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*Brigham Young University - Provo*

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A GENTLEMAN'S BENEVOLENCE: SYMPTOMS OF CLASS, GENDER,  
AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN *EMMA*, *NICHOLAS NICKLEBY*, AND *THE MILL ON*  
*THE FLOSS*

By  
Aubrey L. Hammer

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts

Department of English  
Brigham Young University  
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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Of a thesis submitted by

Aubrey L. Hammer

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

Leslee Thorne-Murphy

Nicholas Mason

Frank Q. Christianson

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Aubrey L. Hammer in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Leslee Thorne-Murphy  
Chair, Graduate Committee

Accepted for the Department

Phillip Snyder  
Graduate Coordinator

Accepted for the College

Gregory D. Clark  
Associate Dean, College of Humanities

## ABSTRACT

### A GENTLEMAN'S BENEVOLENCE: SYMPTOMS OF CLASS, GENDER AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN *EMMA*, *NICHOLAS NICKLEBY*, AND *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

Aubrey L. Hammer

Department of English

Master of Arts

Austen, Dickens, and Eliot each responded to discussions of their time concerning class, gender, and social change. One of the ways they addressed these issues, and sought to find solutions to the problems facing their culture, was through benevolence. Knightley, in *Emma*, uses benevolence as a means of mediating self-interest and sympathy. By acting out of sympathy, through benevolence, he achieves the self-interested benefits of reinforcing the class system and achieving his romantic conquests. Likewise, Dickens' Nicholas Nickleby learns how to use benevolence as a means of social mobility from his mentors, the Cheerybles. Throughout *Nicholas Nickleby* the hero learns how to engage in benevolence out of sympathy, and by doing so he establishes himself as a gentleman and reaps social, economic, and romantic advantages. Eliot's Bob Jakin in *The Mill on the Floss* engages in benevolence out of true sympathy

unhindered by self-interest. His freedom from social constraint and self-interest allows him to truly help Maggie Tulliver when no one else can. These authors' depictions of benevolence all illuminate ways that nineteenth-century literary authors sought to navigate the "Adam Smith Problem" of sympathy vs. self-interest. Benevolence, in these novels, is not disinterested (regardless of their motivation) but is influenced by the character's and author's perception of class, gender, and social change in the nineteenth century.

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## Introduction:

## Vestiges of the “Adam Smith Problem” in Nineteenth-Century

## Benevolence

Nineteenth-century benevolence did not stand alone as an ideology and action but was greatly influenced by formulations of class and gender. Austen, Dickens, and Eliot all conscientiously responded to discussions about class and gender and presented their own constructs of how to solve societal ills through benevolence. Although these authors spanned the long nineteenth century and didn't purposely attempt to model one another, there are undeniable similarities in the issues that they both address and symptomatically reflect. This thesis seeks to understand the ways in which these writers, although decades apart from one another, reacted to the same social questions about class, gender, and social change.

Since this is an exploration of broad, well-known social debates from the nineteenth century, it is helpful to analyze representative and typical authors of the time period (1815-1867). Austen is a legendary novelist who embodies rural, traditional, upper-class England and *Emma* represents a typical domestic novel entrenched in early nineteenth-century ideology. Dickens is the great novelist of the city who represents traditional, Christian, urban England and *Nicholas Nickleby* is typical of literature in the 1830s and 1840s that seeks to expose urban injustices and represent the nitty-gritty aspects of life. Eliot, conversely, is the great mid-nineteenth century novelist of the countryside and represents realist, provincial, non-religious England. Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* is also typical for her time. Her emphasis on realism, rather than idealism, is characteristic for mid-century fiction. Taken together, these authors are representative of

several different modes and ideologies of British life in the nineteenth century. Through these typical texts critics can get a feel for dominant social trends and discussions throughout the century.

### Historical Context

In addition, my chosen texts have significant historical proximity to important changes in how Britons addressed poverty. At the time of *Emma*'s writing and publishing (January 1814-March 1815) British society was closing its legacy as a rural, landed class system and looking toward the new challenges of a fully industrialized nation. The years leading up to Austen's writing of *Emma* had seen high food prices and economic recession. As E.P. Thompson notes, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, poor rates had increased from under two million pounds per annum in the 1780s, to at least four million in 1803, to over six million post-1812 (221). Because of this, debates surrounding economics, poor relief, and class structure were gearing up to full throttle. Arthur Burnes and Joanna Innes give a good general overview of the early nineteenth century in *Rethinking the Age of Reform*. Economic changes saturated British society. Many small farms were engulfed by larger ones through enclosure, and the economic conditions of agricultural laborers deteriorated. Groups such as industrialists, workers, and philanthropists debated endlessly over possible solutions to the economic problems gripping the 1810s (26). In addition, political strife was also prevalent. Austen finished writing *Emma* the same month that Napoleon seized the throne. Three months later, in June 1815, the Battle of Waterloo ended the Napoleonic wars, thus beginning the post-war years in Britain.

Many of the economic problems of the 1810s were linked to enclosure, where upper-class land owners confiscated common areas and other land and consolidated it into one large estate. However, in the 1810s landowners began regretting the lost common lands that were swallowed up by enclosure because the commons enabled the lower classes to subsist on their own food and cattle without seeking welfare support from above (Thompson 221). Enclosure, while helping to ensure the continued economic success of the upper classes, also led to economic destitution for the lower classes and an increased responsibility of the upper classes to provide for the poor.

In the face of such problems, England looked to Late Enlightenment social and political theorizing for solutions to society's problems (Burnes and Innes 30). The years following the Napoleonic Wars were marked by political economy that took on easily accessible formats—tracts, pamphlets, and lectures (Burnes and Innes 31). With such a prevalence of political economy propaganda, it is only logical that Austen's *Emma* is heavily influenced by discussions of political economy. *Emma* reflects Austen's views of social change and welfare in relation to current discussions about political economy.

Since Austen was a part of the rural, landed class system, a novel in which the hero stays home, rather than traveling for most of the novel, seemed most appropriate to analyze. In her other novels heroes such as Mr. Darcy, Captain Wentworth, and Colonel Brandon are mostly seen away from their sphere of governance. Austen's novel follows a traditional landed class system in which the poor are helped through a process akin to the Speenhamland system, which greatly depended upon charity from the upper classes to help those in need. In *The Age of Transition*, Macdonald explains that this system was popularized in the Speenhamland parish in Berkshire in 1795 and worked to help the poor

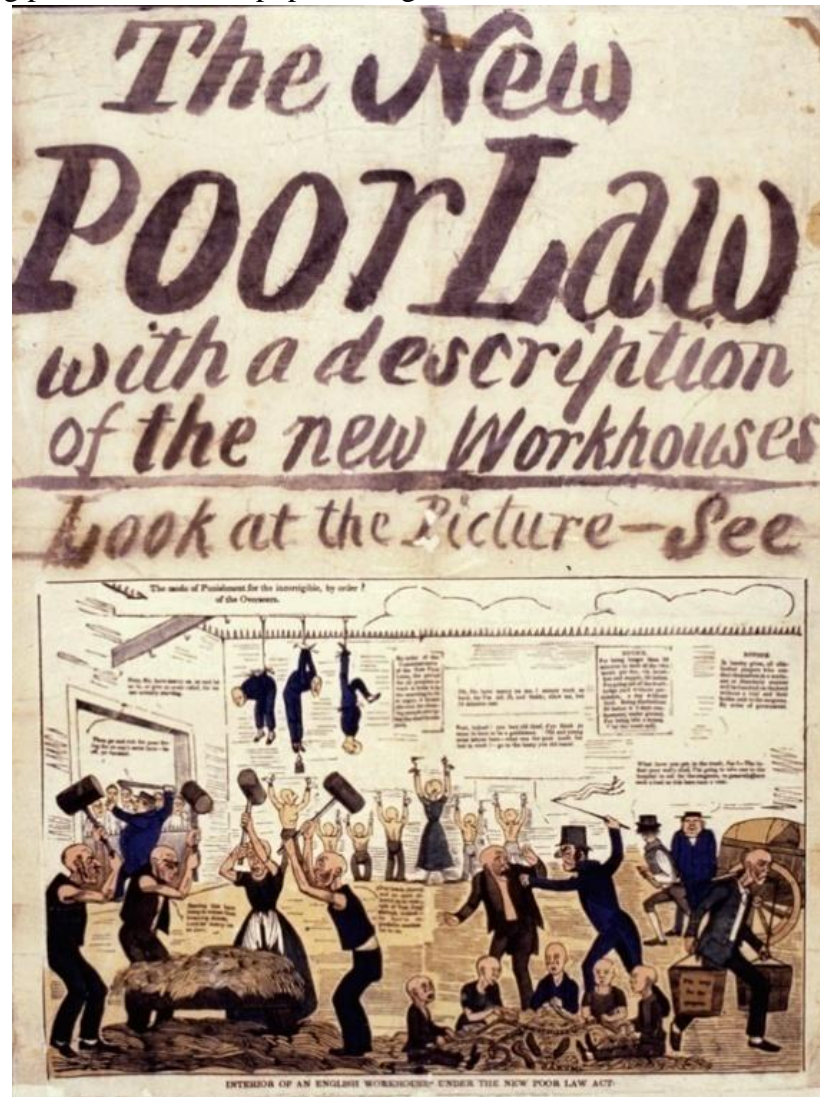
by supplementing wages from charitable funds (56). The Speenhamland system deteriorated as Britain's poor increased due to the beginning of the Corn Laws in 1815.

England in the 1820s experienced relatively prosperous conditions accompanied by steady, though quiet, reform efforts (Burnes and Innes 41). Towards the end of the decade, however, the economy fell into depression and social conflicts became more bitter (41). People agreed that society needed to be either "remoralized" or moralized in new ways, in order to survive the economic, moral, and social challenges of the age (40). The government responded to social reformers with the Reform Act of 1832 and the New Poor Law Act of 1834. The former was meant to give more fair representation to Britain's citizens by extending the vote to the middle class. It added 217,000 voters to the registry and attempted to do away with "rotten" and "pocket" boroughs. However, it actually increased the number of country-gentlemen MPs and was, in essence, "a triumph for Whig paternalists, who leagued with Tory [...] to maintain the status quo" (Burnes and Innes 46).

The problems that many Britons had with the Reform Act of 1832 were overshadowed by the greater difficulties presented with the New Poor Law Act of 1834. The problems with the New Poor Law centered on the principle of "less eligibility" in which conditions in the workhouses were designed to be much worse than life outside of the workhouse so as to deter people from abusing the system. The principles implemented in the New Poor Law Act of 1834 were based upon theories of political economists such as Adam Smith and Malthus and sought to only help the most desperate. In addition, the New Poor Law Act of 1834 transferred rural unemployed workers to urban areas so that they could supposedly find work. This increased the population,

poverty, and filth of urban England. As Marjie Bloy points out, the Poor Law commissioners believed that the existing poor laws caused population growth, low wages, and under-employment.

However, in reality the existing poor laws were a response to the above mentioned problems, and not the cause (8). Many Britons knew that the 1834 legislation was destructive, but did not know where to look for answers. The frustrations stemming from the 1834 New Poor Law Act were often depicted in literature and media. This literature and media sought to publicize workhouse abuses and increase anger towards the New Poor Law Act. The fervor of hatred against the act and attempts



Workhouse Abuse ("New Poor Law" 1)

to publicize the problems in the workhouses can be seen by the poster in Figure 1. In this poster, the poor are being inhumanely treated. Both the old and young alike are being forced to work in cruel circumstances, while the overseers of the workhouse beat and steal as they wish. Although the ineptness and cruelty of the workhouses were well-known, the solutions were difficult to find.

Some people believed education was the key to solving problems of poverty. Education, however, could not compensate for economic instability. The depression in the late 1820s and the 1837 financial crisis in Britain and America destabilized Britain and increased the amount of poor relief needed. Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* was serialized between March 1838-September 1839 and reflected the strife about how to handle the poor. In his novel, Dickens presents the middle classes with both motivation and concise instructions on how to help those in need. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the middle classes were slowly growing as people from the lower classes pushed their way up the social scale. The middle classes were, for the first time, becoming a vital force for Britain's economy. Although the upper classes could attempt to resist middle-class power for a time, their important influence could not be ignored (Macdonald 47). Because of this growth of influence, Dickens addresses how merchants and the upwardly mobile can gain social precedence and economic success through benevolence.

The 1850s and 1860s saw the rise of political power for the lower classes. Social reform movements during this time often focused on the treatment of the lower classes and, in particular, their lack of political power. The lower-classes' political reform efforts culminated in the Reform Act of 1867, which gave the vote to every male householder and renters paying at least 10 pounds per year for unfurnished rooms. The decade leading up to the 1867 Reform Act was filled with discussions about what role the lower classes should have in society. *The Mill on the Floss* is key to this thesis because of its involvement in discussions about lower-class benevolence and its role within



society. Although *The Mill on the Floss* was published in 1860, it was already heavily involved in discussions that characterized the decade of the Reform Act.

#### Definitions and Histories of Terms

The crux of debates about how to help the poor and which class should be responsible for benevolence can be characterized in one word—sympathy. Sympathy is the process of entering into another’s feelings or internalizing the problems and situations of others.<sup>1</sup> Sympathy, a derivative of eighteenth-century sensibility, was crucial to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophies regarding economics, culture, and social change.

Sympathy’s importance comes from its ability to create action in those who cultivate such feelings. In 1723 Bernard Mandeville published the *Fable of the Bees*, in which he argues that the minority in society use morality to govern the majority’s actions. Francis Hutcheson revised Mandeville in 1725 when he argued, in *Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, that benevolence can serve as a foundation for a virtuous society. Hume, no doubt, incorporated these theorists into his 1740 arguments when he said that the soul or animating principle of passion is sympathy (Hume 235). In order to have sympathy, a person must be able to observe another person and mentally enter into his or her experience. Thus, with Hume, sympathy served as a prime medium through which writers could connect with and influence their readers. Sympathy became a way of communicating feelings, rather than just a feeling in and of itself. This communication of feeling helped sympathy translate from a philosophical idea into an

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion of sympathy relies heavily upon Frank Christianson’s “Realism and the Cult of Altruism: Philanthropic Fiction in Nineteenth-Century America and Britain.”

aesthetic principle (Christianson 4). Hume's sympathy is based upon self-identification. Sympathy derives from a self-integration of the other, or "the relation of objects" to the self in which the self "is always intimately present to us" (208). In Hume's construction, sympathy is intimately connected to the understanding of the self. Hume also establishes the paradox between self-interest and sympathy as a central concern for discussions about social cohesion during this time period (Christianson 6).

In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith builds on Hume's assertions. As is generally known, in this work Smith harkens back to Mandeville's philosophy when he argues that acting in one's own self-interest can create a beneficial society. He writes:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love...By pursuing his own interest he (the community member) frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. (I.ii.2)

*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) departs from this assertion by arguing for the importance of sympathy in the social and economic system. As Winch notes, in *Riches and Poverty*, throughout the nineteenth century "the problem...of reconciling the sympathetic ethic of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* with the selfish ethic of the *Wealth of Nations*" was central to the writings and discussions of British society (254). This polarization of motive was termed "the Adam Smith Problem" and remained especially pertinent throughout the century in light of the growing masses of poverty-stricken laborers. Philosophies about sympathy versus self-interest not only dictated the means by

which Britain should aid their poor, but they also had major ramifications in questions of social class and mobility. If one should act out of self-interest only, he or she should seek to maintain the class system if it favors him or her, and seek revolution if it does not.

Many late eighteenth-century discussions about aiding the poor—and in particular the poor laws—reflected issues about sympathy and self-interest. For example, in 1797 William Godwin argued for the poor in *Of Avarice and Profusion*. In this essay he writes that:

What is misnamed wealth, is merely a power vested in certain individuals by the institutions of society, to compel others to labour for their benefit...The poor are scarcely ever benefited...They are paid no more now for the work of ten hours, than before for the work of eight. They support the burthen; but they come in for no share of the fruit. (np)

This is counteracted by Malthus' controversial text *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, published in 1798. In his essay, Malthus argues that the poor laws have “spread the general evil over a much larger surface” (36). The poor laws, according to Malthus, “depress the general condition of the poor,” by increasing the population and taking provisions away from more “worthy members” of society who can support themselves (36). Malthus argues that poor people should not be allowed to marry and should live lives of strict celibacy so as to avoid population increase. Whereas Godwin falls on the sympathy side of the “Adam Smith Problem,” Malthus presents a strong case for the self-interest of the upper and middle classes. Austen and Dickens each reflect this gulf of confusion concerning sympathy and self-interest and each present their vision of how the tenets of the “Adam Smith Problem” can be reconciled.

Austen's and Dickens' constructions of how to resolve the "Adam Smith Problem" center on benevolence. Actions of goodwill, or benevolence, were at the forefront of debates about class, economics, and politics throughout the nineteenth century. For the purposes of this thesis, benevolence is defined as any act of goodwill towards another person. In *Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, Mandeville defines benevolence as "the desire of the happiness of another" (Hutcheson 3), but my examination limits benevolence to specifically include action because, without action, the poor cannot be helped and, therefore, benevolence does no good for societal ills. This thesis explores the ways in which benevolent actions, such as seen in charitable actions, philanthropic endeavors, and compassionate gestures, are informed by class issues and gender ideals in Austen, Dickens, and Eliot.

Class, especially in relation to the long nineteenth century, is a slippery term. Both a three- and a five-class system seem arbitrary in the face of many smaller breakdowns in class that can be made. For the sake of simplicity, the class system in the following chapters will be broken down generally as the upper, middle, and lower classes—but when possible characters will be referred to in terms of their economic and professional situation rather than their general social classification. Class is ambiguous because, in addition to the problems caused by constant social mobility, class in and of itself holds little value. Rather, class gains its value in relation to the social and economic consequences which such identification holds. As Thompson argues in *The Making of the English Working Class*, one of the reasons time, class, and gender should be combined is that "we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from the processes which can only be studied as they work themselves

out over a considerable historical period” (11). By using benevolence as my *process* I hope to discover how perceptions of class and gender developed throughout the century.

In addition to class, gender constructs also heavily influenced social reform throughout the nineteenth century. Many people’s interpretations of how to be benevolent were colored and defined by gender. For example, benevolent men in Austen’s, Dickens’, and Eliot’s works all understand benevolence through the eyes of chivalry. The original definition for chivalry, dating back to 1300, is “knights or horsemen equipped for battle” (OED, “chivalry”, 1). By the late eighteenth century, the term chivalry was defined as “the brave, honourable, and courteous character attributed to the ideal knight; disinterested bravery, honour, and courtesy” (OED, “chivalry”, 28). And, in 1822, Kenelm Digby defined chivalry as “only a name for that general spirit or state of mind which disposes men to heroic and generous actions” (OED, “chivalry”, 27). Key to this thesis, though, is that chivalry in the nineteenth century came to be inseparably linked with the desire to both define what a gentleman was and to prove one to be a “gentleman.” The idea of a gentleman, in turn, reflected views of class throughout the century. By looking at the ways in which the gentlemanly ideal informed benevolence, we can then also see how benevolence reflected ideas about class.

In addition, Eliot’s *The Mill* explores the importance of men and women working together in benevolence. By the middle of the century benevolence was heavily influenced by women’s desire for equality. Social reformers began to realize that in order for benevolence to be truly successful, both men and women were needed. Men, in many cases, could provide the funds and political clout required to help those in need. Women often held the social backing necessary to help others and also ensured the

respectability of benevolent endeavors. As Burnes and Innes note in their text, women “had been coming into view as charitable and reforming activists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” but their political and social power multiplied in the middle decades as they joined forces with male economic holders (61).

