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Dickens and the Idea of the Gentleman

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"I want to be a gentleman," Pip declares early on in *Great Expectations*, and this desire, as well as the problems associated with it, is common to many of the characters in Charles Dickens's novels (101). Yet the category itself defies ready definition: what is the "gentleman" and who qualifies to be designated as such? As a writer of social fiction, and one who captured Victorian society in all its contradictory forms of exuberant optimism and nagging anxiety, fragile hope and sordid aspiration, Dickens chronicles his contemporaries' negotiations of class and identity amidst the creation of a new, post-Industrial-Revolution social order. Dickens's fiction is populated by boys and girls of unknown parentage, and men and women of concealed pasts, who struggle for upward mobility within the shifting sands of social stratification. While Dickens tells the occasional fairy tale story (such as that of Oliver Twist, the orphan who inherits a fortune), more often the fairy tale goes wrong (such as that of Pip, the semi-orphan whose "great expectations" are proven false). Dickens's fiction depicts a Darwinian conflict between progression and regression

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in a society remaking itself out of the legacies of its past, and within that conflict the "gentleman" emerges as one of the most elusive, and yet central, figures.

As the ideal of middle class masculinity, the Victorian gentleman was difficult to define during this period of class mobility and social change. Was the "gentleman" to be defined by class and by money? By behavior and clothing? By religion and morality? As the representative of the new middle class, the "gentleman" could be defined according to all or none of the above. The gentleman clearly had to adopt different criteria than had his aristocratic predecessor, whose identity had been based on land holdings, titles, and birth. The gentleman espoused a new conception of "class" that left behind the "rank" system of the traditional social order while maintaining a distance from workers and laborers. Abstract components such as morality, etiquette and behavior could be admissible criteria in the definition of a gentleman, as well as more quantifiable components such as profession and financial capability. Robin Gilmour writes that "the idea of the gentleman carried some of the best hopes as well as the deepest contradictions of Victorian experience" and encapsulates "the struggle of a middle-class civilisation to define itself and its values" (14). The "gentleman," then, was the embodiment of post-Industrial Revolution British masculinity in the making, the male counterpart to the Victorian standard of femininity the "angel in the house," and the benchmark of the highest standards of middle-class respectability.

Dickens's novels abound in examples of characters that demonstrate the range and the limitations of the "gentleman." James Steerforth in *David Copperfield* is indisputably a "gentleman" according to class

designations of birth, education, and fortune, and yet commits the worst of moral crimes. In fact he is the stereotype of the "gentleman" who "seduces-and-abandons" a working-class girl (Emily), while his fisherman "rival" Ham Peggotty is the epitome of selfless, caring gentleness. Mr. Dombey of *Dombey and Son* is a wealthy merchant whose patriarchal peremptoriness turns his second wife Edith into a martyred Stephen Blackpool, despite his portrayal as a demagogue, is gentle fallen woman and threatens to stifle his daughter Florence. Josiah Bounderby of Hard Times is a wealthy mill-owner who commits the worst of filial impieties by denying his mother, in an attempt to maintain the fiction of his own "rags-to-riches" story, while his antagonist and the idealistic. Sydney Carton of A Tale of Two Cities appears arrogant and decadent but makes the greatest sacrifice by giving his life in order to further the happiness of the woman he loves. In Bleak House, the question of "gentility" is posed for a woman character: can Lady Dedlock, who has abandoned her daughter and yet continues to watch over her, be a true "gentlewoman"?

As the above examples demonstrate, the crucial problem lies in the essence of "gentility," an abstract, difficult-to-define concept that transcends, and yet remains bound to, class categories. Is the "gentleman" a designation of class (rank, money, social status) or morality (behavior, ethics)? During a historical period in which "gentility" and class were crucially important issues, and yet one in which the existing social structure was under flux, the category of the "gentleman" could be claimed by a vast array of appropriate and inappropriate candidates. The problem could also expressed as the age-old split between appearance and reality. Could a gentleman not be a gentleman? In other words, could membership in a certain social

group not be accompanied by the true inner values of gentility? The answer, of course, is a resounding affirmation, and this essay focuses on the problem of the "gentleman" as it was debated in the Victorian era and as it was reflected in the biography and work of mid-nineteenth century Britain's most important writer. First, I examine the critical debate surrounding the Victorian idea of the "gentleman," and then I consider Charles Dickens's personal struggles with the idea of the gentleman in theory and in practice.

