

**“FOR THE LOOK OF THE THING”: MIDDLE-CLASS
CONSUMERISM IN THE MAYHEW BROTHERS’ *LIVING FOR
APPEARANCES* AND *THE GREATEST PLAGUE OF LIFE***

Maria Dimitrova¹, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Bulgaria

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46687/WJXT686o>

Abstract: *The paper discusses the problem of consumerism in the Mayhew brothers’ Living for Appearances and The Greatest Plague of Life: Or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Good Servant. The two novels offer a satirical comment on the emergence, in the mid-19th century, of a distinctive commodity and consumer culture in England – a development intimately related to the growth and the new visibility of the middle classes. The paper places the novels within their appropriate cultural-historical context and discusses the ways in which they address contemporary anxieties about the new consumerism. Most importantly, it focuses on the nexus between consumption and social aspiration; on commodification; on the imitation and adulteration of commodities and social identities; on the specularization of the self; and, with respect to The Greatest Plague of Life, on the problem of the specifically female gender of consumerism.*

Key words: *Victorian fiction, consumerism, social class, gender, Henry and Augustus Mayhew*

In the second half of the 19th century, a newly dense material culture emerged in England that also became “a dominant cultural force” (Miller, A. 1995, p. 13). The process took place within the broad context of “a global industrial economy” in which the commodity assumed a new “world-historical role” (Richards, 1990, p. 1). A range of social, economic, and political factors interacted to create England’s new material culture: industrial production and a more efficient organization of supply and distribution; the repeal of key laws and key taxes and duties, which served to liberate the market; imperial expansion; urbanization (Lysack, 2008, p. 6; Miller, A. 1995, pp. 7-8; Graham, 2008, pp. 2-3). The growing middle classes had a crucial role to play in the process – their “unprecedented access to expendable income” (Lysack, 2008, p. 6) enabled them to establish a new business that consisted, put simply, in the “getting of things” (Richards, 1990, p. 2). Possessions enabled them to assert and sustain their identity in a society in which class distinctions and boundaries were becoming increasingly tenuous (Cohen, 2006, p. xi). The pursuit of commodities thus became an essential aspect of “middle-class self-fashioning” (Cohen, 2006, p. xv), and it resulted in what Veblen (2007) describes as an “elaborate and cumbrous” “apparatus of living” (p. 47).

¹ Assist. Prof. Maria Dimitrova, PhD, teaches at the Department of English and American Studies, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski.” Her academic interests include Victorian literature and culture, 20th-century English poetry, stylistics, poetics, and studies of the paratext. Email: maria.dimitrova@fcml.uni-sofia.bg

The "middle-class vision of restricted equality," on which the business of getting things was premised, received spectacular impetus from the Great Exhibition of 1851. The Exhibition created "a phenomenology and a psychology for a new kind of being, the consumer, and a new strain of ideology, consumerism." It instituted "a way of seeing things that marked indelibly the cultural and commercial life of Victorian England" and "prescribed the rituals by which consumers venerated the commodity for the rest of the century" (Richards, 1990, pp. 4, 17-18). It provided fresh stimulus for developments that were already under way in the culture and organization of shopping,² resulting in a fully "embodied and visual [...] shopping experience" (to borrow a phrase from Lysack, 2008, p. 6).

The home, too, was undergoing a crucial change. Various factors worked together towards the transformation of 19th-century middle-class households into "consumption units," in which the only form of production was "the 'production' of social ritual" (Davidoff, 1974, pp. 411, 416). Victorian homes were marked by a "taste for luxury, ostentation, and outward show" (Richards, 1990, p. 21), fed by the cornucopia of mass production.³ Indeed, as former luxuries came to be seen as necessities (Cohen, 2006, p. 36), the middle classes depended on rapidly proliferating new forms of luxury consumption in order to assert their status. This resulted in what cultural historians have described as the over-furnished look of the Victorian home – especially the late-Victorian home – in contrast to the sparer house interiors of the early 19th century.⁴ Every possible surface in the Victorian home was utilized for the strategic display of status symbols and the evidence of sophisticated taste (Graham, 2008, p. 77). The house, Victorians believed, made the man.

