate from the reputation of the Veneerings. The word 'Contract' totally removes all emotional implications and transforms marriage into a solely legal and official relationship. A contract is usually associated with an individual's voluntary attachment to a business or another form of financial agreement and therefore insinuates that this marriage is a relationship based on wealth foremost, sentimental feelings therefore being secondary. The immediate description of both bride and groom being 'of property' (pg. 107) further suggests this. Contracts, moreover, can exist within fixed time periods before they have to be revised and agreed upon again. Dickens, therefore, immediately insinuates cynicism towards the marriage of the Lammles, suggesting that the couple are marrying for wealth and not love and that this financial relationship may, in the future, have to be revised if the couples monetary situation changes.

Dickens makes the financial status of both the lady and gentleman their prevalent characteristics within the extract. The manner in which they are both introduced to the reader places emphasis on their title and assumed wealth, both described identically as 'The mature young [person] is a [person] of property', (pg. 107) 'lady' and 'gentleman' being inserted respectively. The only separation between the two is their sex, but the clinical tone Dickens uses suggests that this is unimportant. It is the property owning element that matters and it is this that the reader should focus on. The two being 'of property' suggests title and prestige without specifics, Dickens avoiding tying these characters to any verified wealth. Even when Dickens informs the reader that the gentleman 'invests his property' (pg. 107) in shares, there are a few specifics about what these investments are, Dickens instead beginning a satirical tirade about the implications of owning shares.

This lack of specificity could mean two things. Firstly, that both parties could simply be wealthy property owners, that being 'of property' means title, respect and esteem without just reason to receive such compliments. This is unlikely, however, due to Dickens's repeated use of the chapters in the novel featuring the Veneerings as satirical episodes. The second option to what being 'of property' means for the Lammlers is that they are hiding behind an empty title. Being 'of property' could either be a simple lie, that one or neither of them have any property to their name at all and are simply attempting to make themselves more available for marriage, or a white lie, that they do own property but not a great enough amount for it to have much worth. Unlike the Veneerings, who live in 'a bran-new house in a bran-

new quarter of London', (pg. 7) the lady and gentleman have nothing specific to their name, Dickens placing emphasis on title and superficial appearance instead of actual substance. Both the lady and gentleman continue the satire that Dickens emplaces in the Veneerings, but instead in the reverse manner. While the Veneerings are a satire of the genuine nouveaux-riche who have both recently assumed title and wealth, the soon to be married Lammlers act as a depiction of those who lay claim to a false title and marry solely for financial gain.

In the extract Dickens pays special attention to create a caricature out of Alfred Lammler. Alfred is depicted as hollow and devoid of any characteristic beyond financial aspiration. Dickens describes Alfred as having 'no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; [only] shares.' (pg. 107) Alfred's lack of antecedents supports the idea that he is falsely laying claim to a title, while his absence of cultivation and manners could be a signifier towards a lower class upbringing, further suggesting the falsity of his being 'of property'. No character or ideas creates a one dimensional character out of Alfred, further emphasising that the only thing of interest about him is his shares. Dickens suggests, furthermore, that not only is Alfred solely defined by his shares but that he is unable to manage these shares properly, that he goes about his business in 'a condescending, amateurish way'. (pg. 107) Both condescending and amateur are a direct contrast to Alfred's initial description as a 'mature young gentleman'. The tone Dickens uses when describing Alfred's business practices as condescending and amateurish is more sincere than when describing him as a 'mature young gentleman' which, through its repetition

and identicalness to the description of Sophronia, comes across to the reader as sarcastic and mocking. Dickens uses tone to convey a sense that Alfred Lamble is a character that should not be trusted, that he is insincere and fake. He is falsely represented as respectful due to his ownership of unspecified shares and Dickens expresses an overt condemnation of such a man through his satirical, almost parodic, portrayal of Alfred Lamble.