The English Gentleman in the Victorian Age

The problematic category of the "gentleman" has led critics to attempt a variety of sometimes contradictory definitions, and two books stand out among these attempts: Shirley Robin Letwin's *The Gentleman in Trollope*, and Robin Gilmour's *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*. While the two share similar views on the fundamental underpinnings of Victorian gentility, they also disagree in instructive and illuminating ways. Letwin, for one, argues that the category of "gentleman" was at once so vexing and so compelling because it stood independent of class distinctions, while Robin Gilmour considers the "gentleman" as deriving its particular importance from the class conflicts out of which it arose. The two are writing at almost exactly the same time—Letwin's book was published in 1982, Gilmour's in 1981—and it is unlikely that either could have consulted the other, and neither cites the other. An assessment of these two critics' views and of their differences will lead us to a more comprehensive understanding of this elusive standard of Victorian masculinity.

Shirley Robin Letwin's core understanding of the "gentleman" is that "the title flourished just because it had nothing to do with 'class,' as defined by birth, occupation, wealth, or rank" (10). Fundamental to Letwin's argument is the debatable assumption of the relative class fluidity of English society: "there has always been much movement in England from one status to another and a remarkable confusion of classes," Letwin writes (6). "Though there were a great number and variety of social distinctions"—distinctions which Letwin seems to separate from the idea of class—"they were never barriers to movement and did not isolate one order from another," Letwin writes (8). Letwin makes the rather utopian conclusion that "what we now call 'social mobility' is an old English pastime" (9). Indeed this writer's view is that it was this very mobility and a relative lack of class markers that gave the category of the "gentleman" such a potent role: "In a society where distinctions of status and fortune were constantly changing, and were therefore confusing and unreliable, being known as a 'gentleman' may have indicated a more stable affinity among men of widely different origins and positions" (10).

Robin Gilmour's primary difference with Letwin is that the former locates the idea of the "gentleman" entirely within a class-based system and views the gentleman as struggling with a new definition of that structured hierarchy, whereas the latter chooses to diminish the role or existence of that hierarchy to begin with. Letwin writes that "England never conformed to the popular picture of a so-called feudal hierarchy" and writes that "the earliest use of 'gentleman' in England did not designate a member of a particular social class" (6, 4). Meanwhile, Gilmour writes that "[t]he origins of the gentleman lie deep in feudal society and the qualification of birth" (4). Indeed,

Gilmour writes that the notion of the gentleman emerged out of, and symbolized, a negotiation between classes at this period. The gentleman, Gilmour writes, "lay at the heart of the social and political accommodation between the aristocracy and middle classes in the period" (2). Gilmour's more historically-conscious perspective maintains that "the idea of the gentleman helps to focus the experience of the Victorian middle classes during the period of their emergence and consolidation, the years from roughly 1840 to around 1880" (2). According to his analysis, this "preoccupation...reflected the needs and aspirations of new groups struggling to establish themselves in a society...dominated by the land-owning aristocracy" (2).

Gilmour does not entirely disagree with Letwin's sense of the possibility of class mobility, agreeing that it was always this possibility that made the idea of the "gentleman" more exciting. The "social ambiguity" of the gentleman "made it open to debate and redefinition in a way that the concept of the aristocrat was not," Gilmour writes (3). His difference from Letwin lies in his insistent implication of the gentleman within existing hierarchies of class and rank. For Gilmour, the gentleman is not beyond class, but rather the product—and means—of a new negotiation of class. He writes:

> gentlemanliness was not a democratic notion, or it could not have exercised its power over the imagination of the Victorian middle classes if it had been. Its appeal for them lay in its dignified and partially independent relationship to the aristocratic order, and in its potential for moralisation and modernisation. They wanted to widen the basis of qualification to include themselves, without sacrificing the exclusiveness which gave the rank its social esteem (4).

Gilmour thus suggests that the idea of the gentleman was appealing not because it transcended hierarchies, but that it represented a kind of hierarchy that was acceptable, even desirable, for this nouveau middle class.