The new culture of consumerism provoked a host of social, economic, and moral anxieties. Most fundamentally, its materialism was hard to reconcile with the dominant religious values of the time; while the new forms of shopping gave rise to new varieties of crime and new types of criminals.⁵ There was also a general concern about the power of desire and the pervasiveness of commodification – about "the management of the appetites that circle around the display and consumption of goods," and the reduction of the social and moral universe to "a warehouse of goods and commodities, a display window in which people, their actions, and their convictions were exhibited for the economic appetites

² Graham (2008) discusses the "shopping revolution" that took place in the 1830s as prices began to be marked and goods began to be displayed on open counters and shelves; shop windows, too, grew larger and more enticing (pp. 6, 28). Andrew Miller (1995) offers a detailed account both of the new shopping experience and of the new technologies that made it possible (pp. 1-6; see also p. 51).

³ Cohen (2006) cites, for instance, a potter that created over a thousand new designs in 1848 alone; a furniture warehouse that offered nearly 300 types of sideboards; and a major furniture-maker that produced 7,000 different types of bedsteads (pp. 36, 39).

⁴ See, for instance, Cohen (2006), p. 34, and Graham (2008), pp. 76-77.

⁵ On the conflict between materialism and spirituality, see Cohen (2008), pp. ix-xvii, *passim*, and especially pp. 1-31. On 19th-century retail crime and fraud, and women's particular involvement in them, see Whitlock (2016).

of others” (Miller, A. 1995, pp. 10, 6). The Great Exhibition provoked, too, a wide debate on taste, in which the latter was often given a moral value – a tastefully made object was also believed to have a superior “moral tone,” while an object made in poor taste was seen as the sign of “moral turpitude” (Cohen, 2006, pp. 18-19). In addition, the new material culture and especially fashion were linked to a new selfishness, as well as to unseemly social competition and deceit. Contemporary commentators condemned, for instance, the woman who would

rather run in debt for a bonnet, than wear her old one a year behind the *mode*[,] give a ball and stint the family dinner a month after[,] take a large house, and furnish handsome reception-rooms, while her household huddle together anyhow in untidy attic bed-chambers (Craik, 1859, pp. 231-32; italics in the original).

These and other related anxieties found expression in literary discourse as well. Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* is a particularly graphic exploration of the processes of commodification (Miller, A. 1995, p. 6); and Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* critiques the reification of life and the relation between the adulteration of goods and the adulteration of social identities (Gurney, 2015). Indeed, Gurney suggests, adulteration in *Our Mutual Friend* emerges as “a typical characteristic of modern life, not simply as an anomaly of the market place but a persistent, structural feature” (p. 234). Alongside such well known works by major Victorian novelists, two much less familiar novels deserve our attention – Henry and Augustus Mayhew’s *The Greatest Plague of Life: Or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Good Servant*, first published in 1847, and *Living for Appearances*, serialized in the *Illustrated London News* in 1849-50 and published in book form in 1855.⁶ Unlike Thackeray or Dickens, whose work has been extensively studied, the Mayhew brothers’ fiction remains virtually unexplored: there are, to the best of my knowledge, no full-length studies or even individual articles dealing specifically with their novels.⁷ Yet *The Greatest Plague of Life* and *Living for Appearances* mark the same pivotal mid-century moment when the new material culture in England first took shape. Like the work of Thackeray or Dickens, these novels describe the pageant of commodities and probe into the relations between commodity and social identity. They are concerned with conspicuous consumption and social adulteration, with the problem of things done – of entire lives lived – for “the look of the thing” (*The Greatest Plague of Life*, 1864, pp. 210, 260; *Living for Appearances*, 1855, p. 12). To consider the issue of consumerism, commodification, and social aspiration in these two novels, as this paper proposes to do, is to add an important facet to the study of the literary representation of the new material

⁶ On the publication of *Living for Appearances*, see Humpherys (1977), p. 228. Humpherys also cites an 1850 American edition bearing the title *The Fear of the World; Or, Living for Appearances*; in personal correspondence, she has suggested this was probably a pirated edition.

⁷ Brief commentaries are mostly to be found in general discussions of Victorian literature and culture – for instance, Fernandez (2010) comments on *The Greatest Plague of Life* within a discussion of servant literacy (see pp. 11-12); and Chamberlain (2014) considers the novel within a discussion of the representation of servants’ bodies (see pp. 298-301). Roddy et al. (2014) also remark on the paucity of scholarly attention to the Mayhews’ novels (p. 487).

culture that emerged in England in the second half of the 19th century. Within this discussion, occasional brief parallels will be drawn with those of Dickens's novels which are most crucially concerned with the problem of consumerism, and thus provide convenient reference points. But the paper's aim is, above all, to give critical visibility to two largely unfamiliar works of Victorian literature, which also function as important documents of culture.⁸

