

A Letter in Response to Leona Toker*

The argument of Toker's essay mainly focuses, in different ways, on patterns of decline that either fulfill themselves or are reversed. I think all readers of *Our Mutual Friend* would agree that this is a major theme of the novel. Thus a negative figure like Rogue Riderhood starts out bad and gets worse, whereas a relatively positive character like Eugene Wrayburn starts out neutral, begins to decline, and then gets better. I think Toker is wise to use the theme of recycling as one rendering of what takes place in the novel, though I think something more might be said about the motives for recycling. A person like Harmon senior might establish a business of recycling to amass wealth, just as Gaffer Hexam recycles corpses for a much more modest income. Jenny Wren, too, recycles for money, but her practice also has an element of craft, even art, to it. But the chief kind of recycling in the novel is of characters, and this is what Toker wishes to emphasize. However, her connecting all kinds of recycling in the novel, all modes of recovering potential waste, serves to demonstrate, I think unquestionably, how complex and intricate Dickens's design for this novel was. More and more critics are coming to admire this feature of the novel, and thereby giving the lie to Henry James's uncharacteristically unperceptive assessment of it.

The section on Betty Higden and her possible original in Mayhew is instructive of more than Toker says, though what she says is very helpful in understanding Dickens's approach to fiction and also some of his methods. For example, it could be said that he is recycling Mayhew. But what I really have in mind is how Dickens can convey to a knowing audience that he is including human and animal waste in the general term "dust," without having to say it. He signals other

*Reference: Leona Toker, "Decadence and Renewal in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 47-59.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debtoker01613.htm>>.

reminders to his readership, what was on the streets of London to be picked up. The episode between Podsnap and the foreign gentleman is instructive in this regard. Podsnap refers to the marks of prosperity in the London streets, and the foreign gentleman thinks he is referring to horse droppings. It is a sly and forceful way for Dickens to show up Podsnapian pretensions and bolster his motifs as well. Another sign is when Sloppy throws Wegg into the dust cart, creating a splash. Dust does not splash.

One feature of this essay that disturbs me is its title. The word “decadence” seems to me inappropriate, and I believe it is used just once to describe Eugene Wrayburn. Through much of the rest of the essay Toker uses the much more suitable “degenerate,” though that might be too strong a word as well. A case might be made for the word “decadence,” but I think then another theme and pattern in *Our Mutual Friend* would have to be explored. It has to do with dependency. Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn are both dependent upon the good will of their fathers; they are entrapped and suspended by their gentility. Twemlow is in a similar circumstance, being dependent on the aristocratic relative who sustains him. There are many more instances in varied degrees and kinds—including Riah’s dependency on Fledgeby and the Harmon children’s dependency upon their father. Much of the action, as Toker suggests, has to do with escaping that dependency. Harmon Jr. does this by falling in love with the supposedly hateful woman his father wanted to force him to marry, and thus marrying her by his own willed act. Eugene frees himself from the trap of ‘respectability’ by marrying Lizzie. In a way this dependency implies a decadence associated with idleness and even purposelessness. Such dependency, one way or another, must be overcome.

Toker’s essay is a good contribution to the growing respect *Our Mutual Friend* is commanding, mostly, as I said earlier, because it appreciates the art that went into the novel.

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