Chapter Five
Social Class in Victorian England

The class system in Victorian England had three broad divisions: upper, middle and lower. In the first category were the aristocracy and the landed gentry. The second group were subdivided: the upper middle class included professional and business men along with well-to-do Church of England clergy; the lower middle class included clerks and small shop owners. Some people who belonged this last-named subdivision, on the border between the middle and lower classes, were given the epithet 'shabby-genteel'. The lower classes were the manual workers and their families, below whom were the unclassifiable thousands of poor and destitute men, women and children. People were expected to know their place. Mrs Cecil Alexander's hymn, 'All things bright and beautiful' (1848), frequently sung in churches, included the complacent verse (usually omitted nowadays): 'The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them, high or lowly, And order'd their estate.'

Limited movement across the class divisions was infrequent but possible in Victorian England. Successful industrialists, for instance, sometimes aspired to join the higher echelons of society – hence snobbery and gentlemanliness became topics of discussion as the novels of Thackeray and Trollope show. Dickens himself was an example of social mobility, having rapidly moved upwards thanks to his energy and literary achievement, but he knew that for most people a change of class was virtually impossible. In a speech he made to the Liverpool Mechanics' Institution on 26 February 1844, he favoured 'mutual forbearance among various classes' but declared that 'differences of wealth, of rank, of intellect' were inevitable. He thought that there was no fear of general dissatisfaction with one's station in life since the 'distinction of the different grades of society are so accurately marked, and so very difficult to pass' (Fielding, 1988, pp. 56–57). Despite his contempt for the 'dandy insolence' (Letters, VII, p. 664) of Lord Palmerston and other upper-class leaders typically displayed at the time of the Crimean War (1853–56), he told the Administrative Reform Association in a speech on 27 June 1855 that he wished 'to avoid placing in opposition … the two words Aristocracy and the People': 'I am one of those who can believe in the virtues and uses of both, and, I would elevate or depress neither, at the cost of a single just right belonging to the other' (Fielding, 1988, p. 203).

Dickens fills his fiction with people from all classes although the lower and middle classes predominate. He is concerned mostly with urban people – farmers and country people rarely appear in his work (though Mr Browdie in *Nicholas Nickleby* is one exception). Despite his declared belief, just quoted, that the aristocracy had its virtues and uses, he usually negatively depicts its representatives. Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Frederick Verisopht in *Nicholas Nickleby* are caricatures, as their names suggest. In *Bleak House*, the appropriately named Sir Leicester Dedlock, a baronet, who is opposed to ideas of democracy, is confronted by Mr Rouncewell, a self-made ironmaster from the north whose mother is ironically the

housekeeper at Chesney Wold, Sir Leicester's country house. Mr Rouncewell, expressing himself with tact and dignity, thinks that Rosa, Lady Dedlock's maid, would make an unsuitable wife for his son Watt (whose name suggests affinities with James Watt and even Wat Tyler) because of her dependent and ill-educated status as a servant of the aristocratic classes He does not regard 'the village school as teaching everything desirable to be known by [his] son's wife'. Sir Leicester is fearful of the social consequences implicit in the ironmaster's attitude.

> From the village school of Chesney Wold, intact as it is this minute, to the whole framework of society: from the whole framework of society, to the aforesaid framework receiving tremendous cracks in consequence of people (ironmasters, lead-mistresses, and what not) not minding their catechism, and getting out of the station unto which they are called – necessarily and for ever, according to Sir Leicester's rapid logic, the first station in which they happen to find themselves; and from that, to their educating other people out of *their* stations,and so obliterating the landmarks, and opening the floodgates, and all the rest of it; this is the swift progress of the Dedlock mind.

But Sir Leicester answers courteously and 'with all the nature of gentleman shining in him' offers Mr Rouncewell hospitality for the night (BH, ch. 28).