Living for Appearances tackles a number of the problems arising from the new commodity culture head-on. Subtitled *A Tale*, the novel is, indeed, a cautionary tale and a fable for the times. It tells the story of the Nichollses, a "would-be rich" (p. 143) London couple who, despite their slim and precarious finances, aspire to cultivate a lavish lifestyle that would give them entry into more exalted circles. Mr Nicholls is a barrister who only makes £100 a year and vitally depends on an annual allowance of £500 from his father in Newcastle; Mrs Nicholls is the daughter of a farmer who died in debt. The story of their social aspirations is the story of a headlong fall. With each new trophy they acquire – diamonds for Mrs Nicholls, an opera box, a carriage, a larger house in a more fashionable area – they are progressively reduced to asking for an advance on the quarterly instalment from Mr Nicholls's father, for a loan from Reuben Marsh, Mrs Nicholls's farmer brother (whom they otherwise shun), and for an acceptance from a shady friend. They resort to Jewish money-lenders and the pawnshop; they briefly leave London in order to flee from creditors; near the end, Mr Nicholls even forges Reuben's signature in order to provide a guarantor for his debts. After Mr Nicholls's father dies, depriving Nicholls of his allowance and leaving him nothing in his will, the downward spiral stops just short of debtor's prison, with Nicholls held captive at a sordid sponging-house.

The novel's message about "reckless gilded misery" (p. 147) is bald and stark – from the derogatory connotations of the title and a frontispiece proleptically showing Mr Nicholls in the sponging-house; through Reuben's warning, in the opening chapter, that he sees "ruin written in gilt letters" in the Nichollses' house (p. 16); through the sharp juxtaposition, too, of the idle, affected Nichollses and the hard-working, honest Marshes; right up to the abrupt fairy-tale ending, in which the Nichollses' pride is humbled – they end up living in the country along with the Marshes, mending their own clothes and growing their own food, with the world of fashionable London society irrevocably lost. And though the authors stop short of giving the protagonists a tell-tale name such as Dickens gave his Veneerings, the commonplace "Nichollses" was presumably meant to suggest a very common type.⁹

⁸ The length of this paper does not permit a discussion of another novel, written by Henry Mayhew alone – 1851: *Or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and Family, Who Came Up to London to 'Enjoy Themselves,' and to See the Great Exhibition* (1851). This merits a separate study.

⁹ In fact, the novel also lends itself to an autobiographical reading: as Roddy et al. (2014) point out, many of the Mayhews' mid-century novels "seem to correspond to the financial difficulties" surrounding Henry Mayhew's own bankruptcy (p. 487).

Given Mr Nicholls's modest earnings and Mrs Nicholls's modest background, what do they base their hopes of elevation on? Their only claims to distinction are Mr Nicholls's father's knighthood and Mrs Nicholls's beautiful rounded shoulders. The couple's entire social career consists in inflating those two status symbols and converting them into social currency that can buy them the right to mingle with the titled; while each of their material purchases – from the daily groceries to the horse and carriage – is made on credit. The reason why they can get the diamonds for Mrs Nicholls on credit is that Mr Nicholls's father, Sir Giles, has dealt with the jeweller for years. The knighthood, however, is in fact the result of a “lucky accident” (p. 4) – a form of social adulteration and inflation also satirized by Dickens: in *Our Mutual Friend*, self-satisfied Lady Tippins is the “relict of the late Sir Thomas Tippins, knighted in mistake for somebody else” (1865, p. 90). Even more importantly, the impact of Sir Giles's title in the circles towards which the Nichollses aspire is actually limited: on one occasion, Lady Verulam asks Nicholls whether he is related to “that amiable man, Sir Giles Nicholls,” whom she met during a trip to the North (p. 36), and that is all. (The association with the industrial North, too, hardly enhances the title's value as symbolic capital.) Mr Nicholls therefore concentrates on making the most of Mrs Nicholls's shoulders, both displaying them in their own right and using them for a further display of affluence in the form of jewellery. In his consistent effort to capitalize on her looks, he thus transforms her into the perfect trophy wife.¹⁰

It is those shoulders and their visibility that the couple use to measure the degree of their social success. Threatened with insolvency, Nicholls dreads to think that his wife's shoulders may have to end up in the country, “unseen and unappreciated” (p. 150); buoyed by fresh hope, he rejoices that the shoulders will not, after all, have to be “thrown away upon vulgar people: they might still be the admiration of people of *ton*” (p. 151; italics in the original). And when the couple *are* eventually reduced to provincial life, Mrs Nicholls wistfully reminisces about “how much her shoulders had been admired by the *élite* of London” (p. 185; italics in the original). Conversely, the zenith of their social career is marked by the dazzling exposure of Mrs Nicholls's charms shown to their best advantage by black velvet and new jewellery. On one occasion, Mrs Nicholls's body makes such a perfect site for the display of the diamonds that, as her husband remarks complacently, “he saw an old dowager with her eyes fixed upon them for a quarter of an hour” (p. 34).