Such negotiation of new class distinctions was possible, according to Gilmour, because of the gentleman's particular position in the traditional social order. "All aristocrats are gentlemen, but not all gentlemen are aristocrats," he writes, and "strictly speaking the social and historical origins of the gentleman lie in the gentry, not the aristocracy" (5). Therefore,

> The historical significance of the gentleman's location in the hierarchy of the gentry, rather than the aristocracy, was that it provided a time-honoured and not too exacting route to social prestige for new social groups. In terms of the older society of "rank" and "degree" it was a station which aspiring members of the middle classes could hope to penetrate and, to some extent, make over in their image. (5)

Indeed, Gilmour continues, "[t]he moral dimension in the gentlemanly idea made it accessible to reinterpretation and modernisation, while its relative independence of the aristocratic code on the one hand, and the grosser associations of "trade" on the other, meant that in the rapidly changing and increasingly class-conscious society of the nineteenth century it provided a social standing-ground which could be occupied with dignity" (5). While the "aristocracy" was outdated and incongruous in a new industrial society as well as anathema to the new middle class, the category of "gentleman" was flexible enough to be updated for the new industrial society while retaining enough "gentility" from the past to satisfy middle-class *nouveau riche* pretensions.

Gilmour makes the distinction between "rank" and "class" as he places the gentleman in a genealogy of pre-nineteenth-century social hierarchies. He notes that Marx and others commented that the "Victorian bourgeoisie was a revolutionary class [that was able to] ... emerg[e without] ... a revolution," and that this period witnessed the supplanting of one kind of social hierarchy by another (8). Gilmour writes:

> The older structure was the hierarchy of "rank" or "degree," a social pyramid reaching down from the monarchy and aristocracy at the peak to the unenfranchised many at the base. The new structure was that of class, in which society is seen as divided into a number of mutually antagonistic groups, each united by a common series of economic interests. (8)

What is relevant for our purposes within this development is that "the historical importance of the idea of the gentleman was that it was a 'rank' from the older hierarchy which was capable of making the transition into the new society of 'class'" (8). In short, "[t]he idea of the gentleman was crucial because its ambiguities answered to the conflicting needs of the nascent middle classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their desire to be accepted by the traditional hierarchy and at the same time to make their impact upon it" (9).

Thus, for Gilmour the idea of the gentleman powerfully represents the social and political issues central to the Victorian age. Focusing on the period from 1840 to 1880 as the time of greatest attention to the definition of a gentleman, he notes that "it was in these years that the nature of gentlemanliness was more anxiously debated and more variously defined than at any time before or since" (2). Letwin agrees that Victorian society was deeply obsessed with the definition of a

gentleman. Noting that for English society in general, "the large literature devoted to the subject [of what it is to be a gentleman] shows that it has been something of a national hobby," Letwin remarks that "[t]he flow of discourses on the gentleman became a flood in the nineteenth century" (11-12). Letwin cites "long essays" on the definition of a gentleman carried by "*The Cornhill*, the *National Review*, and the *Contemporary Review*"; "[s]ermons...on 'The True Gentleman' and 'What is a Gentleman?'"; and books including titles such as "*The Character of a Gentleman, The English Gentleman, A Fine Old English Gentleman, Quite a Gentleman*" to illustrate this "flood" (12). This debate over the gentleman's traits and qualities constituted one of the self-reflections of a very self-reflective period.

The primary differences between Letwin and Gilmour derive from their divergent positionings of the gentleman within the class negotiations of the Victorian period. Considering Letwin's view of class transcendence together with Gilmour's more historically-conscious view provides us with an enhanced understanding of the gentleman's role in this period. Both Letwin and Gilmour agree, however, that the true "gentleman" transcends notions of class or rank, and each gentleman must earn his claim to that appellation on individual merits and qualities, not merely on the basis of membership in a particular class. Various definitions of the gentleman included an attention to dress, manners, pleasantness, self-respect, and charity to others. The gentleman must at once display a "modest, complaisant, cheerful, affable" manner while also being committed "to defend the helpless against oppression, to fight valiantly for what he considers right, to stand ready to support a just cause against every opposition, to be capable of lasting indignation" (Letwin 17). Letwin writes that

"[d]iscerning foreigners have regularly expressed their astonishment at finding that a man might come of a grand and ancient family and not be gentleman" (6). Gilmour terms "the notion of a gentleman ... as a cultural goal, a mirror of desirable moral and social values," and writes that "the importance [of the gentleman] transcended rank because it was a moral and not just a social category" (1, 3). Indeed the ideal gentleman must be able to navigate the issue of class very delicately: he must "treat everyone as an equal without disregarding differences of rank" (Letwin 15).