The condemnation of the individual who defines themselves solely through wealth is made even more apparent through Dickens's lengthy and exaggerated description of life as defined by shares. Dickens writes that shares, here acting as a metaphor for wealth as a general concept, become an all answering, all encapsulating and completely dominating force within the individuals life. This paragraph of the novel relies heavily on repetition and lists as devices to convey the superficiality that stems from shares. ' Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have shares' provides a shallow description of shareholders character using clauses with no highly descriptive imagery, rather just satire and wit. In a similar way, Dickens uses ' shares' as the answer to all questions concerning the shareholders background and lifestyle:

' Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going? 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.' (pg. 107)

Dickens suggests that shares, and thus wealth, come to define their owner's life. Wealth becomes the individual's past and future, it defines his morals and can even allow him to rise to a position of power. The final question, 'Perhaps he never of himself achieved success in anything, never originated anything, never produced anything?' can be read as rhetorical, suggesting that Dickens has reached the conclusion that a person defined by wealth is unable to produce anything of originality or achieve success without the influence of wealth. Even a rhetorical question, however, that needs no answer can be answered by 'shares', them always being wanted and welcomed by the individual for the very reasons that Dickens condemns. Shares can impose themselves anywhere, their power over the individual stemming from the materialistic attitude that wealth is always relevant.

Within the extract Dickens places such emphasis on the constant relevance of wealth that he makes several allusions to material greed becoming something of its own religion. 'As is well known to the wise in [Alfred's] generation' (pg. 107) is a reference to the Parable of the Shrewd Manager in the Book of Luke, where a manager, upon discovering that he is to be let go by his master, performs dishonest financial duties to win over the approval of his master. The specific reference in the extract is to Luke 16: 8-9:

“As a result the master of this dishonest manager praised him for doing such a shrewd thing; because the people of this world are much more shrewd in handling their affairs than the people who belong to the light.”

And Jesus went on to say, “ And so I tell you: make friends for yourselves with worldly wealth, so that when it gives out, you will be welcomed in the eternal home.” (Lk. 16: 8-9)

The meaning of this passage is generally considered that Jesus did not condone the dishonest actions themselves, but merely praised the manager for his shrewdness and intelligence. Dickens suggests that Alfred Lamble similarly acts shrewdly by investing in shares. Dickens, however, takes a position similar to that of Jesus, by condemning the shrewd actions themselves. By creating parallels between the characters of Our Mutual Friend and Biblical figures Dickens suggests that wealth and faith are similar, that they follow the same structures of devotion and dependence. Dickens even goes as far as to equate the metaphorical shares with God by only writing ‘ shares’ with a capital S, making them almost a deity within the life of Alfred Lamble. The constant relevance of the shares could be paralleled with the constant presence of God, wealth being the foundation of Alfred’s life and thus substituting religious faith. ‘ Oh, mighty shares!’ (pg. 107) resembles a religious affirmation similar to ‘ Amen’, further emphasising the ritualistic focus on wealth shown by Dickens’s depiction of Alfred and how both wealth and religion share a similar structure. Dickens’s cynical view towards wealth and his undertaking to satirise the upper class are both taken to the absolute extreme through his equation of wealth and faith.

Dickens uses both the Veneerings and the marriage of the Lambls to provide a satire of the upper class and their focus on material wealth, his use of wit and humour allowing him to provide a scathing social critique. While the Veneerings begin to symbolise the meaning of their name entirely,

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nothing but a pleasing yet empty façade, the Lammles, specifically Alfred, are presented as untrustworthy and totally superficial. Dickens presents two types of wealth, both highly flawed, that encapsulate the negative aspects of affluence. If wealth is given too much importance within the individual's character the individual and their wealth become one, indistinct and inseparable. The Veneerings cannot be separated from their status as nouveaux-riches and Alfred Lammler is defined solely and entirely by his shares. An over-abundance of wealth, therefore, is the enemy of human character as the two cannot exist harmoniously. Affluence, title and material prestige mean the death of individuality.