

Title: Victorian Research Seminar Week 6 Outline

Authors: Amy Ding and Emma Pernudi-Moon

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Outline Week 6

Marx on the Commodity Fetish

What is the Commodity Fetish? According to Marx, in a capitalistic society, wealth stems from “an immense accumulation of commodities.”

Definitions (courtesy of Aly’s summary):

- Commodity: an object that satisfies human wants (the nature of these wants/the process of satisfaction is useless)
- Exchange-value: “the proportion in which values in use of one sort are exchanged for those of another sort” (corn vs. iron equation)
- Use-value: the utility of a thing
- Elements of the expression of value (relative and equivalent forms)

Winter (learning by memorization/rote)

Illiteracy not simply as a form of deprivation but rather as an alternative, albeit marginalized, social experience (Winter, 226)

Ana’s summary: Cram is a failure of an educational system focused on memorization that has specifically failed Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam. However,

Far from showing that this kind of “cramming” or rote learning is present only in the lower classes, however, Winter argues that Dickens shows a similar situation with the Podsnaps and Veneerings and with Eugene and Mortimer. The Veneerings and Podsnaps are presented as the products of a system that continually produces the newly rich as if from a factory, and Eugene and Mortimer, though possessing cultural wealth that Headstone and Charley certainly don’t have, are still simply products of the same sets of expectations that follow everyone like them.

Winter claims that illiterate characters such as Lizzie, Jenny Wren, and Mr. Venus are able to access modes of creative production since they are able to synthesize and manipulate their knowledge. Do we object to classing Lizzie as purely

illiterate? What other motivations might Dickens have in depicting this kind of object-associated poverty?

Rebecca's seminar paper

I look for the presence of oral culture in the novel: frameworks for "fancy," the fairy tales and songs which the characters weave into their discourse. Does this fictional, imaginative culture allow for comprehension and social bonding separate from systems of Value, or do these cultural narratives prove just as commodified?

Fanciful frameworks for discourse in *Our Mutual Friend* support the hope for genuine emotional connections which is maintained throughout the novel, but are not immune to the monetization and commodification that proves just as pervasive.

Jenny Wren's "mentally cut out and basted" "gaily-dressed ladies" (724).

- Rebecca's reading: Jenny is enacting commodification on these "ladies" by mentally transforming them into objects.
- Winter's reading:

Seen in political and historical terms, or in the generic terms of stage melodrama, however, she is a carnivalesque or revolutionary figure, ready to execute popular justice through painful physical punishment and the public disgrace of hypocrites. Unlike Jo's illiterate relation to the world as "scraps" of inassimilable experience, Jenny's culturally literate but unlettered mental "cutting out" disassembles social symbols and reconstitutes them in scraps of fabric. She also makes the "gaily-dressed ladies," whom she herself will never resemble, into "unconscious" participants in her art.

What are the differences in these readings?

- What are the stakes of reading each way?
- Are there other ways we could take this scene relative to the Commodity Fetish?
- How does Rebecca vs Winter think about representation? About "art as expression" vs "art as product"?

Willa's conception of Wegg

Is Wegg semi-literate? Does he enact the Commodity Fetish/is he able to? What do we make of the emphasis on his literacy?

although Wegg is consistently depicted as ungrateful and conniving, he represents a righteous and destabilizing form of anger – a complete refusal to understand himself as inferior to the wealthy or grateful for any form of assistance.

How does Wegg's interest in Miss Parker and Master George, etc play into this? Wegg's use of names in general? What does it say that this kind of anger is given to two disabled characters (and then what do we make of Headstone and Sloppy)?

Objects in OMF

Tristan's close reading: Podsnap seems to displace the narrator and figure the Veneerings as objects.

Does this make Podsnap and/or the Veneerings an extreme example / satirization of the Commodity Fetish? What does it mean more generally when characters are rendered as objects in metaphor (such as The Bella)?

What does it mean to analyze OMF through a Marxist lens (applying the Commodity Fetish) if we ourselves are not Marxist, and if Dickens, despite his interest in social reform, wasn't either?

What about if we are Marxist? Does it necessitate moral judgement about the novel (a la Miller's critique of Trollope?)

Postscript: OMF as a novel, railway rescue, etc; the material form of the novel generally, the imagination or representation of the material form of OMF specifically

End of the novel: class, death, marriage and more?

As Leila raises, death and marriage (or funerals and weddings) seem to be operating in a similar register. Is this a case of Bahtkin-style distributed language?

Why is marriage an opportunity for social/moral improvement? (see: Bella, Eugene)

As Art notes, is "partnership" perhaps the wrong choice of word in describing Bella's situation and relationships?

What about the Lammles? Do they experience a kind of narrative death in their departure or is it pointless to try to tie them into this motif?

What about the established marriages that we see (the Boffins, the Wilfers)? Or is this kind of association specific to courtship?

What about the Boffins' reveal of their "character change" and our expectations from last week?

Break

E.S. Dallas review of OMF

What did people notice about it?

We were more impressed with the exceeding cleverness of the author's manner than with the charm of his story; and when one thinks more of an artist's manner than of his matter woe to the artist. Very soon, however, Mr. Dickens got into his story; the interest of it grew; the reader, busied with the facts of the tale, learned to forget all about the skilfulness of the artist, and found himself rushing on eagerly through number after number of one of the best of even Dickens's tales.

Here, the social chorus aspects are marked as more associated with the author, which is less pleasurable.

Andrews

Rebecca's summary

Moreover, Andrews posits a transformative theoretical shift in his dual model of the central, authoritative author reading controlling his audiences, as opposed to the multifaceted and shifting authorial performance in a cycle of mutual responsivity with his audience.

Why valorize Dickens so much?

How much of these results are due to it being performed at all, with additional investment from Dickens' status as a public figure? Might other performances of Dickens do the same thing, just to a lesser extent?

What did you find useful about this article?

CliC + Underwood, Bamman, and Lee

Did anyone get interesting results from using CliC?

Alternatively, did people have ideas of queries they didn't know how to implement?

To return to Underwood, Bamman, and Lee, what does "narrative space" mean and how might we look towards mapping it? Could we use Lizzie's boat rescue as an example of something we might want to capture/highlight?

Anyone have thoughts on Dickens' biography or the dust-heap article?

End of class: Rachel talks about SHS paper assignment