### Critical Dialogue

Social reform movements in nineteenth-century Britain took on many different causes such as civil and criminal law, women’s rights, slavery, unions, Chartism, education, workers’ rights, child labor, temperance, and welfare. Much has been written on social reform literature throughout the Victorian era.<sup>2</sup> For example, Arthur Burnes and Joanna Innes focus on the ways in which British society changed socially and politically in their book *Rethinking the Age of Reform*. In their analysis, they explore reformers’ desire for change rather than social reformer’s actual achievements (1). Their emphasis is on the process of how people sought to create social change and idealized such notions, rather than on what achievements were actually made. However, although they discuss in depth the aspirations of reformers, they do not fully address a major aspect of the reform movement—namely, benevolence. Social reformers sought not only to enact political and ideological change, but to help individuals on a grass roots basis through kind acts of money and help. This thesis will add to these critics’ discussion by focusing on the ways in which benevolence reflected reform discussions in British society. Benevolence is a key extension of the argument that Burnes and Innes are making in that benevolence stems from various motivations, one of which is a desire for

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<sup>2</sup> See “Best Regulated Families”: Victorian Social Welfare and the Social Work of the Novel by Laura Camozzi-Berry; *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel* by Laura Berry; or “How to be a Benefactor without Any Money: The Chill of Welfare in *Great Expectations*” by Bruce Robbins for more information on welfare and social reform.

change. Like Burnes and Innes, I do not attempt to extensively chronicle actual changes made but, rather, focus on the motivations behind such efforts.

One motivation behind such actions is the desire for class identification and social control. Nancy Armstrong's seminal text, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, argues that novels and other texts written by and for women in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century greatly aided the rise of the middle class. This rise occurred as middle-class values were fostered within the domestic sphere that women controlled. Because of this origination of middle-class values in the domestic sphere, women held much power over the rise of middle-class consciousness and societal control. One aspect traditionally ascribed to women, and the domestic sphere, is benevolence. Armstrong notes in her text that benevolence, including charitable works, added to women's desire for power and social control. Armstrong writes that the need for benevolent action "among these newly impoverished social elements" allowed women to carve "out territory for domestic work in the larger social arena" (92). This territory was used to create a middle-class consciousness based upon women's domestic constructs. In my thesis I respond to Armstrong's text by looking at the ways in which men, rather than women, used benevolence as a means of social control. Armstrong's analysis of women's use of benevolence to foster social control is well-founded. However, I would like to add to her discussion about gender and class by arguing that men also sought to use benevolence as social control. Austen's Knightley, in *Emma*, uses benevolence to maintain his social standing as gentry and to reinforce the landed class system. Dickens' Nicholas Nickleby learns to engage in benevolence as a way to establish his social class and gain social mobility. Eliot's Bob Jakin sees benevolence as a means of establishing his merit and

status as a gentleman in spite of his class standing. Without disregarding Armstrong, this thesis engages in a different perspective in exploring how class was reinforced or changed through the traditionally ascribed domestic ideal called benevolence.

A major participant of discussions about class and benevolence is Beth Tobin, author of *Superintending the Poor*. Her text explores the ways in which the nineteenth-century class struggle between the emerging middle class and the landed upper class manifested itself in the treatment of the poor. Tobin's argument centers on nineteenth-century women's roles in vilifying current methods of benevolence and their proposed solutions for addressing poverty. Throughout her analysis, Tobin shows how the issues of class, gender, and the care of the poor blended in literature such as *Emma*, *Bleak House*, *Mansfield Park*, and *The Man of Feeling*. My thesis will look in depth at her analysis of class and its impact on poor relief. However, I hope to add to her already great discussion of these issues by focusing my exploration on the ways in which men, in particular, use benevolence as a means of establishing class identity.

Class identity often led to problems between members of different classes. Bridging the gap between the gentry and the lower classes, and thereby avoiding class strife, was best achieved through benevolence. In "Austen's Powers: Engaging with Adam Smith in Debates about Wealth and Virtue," Elsie Michie argues that Adam Smith's debates and, in particular, his benevolent construct of sympathy and self-interest, can be seen in nineteenth-century novels. In this thesis I will show the ways in which Smith's arguments play out in Austen's, Dickens', and Eliot's novels. *Emma* is a key novel in which Smith's arguments play out. Austen shows through *Emma* that the "Adam Smith Problem" may be reconciled through benevolence. Austen and Dickens



both show through their characters that benevolence should be motivated by sympathy but, when done correctly, benevolence will lead to self-interested benefits. Dickens revises Smith's argument by showing that self-interested individuals do not aid society, but destroy it. Eliot also incorporates Smith's arguments into her novel. In *The Mill on the Floss* Eliot incorporates Smith's benevolence model by showing that only benevolence motivated by sympathy can create lasting change. However, she departs from Smith's model by leaving out the self-interested benefits associated with benevolence that is such an integral part of Austen's and Dickens' constructs. Michie's article is part of a larger dialogue about benevolence and political economy that I hope to enter into throughout my thesis. By so doing, I seek to add to Michie's argument, and this critical discussion that focuses on how Smith's theories play out in literature, by looking in depth at Smith's influence on Austen, Dickens, and Eliot.

Lastly, no analysis of class issues in the nineteenth century would be complete without including the influence of the ideal of the gentleman. G. E. Mingay, in *The Gentry*, explores the rise and fall of the gentry as a ruling class. In his text he looks in depth at the definition of a gentleman and how gentility, throughout the nineteenth century, changed from an upper class classification to a catch-all phrase for men of merit. In my thesis I engage in this discussion about the idea of a gentleman by tracing this coupling of class identification, or lack thereof, with gentility throughout the century. By so doing I hope to further illuminate this important discussion by exploring its manifestations in representative literature throughout the century.

## Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 1 I will look at the parallel relationships of Emma and Harriet Smith and Knightley and Robert Martin. These relationships help illuminate concerns about benevolence, class, gender, and social change. At the beginning of the century, as seen in *Emma*, benevolence in the rural community was squarely the responsibility of gentry. Austen argues that benevolence should be motivated out of sympathy. However, benevolence also leads to the self-interested benefit of reinforcing the class system. In this way, benevolence in *Emma* serves as a medium between self-interest and sympathy. In addition, Austen's model of benevolence is very much informed by the ideals and constraints of chivalry. These ideals, when properly implemented, allow those who undertake benevolent actions to gain self-interested benefits of courtship and class stability.

In my next chapter, I will analyze Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*. This novel can be seen as a training manual for those wishing to gain social mobility. Notions of benevolence in this text are clearly linked to a middle-class struggle to attain gentility. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens reflects the polarization of Adam Smith's argument between self-interest and sympathy. Throughout the novel he asserts that, contrary to Smith's assertions in *The Wealth of Nations*, self-interest will not lead to a beneficial society. However, acting out of sympathy will result in economic prosperity and social achievement. Dickens' novel is particularly fascinating in its use of the child victim as the vehicle for discussions about benevolence. The child victim phenomenon was a major focus in the 1820s and 1830s for both literary and political endeavors. Laura Berry, in *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel*, argues that the legislative and

social history of the nineteenth century is one in which “a normalizing discourse and socially controlling legislation” was advanced and resulted in institutions that incarcerated and entombed the poor while “admonishing the middle classes by example” (18). This idea is explored in her analysis of the role of children in England in relation to *Oliver Twist*. Nicholas Nickleby, however, teaches merchants and the upwardly mobile members of the middle classes how to free the poor (and, in particular, the child victim) through the Cheeryble brothers’ example and Nicholas’ learning process.

My last chapter focuses on Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, specifically St. Ogg’s interactions with Maggie Tulliver. Eliot’s novel argues that benevolence is best carried out for and by the lower classes. In this novel, Eliot explores a crucial issue of the poor helping the poor. The middle classes in *The Mill on the Floss* are too distant to understand the true needs of the poor and are not sympathetic enough to truly help. Although the middle classes may act out of other motives, such as self-interest, with mild success, the poor are the only ones who can truly act out of sympathy and really help those in need. Eliot’s reaction to the sympathy vs. self-interest argument is more complex than Dickens’ and Austen’s. Although she does definitely advocate sympathy, she does not condemn other motivations for benevolent action, such as duty and loyalty. In this novel, benevolence is once again reexamined in light of what it means to be a “gentleman.” In addition, Eliot also consciously shows the disastrous consequences that can occur when men and women do not work together in benevolent actions.

As mentioned earlier, this thesis will look at how benevolence was informed by class and gender throughout the nineteenth century. By doing so, this thesis will examine how benevolence was employed to change or stagnate social, political, and economic

endeavors during this time period. In addition, this thesis seeks to understand the ways in which three representative authors—Austen, Dickens, and Eliot—attempted to reconcile the seemingly opposite motivations of self-interest and sympathy through benevolence.

## Chapter 1:

A Knightley Way: Gentlemen's Benevolence in Austen's *Emma*

“It is a truth universally acknowledged,” writes Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*, “that Jane Austen chose to ignore the decisive historical events of her time” (113). Although Austen may have danced around the historical events of her time, rather than integrating them head-on in her literature, she most certainly could not ignore them. Austen was acutely aware of the social, political, and historical happenings of her time and used *Emma* to respond to social questions about class and gender. In *Emma* Austen engages in an exploration of how to heal the corrupted class system. According to Austen, this system can be salvaged if the gentry follow Knightley's example and engage in benevolent works. Benevolence is a mediator between self-interest and sympathy and is used throughout *Emma* to reassert the class system. The class system can only work, however, when proper boundaries are in place. Austen's *Emma* is not only the evidence of social history, but the engagement of Austen in a heated social discussion.

*In Jane Austen in a Social Context* David Monaghan argues that Austen's *Emma* is a novel enveloped in the consciousness of class and society in which current discussions of masculinity, poor relief, and class are mediated through benevolence (30). Monaghan continues:

Austen was the first great English novelist to create an appropriate formal expression for a critical vision of the new society. This is because in the experience of village life, with its arrangement of great houses, farms and

cottages, and its relation to the distant city, she discovered a way to relate individual experience and the society it is formed in. (Monaghan 30)

Although Austen rarely mentions historical happenings, her novels recount nineteenth-century social history through her emphasis on everyday British life (Monaghan 102). Williams rebuts his earlier statement by noting that history has many currents, and during the early nineteenth century one of the most important currents was the social history of landed families. This social history of landed families, William notes, is “quite central and structural” in Austen’s novels (113). Austen’s *Emma* was created amidst debates about many political and social issues, including the budding British population, the destitution of the small farmer, the poor relief system, the 1810 food riots, the war of 1812, the Napoleonic Wars, the Corn Laws, and the 1812 Luddite rebellion. In 1814, the aristocracy and gentry were being attacked on all sides by a society that was fed up with exploitation, selfishness, and apathy. *Emma* is Jane Austen’s defense of the “paternal system of government” from attacks by the workers, political economists, and capitalists of the early nineteenth century (Miller 121).

#### The Enclosure Movement

Arguments surrounding the class based system often centered on the privatization of public land. Enclosure disgusted many members of society (especially those victimized by it) and brought up fierce debates about class, paternalism, capitalism, and poverty that lasted throughout the nineteenth century. The majority of enclosures occurred around the turn of the nineteenth century. Enclosure, in essence, forced small farmers and other villagers from “their” land in favor of making it the “owners’,” or freeholders’, land. At the heart of this debate is the question of whether the rich have the

right to take control of large amounts of land. Some believed that enclosure was a necessary economic matter, as it led to much higher levels of food production. Others, such as E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*, saw enclosure as a system of class robbery allowed because parliament consisted of property-owners and lawyers. The ultimate aim of enclosure, according to skeptics, was an increase in income through higher rents, which aim was achieved throughout the Napoleonic Wars (218). Barton-on-Humber is a classic case of the sting of Enclosure. Out of 6,000 acres in this area, ten owners accounted for 81% of the land enclosed and 19% was divided up amongst 116 people (Thompson 218).

Self-interested practices, as seen in enclosure, were pushed by writers such as Arthur Young. Arthur Young, a prolific writer and social observer, encouraged land owners to manage their land and labor in the most cost-effective way possible without regard to other factors, such as the survival of other community members (21-22). Landowners also benefited from this system by producing a large supply of able workers that forced the wage down. By increasing the supply of cheap labor and decreasing the demand for permanent workers, freeholders could spend less money on the menial tasks associated with enclosure—including harvesting, road-making, fencing, and draining (Thompson 220). One laborer remarked that the farmers “keep us here [on the poor-rates] like potatoes in a pit, and only take us out for use when they can no longer do without us” (qtd. in Thompson 223).

This assessment of the consequences of enclosure is not far from the truth of the matter. Landowners gained control of the property and then raised rents and restricted access to their woods and other areas. Instead of cultivating their own land, farmers had

to pay heavy fees for the privilege of working on their employer's property. This led to a widening gap between rich and poor. Many villagers fled to the city looking for good work, and those who stayed more often than not lived in poverty. In *Emma*, Austen creates a High Tory model which forecasted *Blackwood's* Tory arguments that "protection and support are the right of all [...] it is the duty of the people to pay obedience to those in authority over them; but it is also the duty of those set in authority to protect those placed below them" (in Tobin 68). This protection was vital to the survival of the poor whose economic situation became even more desperate due to enclosure. In 1803 more than one million people, out of a total population of nine million, received poor relief that totaled 4,267,965 pounds (qtd. in Tobin 64).

#### Smith's Construction of Benevolence

The major need for poor relief led to fervent discussions about sympathy and self-interest. As was mentioned in the introduction, discussions about self-interest and sympathy gained prominence in British society with Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. *The Wealth of Nations* focused on the importance of self-interest in creating a mutually beneficial community. As previously noted, one of Smith's most important assertions is:

As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it...By pursuing his own



interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. (294)

In the above quote, Smith is not claiming that people should act out of self-interest, but merely that they do (Smith 5). The above quote shows that Smith felt that if each community member acted out of his “own interest,” rather than promoting the interests of “society” and the community, the community as a whole would be more effectively helped.

Contrarily, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith explores and argues for the cause of sympathy. Sympathy enables emotional reciprocity. Although the spectator “endeavour[s] as much as he can to put himself in the situation of the other,” any sense of “imaginary change of situation” or full understanding of the other’s feelings is only “momentary.” This is because the truth that “they themselves are not really the sufferers continually intrudes itself upon them” (Smith 22-24). Likewise, the sufferer “is as constantly placing himself in theirs (the spectator’s position), and thence conceiving some degree of that coolness about his fortune, with which he is sensible that they will view it” (Smith 22-24). These opposing reflections help to reconcile the spectator and sufferer both with one another and with their emotions. As they each attempt to see life through one another’s eyes, they make an emotional connection that helps draw people and communities closer together.

As people draw closer to one another and learn to sympathize, they experience “universal benevolence” which is the “effect of sympathy” we feel for the “misery” of others. This universal benevolence makes any:

wise and virtuous man [...] willing that his own private interest should be sacrificed to the public interest of his own particular order or society  
 [...A]ll those inferior interests should be sacrificed to the greater interest of the universe, to the interest of that great society of all sensible and intelligent beings. (Smith 345-346)

According to this passage, then, sympathy reinforces the class system by instilling a sense of moral duty to accept one's position within society and to sacrifice greater notions of social and economic progress to the greater good. This process of sympathy serves the self-interest of those who hold economic and social power.

Smith continues the above discussion by comparing this process of benevolence and submission with a soldier. A soldier seeks to serve (or act benevolently) towards his country and fellowmen through battle. As such, soldiers "cheerfully sacrifice their own little systems to the prosperity of a greater system." When a soldier is walking into battle, he does so with "submissive obedience" and "shouts of the most joyful exultation, to that fatal but splendid and honourable station to which [he is] appointed." Smith argues that it is the Englishman's "duty, not only with humble resignation to submit to this allotment, but to endeavor to embrace it with alacrity and joy" (Smith 347). Smith's ideological vision is one of class stability and acceptance of one's place in the class system. For the lower-class laborers of the 1810s, this was a hard argument to swallow. The Luddite Rebellion, an expression of the lower-class frustration with industrialization and the class system, fought against this type of passive resignation. However, Austen seems to argue that Smith's theory of class can be successful when based upon sound motivations and boundaries.

Class stability is no small issue in Austen's *Emma*. Indeed, as Shinobu Minma argues in "Self-Deception and Superiority Complex," the "proper recognition of status is indispensable to daily intercourse among the inhabitants of Highbury" (4). Although people were keenly aware of who was directly above or beneath them, the complexity of the class system and ambiguities intrinsic in a constantly fluid society led to a major problem of "status identification" (Minma 4). Although a person may know exactly what his or her class standing was within the community, it sometimes became difficult to determine the class standing of other community members—especially those further removed from him or herself. One way that status identification occurred, and was made concretely apparent, was through benevolence. Benevolence created a hierarchal model in which others could discern their own class position and others. Class stability, only made possible through continued status identification, could occur through benevolence, which must be motivated by sympathy.

For Smith and Austen, benevolence acts as a medium between sympathy and self-interest. Smith says that benevolence:

is the most graceful and agreeable of all affections; that it is recommended to us by [...] sympathy; that as its tendency is necessarily beneficent, it is the proper object of gratitude and reward; and that, upon all these accounts, it appears to our natural sentiments to possess a merit superior to any other. (Smith 441)

Benevolence is the most agreeable of all "affections" because it is derived from sympathy and leads to self-interested benefits. Smith's construction of benevolence is based upon sympathy and leads to "gratitude and reward" which is "necessarily beneficent" to the

recipient and bestower. Benevolent actions, as a medium between sympathy and self-interest, are “superior” to any other motivation or action. This benevolence, however, only works for Smith when based upon sympathy. Although benevolence can be motivated by both sympathy and self-interest, sympathy is “superior” to self-interest. When people engage in benevolence because of sympathy, they naturally obtain self-interested benefits.

#### A Community Led Astray

What does Smith’s construction of sympathy and self-interest have to do with *Emma*? *Emma* is symptomatic of his benevolence model. Austen reconciles paternalistic power by portraying Knightley as a benevolent genteel leader. Knightley engages in benevolence because of sympathy and, therefore, reaps self-interested benefits. In this novel Austen teaches the audience the rules of an ideal rural class-based system. In order for the system to work, those who hold power must engage in benevolent actions out of sympathy. In addition, boundaries must be set between the gentry and the other members of the community. These boundaries and benevolent actions help maintain the class system by engendering reciprocity between the lower classes and the gentry.

However, in *Emma*, the class system is failing because many members of the gentry have not learned how to sympathize with those beneath them. Emma is a prime example of a member of society who does not sympathize with those beneath her. Knightley, and Austen, characterize Emma as a “nonsensical girl” who must learn how to properly function within society (193). Knightley criticizes Emma for being “unfeeling” towards Miss Bates, a woman for whom Emma should readily feel “compassion” because of Miss Bates’ “situation” (245).

Austen teaches her audience and Emma how to succeed in a class system by contrasting successful and unsuccessful gentry. Emma attempts to maintain the class system by openly mocking those beneath her and subtly reminding them of their lower status, rather than through benevolent action. Emma does this because she has not been raised with any upper class female role models to teach her how to appropriately maintain the class system. Austen deprives the heroine of proper role models for two reasons. First, by giving Emma poor examples rather than good, she is able to indict parts of the current paternalistic system without discrediting her argument for it. Secondly, by making the other major figures in her life poor examples, Austen leaves Emma only one clear choice to follow—Mr. Knightley. This set up helps show Austen’s ideal system and is convenient for the romantic plot of the novel.

Beth Tobin engages in a keen analysis of the corrupt class system in her chapter entitled “Property in Austen’s *Emma*” in *Superintending the Poor*. Tobin effectively argues that Emma is led astray in her class ideologies because the Woodhouses are the only characters who do not truly belong in the Highbury community. Emma is estranged from the community because her family does not own significant property: “The landed property of Hartfield was certainly inconsiderable, being but a sort of notch in the Donwell Abbey estate” (89). Nardin, in *Those Elegant Decorums*, writes that Emma cannot understand what is due to the inhabitants of Highbury because she lacks “the sort of natural, historic ties to the place and its people which land ownership provides for Mr Knightley” (109). Since Emma has “no real estate, she has no real ties to Highbury, and unlike Mr. Knightley, she has no clear-cut role to perform vis-à-vis” those below her (Tobin 56-59).

More importantly, Mr. Woodhouse represents “new money” that was derived from trade rather than land. Emma tells herself and the audience that the Woodhouse money was derived from “other sources” (89). As Tobin notes in her chapter, we do not know what these other sources are, but based upon Mr. Woodhouse’s total lack of interest in the public world, it is assumed that the Woodhouses live off of the interest accumulated from trade or in the London money market during the late seventeenth- and early-eighteenth centuries (57). Although their family has been wealthy for several generations, their lack of an estate keeps them classified as “new money.” Several other clues that the Woodhouses belong to the category of “new money” include: Emma’s family have only lived in Highbury for “several generations.” Their house is modern which limits their residence there to three or four generations, and Hartfield is only sixteen miles from London. As Tobin deduces in her chapter, this distance can be traveled by horseback in a few hours, which suggests to Austen’s readers that Emma’s fortune derives from someone who decided to live in Highbury in order to conduct trade business in nearby London. Such business would include buying and selling stocks in corporations or colonialist ventures (such as the East India or South Seas companies) or loaning money to the government’s imperialist wards (William III and Anne’s) (57).