Letwin and Gilmour further agree that the "gentleman" is a uniquely English phenomenon. Gilmour cites Gerard Manley Hopkins's comment that "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" (1). Letwin writes that "everyone agrees that the word [gentleman] describes something so peculiarly English that it cannot be translated," noting that "[t]he history of the word makes it impossible to doubt that the gentleman is a character whose native habitat is England" (19, 21). Placing the origins of the "gentleman" within a uniquely English sensibility links together definitions of gender and of nationality. Masculinity, then, is inseparable from "Englishness," and morality is not unlinked to class, and these are the lessons that Dickens himself pursued throughout his life and his fiction.

Gentility and Its Others in Dickens

Still one of the most widely read British novelists and one that enjoys popular as well as critical acclaim, Charles Dickens's current

position in the canon was matched by his power within Victorian literary circles during his lifetime. Catapulted to early fame (*Sketches by Boz* was published when he was twenty-four; *Oliver Twist* when he was twenty-five), Dickens held sway over the mid-nineteenth-century literary universe not only as its most popular novelist but also as a journalist, publisher, and editor, exercising control over other writers' works as well as his own. As the editor of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, Dickens oversaw the novels serialized in those weekly journals, which included Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, Wilkie Collins's *A Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, his own *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*, and many others. A crucial arbiter of Victorian literary tastes for a middle-class audience, Dickens was careful to manage his reputation as a writer of family fare. Dickens's *bildungsromane*—*Oliver Twist, David Copperfield,* and *Great Expectations*—are among his most popular novels, and all engage with the question of what it means to be a gentleman. At the same time, Dickens himself was pursued throughout his career and his life by the desire for and doubts about his gentility that are such prominent themes in his fiction.

Dickens's semi-autobiographical stories about boys growing up have at their core an anxiety about gentility—of how to become a gentleman and how to remain one—derived from his own childhood. One of the most traumatic and much-discussed events of Dickens's early life was connected with his family's impoverishment. At the age of twelve, Charles was taken out of school and sent to work in a blacking warehouse; a little over a week later, his father was imprisoned for debt, and his mother and siblings moved into the Marshalsea Prison along with the father. For the sensitive oldest son Charles, the trauma

of this experience—from family humiliation to a sense of personal betrayal—stayed with him for the rest of his life. In his autobiography, first printed in his friend John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Dickens wrote:

> The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more, cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life. (quoted in Johnson 34)

The connection that Dickens made here between financial insolvency on the one hand, and despair, humiliation, and misery on the other, haunted him throughout his life.

This blacking warehouse incident, discussed at length by critics and biographers, is replayed throughout Dickens's fiction as an anxiety about class and a pervasive consciousness of guilt. In particular, Dickens writes and rewrites the scene in two prominent instances in *David Copperfield* and in *Great Expectations*, and both examples bear striking similarities in tone and expression to the autobiographical narrative. It is as if Dickens sought, in writing, a catharsis for his trauma that was always ever incomplete, requiring repetition. In *David Copperfield*, the eponymous child protagonist is sent away from home by his brutal new stepfather Murdstone, and eventually ends up working in Murdstone and Grinby's factory warehouse. The description of David's sentiments is almost word for word that of Dickens's

autobiography:

> The deep remembrance of the sense I had, of being utterly without hope now; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation by, would pass away from me, little by little, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written (133)

In another fictional rendering, Pip in *Great Expectations* fears that the unattainably sophisticated and genteel Estella will see him in his crude blacksmith's apprentice's state, and he expresses the same sort of fear, anxiety, and shame as iterated above:

> What I dreaded was, that in some unlucky hour I, being at my grimiest and commonest, should lift up my eyes and see Estella looking in at one of the wooden windows of the forge. I was haunted by the fear that she would, sooner or later, find me out, with a black face and hands, doing the coarsest part of my work, and would exult over me and despise me. (87)

Here, the fear of humiliation is directed at the possibility of being seen by his romantic object, and further extends to her "exult[ation] over him."