Another principled man of the industrialized middle classes is Daniel Doyce in *Little Dorrit*, an engineer and inventor, who is angered and frustrated by the upper-class inefficiency and indifference of the Circumlocution Office and takes his skills abroad to 'a certain barbaric Power' (LD, II, ch. 22), which honours him for his achievements. Other men from the upper stratum of the middle class in Dickens's fiction use their money and influence benevolently, such as Mr Brownlow (in *Oliver Twist)*, the Cheeryble Brothers (in *Nicholas Nickleby)* and Mr Jarndyce (in *Bleak House)*, though some critics find their actions unbelievable. But Dickens also portrays among middle-class businessmen the selfishness of Scrooge (in *A Christmas Carol)*, the heartless ruthlessness of Ralph Nickleby, the cold pride of Mr Dombey, the hypocritical boastfulness of Bounderby (in *Hard Times)*, who has made his money in Coketown, and the shallow pretensions of the Veneerings (in *Our Mutual Friend).*

Moving down the social scale but staying among professional people, we find portraits of good and bad lawyers, doctors, clergymen and schoolteachers and especially fond depictions of shabby-genteel people like Dick Swiveller (in *The Old Curiosity Shop)*, the Cratchits (in *A Christmas Carol)*, the Micawbers (in *David Copperfield)* and the Wilfers (in *Our Mutual Friend).* Dickens always has profound sympathies for the poor lower classes, including paupers and deprived and neglected children right at the bottom of society, usually endowing them with virtuous qualities: Jo (in *Bleak House)*, the Plornishes, Nandy and Maggie (in *Little Dorrit)* and Betty Higden (in *Our Mutual Friend).* The class demarcation is usually inflexible, as he himself sometimes implied, although Dickens appeals directly – or more often indirectly – to his readers for an understanding of – and sympathy with – the underprivileged. His apostrophe on the death of Jo, the crossing-sweeper, in *Bleak House* is a striking outburst: 'Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen, Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day' (BH, ch. 47).

He emphasizes the importance of integrity, hard work and effort, whatever the social class

of the people concerned. David Copperfield, who is partly modelled on himself but who comes from a slightly higher stratum of the class into which Dickens was born, strives for success in love and authorship, urged on by his great-aunt, Miss Trotwood. She tells him that she wants him to be 'a firm fellow. A fine firm fellow, with a will of your own. With resolution … With determination. With character, Trot. With strength of character that is not to be influenced, except on good reason, by anybody, or by anything' (DC, ch. 19). David is later set on helping his aunt out of her financial difficulties and on marrying Dora: 'What I had to do, was, to turn the painful discipline of my younger days to account, by going to work with a resolute and steady heart. What I had to do, was, to take my woodman's axe in my hand, and clear my own way through the forest of difficulty, by cutting down the trees, until I came to Dora' (DC, ch. 36). But Pip, in *Great Expectations,* idles his time away in London when he is given money by an unknown benefactor in order to become a gentleman and is cured of his selfishness only by humiliation when he discovers that the source of his wealth is Magwitch, a former criminal. The true gentleman in that novel turns out to be Joe Gargery, the village blacksmith, who had been Pip's surrogate father. Another reformation is that of Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend,* who – unlike Pip – was born into a privileged world. He is an idle and world-weary young barrister from the upper classes of a type Dickens had previously portrayed in the person of James Harthouse in *Hard Times.* Later readers of the novel compared Wrayburn to an Oscar Wilde character. He falls in love with Lizzie Hexam, the daughter of a Thames boatman. She reciprocates his love, although unable to admit her feelings because of the social disparity. Bradley Headstone, the schoolmaster, who also loves Lizzie and has struggled to attain middle-class respectability, bitterly resents Eugene's apparently effortless superiority. Nevertheless, Eugene reforms and he and Lizzie eventually marry, shocking the moneyed and aristocratic circle in which he moved. Twemlow, one of that circle, speaks up for the young couple in some of the last words of the novel: 'if such feelings induced this gentleman to marry this lady, I think he is the greater gentleman for the action, and makes her the greater lady' (OMF, IV, Chapter the Last). That is the most remarkable example in Dickens's novels of the breaking of class barriers.