Since Mr. Woodhouse does not depend upon the land for his livelihood, through agriculture (as the gentry does), he has no real interest in those who live on the land, but is concerned only with himself and his own interests. Beth Tobin argues that Mr. Woodhouse is “self-involved and lacking any sense of civic responsibility [...] any sense of duty to his community other than admonishing his friends for eating too much rich

food” (Tobin 60). Austen’s portrayal of Mr. Woodhouse reflects the rift between “old money” landed gentry and “new money” gentry with no land.

The rift between old and new money is prevalent in nineteenth-century literature. For example, Oliver Goldsmith plays upon this theme in “The Deserted Village,” in which he cries against the “new money” men who escape to the countryside and destroy the economic and social structure of the idyllic class system with their tainted and disconnected wealth (Tobin 69). Mr. Woodhouse’s passive aggressive actions are a good example of F.M.L. Thompson’s assertions that the gentry could maintain control of those beneath them and dispel “potential disaffection or awkward independence (through) vigilance and calculated manipulation” (qtd. in Tobin 27). By demeaning the behavior of Mr. Woodhouse, Austen can indict the gentry’s exploitation of power and privilege without condemning the basic paternalistic model of landownership and management. Austen shows, through her opposing models of the upper class, that it is the “new money” upper class, not the real “old money” gentry, who are guilty of misconduct (Tobin 69). By contrasting Mr. Woodhouse’s new money corruption with Knightley’s old money gentility, Austen provides a reason for the corrupted class system while still reasserting the basic system.

Through Woodhouse, Austen convincingly argues that the larger fault for Emma’s deficiencies, and Britain’s, should be laid to blame upon the new money paternalists who do not know how to rule but think they do. In Austen’s novel this corruption is embodied in Mr. Woodhouse’s gentle selfishness (Tobin 60). Throughout the novel Mr. Woodhouse is considered a kind man, but his benevolence does not stem from true sympathy or disinterested kindness. Mr. Woodhouse is a prime example of

using benevolence as a means of passive control, without the motivation of sympathy. In the novel, Mr. Woodhouse insists on having one of his servants show Frank Churchill the way to Jane Fairfax's home. Frank Churchill proclaims, "My dear sir, upon no account in the world; my father can direct me" (126). Mr. Woodhouse then insists by saying, "But your father is not going so far; he is only going to the Crown, quite on the other side of the street, and there are a great many houses; you might be very much at a loss, and it is a very dirty walk, unless you keep on the foot-path; but my coachman can tell you where you had best cross the street" (126). At first these examples seem to derive from simple kindness, but upon closer examination the reader is left to wonder if Mr. Woodhouse has other motives. Although he acts very non-aggressively, his persistent insistence that his servant guide Frank Churchill seems to hint at a need for control. He wants to know what Frank Churchill is up to—where he is going and whom he is seeing. Likewise, by placing a servant (Hannah) that is close to the family with James (a neighbor of rising social standing) he can keep tabs, so to speak, on what is going on in James' household (3).

### A Knightley Way

Austen clearly shows the ramifications of toying with the class system through her comparison of Knightley and Emma. Benevolent actions and social boundaries are essential to a functional class system because they engender reciprocation, which ensures the continuation of the class system. Emma spoils her role as community leader through her interaction with Harriet by attempting to elevate Harriet's social standing.

The contrast between Knightley and Emma is easily seen through their discussion of Mr. Martin's proposal to Harriet Smith. Emma's relationship with Harriet (her



“intimate friend” (39)) parallels Knightley’s relationship with Mr. Martin (whom he considers one of his “best friends” (37)). Throughout this discussion about Harriet and Mr. Martin, Emma’s disregard for boundaries and Knightley’s mastery of boundaries are clearly discerned. During the course of the novel, Harriet becomes closer and closer to Emma and Emma continually disregards boundaries in favor of Harriet’s friendship. Harriet repeatedly stays with the Woodhouses and spends “more than half her time there” to the point where she has “a bed-room appropriated to herself” (36). Emma’s misguided benevolence towards Harriet “blinds” her and makes her forget Harriet’s station. Emma crosses boundaries by having Harriet move in and live with her as a sister, teaching Harriet to shun people of higher status (Mrs. Elton, Robert Martin, Jane Fairfax), persuading Harriet to refuse an eligible match and pursue a match far above her (Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill), and inviting Harriet to gatherings in which everyone else is high above her in station. Emma agrees with Knightley’s assertion that she has improved Harriet and prides herself on being of “some use” to Harriet (37). However, Emma’s motivation for becoming friends with Harriet is based upon Harriet being of *some use* to her, rather than the opposite.

Emma’s benevolence towards Harriet is based upon self-interest rather than sympathy. As Minna notes, “Emma glosses over her unwarranted control of others by [a] subtle manipulation of motives” (3). Emma’s only true friend is Miss Taylor and, at the opening of the novel, Miss Taylor marries Mr. Weston. To compensate for this loss, Emma befriends Harriet Smith (who also had “no visible friends” (13)). Emma praises Harriet Smith as a good “walking companion” who was very “useful” because Emma could “summon” her “at any time to a walk” (15). The ability to walk when she wants,

Emma notes, is a “valuable addition to her privileges” (15). In addition, Emma argues, Emma’s social classifications are based not only upon legitimate classifications, but upon the degree to which various people satisfy her sense of superiority. Harriet, a “flatterer in all her ways” is esteemed to be a “gentleman’s daughter” (23, 39). This self-interested friendship leads to Harriet’s humiliation and class confusion. As Knightley scathingly points out, Emma has been “no friend to Harriet Smith” by transgressing class boundaries and “puff[ing]” up Harriet’s “weak head” into “expectations too high” (40).

Knightley also prides himself on having been of use to Robert Martin: “He came to the Abbey two evenings ago, on purpose to consult with me” (37). Knightley has a “thorough regard” for Robert Martin, and Martin wants Knightley to approve of his chosen marriage companion (37). After Martin “proved” why he should be able to marry Harriet, Knightley “had no hesitation in advising him to marry” and “sent him away very happy” (36, 37). Although Knightley and Martin are obviously close friends, Knightley is careful to maintain a boundary based upon class in this relationship. Knightley maintains his position as landlord with Martin as tenant.

Emma, on the other hand, transgresses proper class boundaries by attempting to elevate Harriet Smith to her same level. Although Emma is trying to help and be of “use” to Harriet, her benevolence is destructive because of her disregard for class boundaries (37). Emma defends her actions in persuading Harriet Smith to refuse Robert Martin by saying: “I cannot admit him to be Harriet’s equal” (38). Knightley brashly points out the defects in Harriet’s situation as a “natural daughter” and “parlour-boarder at a common school” (38-39). Knightley feels that his “only scruple in advising the match was on his (Robert Martin’s) account, as being beneath his deserts [sic], and a bad connection for

him” (38). Emma retorts: “Think a farmer, a good match for my intimate friend! Not regret her leaving Highbury for the sake of marrying a man whom I could never admit as an acquaintance of my own!” (39).

The irony in this, of course, is that Mr. Martin is “superior in sense” and “situation” to Harriet (39). Harriet Smith should not be the “intimate friend” of Emma precisely because she is in a class which Emma should not be intimately associating with. Although Knightley and Robert Martin spend time together, Knightley would never invite Martin to join his estate parties and stay at the Abbey with him. When speaking of Mr. Martin and Harriet Smith, Emma retorts: “Mr. Martin may be the richest of the two, but he is undoubtedly her inferior as to rank in society.—The sphere in which she moves is much above his.—It would be a degradation” (39). Emma’s statement that Harriet moves in a higher sphere is true; however, she is only artificially implanted in a higher sphere through Emma’s misguided benevolence. In reality, Harriet’s sphere is lower than Robert Martin’s because of her illegitimacy. Harriet was intended to move in “Mrs. Goddard’s line” of society, with whom Emma is not intimate.

Emma concludes her argument with Knightley by saying, with a smirk of triumph, that Harriet Smith “knows now what gentlemen are; and nothing but a gentleman in education and manner has any chance with Harriet” (41). Knightley echoes this when he laments that Harriet’s inferior circle was “good enough” until Emma “chose to turn her into a friend.” When class boundaries are transgressed, the system of benevolence fails to create reciprocity and class lines break down. Emma should have asserted proper boundaries in their relationship in order to keep Harriet in the sphere where she belonged. As Knightley predicts, “Let her marry Robert Martin, and she is

safe, respectable, and happy for ever; but if you encourage her to expect to marry greatly, and teach her to be satisfied with nothing less than a man of consequence and large fortune, she may be a parlour-boarder at Mrs. Goddard's all the rest of her life" (41).

Although Emma does eventually give her consent to Harriet and Robert Martin, she does not do so until after her reformation. After Emma refuses Mr. Martin for Harriet, and before her reformation, she encourages Harriet to fall in love with Mr. Elton, which leads to Harriet's public humiliation. At the ball given by Mr. Weston, Harriet is slighted by Elton—the "amiable, obliging, gentle Mr. Elton"—who in an attempt to hurt Emma disgraces Harriet Smith publicly (213). After refusing to dance with Harriet Smith, he directly "joined Mr. Knightley [...] while smiles of high glee passed between him and his wife" (213). Emma notices this scene from a distance, and the reader is left to assume that Mr. Knightley, sitting directly next to Elton, also notices. And, though he did not enjoy dancing, Knightley instantly asks Harriet Smith to dance. This example is especially important because Knightley is able to make Elton look "very foolish" for his lack of sympathy while aiding Harriet at the same time. Upon seeing this, Emma is filled with "gratitude" on behalf of Harriet Smith (214).

When Knightley chooses to rescue Harriet from public humiliation, he acts benevolently out of true sympathy for a community member in need. Under the social mores of the ideal landed system, where boundaries are firmly in place, reciprocation would then occur. Paternalistic reciprocation takes place when receivers of benevolence remain loyal and subservient to the benevolent landowners because of the kindness and benevolence they have received. In this case, it is Harriet's duty to exercise reciprocation by respecting and appreciating Mr. Knightley's position as the economic and social

leader of Highbury. As a community member of inferior social standing (at least, as one who should have inferior social standing), Harriet describes Knightley's service to her in terms of paternalistic reciprocation: his "kind action" shows "noble benevolence and generosity" and proves how "superior" he is (267). However, Emma's friendship has been a "disservice" to Harriet Smith which creates "feelings as might otherwise never have entered Harriet's imagination" (264). Harriet is disillusioned by her friendship with Emma and—free of all social boundaries—paternalistic reciprocation is replaced with one-sided courting.

Even Emma does not believe it possible that Harriet Smith would dare to fall in love with Knightley. When the realization hit her, her "voice [is] lost," and she feels "great terror" (266). Harriet describes Knightley as "infinitely superior" and asserts, "I hope I have better taste than to think of Mr. Churchill" who is much higher socially than Harriet (266). Harriet says that she would not have fallen for Knightley because it was "too great a presumption almost, to dare to think of him" (266). However, Harriet fell in love with Knightley because she was under the impression that Emma "entirely approved and meant to encourage" the attachment (266). And, most poignantly, Harriet justifies her feelings by telling Emma that "if you had not told me that more wonderful things had happened; that there had been matches of great disparity (those were your very words);--I should not have dared to give way to" loving Knightley (266).

It is during this conversation that Emma realizes "with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself" (268). Perhaps this realization comes because Emma is the only member of the Highbury community high enough in social ranking to be a proper match for Mr. Knightley. After all, Emma notes in her refusal of

Elton that her fortune was such to make her family “scarcely secondary to Donwell abbey itself” (89). Therefore, the only way to ensure this ill-placed reciprocation from happening again is to have Knightley properly married to one within his own social sphere.

In contrast to Emma, Knightley properly engenders paternalistic reciprocation in Robert Martin through his benevolent actions and maintenance of boundaries. When Robert Martin comes to counsel with Knightley, he does so because he is concerned about Harriet’s social standing in relation to his (because she has become intimate with Emma). Robert Martin has “some apprehension perhaps of her being considered (especially since *your* making so much of her) as in a line of society above him” (37). Knightley is “very much pleased with all that he said” in relation to class lines and praises Martin for his understanding of boundaries: “I never hear better sense from any one than Robert Martin” (36). Robert Martin is praised by Knightley because he is first and foremost concerned with maintaining class lines. Knightley has “a thorough regard for him and all his family,” and Martin considers Knightley “one of his best friends” while still maintaining proper respect for Knightley’s class position (36). As such, Robert Martin is considered a “respectable, intelligent gentleman-farmer” because he works within the sphere to which he was born. Whereas Knightley shows kindness to Martin by counseling him, Martin reciprocates this kindness by esteeming Knightley and thinking “highly” of him as a “counsellor” and leader (38).

The relationship between Knightley and Robert Martin is all the more idealistic because of their intricate link to enclosure. Knightley and his brother openly speak of enclosure activities in *Emma*. They speak about “the plan of a drain, the change of a

fence, the felling of a tree, and the destination of every acre for wheat, turnips, [and] spring corn” (65). As a small farmer, much of Robert Martin’s land would have been taken when Knightley engaged in enclosure. When Knightley fences land he does so to keep animals out, but also to keep farmers like Robert Martin from usurping his land. Austen shows through Knightley’s and Martin’s relationship that enclosure does not have to destroy the gentry’s ties with the community. Knightley and Martin are able to maintain their relationship in spite of enclosure because Knightley treats Martin with respect and sympathy. Likewise, Martin is not bitter towards Knightley’s enclosure efforts because he acknowledges Knightley’s elevated class status and acts accordingly. Most importantly, Knightley does not alienate his community emotionally—although he does physically through enclosure—because he chooses to engage in benevolence.

Knightley’s benevolent actions are successful because he feels sympathy for those beneath him. He is described as having a “compassionate attachment” for Jane Fairfax, and Emma describes Knightley as “benevolent” and “humane” (167, 145). At the end of the novel Knightley is characterized as being “always so kind, so feeling, so truly considerate for every body” (296). Knightley is the sympathetic landlord; he enters into the feelings of others and attempts to feel as they do. His benevolence is guided by these feelings of mutuality and understanding. Knightley resembles Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* in that he is not one of the many “wild young men...who think of nothing but themselves” but a “responsible active male” (161, 180).

#### Masculine Benevolence

However, Knightley’s benevolent actions are especially interesting because his benevolence is not only motivated by sympathy but constructed around masculine ideals.

Masculine ideals, and especially interpretations of the meaning of gentlemanliness, were a crucial tool for social identity from medieval England until the end of the nineteenth century. In 1577, William Harrison focused his definition of a gentleman on personal attainments: “Whosoever studieth the laws of the realm [...] or beside has service in the room of a captain in the wards [...] and] can live without manual labour, and thereto is able and will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman” (qtd. in Mingay 2). By 1626 Sir William Vaughan, of Golden Grove in Carmarthenshire, defined a gentleman this way:

The means to discern a gentleman be these. First, he must be affable and courteous in speech and behavior. Secondly, he must have an adventurous heart to fight and that but for very just quarrels. Thirdly, he must be endowed with mercy to forgive the trespasses of his friends and servants. Fourthly, he must stretch his purse to give liberally unto soldiers and unto them that have need. (qtd. in Mingay 2)

By 1626, as seen above, the emphasis of what a gentleman was had begun to include not only personal attainments and tangible qualifications, but internal characteristics. The inclusion of personal characteristics and manners into qualifications of a gentleman was a gradual process. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries qualified gentlemen in England continued to engage in openly disreputable behavior. In fact, as G.E. Mingay points out in *The Gentry*, although the concept of what a gentleman should be had been discussed since late medieval times, and many treatises on courtesy and manners were written, “it was not until the eighteenth century or later that some ordinary country gentlemen gave up their habits of licentious carousing, brawling, and swearing” (154).



Although such behavior most likely continued in private, stricter codes of public behavior became the norm for gentlemen in the nineteenth century. Due to this gradual inclusion of behavior and internal characteristics into the definition of a gentleman, by the early nineteenth century the term ‘gentleman’ became a way of characterizing not only a man’s economic assets and personal experience, but his character.

As such, the concept of the gentleman served many purposes for different classes during this time. For aristocrats, according to Bertrand Russell (an earl), “the concept of the gentleman was invented by the aristocrats to keep the middle classes in order” (qtd. in Gilmour 5). For others, however, gentility was not an aristocratic invention but a “point of entry” for those wishing to bridge the gap between upper middle and gentry classes. These differentiations of the purpose of gentility are where Austen enters the discussion. Each male member in *Emma* views himself implicitly as a gentleman. For characters such as Elton and Churchill, being a gentleman is a way to exclude other members of society. For Woodhouse and James, notions of gentility serve to legitimize their upwardly mobile desires. But where does Austen stand on these issues? These masculine ideals, and in particular, formations of gentility, help shape the identity of many characters in *Emma* and, as with sympathy, served to highlight both ideal and corrupt characters.

Mr. Woodhouse, as previously shown, is not an ideal character. One of his many faults is that his personality represents the outdated and denigrated gentlemanly ideal that was popular at the end of the eighteenth century. Claudia Johnson asserts quite convincingly that Mr. Woodhouse represents the ideal of sentimental masculinity that includes such attributes as sensitivity, irrationality, tenderness, and benevolent nerves

(198). Mr. Woodhouse's masculinity is based upon notions of sentimentality and passive control that live off emotion, frivolity, and outdated ideals. Although he is rich and could do much for his community, he chooses to be passive and sentimental. At the end of the century qualities such as forcefulness, bluntness, and brusqueness were considered harsh and threatening while a sentimental man, such as Woodhouse, ruled his community by the love he engendered in others, rather than the power he held. The sentimental man legitimized his authority not by economics or force but by sensitivity. In essence, he ruled by weakness rather than intimidation or force (Johnson 198). He made sure that those close to him stayed close because they feared for his health and worried about affecting his well-being by upsetting him or going against his will. In this system, those beneath the freeholder respected him out of pity and guilt, rather than out of merit and obligation. It is logical to see how such a system would easily fail. Although by the time *Emma* was written the sentimental man had become somewhat of a joke, Woodhouse's character still represents a common popular character type for the latter end of the eighteenth century.

Frank Churchill is another poor model to which *Emma* falls prey. Frank Churchill is linked with Mr. Woodhouse in that his character type also harkens back to a maligned model of gentlemanliness—the Chesterfield man. The Chesterfield persona is based off of Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son*, which gained Chesterfield a reputation for being condescending towards human nature, chauvinistic towards women, and manipulative in human relations (Gilmour 17). Chesterfield argued that this type of behavior and attitude would ensure a gentleman's success in society. Many eighteenth-century gentlemen believed in Chesterfield's model and followed it thoroughly.

However, to many nineteenth-century critics, Chesterfield was a menace to the name of gentlemen. One extreme example is John Churton Collins, a Victorian critic, who remarked:

His name is little more than a synonym for a profligate fribble, shallow, flippant, heartless, without morality, without seriousness, a scoffer at religion...Even among those who do not judge as the crowd judges there exists a stronger prejudice against Chesterfield than exists with equal reason against any other Englishman. (qtd. in Gilmour 16)

In an 1820 letter Keats said of Chesterfield: "I would not bathe in the same River with lord C. though I had the upper hand of the stream. I am grieved that in writing and speaking it is necessary to make use of the same particles as he did" (Rollins 272).

Austen, too, seemed to accept the common view that the Chesterfield man was not a respectable gentleman.

The Chesterfield man is shown in Frank Churchill, who is described as one who seems "to love without feeling" (228). Churchill's true character can be seen in his actions towards Jane Fairfax. Throughout the novel Churchill taunts both Jane (openly) and Emma (secretly) by joking with Emma about Jane's supposed secret lover. He shows that, although he has committed himself to Jane and honors that commitment, he has no true consideration for her feelings or the feelings of anyone other than himself. Frank Churchill's first priority is not his family or loved ones, or even his reputation, but the accumulation of wealth and titles.