Dickens's father's imprisonment for debt meant that poverty was dimly linked with criminality, and this sense of childhood trauma generated an unspecified but potent sense of guilt and wrongdoing. These anxieties, for instance, may explain why George Orwell views Dickens as "show[ing] less understanding of criminals than one would expect of him" (642). Orwell writes: "As soon as he comes up against crime or the worst depths of poverty, he shows trace of the 'I've always kept myself respectable' habit of mind" (642). On the other

hand, Anny Sadrin is somewhat more forgiving in describing Dickens as "divided between leniency towards the criminal that he might have been and contempt for the criminal that he never was" (72).

The author himself responded to these childhood anxieties with a lifetime craving for financial success. A highly commercially successful writer and wealthy by prevailing middle-class standards, Dickens spent his lifetime pursued by and satisfying his extended family's demands for money—from his parents and his brother to his ten children, from his wife and her sisters to his mistress—and sought to assure financial security for his dependents beyond his death. This anxiety about providing for everyone around him, critics suggest, contributed to Dickens's overwork in his late years and indirectly to his death. Bernard Shaw, for instance, judges that Dickens "overloaded himself and his unfortunate wife with such a host of children that he was forced to work himself to death prematurely to provide for them and for the well-to-do life he led" (637).

But money was not the only prerequisite for a gentleman that made Dickens uneasy. In part, Dickens's anxieties about his gentility derive from the shifting social and class definitions chronicled by Letwin and Gilmour above. In Dickens's time, the category of gentleman was newly separating itself from the leisured aristocracy and incorporating a middle-class work ethic. Gilmour writes that this period saw a revision of "the abiding separation of work and income on which the social exclusiveness of the traditional gentleman was based" (7). In the traditional view, "[i]t was considered essential that a gentleman should ... be able ... to 'live without manual labour,' " and thus the new conflict was that "while gentlemanly status offered respectability and independence within the traditional social hierarchy, at the same time

it challenged the dignity of the work which made the new industrial society possible" (7). Dickens, after all, was most definitely a working man: were the professions of journalist, writer, editor, publisher, and public performer, compatible with being a "gentleman"? If Dickens had been humiliated by the thought of working as a twelve-year-old boy (which would not have been extraordinary for Victorian children at the time), could he write novels for a living and still be a gentleman?

Dickens in his fiction advocates hard work and self-made middle-class men over the leisured aristocracy, and yet what he endorsed in principle and advocated in his fiction could be different from what he felt intuitively. Letwin notes that "what distinguishes a gentleman is not unworldliness, but rather industry and practicality," and while Dickens would agree with this, was he sure of this in his personal life, with a history of fearing the vulgarity of work? (18). Gilmour suggests that this very anxiety could "even be discerned at the heart of the personal quarrel between Dickens and [William Makepeace] Thackeray—Dickens who believed passionately in the dignity of literature, Thackeray who tended to feel that to earn one's living by writing novels was not a fit occupation for a gentleman" (7-8). And yet Thackeray's anxiety may not have been entirely unshared by Dickens. Of course it is impossible to determine the psychological state of an author who died over a hundred and thirty years ago. It is ironic, however, that in some ways the very work at which Dickens labored to ensure his distance from his childhood poverty, itself rendered uncertain his much-desired gentility.

If work might compromise his gentility, so too could Dickens's personal life during the last decade of his life. He had met Ellen

(Nelly) Ternan, a young actress twenty-seven years his junior and his soon-to-be mistress, in 1857. He soon separated from Catherine (Kate), his wife of twenty-three years and the mother of his ten children, and embarked on a life of multiple identities and multiple households (his own household with most of his children, Kate's household, Nelly's household, and other temporary living quarters). This new life would require him to adopt pseudonyms (when traveling with Nelly, as Claire Tomalin demonstrates in her biography of Ternan) and would involve a public disagreement with his long-standing publisher. In July 1860 Dickens's favorite daughter Kate married herself rashly to a man of whom her father could not approve and whom she did not love, and Dickens was plagued by the sense that she did so in order to escape his deteriorating household. The next year, his oldest son Charley married the daughter of Dickens's estranged publisher, and Dickens refused even to attend the wedding.