Knightley breaks with eighteenth-century notions of masculinity by representing the new *amiable* man instead of the *aimable* man of the past. In essence, he engages in

benevolence because of his sympathy rather than out of pure self-interest. This new type of masculinity is not interested in artifice or superficiality, but focuses on a calmness that shows real attachment (Johnson 201). Such masculinity “connotes a new openness and directness, a new sincerity, in social relations” that makes the Chesterfield gentleman look “secretive, hypocritical, cold—and also comic” (Gilmour 18). Arthur Young, in *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel*, shows the importance of masculinity when he writes, “The novel influences the attitudes and values of its readers most powerfully through the manipulation of cultural symbols. In the determination of class relations during this period, the most significant of such symbols is that of the gentleman” (4). For Austen, being a gentleman is not merely having “gentility” but “doing one’s duty, carrying out responsibilities, and being considerate” (Tobin 51). Austen’s *Emma* shows not only what gentlemen are (considerate and concerned with the proper fulfillment of duty)—but also what the gentlemen do (Tobin 56). Gentlemen, for Austen, willingly and actively engage in benevolence out of sympathy and, because of their motivations and work, they maintain and achieve self-interested benefits.

Some of the self-interested benefits that Knightley achieves in *Emma* are brought about because of his masculine construction of benevolence. Knightley sees his role as a benevolent leader through the lens of chivalry. As such, he embraces both the ideals and the goals of chivalry. The obvious support for Knightley’s chivalry is his name—he is the knight on horseback, riding through the fields, protecting those beneath him from poverty and distress. As such, he is motivated by chivalrous aims—namely, courtship. As Young notes, Knightley resembles the knight in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* in that “the gentleman is the active principle that is given inspiration and direction by the

idealized vision of his consort” (6). Knightley is kind to others because he feels real sympathy for them, but also because he wants to attract a good wife. Knightley sets an example for Emma throughout the novel because he wants her to learn to be benevolent and, I believe, because he wants to win her over through his masculine benevolence.

Knightley’s rescue of Harriet Smith at the ball is a key example of how Knightley’s construction of benevolence is linked to masculine ideals. He is the chivalrous male sent to rescue Harriet Smith from public humiliation. Harriet remarks that Knightley’s “service” makes her believe he is “superior...to every other being upon the earth” (267). She tells Emma that, although she appreciates Frank Churchill rescuing her from the gypsies, Knightley’s actions took place in “a much more precious circumstance” when he came “forward to [her] rescue” at the ball (267). Churchill’s rescue of Harriet from the gypsies is, perhaps, more traditionally aligned with chivalry, a demonstration of “old-fashioned chivalry” (Young 32). Young continues: “Even attenuated aggression, however, no longer makes a man of honor in the post-Grandisonian world; the rescue that counts is the one carried out by Knightley” (32). It is in the above mentioned conversation that Harriet Smith remarks on Knightley’s “noble benevolence” (267). Knightley could have taken many courses of action: he could have escorted Harriet away from the ball, he could have openly confronted Elton, or he could have done nothing. However, he chose instead to rescue Harriet through a courting ritual—dancing. Knightley’s benevolent response is not one of practicality or logic, but of masculine ideals of romance.

Perhaps, then, the blame for Harriet’s feelings for Knightley should not all be placed upon her. A case could be made that Knightley’s linking of benevolence with

masculine ideals of chivalry naturally lead to the induction of romantic feelings on the part of those benefited by him—especially when those involved are ignorant, ignored, and reeling from a spurned love. Knightley’s construction of benevolence in chivalric terms logically creates a system in which those benefiting from his kindness fall in love with him. Harriet Smith is directly helped by Knightley under romantic terms—at a ball, in front of a past love interest, and surrounded by friends championing her marital interests. With this context in mind, it is no wonder that Harriet transgresses class boundaries and falls in love with Knightley. This point highlights the way in which chivalry also mediates self-interest and sympathy. Men engage in chivalric action out of sympathy for women in need, but by doing so they gain self-interested benefits of love and power over the women they help.

At the end of the novel Knightley once again shows that his construction of benevolence is linked to masculinity and chivalry by rushing back to Hartfield to “soothe” and “counsel” Emma’s supposedly broken heart (because of Frank Churchill’s engagement to Jane Fairfax). The reader learns that Knightley has “no idea of trying” to court Emma and “no selfish view” in his actions. However, “in the momentary conquest of eagerness over judgment,” Emma is transformed from a person on which to bestow benevolence into a romantic conquest (283). True to chivalry’s intentions, Emma agrees to marry him at his most chivalrous moment.

The inclusion of chivalry in nineteenth century constructs was not uncommon. In fact, Austen’s construction of an ideal rural class-based system was also not unique for her age. Indeed, Austen was not alone in looking to the past for solutions to the present conditions. Leaders such as Cobbett, Hunt, and Oastler all believed in the “golden age of

the village community before enclosure and before the Wars” (Thompson 230). Fergus O’Connor, the Chartist leader, said:

Here’s that we may live to see the restoration of old English times, old English fare, old English holidays, and old English justice, and every man live by the sweat of his brow [...] when the weaver worked at his own loom, and stretched his limbs in his own field, when the laws recognized the poor man’s right to an abundance of everything. (qtd. in Thompson 230)

This myth of the lost ideal community became a powerful force that could be said to rival Owen’s utopian projects and Socialist theories during the 1810s (Thompson 230). For many who experienced and encountered the hardships associated with the 1810s, the golden age myth of paternalism was a very tempting solution (Thompson 231). In the nineteenth century, this idealization of the past was widely used to critique capitalism (Williams 35). This myth of the golden age served as “a magical and inherited island in a rising and pitiless sea” of capitalism (Williams 41). This “rural-intellectual radicalism” was hostile to industrialism and capitalism and “attached to country ways and feelings, the literature and the lore” (36). Put in this light, such a mentality can strongly be seen in Austen’s writings. Austen’s idealizing abstraction forces her novels’ “acquisitive society” to “judge itself at once by an inherited code and by the morality of improvement” (Williams 115). *Emma* is not an outlandish fantasy of one woman but a prominent myth of post-war England. In this novel, Austen attempts to show her vision of the golden age myth and explore the ways in which such a myth could succeed. *Emma*

shows readers the ways in which a retrospective idealized society can “assure the continuity of the general formula” of paternalism (Williams 116).

The purpose of this chapter has been to establish a representative perspective of benevolence in relation to class, gender, and social change at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In this chapter we have seen these issues through the lens of a changing England. Enclosure changed the shape and focus of rural England from a system based upon individual self-sufficiency to a hierarchal structure of sustenance living for all but a mighty few. Such events as the Corn Laws, post-war unemployment, and industrialization deeply affected the views of class, benevolence, and social change in England. These events made some people push for social reform and shy away from traditional community structures, as seen in the disintegration of the rural class-based system. For others, though, they turned back to the rural class system and looked for ways to improve the system, rather than disregarding it. In *Emma*, Austen attempts to show post-war England that the class system that so many were trying to obliterate still held value and hope for Britain’s social problems. While Austen admitted that corrupted gentry caused many of Britain’s problems (through negligent “new money” invaders), the class system itself, when correctly implemented, could provide the solutions Britain needed. This retrospective search for solutions included not only class ideals but notions of masculinity based upon chivalry.

Benevolence, to Austen, is the key to a successful class system. Benevolence mediates sympathy and self-interest and helps to reassert the class system by engendering reciprocation between community members. Proper reciprocation can only take place when boundaries are set between classes. These boundaries metaphorically support



enclosure as a means to the continued social and economic power of the gentry. Austen's *Emma* is a prime example of an early nineteenth century text that looked to the past for solutions to current social problems. However, as the century progressed and Britain became overwhelmed with poverty and class struggles, it looked for new ways to solve its social problems. The outcome of these discussions was the rise of the middle class, increased social mobility, and the middle-class usurpation of moral authority to lead society. In my next chapter I will continue my discussion by exploring the ramifications of these social changes as reflected in Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*.

## Chapter 2:

A Cheeryble Proposal: Redemptive Capitalism in *Nicholas Nickleby*

In *Emma* benevolence serves as a mediator between self-interest and sympathy that allows those who engage in such good actions (notably the gentry) to reap the self-interested benefit of maintaining the class system. Dickens, however, sees benevolence as a means to social mobility, rather than stagnation. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens creates a bildungsroman of redemptive capitalism in which Nicholas learns the process through which he can become a gentleman. Nicholas learns that, under Dickens' construct, "new money" men who engage in benevolence motivated by sympathy may reap economic gain and social mobility and, through this combination of morals, economics, and class, become gentlemen.

In this chapter I will focus on Dickens' theory of redemptive capitalism. Redemptive capitalism is a construct in which those who have capital and wish to gain social prestige may do so by redeeming themselves from their capitalist roots through benevolence. The convergence of capital and benevolence enables men to establish themselves as gentlemen. By becoming gentlemen those with capital gain the moral authority to move up in social standing and, thereby, gain social, political, and economic power. Nicholas must learn this process from the Cheerybles and successfully undergo this development into a gentleman in order to regain his social and economic status.

Before discussing how *Nicholas Nickleby* is a bildungsroman, it must first be noted that Dickens most likely did not intend the novel to be taken as such. When reading Dickens' many novels it becomes apparent that, with few exceptions, Dickens does not support true social mobility. Rather, most of his characters that succeed in

rising in social status usually do not obtain a new status but regain a former one. For example, Nicholas Nickleby is born into the genteel class, falls from that class because of his father's bankruptcy, and eventually regains his former class status through his own actions. Although the Cheerybles do indeed gain social standing and enter into a sphere they have never been a part of, this is not typical for Dickens. However, even though *Nicholas Nickleby* was not designed to teach men how to rise in social standing (at least not for those who had never been a part of a higher class), this novel most certainly did teach those interested in gaining social momentum how to do so.

Nineteenth-century benevolence is traditionally linked with women. Benevolent actions, which include charitable work, philanthropic endeavors, and other kind actions, were important to nineteenth-century women because they bridged the gap between private and public sectors. Through benevolence women could actually get out of the house and into the community and be a part of a larger discussion. As Nancy Armstrong points out in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, it was women's "acknowledge aptitude" for benevolence "that first enabled [them] to move out of the home and into the political arena" (92). This bridge between the private and public spheres, through benevolence, is abundantly represented in literature in works such as *Aurora Leigh*, *Pillars of the House*, *Jane Eyre*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. Although men in nineteenth-century literature did engage in benevolence, they usually were not the focal point of the novel (as seen in *Emma*).

Most of Dickens' novels involve benevolence because, as a social activist, Dickens was very concerned with how the victimized portion of society was treated. Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* learns to forego capitalist gain in favor of benevolence,

while Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House* exemplifies what happens when people confuse their priorities in favor of benevolent fervor. However, in *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens shows readers the ways in which a benevolent life can help to both define and benefit capitalists. No doubt Dickens was aware of the lack of benevolent actions associated with men in literature and, therefore, *Nicholas Nickleby* addresses some of these important issues.

#### Dickens' Construction of Masculinity

For the mercantile and new money classes, it could be argued that no other class issue was as prominent during the 1830s as the notion of a gentleman. Arthur Young, in *Culture, Class, and Gender*, states that the idea of the gentleman is “arguably the most pervasive, important, and unstable symbol in Victorian culture” (4). Asa Briggs, in *The Age of Improvement*, supports Young when he says that the idea of the gentleman is “the necessary link in any analysis of mid-Victorian ways of thinking and behaving” (2). Gilmour remarks in *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*: “the idea of the gentleman carried some of the best hopes as well as the deepest contradictions of Victorian experience...there lies the struggle of a middle-class civilization to define itself and its values, a process in which the novelists were intimately and sympathetically involved” (14). This chapter is principally concerned with the behaviors by which those wishing to gain in their class standing sought to define themselves as gentlemen.

In order to understand the importance of behavior, we first must look at the motivations behind the desire to become gentlemen. Becoming gentlemen was a “key concept in the first strategic move on the part of the middle class in its rise to social and cultural dominance” (Young 5). If a member of the new money class could establish himself as a gentleman he then could move upward socially. The desire to move socially

upward was based upon a desire for more economic, social, and political power. This power centered on the “appropriation of the moral authority that had been the birthright of the aristocracy” in previous decades (Young 5). Because Victorians felt that society must be governed by those who have moral authority, this concept of moral character became a prime concern for those wishing to move upward socially and thereby gain more power within the community. This idea was first represented by Richardson’s Sir Charles Grandison, who is the “archetype of the reformed gentleman, the pattern on which subsequent middle-class variations are based” (Young 6). Even though Sir Charles is of a higher class, he is the “exemplar not of the gentleman of birth but of the Christian gentleman, and it is through the concept of the Christian gentleman that virtue becomes one of the necessary attributes of gentlemanly status” (Young 6). Benevolence, as a key outward indicator of virtue and moral authority, is essential to the process of establishing oneself as a gentleman.

As such, I believe that *Nicholas Nickleby* served as a training manual for those of the new money and mercantile classes wishing to establish themselves as gentlemen through benevolence. Nicholas Nickleby’s outward quest throughout the novel is “principally concerned with the business of establishing his identity as a gentleman” (Ford 16), whereas his inward quest is one of character building and learning how to engage in benevolence. Ford points out that Nicholas, for most of the novel, asserts attributes of radicalism and is focused on challenging social injustice and exploitative aristocracy (as seen in Ralph Nickleby’s actions towards Kate). However, Nicholas’ ultimate aim, and eventual pinnacle achievement, is not in radicalism and social justice, but in the “recovery of his ancestral position in the traditional hierarchy” (27). This

recovery, and consequent establishment of Nicholas as a gentleman, comes about as he learns how to be a benevolent capitalist.

Capitalism and economics in general, were a tumultuous affair for the first decades of the nineteenth century. Austen's writings came amidst the Napoleonic wars, whereas Dickens' writings focus on dealing with the aftermath of economic instability. In 1816 bank failures caused economic crisis both in England and America which took its toll over the next decade or so. The 1820s were politically stable but economically unstable. During this time the Corn Laws were in full effect, which drove up the cost of bread and the amount of those in poverty. These economic concerns affected people's views on class and social change. Many believed that those who had money needed to use it to help those without, rather than hoarding it like Ralph Nickleby.

Just as most people in Dickens's time, especially after the economic upheaval of the 1820's, were seeking for economic stability, most people also were seeking for a way to solve societal problems. The 1820s were filled with struggles for free press, trade union strife, and middle-class angst. Towards the end of the 1820s the middle class began to gain a "middle-class consciousness" for the first time (Thompson 711). The middle class began to see itself as a social, political, and economic force that did not want to be left behind. In order to assert power, the middle class had to establish itself as a social authority. To do so they looked to morality and sought to establish their authority based upon moral grounds. As moral capitalists the middle class, they believed, had the authority to lead society. In this way, benevolence became key to addressing the social, political, and economic problems of the 1830s.

As previously defined, benevolence is any kind action towards another person. Benevolence in *Nicholas Nickleby* differs from many of Dickens' other novels in that those engaging in benevolence are (with the exception of Kate Nickleby) almost always men. This novel is similar to Austen's *Emma* in that the male characters engage in benevolence through a lens of masculinity. It differs, however, in that other types of benevolence (feminine benevolence, for example) are almost completely absent from the novel. There are no Esther Summerson characters in this novel, with their jingling keys and angelic faces. Rather, benevolence in *Nicholas Nickleby* takes on a rougher, capitalist-minded appearance. Nicholas rescues Smike not through his angelic goodness, per se, but through his masculine strength and ability to beat up Squeers. Newman Noggs helps those in need not through patience and sitting with the ill, but through spying and stealth. Even the subject matter is rougher—the ailments of the needy are not hinted at or glossed over, but put out for all their glory: a large family is widowed when a warehouse worker is crushed to death, Kate is sexually accosted, Madeline Bray is sold into sexual slavery by her father so that he may enjoy a life of debauchery, and Smike is so abused that he is mentally and physically handicapped. In this way, *Nicholas Nickleby* is especially helpful for those wishing to become gentlemen. This novel does not help women wanting to know how to visit the sick or set up a charitable society, but it does help men in trade and business learn how to integrate their capitalist endeavors with their desire for social mobility. The key to capitalism and social mobility, for Dickens, is benevolence.

This use of benevolence as a means to social mobility is where Dickens noticeably differs from Austen. In Austen's idealistic Highbury community, benevolence

keeps the masses at bay while helping those above maintain their privileges. For Dickens, benevolence serves to move someone up the social scale where capital alone will not. In Victorian society, capital could take the merchant out of the warehouse but it could not take the warehouse out of the merchant. Only an appropriation of moral authority, through becoming a gentleman, could move a person up the social ladder. In this way, benevolence becomes a form of redemptive capitalism. Through benevolence, men can redeem themselves from their capitalist roots.

The Cheerybles are a prime example of this process. The Cheerybles are German twins who started life as “two poor boys” that “never went to school” and came to London without money or shoes (453). Through their industry and intelligence the Cheerybles became prosperous capitalists who now fall within the new money class. Their focus on benevolence, however, is what makes them gentlemen. When Nicholas first meets Charles Cheeryble he characterizes him as an “old gentleman.” Nicholas terms him thus not because of his clothes per se (although they are described), but because “what principally attracted” Nicholas was Charles’ “honest” eye and his expression of “kind-heartedness” (427-428). By being kind to those in need the Cheeryble brothers are able to establish themselves as gentlemen to both their employees and those within the larger community.

In order for a man to be considered a gentleman, and thereby gain social mobility, he must engage in benevolence out of sympathy rather than self-interest. In this matter Dickens follows Austen’s cue. Austen and Dickens agree that while self-interested motivations are bad, self-interested benefits are good. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Ralph Nickleby engages in benevolent actions. He finds employment for Kate and Nicholas



and housing for the family. He introduces Kate into society, of sorts, and checks up on her and Mrs. Nickleby. His benevolence, as the reader knows, is ineffectual not because it is absent but because it stems from self-interest. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Adam Smith argues that benevolence should be motivated by sympathy. In this argument Smith asserts that benevolence acts as a mediator between sympathy and self-interest. However, Dickens, in his novel, takes issues with Smith's self-interested model presented in *The Wealth of Nations*. *The Wealth of Nations* focuses on the functionality of self-interest within society. Ralph Nickleby is Smith's *Wealth of Nations* self-interested man, who acts "from [his] regard to [his] own interest" and out of "self-love" rather than love of others (Smith, *Wealth*, I.ii.2). Dickens proves through Ralph Nickleby that Smith's *Wealth of Nations* assertion (that by acting out of self-interest a man may promote the good of society) is false. Ralph Nickleby, one who never acts out of any motivation other than self-interest, does not promote the good of society, but the destruction of society. Through his actions Kate's reputation is at risk, Madeline Bray is almost sold into sexual slavery, Smike dies from ill use, Newman Noggs falls from a gentleman to a drunk, and Nicholas is separated from his family and ends up roaming the country. Not even Ralph's money after his death helped society. We learn at the end of the novel that Ralph's money, which "burdened his soul with so many evil deeds, [was] swept at last into the coffers of the state, and no man was the better or the happier for them" (775). By acting out of self-interest, then, men do not aid but destroy society. Dickens shows that, in his societal construct, those engaging in benevolence should be motivated by sympathy in order to help both themselves and others. In this way, Dickens refutes Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* while at the same time supporting *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

## A Cheeryble Proposal

Smith's construction of benevolence as a mediator between sympathy and self-interest can best be seen through the Cheeryble brothers. When Nicholas first sees Charles Cheeryble, he describes him thus: "Such a comical expression of mingled slyness, simplicity, kind-heartedness, and good-humour [...] Grafted upon the quaintness and oddity of his appearance was something so indescribably engaging and bespeaking so much worth" (427-428). It is interesting to note that Dickens' description of Charles Cheeryble incorporates attributes of economic success within the description of his merit: he was a "gentleman" who showed "slyness" and spoke of "so much worth." Economics and benevolence, at least in Dickens's mind, are very much interconnected. The Cheerybles succeed in their benevolent actions, and thus their social ambitions, because they act from sympathy. However, it seems that a byproduct (or perhaps a direct product) of their benevolent actions is that they also have increased market value, as they are described as having a "thriving business" (431). They are trusted and thought of as kind and forgiving. Dickens writes: "There was something so earnest and guileless [...] such a complete disregard of all conventional restraints and coldness, that Nicholas could not resist it" (430).