His personal circumstances were tenuous at best, and meanwhile Dickens was wildly anxious that his reading public might learn of the situation, which he felt, correctly, would damage his reputation as a family writer and would affect the sales of his books. He was upset by the effect on his children of the break-up of his family, and he must have considered the meaning of his actions within the moral climate of Victorian England. Was he a gentleman, even as he was an adulterer, a problematic father, and possibly a deceiver of his reading public? From questions of gentility and financial well-being that plagued Dickens from his childhood, to questions of gentility and profession as a working writer, now to questions of gentility and family values, Dickens throughout his life was haunted by the elusiveness of gentility.

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In what is perhaps Dickens's most sustained engagement with what it means to be a gentleman, *Great Expectations* draws on the insecurities and anxieties of the age in chronicling Pip's tempestuous road to becoming a gentleman. In this "most Victorian of Dickens's novels" published in 1860-61, the definition of a "gentleman" poses a constant puzzle for the main character and for everyone around him (Sadrin 47). Early in his childhood, Pip asserts that he "want[s] to be a gentleman," and believes that his dreams have come true when a mysterious anonymous benefactor directs that Pip be brought up and educated as one (101). This turns out to be only the beginning of Pip's journey toward differentiating the outer accoutrements of gentility from its inner meaning. Defining gentility may seem like the first step in attaining it, but confidence in being able to identify a *homo gentlemanis* seems inversely correlated with the actual ability to do so. Pip's hometown tailor Trabb or his uncle Pumblechook would not hesitate to offer a definition of a gentleman, based on the cut of a man's suit, the thickness of his wallet, or his social position, but actually know little about the species. Meanwhile, his brother-in-law Joe Gargery, who would least claim to know a gentleman if he saw one, turns out to be a true "gentle Christian man" (344). Pip the child believes that a "gentleman" must have clothes, wealth, and leisure; Pip the mature adult at the novel's end recognizes that a "gentleman" must have loyalty, generosity, and self-reliance.

Robin Gilmour writes that "It used to be said of Dickens that he could not describe a gentleman," a criticism that arose from a "snobbish assumption that he could not describe gentlemen because he

was not a gentleman himself" (105). *Great Expectations* spends five hundred pages tracing Pip's vexed and vexing relationship with the category of "gentleman," with Pip spending his adolescence trying to learn the discriminating ways of the genteel only to realize that his earlier, indiscriminating ways might have been the truest interpretation of gentility after all. Defining a "gentleman" is a life's work for Pip, and it was a life's work for Dickens, who at once participated publicly in the Victorian debate about the idea of the "gentleman" through his writings, and struggled privately with an unease about his own qualifications for that title.

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Abstract

The ideal of middle class British masculinity and the representative of the new Victorian respectability, the "gentleman" was difficult to define amidst the class mobility and social change of the nineteenth century. Was the gentleman to be identified by class and by money? By behavior and clothing? By religion and morality? This essay focuses on the problem of the "gentleman" as it was debated in the Victorian era and as it was reflected in the biography and work of the mid-nineteenth century's most important English writer, Charles Dickens. I examine the critical debate surrounding the Victorian idea of the "gentleman" by comparing the arguments of Shirley Robin Letwin's *The Gentleman in Trollope* (1982) and Robin Gilmour's *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (1981). Letwin views the "gentleman" as largely transcending class structure, while Gilmour's more historically-conscious view locates the gentleman as emerging out of, and even enabling, the class negotiations of this period. Against the backdrop of such debates, I discuss Charles Dickens's struggles with the idea of the gentleman in theory and in practice. In his novels, especially his semi-autobiographical *bildungsromane* about the growth and development of boys into adulthood, Dickens prominently engages with the identity and definition of the gentleman. As I demonstrate in this essay, this interest originated from Dickens's own childhood trauma and his subsequent drive to attain gentility, a necessity complicated by the vicissitudes of his personal and professional life.