The Cheerybles draw people in through their sympathy, which enables them to succeed economically because they are trusted and, therefore, incite others to be honest. Dickens then teaches his audience by continuing: "Among men who have any sound and sterling qualities, there is nothing so contagious as pure openness of heart" (430). By being open and sympathetic, Dickens argues, men can succeed economically while being benevolent. The Cheeryble brothers typify Smith's assertion that sympathy must be the

foundation of action. Throughout the novel, Mr. Nickleby rants and raves that this type of attitude makes people lose money, but Dickens proves otherwise.

The Cheerybles are well off and seem to have plenty of business to go around. Dickens notes, “Among the shipping announcements and steam-packet lists which decorated the counting-house wall, were designs for alms-houses, statements of charities, and plans for new hospitals” (447). Their “thriving business” thrives not only in spite of, but because of, their benevolence. The Cheeryble brothers succeed in their social aspirations because, for them, benevolence serves as redemptive capitalism. The reader excuses their success in business (whereas we condemn Ralph’s success in business) because, even though they are good capitalists, their actions are based off of sympathy rather than self-interest. Dickens is able to reconcile his issues with *The Wealth of Nations* and his fervent support of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* through redemptive capitalism. A man may act out of sympathy and thereby help society while still reaping capitalist benefits that help himself.

Redemptive capitalism can only be successful when based upon benevolence. In order for Nicholas to become a gentleman and thereby move up the social ladder, he must learn how to engage in masculine benevolence. The Cheeryble brothers serve as role models in teaching Nicholas how to successfully involve himself in masculine benevolence. Through the Cheerybles Nicholas learns that masculine benevolence respects women, focuses on solutions rather than causes, and teaches others self-reliance.

The first principle of masculine benevolence, for the Cheerybles, focuses on women. Nicholas learns this principle as he is taught how to correct the wrongs inflicted on Madeline Bray and the poor of England. Charles Cheeryble says:

If I had been poor [...] I would have denied myself—of course anybody would under such circumstances—the commonest necessities of life, to help her (Madeline’s mother). As it is, the task is a difficult one. If her father were dead, nothing could be easier, for then she should share and cheer the happiest home that brother Ned and I could have, as if she were our child or sister. (567)

Here Dickens teaches those engaging in masculine benevolence to put the needs of others ahead of their own—to once again act out of sympathy rather than self-interest. In addition, a woman in need should be treated as a “child” or “sister,” rather than as a sexual conquest. When helping Madeline or other women, the Cheerybles show Nicholas that he should not look at them as sexual objects, but as asexual people.

This is not to say that masculine benevolence is not tied to chivalry. On the contrary, like Austen, Dickens sees masculine benevolence as bound up with medieval notions of chivalry. However, Dickens differs from Austen in his adaptation of medieval chivalry. For Austen, chivalry is the realm of the landed gentry; for Dickens, it is a powerful appropriation tool of the upwardly mobile classes. As Young notes, nineteenth century interest in medievalism is not so much a model for social relations but a way to establish bourgeois gentlemen rather than corrupt aristocrats as “the rightful heir of the medieval knight, the man of action governed by codes of honor and duty [...] This reconstitution of the knight and the lady as the middle-class gentleman and the domestic woman allows the middle class to present itself imaginatively as the natural leaders of their society” (6). Masculine benevolence in *Nicholas Nickleby* is similar to *Emma* in that both novels focus on benevolence as a means of courtship. Nicholas desires to help Madeline Bray, but for most of the novel he is principally concerned with courting her.

In addition to teaching Nicholas how to treat women, and especially Madeline Bray, Charles also shows Nicholas the importance of focusing on solutions rather than causes. Charles reacts to Nicholas's summary of Mr. Bray as "an unnatural scoundrel!" by saying, "We will use no harsh terms, but accommodate ourselves to the circumstances in which this young lady is placed" (568). Instead of agreeing, or even stooping to judging or trying to understand Mr. Bray, the Cheeryble brothers are simply interested in helping Madeline Bray. In fact, their goal over time had not been analyzing the causes of the problem, but in coming up with different ways to address the issues at hand. The Cheeryble brothers "had been revolving in their good old heads manifold plans and schemes for helping this young lady in the most delicate and considerate way" (568). Rather than quibbling about causes or name-blaming, Charles Cheeryble spends his time finding solutions. The focus of benevolent actions, according to Dickens, should be to "be the humble instruments of gradually making happy" those who are poor (568-569).

The Cheerybles also teach Nicholas about successful benevolence by focusing on self-sufficiency. The reader will notice that the Cheerybles attempt to help people while letting them help themselves—they bless their employees not just with handouts, but with the ability to work for money. They desire to help Madeline Bray in a way in which she would be "led to think that she was under no obligation" to them (569). They, therefore, arrange for Nicholas to buy Madeline's handiworks in order to help her survive. Dickens shows, through the Cheerybles, that new money men engaging in benevolent works should do so with an eye towards self-sufficiency, so that those whom they help can learn to be independent.

## Benefits of Benevolence

As we have seen, Dickens' construction of benevolence is based on market value. Increased market value is the main tenet of how Dickens departs from other writers of his time in discussing benevolence. *Nicholas Nickleby* supports Austen's discussion of benevolence because both authors assert that benevolence is beneficial not only for those directly benefited, but also for those who engage in such actions. Dickens does not stick to traditional moralist arguments for benevolence, but rather centers his argument on self-interested notions of class and economy. By introducing self-interest into the equation, Dickens can persuade his readers that they too should engage in benevolent actions. Here Dickens clearly revises Adam Smith's argument that people are most motivated out of self-interest. According to Dickens, this self-interest does not come at the beginning of the equation (like Smith argues), but at the end. By acting out of sympathy benevolent men will gain self-interested benefits. Likewise, this argument is crucial because, unlike women, men control the market place. As such, men are in a better situation than women to successfully engage in Dickens' model of redemptive capitalism through benevolence.

In addition, men who engage in redemptive capitalism reap social benefits. At the end of the novel Nicholas is able to marry Madeline Bray because he rescues her from her marriage to Gride. Because of his benevolence, he "acquire[s] in right of his wife" a large sum of money. This money is invested into the Cheeryble business, and it enables both Cheeryble brothers to retire. Upon retirement, the Cheeryble brothers are "surrounded by happiness of their own creation, and live to increase it" (774). The Cheeryble brothers would not have increased their fortune if they had not been benevolent to Nicholas. Nicholas would not have had a fortune without his benevolent

actions towards Madeline Bray. Every man in *Nicholas Nickleby* who chooses to be benevolent gains financial and social rewards. Even Newman Noggs, the fallen gentleman, is able (through his benevolent actions to Nicholas) to gain the trust of the Cheerybles and, through them, become reinstated as a gentleman and improve his financial situation.

The gaining of social benefits is, of course, Austen's main tenet of why the gentry should engage in benevolence. The difference for Austen, of course, is that along with these social benefits those who engage in benevolence also gain by reminding others of their lower social position. Emma visits the poor in Highbury and, thereby, increases her standing within the community as a charitable lady. However, she also subtly reminds those she visits that they are beneath her and, hence, require her help. Likewise, Emma has no interest in Mr. Martin because he is not in need of her benevolence and cannot, therefore, increase her sense of superiority by interacting with her. Although Dickens and Austen both argue for the great social benefits deriving from benevolence, they see those benefits as working in opposite directions. Dickens sees benevolence as a means of financial and social elevation, whereas Austen views benevolence as a tool of social and financial stagnation.

#### The Child Victim

As we have discussed, the Cheerybles train Nicholas and, by proxy, the audience, throughout *Nicholas Nickleby*. Although Dickens' construction is based on economy, his vehicle for benevolence is the child victim. The exploitation and oppression of children was very much a concern for Dickens and other writers during his time. Although the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children would not

be founded until 1884, cruelty towards children was very much an issue throughout the century. Working-class children were expected to work full-time starting at a young age to help support the family. As Hopkins notes in *Childhood Transformed*, “children in the workshops, down in the mines, in the factories and elsewhere were cuffed and beaten as a matter of course” (186). James Greenwood, in *The Seven Curses of London*, gives a typical example of working-class life. In his example, an average working-class male would attend school until the age of eight or ten, and then it would be “accounted high time that he ‘got a place’” and began to earn a living (qtd. in Paterson 197). In the 1820s and 1830s Britons became more outspoken about the treatment of children. In 1832 Thomas Bailey demanded “a full restitution of the rights of humanity to the long oppressed and neglected children of the poor” (qtd. in Cunningham 92). By the 1820s and 1830s Britons believed that both black slaves and children were victims of society that needed to be rescued.

The child victim phenomenon gained precedence in social, economic, and political discussions of the 1830s because reformers and authors successfully linked the practice of employing children to slavery. In 1814 William Wordsworth wrote that a factory boy is “a slave to whom release comes not,/ And cannot come” (qtd. in Cunningham 75). In 1818 Southey admired the reform movement “in behalf of those miserable children who have been called the white-negro slaves of England” (qtd. in Cunningham 75). William Smith, the Unitarian MP, claimed in 1825 that the slaves in the West Indies did not work as much as the children in Manchester and in 1828 Richard Carlile compared the life of a West Indies slave as favorable to the life of a child laborer (Cunningham 76). In 1830 Richard Oastler, a founder of the Factory movement, wrote a



famous letter to the *Leeds Mercury* entitled “Yorkshire Slavery.” In this letter he wrote of child laborers: “Ye live in the boasted land of freedom, and feel and mourn that ye are slaves, and slaves without the only comfort which the negro has. He knows that it is his sordid, mercenary master’s interest that he should live, and be strong, and healthy. Not so with you” (qtd. in Hopkins 76).

This link between slavery and child labor stemmed from the practice of selling children to employers. In 1785 J. Hanway wrote in *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers* that, “Orphans, who are in a vagabond state, or the illegitimate children of the poorest kind of people, are said to be sold; that is, their service for seven years is disposed of for twenty or thirty shillings; being a smaller price than the value of a terrier” (qtd. in Cunningham 54). In 1818 John Lawless reported to a parliamentary select committee that he knew of “more than Twenty Instances” in which children were sold for three to six pounds. Other master chimney sweepers who reported to committees said they had seen children sold for less, “but no one disputed the fact of the matter” (qtd. in Cunningham 55). By the 1830s British society, for the most part, accepted child labor as a form of slavery and the sale of children as an extension of the slave trade.

The child victim, and their link to slavery, was often presented in literature. Twentieth century critics have noticed the predominance of the child victim phenomenon in nineteenth century British literature. Peter Coveney notes that in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the child went from a position of comparative unimportance to being the focus of unprecedented literary interest (qtd. in Berry 15). Laura Berry, in *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel*, states:

What is especially notable in the early Victorian period [...] is that the child's "interests" were as likely to be articulated in poetry as in a pamphlet. Virtually from the start, social reform writings on child protection were linked with and supported by the efforts of *literary* writers. (2)

The child victim tale was not just noticeable in literature, but dominant. This narrative, during most of the century, was illustrated in novels, poems, political debates, manuals, reform pamphlets, newspapers, and monthly reviews. These depictions were often thrilling and repeated endlessly (Berry 165). Most importantly for this chapter, Hugh Cunningham points out in *The Children of the Poor* that the child victim's restoration to childhood in literature and elsewhere "is achieved, in an uncomplicated way, by heroic philanthropy" (Cunningham 5). In the 1820s many poets took up the interest of child labor. In 1824 a Birmingham poet wrote:

The slave from Afric's burning clime  
 Finds multitudes to plead his cause;  
 Whilst I alone am left, to want  
 The shielding power of Britain's laws. (qtd. in Cunningham 62)

Also in 1824 Sheffield wrote:

The loved the Negro o'er the wave,  
 They strove to set *him* free;  
 But though *I* am a little slave,  
 There's nobody love *me*! (qtd. in Cunningham 63)

Bernard Barton, an 1820s poet, captured the idea that children should be innocent in free from care through the protection of others when he wrote:

Britons! Holding freedom dear,  
 Abject slavery greets you here;  
 HOME-BREAD SLAVERY!—dire disgrace!  
 Borne by childhood's helpless race. (qtd. in Cunningham 63).

The above poems appealed to current views about slavery and sought to transfer these beliefs from African slavery to child labor. Such efforts aimed at reforming child labor on the same moral grounds that slavery had been attacked. In addition, reformers and writers gained extra ammunition in their fight against child labor by idealizing children as innocent victims in need of rescue. These poems were widely publicized, and the themes were taken further by Dickens in the 1830s. Dickens seems to be especially interested in discussing the child victim in *Nicholas Nickleby*, both as a thematic element and as a symbol of society.

The child victim phenomenon, starting in the 1820s and continuing throughout the century, became synonymous with the future of the state. Cunningham states that the victimization of children “was a crisis not only for the children, but also for the nation. How would anyone—how would God—judge a civilization which treated its children in this way, and destroyed the sanctioned pieties of family life for the sake of profit? (9). In Florence Hill’s 1868 *Children of the State* she argues that the success of the state is directly linked to the rescue and reform of children. Child welfare, in Hill’s view, is at least partially a reflection of the condition of nation and state (qtd. in Berry 163). The child victim phenomenon served to link the public and private lives of Britain. Berry

argues that the interference of sociopolitical influences in private life in the nineteenth century derived not just from legislative action but from child victim narratives in novels (12). Narratives such as *Nicholas Nickleby* addressed the ruptures in society and problems of private life in a telling and dramatically effective way (Berry 13). Arthur Adrian, in “Dickens and Inverted Parenthood” sees the child victim as being used in Dickens to show injustice in society and the cruelties of the national economy (qtd. in Hansen 19). For Dickens and other authors during the Victorian era, the child serves as a convenient figure for exploring the problems and tensions of society (Berry 15). As a social writer, Dickens found an easy vehicle for discussing social ills through the medium of child interests. Michael Hansen argues that “the undeviating innocence which characterizes Dickens’s children leave them ill-prepared to meet the challenges of a corrupt society, but their position as innocent victims makes them a powerful rhetorical tool in exposing that corruption” (19). The child victim, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, is the barometer of a benevolent society. People may judge the extent to which a society is benevolent by looking at the condition of victimized children.

Because of this, the child victim serves as a tool through which Nicholas learns how to engage in benevolence. In this novel, Smike is an obvious child victim. Although Smike is an adult, it is clear that mentally and emotionally he remains a child throughout the novel. He is described as “a child in everything” and an “unfortunate boy” (736). Smike’s physician tells Nicholas that Smike’s “constitution has been greatly tried and injured in childhood” (602). Smike eventually dies from consumption. Sadly, Smike is a product of the broken social system and serves as an analogy for what is

wrong with the system. The links between Smike and slavery are clear—he is not allowed to read, is beaten mercilessly, and is forced to wear rags and sleep in the cold.

At the core of Smike's relation to societal ills is his creator, Ralph Nickleby. Smike and Ralph, although opposites, are very much connected through the child victim phenomenon. For one thing, Ralph has a hand in Smike's death. The confrontation over who is responsible for Smike, led by Ralph Nickleby, greatly weakens Smike: "Smike himself, whose health, long upon the wane, began to be so much affected by apprehension and uncertainty as [to cause] alarm" (601). Although Smike's life was slowly waning, it would have perhaps been prolonged had not Ralph Nickleby placed added strain and anxiety upon Smike through his kidnapping and attempt to force him back into servitude to Squeers.

The British social system, like Ralph Nickleby, is broken because it is bereft of sympathy. Whereas the Cheerybles are full of sympathy, Ralph Nickleby has none. Nicholas notes that in the Cheeryble counting house there is a blunderbuss (an early shotgun) and two swords above the chimney-piece to scare evil-doers, but the "blunderbuss [is] rusty and shattered, and the swords [are] broken and edgeless...it seem[s] as though even violent and offensive weapons [partake] of the reigning influence, and [become] emblems of mercy and forbearance (447-448). Because of the Cheeryble's "reigning influence" of benevolence, the "terror" of the child victim and poor in society [is] "shattered" and replaced with "mercy and forbearance." With such sentiments as these throughout *Nicholas Nickleby*, the Cheeryble brothers show that they operate through mercy and sympathy. Without sympathy, Dickens argues, the social

system, like Ralph Nickleby, is doomed to fail not only in its benevolent endeavors but in its economic and political power.

The social system of Britain is also broken because, like the parent of the child victim, it lacks natural affection. When Ralph plots to “restore a parent his child,” Mr. Snawley, the named father, makes “straight up to Smike” and “tucks that poor fellow’s head under his arm in a most uncouth and awkward embrace” and then supports Ralph Nickleby and Squeers’ attempt to force him back into Squeers’ custody (556). Here the reader sees Ralph’s slave trade attempt to force Smike back into the slavery he has escaped. Nicholas is quick to inform Charles Cheeryble of the situation and complains that Mr. Snawley cannot be Smike’s father because “nature does not seem to have implanted in his breast one lingering feeling of affection for him, and surely she can never err” (563). Charles Cheeryble then responds:

Natural affections and instincts [...] must be reared and fostered, or it is as natural that they should be wholly obscured, and that new feelings should usurp their place, as it is that the sweetest productions of the earth, *left untended, should be choked with weeds and briars*. I wish we could be brought to consider this, and remembering natural obligations a little more at the right time, talk about them a little less at the wrong one. (564, italics added for emphasis)

Charles’ statement serves not only to illustrate Smike’s plight, but the plight of the social system in Britain. Whereas Smike was “left untended,” and was therefore “choked with the weeds and briars” of the likes of Squeers, the British social system has abandoned its children and instead of rearing and fostering them, has led them to be

“wholly obscured.” Rather than growing up with love, “new feelings” of desperation, ignorance, and neglect have sprung up. Interestingly, Ralph Nickleby is described as an “unnatural man,” one who has lost affections and sympathetic instincts (736). Through Charles’ soliloquy Dickens asserts that “natural obligations” should be thought more of at the right time, when action is still possible, rather than talked about after it is too late. Here he is arguing that those with means to enact change, merchants and new money men engaging in his theory of redemptive capitalism, should remember and act now, rather than discussing later. The poor should be helped while they are young and innocent, rather than waiting until after they are in jail for stealing food or dead from ill use.

The irony of the child victim and the social system in general is that those who oppress the child depend upon the child for survival. Mr. Bray depends upon his daughter’s paintings, and future marriage, to survive the hardships he has caused. Squeers depends upon Smike to help keep his school clean and functional and to give him a sense of power; hence, he is desperate to get him back at any means. Even Ralph Nickleby depends upon Newman Noggs (who we can argue is childlike in his despondent state of poverty and alcoholism) to keep his business affairs running and keep people away from his door that he does not wish to see. It is ironic that in society those whom we often condemn are the ones we depend upon for survival. In the age of aristocrats living beyond their means, they often left debts unpaid that hurt not themselves but the poor who depended upon repayment of debts to survive. Likewise, without the many servants, drivers, and chimney sweepers, life could not comfortably continue for the richer members of nineteenth-century society. Those who act out of self-interest, in the name of capitalism, depend upon the victimization of others in order to succeed. This, it

would seem, is the opposite of Smith's assertion that self-interest leads to a mutually benefited society.

As seen with the slave trade, a system in which those who are victimized are condemned, yet required, is destined to self-destruct. Smike and Ralph are also connected to one another because Smike's death directly leads to Ralph's suicide. It is symbolic that Ralph Nickleby commits suicide at the end of the novel. Just as Ralph holds no sympathy for others, he can give none to himself. Upon hearing of Smike's relation to him Ralph thinks to himself: "They had all turned from him and deserted him in his very first need" (751). However, this is not true. The Cheerybles repeatedly offer to help him and give him "mercy" in his time of need (720). It is not the Cheerybles or Newman Noggs that refuse to help Ralph, but himself. A society that does not show sympathy to the poor will find no sympathy when it is needed. Ralph cannot help himself because he has forsaken all "natural" feelings of sympathy. Ralph's situation is described thus: "everything crumbled and fallen upon him, and he beaten down beneath the ruins and groveling in the dust" (751). Ralph's suicide is described not in human terms, but in architectural and natural terms—"The rain and hail pattered against the glass, the chimneys quaked and rocked; the crazy casement rattled with the wind" (753). Ralph, because of his lack of sympathy, has become an embodiment of society—the buildings, the weather, the fallen ruins of a great and terrible past. The core of this analogy is that society (Ralph) is the creator of the victim child (Smike) whom he creates, then disdains, and then destroys through negligence. This negligence and destruction, in turn, leads to the destruction of the creator (society), because it does not have the internal support network or posterity required to help it in times of need.



### Madeline Bray as a Child Victim

What is to be done with such a system? Dickens, through *Nicholas Nickleby*, argues that the system can be saved by learning how to effectively help the victims, child or otherwise, in society. The people of Britain are akin to Nicholas Nickleby, besought with good intentions but weighed down by economic instability and in need of a strong role model. Just as Nicholas Nickleby needs to learn from the Cheeryble brothers how to successfully interweave economics and benevolence, so men who wish to move up the social ladder need to learn from *Nicholas Nickleby* and begin to effectively engage in benevolent works.

Redemptive capitalism can be seen in action through another one of Ralph's child victims—Madeline Bray. Whereas Smike dies because of his victimization, in Madeline Bray we see a solution to the national crisis of poverty through the new money class. Ralph creates Madeline Bray's child victim status and Nicholas, through saving Madeline, can redeem his own name (and status). Once Nicholas has been taught correct principles of masculine benevolence, he is left to practice them. The Cheerybles are conveniently out of town when Madeline's plight comes to a crisis. Madeline Bray is the most obvious link in this novel between the child laborer and the slave trade. Madeline works tirelessly to provide for her father and herself, but her income is not great enough. Her father, in order to eliminate debts and live a life of idleness, attempts to sell Madeline into a marriage of sexual slavery with Gride. This set up helps Dickens to both illuminate the corruptness of child labor (as a means to support adult idleness) and the immorality of child labor (because it often led to sexual abuse).

When Nicholas first hears of Madeline's situation he, like many Britons, feels overwhelmed and powerless to enact change. Newman and Nicholas, upon hearing of Madeline's crisis, engage in an analogical discussion of benevolence:

“Think,” urged Newman. “Is there no way?”

“There is none,” said Nicholas, in utter dejection. “Not one. The father urges—the daughter consents [...] How can I hope to save her?”

“Hope to the last,” said Newman [...] “Always hope, that's a dear boy. Never leave off hoping, it don't answer. Do you mind me, Nick? It don't answer. Don't leave a stone unturned. It's always something to know you've done the most you could. But don't leave off hoping, or it's of no use doing anything. Hope, hope, to the last!” (641)

Although the context for their discussion is Madeline Bray, it is easy to see that Dickens is actually exploring the engagement of benevolence for the poor in Britain. Although it is easy to feel hopeless, he urges that there is always a way. That way, I believe, is through upwardly mobile capitalist becoming actively engaged in benevolent actions.

*Nicholas Nickleby* is a bildungsroman in which Nicholas must learn the skills necessary to become a true gentleman. Nicholas' moment of transition from boyhood to gentleman, in my opinion, is when he realizes that, like the Cheeryble brothers and Madeline's mother, “in this effort I am influenced by no selfish or personal considerations, but by pity for her and detestation and abhorrence of this heartless scheme; and that I would do the same were there twenty rivals in the field, and I the last and least favoured of them all” (642). By setting aside his own self-interest in order to

help Madeline Bray, he passes from a young man seeking his own good through benevolence to a man seeking for the betterment of society through benevolence. Here Nicholas effectively enters into the great mediating effect of benevolence—he acts out of sympathy without self-interested motivations, and by doing so he receives the self-interested benefit of establishing himself as a gentleman. By acting out of sympathy Nicholas achieves, unknowingly, his own self-interest.

With such a transition he can now follow in the footsteps of the Cheerybles. Rather than focusing on the cause, he focuses on the solution. Nicholas and Kate rush to Madeline's aid with a "gallant bearing" to "offer to the unhappy subject of [...] treachery [...] a refuge and a home" (673). Kate accompanies her brother in an attempt to persuade Madeline through the "prayers and entreaties of one of her own sex" (673). Here the reader sees true benevolence in action. The siblings, male and female, stand united in their desire to help another. This union of the sexes in benevolence foreshadows Eliot's discussion of the role of both sexes in benevolence in *The Mill on the Floss* (see ch. 3). Whereas Kate offers solace and ensures respectability, Nicholas makes sure the process is not impeded by those who wish harm upon the poor, and he also provides the power, influence, and money necessary to accomplish the deed.

In this instance, the audience is able to see the power of sympathy in action. Sympathy enables Nicholas and Kate to act with force and so-called righteous indignation towards the misdeeds of Ralph Nickleby and Gride. Indeed, Ralph Nickleby and Gride are "carried away by the extraordinary energy and precipitation of Nicholas, which bore down all before them" (676). The Cheerybles have taught Nicholas to act

with sympathy, power, and disinterested motivations. True to the Cheeryble advice, Nicholas carries Madeline “as if she were an infant” rather than as a conquest (676-677).

Nicholas is rewarded for his embrace of redemptive capitalism. Because of his actions, Madeline chooses to give “her hand and fortune to Nicholas” (774). As previously mentioned Nicholas takes this money and invests it in the Cheeryble company. He becomes a “rich and prosperous merchant” and buys his father’s estate back and, though he maintains his ties with trade, he becomes a country gentleman. The triumph of *Nicholas Nickleby*, both the novel and the man, is not in his courtship but in his social mobility. Through the interweaving of capitalism and benevolence, Nicholas is able to redeem himself both financially and socially. Dickens argues, through Nicholas’s persuasive example, that men of the merchant and new money classes might find the same success in social mobility by following the Cheeryble proposal of redemptive capitalism. In this chapter I have attempted to show how *Nicholas Nickleby* teaches Dickens’ community, and specifically the upwardly mobile, about benevolence and its mediating effects in society. In my next chapter I will look at the ways in which Eliot continues Dickens’ discussion of benevolence in communities and the importance of males and females working together in benevolent actions.

## Chapter 3:

Man's Best Friend: Bob Jakin's Canine Benevolence in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*

Austen's *Emma* presents benevolence as a means to maintain the class system. Benevolence, for Austen, should derive from sympathy, but through benevolence the upper classes can reap self-interested benefits. These self-interested benefits include the maintenance of class power and attainment of romantic conquests. Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*, on the other hand, focuses on benevolence as a means of social mobility for the middle classes. Dickens, like Austen, shows in *Nicholas Nickleby* that benevolence should spring from sympathy. Likewise, those who engage in benevolence may also expect to receive the self-interested benefits of social mobility and economic prosperity. Eliot argues in *The Mill on the Floss* that benevolence should be entrusted to those for whom social mobility is not an option—the lower classes. Benevolence can, when embraced by the lower classes, help to establish communal roles and character. Benevolence can be motivated by other motivations than sympathy, but only through sympathy can lasting change and real help occur. Unlike Austen and Dickens, Eliot's model of benevolence does not include self-interested benefits. Rather, her model focuses on the ability of the lower classes to feel true sympathy and the inability of other classes to do so. Eliot's focus on benevolence in *The Mill on the Floss* stems from her conviction that literature should be a form of social reform. Such social reform efforts began and ended with community ideology.

Suzanne Graver, author of *George Eliot and Community*, believes that George Eliot, as a major influential figure of the Victorian period, engaged in a discussion that was concerned with the rediscovery of community. Graver argues that Eliot viewed

literature not only as an index of the status of society but also as an agent of social evolution (1, 186). George Eliot wrote *The Mill on the Floss* on the eve of major social reform in England, in 1859 and 1860. The social fervor of Britain had changed significantly since Dickens' 1839 *Nicholas Nickleby*. In 1841 there were 15.9 million people in England; by 1861 the population had grown to 20.1 million. In 1833 only 1 in 5 men could vote. By 1869, after the passing of the Reform Act of 1867, 1 in 3 men could vote. As Eliot sat down to write this novel the nation fomented with cries for equal rights and representation. Eliot's novel plays into current discussions of the 1860s about what role the lower classes should have within the community.

In this chapter I argue that Eliot believes that the lower classes are most qualified to truly help the poor because they alone can feel real sympathy for those in need. The middle classes cannot engage in successful benevolence because they are limited by public opinion, they hold strong stereotypes and prejudices against the poor, and they are separated from the poor through experiential difference. Effective benevolence, which is motivated by sympathy, is best shown through Bob Jakin. Bob Jakin can help Maggie because he truly understands and feels for her situation. Bob Jakin's benevolence is quite interesting because he, like Knightley and Nicholas Nickleby, also clearly links his benevolent gestures to gender. Bob Jakin's benevolence is influenced by his ideal of a gentleman, his chivalrous beliefs, and his inclusion of females working with him in benevolent efforts.

Benevolence centers on a desire to help those in need and create social reform. Eliot was an active member of social reform discussions. Eliot felt that it was the artist's duty to teach society about itself, to make literature a self-reflective journey in which

readers could learn how to reform their own communities through sympathy. Eliot once said that “if art does not enlarge men’s sympathies, it does nothing morally [...] The only effect I long to produce by my writings is that those who read them shall be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves” (qtd. in Johnson 204). This definition of sympathy echoes Adam Smith’s argument that in order to feel true sympathy a person must attempt to mentally enter into another person’s situation and see things as they see them. Eliot clearly wrote to create social change, and saw this change as coming about through sympathy. She wrote:

I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this [...] that you would be likely to turn a harder, colder eye [...] on the real breathing men and women who can be chilled by your indifference or injured by your prejudice, who can be cheered and helped onward by your fellow-feeling, your forbearance, your outspoken, brave justice. (qtd. in Johnson 205)

Eliot wrote in a letter that “there is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims” (qtd. in Graver 264). She defines the process of sympathy by saying that sympathy “requires seeing other people as we see ourselves, sharing and understanding their situations, and changing places with them in our own imaginations” (Graver 264). Sympathy, then, is the key to changing society.

In the above passages, Eliot declares her membership in a larger movement of social reform writing. Carl Malmgren, in “Reading Authorial Narration: The Example of *The Mill on the Floss*,” asserts that Victorian writers felt it their duty to articulate laws

governing human nature and society. By so doing, Victorian writers thought they could create a new foundation of moral consciousness. In essence, Victorian novels were written to influence people's actions and to speak out on matters of right and wrong (478-479). Novelists were concerned with inspiring people to act and, in particular, they were concerned with how to help the poor and what role the lower classes should have within society. Henry James argued that "there is surely no principle of fictitious composition so true as this—that an author's paramount charge is the cure of souls" (James np).

Through her art, Eliot sought to find relief for those souls who were suffering among the masses of Britain. Eliot believed that "every great artist is a teacher...giving us his higher sensibility as a medium" (Pinney 126). This happened in Victorian literature when authors reached out to their readers and created a community of sympathy and a fictional classroom within which to learn as teacher and pupil or writer and reader (Malmgren 482). Through this process, readers were able to not only experience the feelings of characters in novels, but to be educated about lives different from their own and social causes that the author felt were important (Weed np). This social education, Eliot hoped, would evoke sympathy and change within society.

Both Austen and Dickens also created communities of sympathy in their novels. In *Emma* we feel bad for Miss Bates when Emma cruelly ridicules her. In *Nicholas Nickleby* we are appalled at Smike's treatment and fear for Madeline Bray's future. However, Eliot differs from Austen and Dickens in that her protagonist is the victim rather than the hero. In *Emma* the reader learns how to engage in benevolence by watching Emma cause chaos and reform herself. Through Dickens' writing, the audience learns how to engage in benevolence with Nicholas. In *The Mill on the Floss*, however,



the reader feels the other side of the equation—the reader sees what it is like to be ridiculed, embarrassed, wrongly accused, and outcast. This perspective allows the reader not only to learn how to engage in benevolence, but the importance of benevolence. When Bob Jakin comforts Maggie in his simple, clumsy way, the audience feels all of the gratitude of Maggie. Rather than looking upon the scene as those with control and moral authority, Eliot creates for her audience a powerful experience of being victimized and abandoned. This enables her audience to truly feel sympathy for those in need, rather than maintaining a distance between those in need and the reader. This process of entering into the experience of the poor was crucial for Eliot so that she could break powerful and commonly held stereotypes about those in need.

#### Perspectives on the Poor

As mentioned above, Eliot wrote *The Mill* on the eve of major social reform in England. With the beginning political fervor that led to the Reform Bill of 1867, Britain was feeling real trepidation and confusion about the future of politics in the nation (3). Many people were suspicious of the poor throughout the nineteenth century, but particularly on the eve of the Reform Bill. One such example is B.P. Bosanquet, who in his 1868 book *London: Some Account of it's Growth, Charitable Agencies, and Wants* attempts to teach people outside of London how to engage in charity in London. In this book he describes the poor as “vicious,” “degraded,” and “feebler” than those above them (136). The poor are also described as a “sunken useless class” (144). Such writings and suspicions were not uncommon during this period.

Hugh Shimmin, a mid-century Liverpool journalist, reflects the oft established stereotype that the poor are non-religious and uneducated. He argues that those who

attend church do so in order to receive tickets for food: “It is quite possible that persons may be induced to attend meetings of this character with a single eye to the loaves and fishes” (Walton and Wilcox 113). Shimmin also, surprisingly, negates religion’s ability to change or improve the lower-class condition. He laments that at the church meeting for the poor “we heard nothing of the blessing and dignity of labour, nothing of self-reliance and manly independence, nothing which would excite or stimulate any person present to adopt habits of domestic economy, *but much that the poor people could not understand*” (Walton and Wilcox 113, emphasis added). The poor people, in Shimmin’s opinion, should be taught principles of labor and independence rather than listening to ideas they cannot understand.

This stereotype of slothfulness was recognized by the poor, who attempted to dispel such notions. William Cobbett praised Methodists for their sobriety in 1821 when he said, “I look upon drunkenness as the root of much more than half the mischief, misery and crimes with which society is afflicted” (qtd. in Thompson 740). Likewise, Richard Carlile, a prominent mid-Victorian political activist, attempted to justify his success “in the face of the boisterous unskilled tide” (Thompson 741). Carlile recalls:

I was a regular, active, and industrious man, working early and late...and when out of the workshop never so happy anywhere as at home with my wife and two children. The alehouse I always detested...I had a notion that a man...was a fool not to make a right application of every shilling.  
(qtd. in Thompson 741)

These examples attempt to disprove Shimmin, among others, who assumed that the poor were drunk and idle.

The important focus of these discussions for Eliot was that by the 1850s and 1860s the economic, social, and political conditions and concerns of the nineteenth century began to take shape. More importantly, it became evident during this time period that the means to change were as significant as the ends (Briggs 2). But what were those means? H. T. Buckle, a leading Victorian historian, argues that the changes in British society culminating at this time did not occur because of any one great event or revolt, but came about by the persistent moral force of social reformers (qtd. in Briggs 2). This moral force centered on benevolent endeavors.

Dickens' construction of benevolence sought to put sympathy and compassion back into the poor relief system. Like Dickens, Eliot is very much concerned with sympathy. However, she is also concerned with the massive need for help for the poor regardless of the motivation. In an attempt to address these concerns, philanthropic organizations had increased exponentially throughout the century. In the 1820s three major philanthropic societies were founded (Anti-Slavery Society, Royal National Lifeboat Institution, and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). By the 1860s twenty more philanthropies had been founded. As the century wore on, more and more people turned to organized philanthropy in order to make a difference. These philanthropies, especially the Charity Organisation Society, sought to help the "worthy" of society who were needy.

However, amidst these multitudes of philanthropies, sympathy was often neglected. Hugh Shimmin, in an article entitled "The Social Condition of the People," sought to describe and compare four different impoverished families living next to one another. Shimmin writes that there is an "anxiety and manifest earnestness of the so-

called upper or middle class to alleviate the sorrows or mitigate the sufferings of their brethren in humbler life” (Walton 108). However, his description of the situations of his impoverished “brethren” does not reflect this sympathetic assertion. When discussing an abused family, he describes the home thus:

There was a talking parrot in the house that used to imitate the children crying and the wife’s screams when the husband was abusing her. The drunken woman’s noise, the screaming of the bird, and the lamentation of the children from day to day, rendered them anything but pleasant neighbours. (109)

Notice that Shimmin’s emphasis is not on the victimized children and wife, but on their status as unpleasant neighbours. This case is not exclusive. Each of the three bad examples Shimmin gives of poor people focus on their lack of morality, cleanliness, and neighborly consideration, rather than on the dire needs of the children and family. The fourth example, a young couple with no children, is held up as a model of how impoverished people can escape their situations without welfare if they center their lives on “sobriety, frugality, and earnest labour” (112). However, Shimmin does not take into account that this couple has no children and the husband earns enough money for his wife to stay home and keep their residence in “a spirit of order, comfort, and cleanliness” (112).

#### Ineffective Middle-Class Benevolence

In *The Mill*, Eliot seeks to portray a different and more sympathetic view of the poor. Eliot effectively departs from the debates she was a part of by arguing that, although many motivations are effective for helping the poor, sympathy is the highest

motivation and most effective means of aiding those in need. As such, the poor are best suited to help one another because they alone can truly feel deep sympathy for those in need. Unlike Austen and Dickens, Eliot's model does not include an element of self-interest. Eliot's construction of benevolence, and the ways in which community members help, or don't help, Maggie Tulliver reflect current debates about sympathy, self-interest, and benevolence. In my previous chapter, I argued that Dickens believes that those working for social mobility were in the best position to help the poor.

Merchants and the upwardly mobile were best able to help the poor because they were far enough removed from poverty to have the economic means available to help, yet close enough (through work, housing, etc.) to see what was really needed and feel some level of sympathy for those in need. However, often the poor became skeptical of efforts to help them from those wishing to move up the social ladder and make an economic profit.

Anger from the poor towards those above them stemmed from, among other things, the fact that although many with means were willing to help those in need, such help often derived from self-interest. James "Bronteere" O'Brien, a theorist of working-class experience, wrote in 1833:

These two classes never had, and never will have, any community of interest. It is the workman's interest to do as little work, and to get as much for it as possible. It is the middleman's interest to get as much work as he can out of the man, and to give as little for it. Here then are their respective interests as directly opposed to each other as two fighting bulls.

(qtd. in Thompson 822)

Throughout the century, hard feelings between the poor and those with money had been growing for a number of reasons. In *The Mill*, Eliot gives her perspective on benevolence and how those in need should be aided. The middle classes' lack of sympathetic benevolence, in Eliot's eyes, made those with money to help ineffective in their benevolence. The intrinsic ironies within the professional class' benevolence can be seen in Dr. Kenn, St. Ogg's parish leader.

Dr. Kenn, the stern but charitable minister of St. Ogg's, attempts to help Maggie out of a sense of duty. As Bob Jakin says: "He looks fine an' sharp after the parish—he does" (488). Eliot describes Dr. Kenn as having "quiet kindness" and being able to help because of his "long experience" (494). However, there is "an entire absence of effusive benevolence in his manner," and he says that he wishes he could act from his "feeling and opinion unmodified" by the community opinion (495). In this way, Dr. Kenn represents a mixing of sympathy and self-interest. Although he does sympathize with Maggie, he also acts out of self-interest by helping her because it is his job and then refusing to help her when the town begins speculating about their relationship. After all, even he "hesitated in the first instance" to offer Maggie a governess job, and only consented after every other employer in the town refused to help her (507). The town began rumouring that Dr. Kenn took "so lenient a view of the past" because he liked Maggie's "fine pair of eyes" (507). Dr. Kenn fired Maggie because he was "finally wrought upon by the consideration of the peculiar responsibility attached to his office, of his avoiding the appearance of evil" and felt that it was his "duty to succumb" to public opinion (512). Although Dr. Kenn does try to genuinely help Maggie, he fails because—as a member of the professional class—he is very much concerned with his social status.

This can be contrasted with Bob Jakin, who desires to help Maggie without regard to public opinion. When Maggie seeks refuge with Bob Jakin he asks her, “Do you owe anybody a grudge?” (489). When Maggie inquires why he asks such a question, Bob replies: “I wish you did—an’ ‘ud tell me—I’d leather him till I couldn’t see—I would—an’ the Justice might do what he liked to me arter” (489). Bob seeks to help Maggie without regard to public opinion, whereas Dr. Kenn helps Maggie only within the bounds of public opinion. In addition, Dr. Kenn attempts to console Maggie by saying, “you may rely on all the influence my position gives me. I am bound to aid and countenance you by the very duties of my office as a parish priest” (497). Dr. Kenn adds as an afterthought that he has a “deep interest” in Maggie’s “peace of mind and welfare” (497). It is ironic that Dr. Kenn offers to help Maggie through his social standing as a member of the professional class, yet his social standing renders him ineffectual. The reader is left feeling that, although Dr. Kenn is a kind person, he feels no true sympathy for Maggie. Dr. Kenn is “aghast at the obstinate continuance of imputations” against Maggie but feels “powerless” in the face of public opinion (504-505). As stated earlier in this chapter, Eliot defines sympathy as “seeing other people as we see ourselves, sharing and understanding their situations, and changing places with them in our own imaginations” (Graver 264). Dr. Kenn’s benevolence is inadequate because he does not fully enter into Maggie’s situation, but sees aiding her as merely part of his daily job duties as a member of the clergy.

Likewise, the inability of religion to meet the needs of the poor can be seen in the poor’s reaction to clergy members. In 1830 an Essex vicar was threatened with this rural laborer’s note: “Prepare your wicked Soul for Death... You & your whole Crew are

biggest Paupers in the parish” (qtd. in Thompson 233). Another letter to the Rector of Freshwater (Isle of Wight) reads: “For the last 20 years wee have been in a Starving Condition to maintain your Dam Pride” and, speaking of the fire that they set, “As for you my Ould friend you didnt happen to be hear, if that you had been rosted I fear, and if it had a been so how the farmers would lagh to see the ould Pasen [Parson] rosted at last” (qtd. in Thompson 233). Many of the poor did not want help from the professional class, and especially not from the religious professional class. They desired help from people who felt true sympathy for their situation, rather than people who acted merely out of duty and social conscience.

Aunt Glegg is a member of the rural middle class. Prior to his death, her husband was in business (part of the tradesman class), and they were both capitalists. Through Aunt Glegg, Eliot shows that, although the tradesman class may have good motivations, their benevolence falls short of sympathy. At the end of the novel, Aunt Glegg is Maggie’s loudest defendant. She is motivated out of loyalty. This brand of loyalty is based on self-interest, the drive for protection in time of need. By remaining fiercely loyal to family members, Mrs. Glegg ensures that she will have loyal family members when trouble strikes her. At a superficial level, Aunt Glegg can sometimes be characterized as a harsh and selfish woman. However, George Eliot did not feel this way about Mrs. Glegg. Eliot wrote:

I am so far from hating [Mrs. Glegg] myself, that I am rather aghast to find [her] ticketed with such very ugly adjectives...I am rather alarmed lest the misapprehensions...should be due to my defective presentation, rather than to any failure on the part of the critic. (qtd. in Graver 264)



Mrs. Glegg, then, is not meant to be a character of contempt but a complicated portrayal of a woman with many opinions. Although Mrs. Glegg can be rather harsh to other characters, she is harsh and petty only in petty matters. When matters get serious, Aunt Glegg tries to be forgiving and non-judgmental of others. For example, when Mr. Tulliver offends Mrs. Glegg and refuses to apologize even though he is in debt to her, Mrs. Glegg storms about but is ultimately very forgiving of his actions. She says: “you may tell Mr. Tulliver, and Bessy too, as I’m not going to behave ill because folks behave ill to me: I know it’s my place, as the eldest, to set an example in every respect, and I do it. Nobody can say different of me” (128). Although Aunt Glegg may at times throw fits of passion, when true virtue is needed, she steps up as a forgiving character in *The Mill*.

Aunt Glegg has very strong notions about family duty and honour. Throughout the novel, she shows that it is a family’s responsibility to be non-judgmental and, when guilt has been unequivocally proved, to be forgiving. When Maggie disappears, Mrs. Glegg “felt assured that Maggie was drowned: that was far more probable than that her niece and legatee should have done anything to wound the family honour in the tenderest point” (498). Upon hearing of Tom’s actions towards his sister, she “burst forth in severe reproof of Tom for admitting the worst of his sister until he was compelled” (498). Aunt Glegg’s character can be seen in her reaction to Maggie’s misdeed: “Mrs. Glegg allowed that Maggie ought to be punished...but punished in proportion to the misdeeds proved against her, not to those which were cast upon her by people outside her own family, who might wish to show that their own kin were better” (500). To a Victorian audience it would have seemed ridiculous for a respectable member of society, like Aunt Glegg, to completely disregard Maggie’s overt actions (ie. disappearing with a man) and champion

“innocent until proven guilty.” Aunt Glegg’s statement is very forgiving and non-judgmental, almost too much so. She does not want to judge or punish Maggie for self-gratification, as do other members of society, but she merely wishes for both mercy and justice to be served in proportion to truth, not conjecture.

As opposed to the community of St. Ogg’s and Maggie’s family, Aunt Glegg waits to hear the proof of Maggie’s conduct before judging her, and then does so only in a forgiving light. She even sends word to Maggie that Maggie can “have a shelter in her house” even though she’s been “so set again’ having one extra in the house” and that she will “uphold [Maggie] against folks as say harm of [her] when they’ve no call” (500). Aunt Glegg not only remains non-judgmental, but she is willing to sacrifice her social position in defense of Maggie.

If more community members had held Mrs. Glegg’s mentality of a forgiving and non-judgmental attitude, perhaps Maggie could have been saved. She, at least, would not have been ostracized from the community and would have been able to explain her circumstances. However, St. Ogg’s is ruled by the “man of maxims”:

who is the popular representative of the minds that are guided in their moral judgment solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by a ready-made patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality—without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation, or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human. (498)

As has been discussed, George Eliot's purpose in writing was to extend sympathy for others, and particularly those who were downcast or ostracized throughout society. In this way, I think she was attempting to rally community members into being forgiving and non-judgmental by developing "wide fellow-feeling." Aunt Glegg is both forgiving and non-judgmental in a way that reflects her understanding of compassion and sympathy and that shows her flexibility in asserting moral maxims.

However, Aunt Glegg's benevolence is still insufficient. She, and by extension her class, is limited in the effectiveness of their benevolence because of experiential distance. Aunt Glegg's life is one of money, "belongings," and class (71). Her focus is in making sure that her family members act as they should and that lesser members (such as Tom Tulliver, who lost social standing because of his father's bankruptcy) are not brought "up above his fortin" (71).

The weakness of this class in helping the poor is summed up by Mrs. Glegg when she says, "There's folks in the world as know better than everybody else" (72). Aunt Glegg's benevolence falls short of the ideal because, as a member of the middle classes, she has not had the experiences she needs to truly sympathize with the poor. Glegg's benevolence is based upon the assumption that she "know[s] better than everybody else" because of her class standing. For example, Aunt Glegg offers to help Maggie in ways that she is convinced are correct without considering Maggie's feelings. For example, Mrs. Glegg offers Maggie a home on these conditions: "you shall have a shelter in her house, if you'll go to her dutiful," and Aunt Glegg "won't throw ill words at her—there's them out o' the' family 'ull be ready enough to do that. But I'll give her good advice; an' she must be humble" (500). Aunt Glegg's focus in life is economics and, to her credit,

she offers help to Maggie on economic terms. However, in her conditions are also moral overtures that are unmistakable. Although Aunt Glegg “won’t throw ill words” at Maggie, she makes it clear that any benevolence that Maggie accepts must be willingly accompanied by “advice” and Maggie must be both “dutiful” and “humble” (500). The case could be made that Aunt Glegg is acting out of self-interest by wanting Maggie to remain within her visual control (so as to not hurt the family honor again), but I would like to take a positive view. I believe that Aunt Glegg is not acting out of self-interest and that she really does want to help Maggie, but that she fails because she is not acting out of true sympathy for Maggie’s situation.

The above terms, “dutiful” and “humble,” set up a relationship of condescending benevolence that smells of the 1834 Poor Law Act assumption that the poor, by virtue of their economic situation, must be personally at fault. Under Aunt Glegg’s plan, Maggie will receive aid but she must pay for it—through her subservience—regardless of whether or not she did something to deserve such treatment. She is a member of the “guilty poor,” who must have done something wrong to become poor. This mentality reflects a paradox in Victorian thinking. Victorians believed in Adam Smith’s model of success through self-interested behavior yet, when someone fell into poverty, they claimed it was because they engaged in self-interested behavior (i.e. drinking, immorality, slothfulness, etc.). As Adam Smith argues in *The Wealth of Nations*:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love [...] By

pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.” (I.ii.2)

Shimmin reflects this by arguing that the families he examined all had “ample means for maintaining themselves and their families in comparative comfort” (on around 24s. per week) but did not because of their self-interested behavior (112).

Aunt Glegg’s response to Maggie is ironic in that her benevolence is one of protection against those outside of the family (and fierce defense of Maggie in front of people out of the family) and punishment within. This attitude is very easy to hold because Aunt Glegg has never experienced the economic or moral turmoil of Maggie’s life. As such, she judges Maggie’s situation based upon her own limited experience of wealth and security. In addition, since Aunt Glegg has never experienced poverty, temptation, or real love, she lacks the ability to enter into Maggie’s situation and see what Maggie really needs. Maggie feels this inability to sympathize as she thinks of all of the “contact her bruised mind would have to bear” by living with Aunt Glegg (500). Maggie feels that she cannot be “dependent” and must “get [her] own bread,” even if she must live in destitution to do so. Maggie does not want to suffer the consequences of the “truly needy” that Aunt Glegg’s mentality entails. As we have seen, although Aunt Glegg’s benevolence stems from a worthy motivation (loyalty), her benevolence is still inadequate because it does not stem from true sympathy and is corrupted by experiential distance.

#### Bob Jakin’s Canine Benevolence

If the key to true sympathy is a lack of experiential distance, than the poor would be in the best situation to help those in need. George Eliot shows the importance of the

poor helping the poor through Bob Jakin. When one reads of Bob Jakin there is something very appealing and comforting about his personality. This appeal, I believe, comes through Bob Jakin's canine associations. Eliot often links Bob Jakin overtly with canines and canine qualities. Bob Jakin's "natural function" is "frightening the birds" and Maggie is scared of him because of the "brindled dog" at his home (47). Bob Jakin is intimate with "snakes and bats" and has a "magical power of detecting the hedgehogs and stoats," and he does things that are "rather naughty" (47-48). He is described as having a "snub-nosed face" and being one who finds "virtue in rags" and desires to have "ferrets an' dogs, an' be a rat-catcher" (48, 240). When Tom kicks his dog for being a "poor-spirited" animal, Bob Jakin is visibly upset and chooses to distance himself from Tom, walking "in the shallow edge of the overflowing river" rather than by him (49). Shortly after, Tom attempts to pacify Bob Jakin by telling Bob that he is "master" over him (51). While in a wrestling match, Tom's dog Yap runs up and bites Bob "with honour" (51). Rather than feeling pain and resignation from being bit, Bob is invigorated and can fight with "fiercer tenacity" and "new exertion" (51). Eliot tells the reader that the "very focus or heart of Bob's world" is "Kennel Yard," a physical location in *The Mill* but also clearly symbolic (52). When Bob comes to see Tom after the family's bankruptcy, Bob is described as covered in "a shiny deposit of dirt" and meets Tom in the kitchen rather than in the main part of the house (237). Bob recalls to Tom that he saved a "terrier pup" from being drowned by its owner and had to "jaw him a good un afore he's give it me" (238). Bob looks at Maggie Tulliver with a "pursuant gaze of an intelligent dumb animal, with perceptions more perfect than his comprehension" (240). Clearly, Eliot infused Bob Jakin with canine symbolism for a reason.

But why a dog? In the 1850's and 1860's benevolent fervor reached beyond the realm of humans. McCord states that: "As the scale and variety of charitable enterprises continued to grow, animals as well as humans were among the beneficiaries. During the third quarter of the century, interest in pets, especially dogs, was growing" (346). In 1824 the Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals was founded. This interest gained momentum with the founding of the Vegetarian Society of Great Britain in 1847 and a series of articles published by Marshall Hall in *The Lancet* that addressed questions about animal experimentation and medical ethics (Kreilkamp abstract). In addition, the Battersea Dogs Home was founded in 1868 and the Kennel Club was established in 1873 (Walton 219-239). Interest in canines was not limited to philanthropic endeavors but extended to literary works. Canines were an easy way to engage readers in texts because most British people were already very familiar with dogs. Their common knowledge provided writers with an easy tool for characterization, symbolism, and discussion. Since people were already interested in being kind to animals, authors could easily show the character of a person by the way in which he or she treated animals. By so doing, he or she could quickly gain the reader's support or opposition for a character.

*Agnes Grey*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Jane Eyre* were all published amidst these discussions on the role of canines. Readers in the 1860's were already familiar with the symbolic use of canines to characterize people in novels because of the Brontes' use of canines as a characterization tool. As Judith Caesar points out in her discussion of *Wuthering Heights*, dogs are useful symbols for novelists because they are profoundly ambiguous. Dogs can be dangerous when not under human control (or, if humans are representing dogs, under cultural constraints); yet, dogs are much more loyal, accepting,

and forgiving than the humans that train and control them. Humans connect with dogs because dogs are the animal within the human, the part of the human self that is not socialized, not civilized, and not controlled. Dogs represent the part of the human self that is savage beyond human ability and loving beyond human expectations. These connections make dogs in novels resemble not animals, but the human characters themselves (149-150).

Dogs were a convenient way for Eliot to symbolize the poor because in many ways the two groups were considered similar during this time period: both were cared for out of misshapen notions of kindness and then neglected when those notions wore off, both groups lived in squalor, and both groups were considered dangerous (canines through rabies, the poor through immorality and contagious diseases). By infusing Bob with canine symbolism, Eliot is able to make him more loveable and prove a point—the poor in society are most able to help those in need. Bob's canine qualities immediately draw the audience in and make them love him despite his rather base habits and appearance. Dogs, in this way, serve as a means for Eliot to engage the reader in impoverished life and break the reader's established stereotypes about the poor.

Bob Jakin breaks stereotypes about the lower class because he is inviting and friendly. In British society most people looked up the social ladder for help, but in *The Mill* Eliot has the characters look down the social ladder to receive the help they truly need. Bob Jakin is an itinerant trader and most assuredly part of the lower working classes. Although his economic and social standing is destitute, he is the first person Maggie turns to for benevolence. After Maggie is disowned by her brother for disappearing with Stephen Guest, she and her mother discuss where to go. They choose



not to go to her aunts for fear of judgment and rejection. Rather, Maggie says: “Let us go to Bob Jakin” (486).

The reader is then taken to Bob’s home and sees Bob sitting “with a heaviness at heart” because Maggie’s case “had become matter of common talk” among town (486). Bob Jakin is first and foremost sympathetic. When Maggie appears at his door, Bob has “no questions to ask”, but immediately takes her and her mother in and tries to comfort them (487). Bob Jakin knows how to best comfort Maggie because, as one in reduced circumstances, he knows what Maggie Tulliver needs. As one who has been socially and economically embarrassed throughout his life, Bob knows that those who are being mocked do not wish to discuss their shame, but to be left alone. Because of this, Bob is “silent, and [does] not allow his wife to ask him a question” (487). He knows that Maggie needs her dignity and privacy, and so he makes sure to address her as “Miss” and he will not “present himself in the room, lest it should appear like intrusion and a wish to pry” (487). Maggie confirms the rightness of Bob’s instincts when, in the next paragraph, she is relieved that her mother chooses to go home for a few hours as Maggie “desired to be alone with her grief” (487).

Bob’s attitude towards Maggie brings up an important discussion about masculinity in *The Mill*. The male characters in Eliot have usually been looked at one of two ways. Either historically, by analyzing how they’re connected to Eliot’s friends and family, or psychoanalytically, linking Eliot’s men to her supposed androgyny (Gouws IX). Bob’s benevolence towards Maggie is tied up in his masculinity. Bob refuses to call Maggie anything other than “miss” and is careful to treat with with the dignity and respect he believes she deserves. He is described as “having the same chivalry towards

dark-eyed Maggie, as in the days when he had bought her the memorable present of books” (487). It is interesting to note that in the above statement benevolence is, as in Austen’s *Emma*, once again tied with masculinity in the form of chivalry. Bob Jakin, even as the lowest community member, attempts to play the part of chivalry in his actions towards the “fallen woman.” Bob Jakin, although a poor community member, represents a chivalrous gentleman in *The Mill*.

Bob’s connection between masculinity and benevolence is also shown in his reaction to Stephen Guest. Interestingly, Bob Jakin is the only character in the novel who seems to criticize Stephen Guest’s behavior and suggest that he should be punished for his part in the affair: “Bob, for his part, hoped (Stephen Guest) might be in the warmest department of an asylum understood to exist in the other world for gentlemen who are likely to be in fallen circumstances there” (487). Eliot’s use of the word “gentlemen” illuminates an interesting point. As we have seen, Austen viewed the term gentlemen as a gentry classification used to hold and usurp power. Dickens saw the term gentlemen as a powerful tool for merchant social mobility and as a means to assume moral authority in society. For Eliot, however, the term gentleman denotes not a social category but a moral category. Eliot’s use of “gentlemen” in the above phrase is ironic—Bob Jakin does not view Stephen Guest as a gentleman, but as a morally corrupt villain. Young, in *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel*, argues that by the time *The Mill* was written the term gentlemen had been appropriated as a lower middle class classification. The definition of a gentleman, by the mid Victorian period, became an unstable term that could not be defined but that could be recognized (6). Such assumption of the term by all the classes enabled the poor to “erode the power of the most cherished bourgeois

symbol”—the gentleman (7). Perhaps Bob’s actions, in comparison with Stephen Guest’s, tell more about who is the *gentleman* than mere economic status. Gouws, in *Typical Victorian Men*, notes that “In much of her fiction Eliot presents a normative man with whom the reader is meant to sympathize and to whom other less sympathetic characters are contrasted” (2). In *The Mill* the audience not only sympathizes but embraces Bob’s quirky, impoverished character. Eliot breaks with tradition by associating the term gentleman not with class, but with benevolence. Those who engage in benevolence, such as Bob, are deemed as gentlemen. Those who do not engage in benevolence—or worse, destroy other’s lives through their actions—are deemed as not being gentlemen. Although Stephen Guest is, at the beginning of the novel, described as “a gentleman of quite the first family in St. Ogg’s” he loses his gentlemanly status by running away from St. Ogg’s and leaving Maggie to suffer alone (397).

Bob chooses to help Maggie by introducing her to her namesake, his daughter. Bob brings the baby to Maggie and tells her “we made free to name it after you, an’ it ‘ud be better for your takin’ a bit o notice on it” (487). The wording of Maggie’s response is key: “Maggie’s heart had swelled at this action and speech of Bob’s: she knew well enough that it was a way he had chose to show his sympathy and respect” (487). Bob is the most benevolent character in *The Mill* because he acts out of true sympathy unhindered by experiential distance or public opinion. Bob sits with Maggie and grasps “the skin of Mump’s neck” (his dog) because he is nervous about doing something that would hurt or embarrass Maggie (488). It is no coincidence that in his moment of supreme sympathy, Bob sits at the same level with his beloved dog.

As previously noted, Bob's conversation with Maggie is also representative of his masculine benevolence. Bob asks Maggie "only one thing" saying, "Do you owe anybody a grudge?" (489).

"No, not any one," said Maggie, looking up at him inquiringly. "Why?"

"O, lors, Miss," said Bob, pinching Mump's neck harder than ever, "I wish you did—an' 'ud tell me—I'd leather him till I couldn't see—I would—an' the Justice might do what he liked to me arter." (489)

I have already discussed Bob's disregard of public opinion, but there are several other interesting things to note about this conversation. First, the poor are in the best position to engage in benevolence because they are not constrained by the community circle in the same way as other classes. Because they are looked down upon by the community, they are in large part immune to its censure, and can, therefore, help those who are also outcast. Bob does not care what others think about him but takes Maggie in without question. Bob acts out of sympathy rather than out of concern for public opinion. Eliot consciously shows Bob's worth in the community (although no one else in the community seems to notice) by having Bob act out of sympathy rather than public opinion. As Laura Berry points out: "For Eliot, to be animal is to be part of the tangled web of the world...there are times when for Eliot the worthiest human beings *are* the animals, who can be mutely and immutably true to the best instincts of their species and remain uncorrupted by society's civilizing forces" (160). Bob can be the character of most "worth" to Maggie Tulliver because he is "uncorrupted by society's civilizing forces" and, therefore, cannot be dictated to by society. Without society to control and constrain him, Bob is able to act out of true and unwavering sympathy. In this way, Bob

tellingly shows how to truly be part of a community by both rejecting public opinion and engaging in social consciousness. For Bob, being a good community member means showing sympathy and exercising social conscience rather than adhering to strict social norms. In addition, Bob once again links masculinity with benevolence by threatening physical punishment upon those who have hurt Maggie. Rather than offering to publically humiliate Stephen Guest (or other offenders), or to try them in law, Bob chooses to defend Maggie's honor through a masculine outlet of "leather[ing]" wrongdoers.

Bob once again shows his merit by refraining from asking for lurid details of Maggie's trip. Although he "longed to be informed," he only asks Maggie for information that might enable him to be of further assistance to her (488). By so doing, he shows true benevolence. As opposed to Aunt Glegg, who expects Maggie to stand before her and tell all, and Dr. Kenn, who expects a confession so he can judge whether she should be forgiven, Bob Jakin does not seek to judge, but to help.

Lastly, in the above conversation we see, once again, Bob showing benevolence while physically connecting himself to a canine. This association is solidified when, at the end of their conversation, Bob says, "Happen you'd like Mumps for company, Miss [...] he knows iverything, an' makes no bother about it [...] Lors, it's a fine thing to hev a dumb brute fond on you; it'll stick to you, an' make no jaw." To which Maggie replies: "Yes, do leave him, please [...] I think I should like to have Mumps for a friend" (489). It is a logical step for the reader to see "Mumps" in this dialogue as interchangeable with "Bob." Bob is the "dumb brute" who "knows iverything." He is the blessing that can "stick to you" in times of need. He is the "company" that helps and "makes no bother

about it,” and he is the benevolent poor community member who sits (literally) as a sympathetic “friend” for those in need. Mumps immediately sits down and “made no sign of restlessness when his master left the room” (489). Mumps is able to flawlessly take the place of his master because the master is patterned after the servant. And, just as the master mirrors the servant and finds success, so tradesmen and the professional classes need to be humble enough to look to the impoverished classes for direction on how to be truly benevolent.

#### Benevolence and Gender

Eliot’s discussion of benevolence would be incomplete if she did not show how gender was linked to benevolence. Although the discussion about which class should engage in benevolence was prevalent, discussions about which gender benevolence should belong to also permeated this time period. But why? As mentioned in my introduction and in my Dickens chapter, benevolence had typically been used as a means for women to enter the public sphere. For example, in Austen’s *Emma*, Emma rarely leaves her father’s property unless it is a charitable or social gathering. Almost all of her visits away from home that are not accompanied by a man are to visit the impoverished Bates or other poor families in the village. As the need for true economic relief grew, however, poor relief often became the realm of men because they were the ones who enacted legislation about the poor and they held the economic means to really help those in need. Dickens shows this side of benevolence in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Although *Nicholas Nickleby* is dominated by benevolence, very few of those benevolent actions are undertaken by women. Rather, benevolence in *Nicholas Nickleby* is inseparably connected to economic power and, thereby, men.

Eliot, however, argues that benevolence should not just be the realm of men or women, as previously argued, but that effective benevolence includes both men and women working together. This is a key departure from Austen and Dickens, who rarely show men and women working as equal partners in benevolence. To Eliot, both men and women have powerful resources that can help those in need. Gillian Beer, author of *George Eliot*, states that Eliot viewed “men and women as locked together by their needs and hopes, and by their common misunderstanding” (qtd. in Jones 32). These needs and hopes could find fulfillment through mutual benevolence. Eliot, as critics know, was not a suffragist or part of the women’s movement, but she was intelligent and believed that women should hold their own. In *The Mill*, men most often control the economic means. Maggie’s mother is dependent upon her husband and then her son for her livelihood. Aunt Glegg is terrified that her husband will not leave her wealth when he dies. Maggie depends upon the kindness of men, such as Dr. Kenn and Bob Jakin, for survival. Yet, women help provide emotional support and, more importantly, control community standing. After all, it is the “world’s wives,” not husbands, that disparage Maggie Tulliver (492). Only when women and men work together can the process of sympathy lead to effective benevolence. Eliot wrote in a letter that: “complete union and sympathy can only come by women having opened to them the same store of acquired truth or beliefs as men have, so that their grounds of judgment may as far as possible be the same” (qtd. in Jones 32). When men and women work together they can feel true sympathy for both sexes and look for solutions that, without both men and women, they could not attain.

For example, when Maggie comes to stay with Bob Jakin, Maggie specifically mentions that they can only stay if “his wife will have room for us,” and Bob’s wife was “commanded to make all things comfortable,” for the guests (486-487). If Bob’s wife had not been home Bob would not have been able to help Maggie as it would have furthered the community’s belief that she is a “fallen woman.” Furthermore, Dr. Kenn is unable to continue helping Maggie because his wife is dead and, therefore, cannot legitimize the innocence of his benevolence towards Maggie. If Dr. Kenn’s wife had been alive she could have been the public face behind Dr. Kenn’s benevolence and Maggie, therefore, would have been able to be helped by him. Aunt Glegg is unable to help Maggie find a job because she has no husband with ties to the economy of St. Ogg’s. In addition, Aunt Glegg has no husband to calm the community’s public censure of Maggie through economic force. Maggie’s mother cannot vindicate Maggie towards her brother Tom because Maggie’s father is dead and, as such, Maggie’s mother is dependent upon Tom’s good opinion of her for her livelihood. If Maggie’s mother offends Tom, then she too will be destitute like Maggie. Without a man to stand by her, Maggie’s mother has no economic means with which to aid her daughter. Likewise, since Maggie’s father is dead there is no male family member to bring Stephen Guest to accountability. These examples show the importance of having both men and women work together in benevolence and the problems that occur when only one sex engages in benevolence.

These two functions lead to a complementary relationship when men and women work together in benevolent actions. But why did this change from Dickens? Why did Dickens envision benevolence as the realm of primarily men, whereas Eliot envisions a



complementary relationship? For one, Eliot was keenly and personally aware of the damage that can be done by the “world’s wives.” Having been a focus of constant gossip and judgment for decades, Eliot knew firsthand what impact women make on the success or failure of an individual. In addition, in the thirty years between *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Mill*, the suffrage movement had begun. The Reform Act of 1832 specifically disenfranchised women and, in response, the British suffrage movement was created. As such, the late 1850s and 1860s saw many public discussions about the role of women in society. Eliot was able to add to this discussion by showing the importance of men and women working together in benevolent endeavors.

How did this lopsided framework of men and women not working together (with the exception of Jakin) play out? It is odd to me that, for such a non-idealistic book, Eliot begins with an idealistic description of St. Ogg’s. She writes that the “loving tide” meets St. Ogg’s with its “red roofs” and “broad gables” and turns the river “a soft purple hue under the transient glance” of the “February sun” (7). Eliot begins her book with an idealistic description of the geographical location in which her plot is set because she desires that the community be as idealistic as the setting. The beginning of the novel is idealistic, but as Maggie grows and attempts to enter her community, the book’s idealism deteriorates into realism and begins to feel more like an autobiography than a fictional narrative. The community of St. Ogg’s becomes “an anonymous force, capable of destroying people’s good name and reputation, threatening and inaccessible in its detached control” (Norbelie 135). This community, as the reader begins to notice, starts to resemble not a fictional world but that of the actual. In this way, the audience begins to feel that Eliot is addressing their actions through her characters.

As past critics have shown, women play an important part in destroying the idealism that *The Mill* begins with. In *The Mill*, Eliot “imagine[s] her central relationships within the context of a wider community in which women play an important and creative role [...] as initiators and creators of communality” (Nestor 168). In St. Ogg’s, “the elite society [...] comes under female domination; the men are little more than animated puppets who flit on and off the feminine stage” (Woodward 51). The community of St. Ogg’s is ruled by the “world’s wife” which holds a “fine instinct which is given her for the preservation of society” (491). The “world’s wife” is used to show the negative effects of community on those members whom she discredits. For example, the world’s wife (when speaking of Maggie Tulliver) “hoped she would repent, and that God would have mercy on her: He had not the care of Society on His hands—as the world’s wife had” (492). By placing themselves as enforcers of society, the world’s wives become more judgmental than God. In response to this and other community member actions, Eliot notes: “Retribution may come from any voice: the hardest, cruelest, most imbruted urchin at the street-corner can inflict it: surely help and pity are rarer things—more needful for the righteous to bestow” (494). It is interesting that Eliot chose women as the main persecutors of Maggie Tulliver, when Eliot believed that women held a “peculiar constitution for a special moral influence” (Haight 4:467-468).

As such, by portraying women as purveyors of judgment and coldness in *The Mill*, she makes a statement about the very important and versatile role women play in benevolence (or the lack thereof). It is sad that when given a position of authority women, who are often victimized and misunderstood, refuse to forgive Maggie (and, it could be argued, are the least forgiving of all community members) because, according to

them, Maggie has endangered every feminine reputation (Woodward 51). To Eliot, then, the benevolent woman should be helpful to those who are downcast within society without judging her moral worthiness. Women, in particular, should turn to one another for comfort and understanding in the face of victimization, instead of further victimizing each other through their judgments.

However, men are equally important in benevolence. Throughout Eliot's narrative, men choose to give up their authority in favor of women. Eliot writes that "it was the general feeling of the masculine mind at St. Ogg's that women were not to be interfered with in their treatment of each other" (506). Each man who becomes an "animated puppet" within St. Ogg's chooses to do so. In a world dominated by patriarchy, these men choose to give up their agency and power within the community. In this way, they readily choose to be passive observers of communal destruction, rather than active participants in benevolence and social reform. In addition, when persecution turns to Dr. Kenn, the men of St. Ogg's smile "pleasantly" instead of being horrified and taking action against the persecutors (507). Some of the men are "fond of scandal" and further scandal through their "masculine jokes" (506). Men choose to watch not only women victimized by the women of St. Ogg's, but other men as well. This can be seen as a severe critique against men who insist on patriarchy but yet abandon it when they are really needed to maintain stability.

Eliot's moralistic asides to the audience and community of St. Ogg's are almost always inclusive of both genders. She notes that "until every good man is brave, we must expect to find many good women timid" (506). In this way, the men are just as much responsible as the women to be benevolent. Women are needed in benevolence because

they control the social community, whereas men control the economics. A man can help someone in need by helping them economically (ie. find a job, learn skills, money, etc.). However, this will be in vain if he or she continues to be outcast from society. Likewise, a woman can help someone in need by standing with them and improving their social standing in the community, but this will not truly help unless they have the economic means to better their situation. Maggie Tulliver does not improve her situation because she does not have the help she needs from both men and women. The men of St. Ogg's refuse to help her find and maintain a job and the women of St. Ogg's who have social power refuse to use it for Maggie's good. As such, she is left as a social outcast. Thus, in *The Mill*, Eliot argues that both men and women are needed for effective benevolence.

As we have seen in this chapter, Eliot is very concerned with benevolence in *The Mill*. For Eliot, benevolence is best carried out by the poor because of their ability to truly sympathize with those in need. Eliot reflects the trend towards canine love by infusing Bob Jakin with canine symbolism. This canine symbolism helps Bob appeal to readers and aids readers in dispelling their stereotypes about the poor. One way that Eliot breaks stereotypes about the poor is through Bob's perspective of benevolence as a gentlemanly act. Bob's construction of benevolence holds vestiges of chivalry and is directly linked to his desire to behave as a gentleman. Since the lower classes are not prone to social mobility, they are not constrained by public opinion and are best able to help those in need. However, benevolence is also ineffective unless both men and women work together to help those in need. Without the economic power that men hold and the social power that women hold benevolence cannot truly succeed.

## Conclusion:

## Literary Social Reform

The “Adam Smith Problem” permeated debates about political economy, poor relief, and class issues throughout the nineteenth century. These debates focused on the seeming opposition of sympathy and self-interest. As we have seen, Austen, Dickens, and Eliot each sought to interpret the “Adam Smith Problem” and found their own solutions for the polarizing motivations of sympathy and self-interest. For these authors the answer to navigating self-interest and sympathy lay in benevolence. Benevolence, according to Smith, was the highest expression of sympathy for someone in need. Benevolence, however, did not stand on its own. Throughout the past three chapters I have shown how benevolence was symptomatic of class and gender issues throughout the century.

In *Emma*, benevolence serves as a means to maintain the class system in a traditional rural community. This idealized traditional model, when successfully implemented, is based upon reciprocity. The gentry engage in benevolence out of sympathy but, by doing so, they gain self-interested benefits by reinforcing the class system and gentry power within that system. Benevolence from 1815-1860 was very much a class phenomenon. In Austen’s *Emma*, benevolence is the realm of the gentry. Because of this class emphasis, benevolence can only be successful when proper boundaries remained in place. Throughout *Emma*, Knightley is charged with teaching the heroine the importance of boundaries and sympathy. Only when Emma truly learns to enforce social boundaries and to feel sympathy for those in need can she genuinely help members of the lower classes and establish her role in the gentry class.

Benevolence is also symptomatic of gender in the nineteenth century. In *Emma*, Knightley ties benevolence with male gender ideals based upon the chivalric code. His benevolence is one of coming to the rescue of those in need and acting the part of the noble knight. In addition, his construction of the motivations of benevolence is also marked by chivalry. Although I believe that he truly does feel sympathy for those in need, he also engages in benevolence towards Emma in order to court her.

For Dickens, benevolence acts as a means to improve one's social condition and economic standing within the community. Benevolence, for Dickens, should be motivated by sympathy. However, by acting out of true sympathy, the person engaging in benevolence achieves self-interested perks of increased market value and higher social standing. In Dickens' text, benevolence creates social and economic opportunities by establishing the man than undertakes such actions as a gentleman. Throughout the novel, Nicholas learns from the Cheeryble brothers how to establish himself as a gentleman, through benevolence. Only when Nicholas learns how to properly engage in benevolence can he take his place as a successful gentleman.

Like Austen, Dickens' construction of benevolence is also marked by the gender ideals of chivalry. However, Dickens differs from Austen in that he is careful to point out that Nicholas does not view benevolence as a sexual conquest. Although Dickens consciously separates his character from Austen's romantic construction of benevolence, a byproduct of Nicholas's chivalric benevolence parallels Austen in that he, too, gets the girl he rescues.

Eliot's construction of benevolence differs from Austen's and Dickens'. First, benevolence, in *The Mill on the Floss*, does not have to be based upon sympathy.

However, Eliot effectively shows throughout *The Mill* that only sympathetic benevolence can be really effective. Benevolence without true sympathy may temporarily help (such as Dr. Kenn employing Maggie Tulliver for a short period of time), but, in the long term, only sympathetic benevolence can create lasting changing for those in need. Eliot's novel suggests that the lower classes are best situated to help those in need because they, alone, can truly understand and sympathize with the poor.

In *The Mill*, Bob Jakin is careful to undertake benevolence as a gentleman. Although chivalric ideals are not expressed in the same way as in Austen and Dickens, Eliot proves throughout *The Mill on the Floss* that benevolence is still interconnected with characteristics of gentlemanly behavior that are based upon notions of chivalry. In addition, Eliot clearly departs from Austen and Dickens in that gentility in *The Mill* is linked to merit rather than class. Bob Jakins desires to be a gentleman because of his merit and personal character, and Eliot clearly shows that Stephen Guest is not considered a gentleman even though he holds a high class standing. In addition, benevolence is also tied with the women's movement in *The Mill on the Floss*. Throughout the novel, Eliot asserts that benevolence should be the realm of both men and women and is a good ground on which to explore ideals of equality and mutuality. Together, women and men can improve a person's economic and social standing within the community.

Lastly, my exploration of benevolence is shaped by historical progression. In the 1810s benevolence became a crisis issue for Britain because of the combination of enclosure, post-war economic stress, lower-class uprisings, and the Corn Laws. Many people sought for new solutions to the problems surrounding Britain. Austen, however,

represents a prominent subset of British thought that looked to the past for answers to the problems of the 1810s. In *Emma*, Austen explores the ways in which the myth of paternalism could take shape and succeed in British society.

Dickens' novel is influenced by the desire of the middle classes to establish themselves as social and moral leaders for the nation. Dickens' argument that the middle classes are best situated to help those in need is influenced by the power that the middle classes received through the 1832 Reform Bill. Dickens' novel also explores possible solutions to the poverty that the New Poor Law Act of 1834 exacerbated. No one in *Nicholas Nickleby* is sent to a workhouse or categorized because of their poverty, but those in need have their needs met by the personal benevolence of the middle classes. *Nicholas Nickleby* makes a strong case for a new poor relief system that focuses on motivating individuals to be both productive and self-sufficient (for example, the Cheerybles help Madeline Bray by buying her artwork rather than giving her free handouts).

In addition, *Nicholas Nickleby* seeks social reform for the child victim. This novel is dominated by images of the child victim, as seen in Smike and Madeline Bray. Throughout the novel Dickens plays into the popular assumption that child labor, and victimization, was a form of slavery that needed to be eradicated. In Smike we see the fate of the child victim rescued too late, and in Madeline Bray we see the child victim rescued and restored to her proper role.

Eliot's novel is also filled with child victims who, like Nicholas, fall from prosperity to poverty because of their father's actions. However, rather than focusing on the middle classes, Eliot's novel is entrenched in the lower classes' desire for more



political and social power in British society. Her novel is informed by current stereotypes of the poor and discussions leading up to the 1867 Reform Bill that gave the lower classes voting rights. In addition, Eliot's construction of gender roles in benevolence is influenced by the women's movement and discussions of equality in the 1850s.

In all three cases, current historical events directly influence the ways in which Austen, Dickens, and Eliot conceive of benevolence. For Austen, benevolence serves as an immediate relief to the problems surrounding Britain and also serves to ensure that France's revolutionary fervor does not spill over into Britain. For Dickens, benevolence acts as a way for the middle classes to establish themselves as gentlemen and assert their rights to social, economic, and political governance based upon moral grounds. Eliot's conception of benevolence is highly influenced by her construction of the poor and the discussions surrounding the role and character of the lower classes. In each of these novels, historical events of the time not only shape the construction of benevolence but influence the purpose and motivations behind it.

This thesis has focused on benevolence from 1815-1860 because I see a cohesive connection throughout this time period. The 1810s sparked discussions about poor relief and the role of benevolence in society because of the end of the Napoleonic Wars and implementation of the Corn Laws. These factors led to a stronger class unrest and disillusionment than previously seen in the century. This class unrest was not satisfied until the Reform Bill of 1867 gave the lower classes political power. Although class problems continued, and still continue in Britain today, it seems that the fervor of the lower-classes' angst climaxed in this period and tapered off after 1867. In addition,

Austen, Dickens, and Eliot are useful authors to analyze because they represent differing perspectives on benevolence. Austen contributes a rural, gentry, traditional perspective. Dickens' stands as the middle-class, urban, traditional representative, and Eliot's writings serve as a pastoral, lower-class, progressive representative of benevolence.

Literature in the nineteenth century served not only to entertain but to teach and to change society. Austen's novel sought to teach people how to take back the class system and reestablish traditional community roles. Dickens' novel powerfully illuminated the plight of the child victim and showed the middle classes how to act as social reformers and gain social prestige. Eliot, on the other hand, attempted to break commonly held stereotypes about the lower classes and showed the lower classes how to engage in benevolence. In this way, literature for these authors was not just a creative exercise but a chance to change the very foundations of social thought.

Social thought for these authors centered upon class and gender. After reading this thesis, I hope the reader has gained a new perspective on how benevolence reflected discussions of class, social change, and gender in the nineteenth century. Although there is still much that could be done on this subject, I hope that this thesis has proved to be a good starting point for those interested in the cultural ramifications and mechanisms of benevolence during this period. Benevolence from 1815-1860 was not just a way for women to assert themselves in the public sphere or for people to appease their consciences. Benevolence enabled people to reassert the class system, break through the class system, establish gender roles, try out political economic philosophy, and engage in political discussions. Although the poor were often helped by benevolence, this was by no means the only motivation or result of benevolence. Benevolence in the nineteenth

century served as a means of cultural and social exploration during a time of intense social reform. This exploration, more often than not, found a useful outlet in the idea of the gentleman. The idea of the gentleman, as has been shown, was prominent throughout this time period. As the poet Hopkins wrote in 1883, “By the by if the English race had done nothing else, yet if they left the world the notion of a gentleman, they would have done a great service to mankind” (qtd. in Gilmour 1). This lasting service, Austen, Dickens, and Eliot asserts, comes through nineteenth-century benevolence being linked with class and gender.

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