Throughout the novel, social triumph for the couple consists in being looked at by those they look up to: they systematically construct and offer themselves as objects for visual consumption. The reason they find their opera box a success is that the lights make Mrs Nicholls's diamonds even more dazzling and she proves a magnet for the audience's lorgnettes. Nicholls himself becomes

¹⁰ She is, of course, one in an array of trophy wives in Victorian fiction. Unlike Dickens's Edith Dombey, for instance, Mrs Nicholls is a comic creation, but also one that demonstrates starkly the extent to which the wives of the moneyed could be relegated to the realm of the specular.

a similar magnet on one memorable occasion on which Lord Cressey "walk[s] home with him all down Bond-street, and everyone ke[eps] looking at them" (p. 116). The couple concentrate all their energy on enhancing the exhibition value – to use Benjamin's term (1969, p. 225) – of their possessions. Thus, for instance, they decide to move to a house near Hyde Park in order to allow for the maximum impact of their lifestyle: just as Mrs Nicholls's shoulders would be wasted on the provinces, the couple's newly acquired horse and carriage would be wasted on the humbler St. John's Wood. Likewise, the reason they particularly treasure the invitation to the wedding of Lady Verulam's daughter is that the newspapers will print a list of all present at the event.

In its most basic form, the construction of social cynosure in the novel consists in the static display of material objects – the more numerous and the brighter they are, the better. Sir Giles's house, for instance, flaunts the family coat-of-arms painted over the door in "glaring blue, red, and yellow"; inside "all [is] tinsel and glitter" – the "heterogeneous mass of riches heaped up" even in smaller rooms "make[s] the eye ache with the daubs of red and yellow and gold that besmear[...] the furniture on all sides" (p. 168). This is a particularly stark illustration of the Victorian tendency, discussed earlier, to crowd and clutter domestic space with symbols of breeding and status. The description may be a little overblown; but it serves the novel's satiric and didactic purposes perfectly, and suggests the degree to which even the supposedly private space of the home could be transformed into an overwhelmingly public area for the public performance of status. The Englishman's home may be his castle, but it certainly is his Great Exhibition.

The party designed to quash the rumours of the Nichollses' insolvency involves a similar display, in which even the food is intended primarily as a spectacle. The proof of the novelty confectionery is in the gazing: the Nichollses know their party is a success when they see the elephant cake "look[ing] magnificent" and the sugar birdcages draw "loud and continued admiration" (p. 153). The display is, of course, spurious: virtually every item at the party has either been acquired on credit, including the dining-room table that provides the central exhibition area, or – like the plate, the epergnes, and the candelabra on the table – simply hired. Even more thoroughly than the description of Sir Giles's house, the description of the party exposes not simply dubious taste and dubious breeding, but the fraudulent practices of social imitation and adulteration – the construction of counterfeit social selves.

Imitation and adulteration are, indeed, the Nichollses' chief *modus operandi* as they manufacture themselves as a spectacle for others' consumption. At its most general, their ambition is to create the impression of an income several times their actual income. They also strive to create an impression of provenance where there is none. Thus, they justify the old-fashioned setting of Mrs Nicholls's diamonds by explaining that the diamonds are an old family heirloom (Mrs Nicholls, we remember, is of farming stock). Likewise, the four "respectable" green-grocers that the couple hire as footmen for the grand

party are meant to look as if they have been with them from “[their] infancy” (p. 149).¹¹ The practice of imitation and adulteration extends to virtually all the Nichollses’ social interactions. On one occasion, for instance, Mrs Nicholls goes to the opera wearing not only her usual finery but also an added plume which suggests that, like other members of the audience, she has arrived at the opera straight from a reception at the Queen’s drawing room. And if Sir Giles’s title is adventitious, at least some of Mrs Nicholls’s charms are artificial: her famous ringlets are a result of the fact that she spends most of her life in curl-papers.

The social cynosure which the Nichollses so carefully construct is, due to its spuriousness, necessarily haunted by the threat of its dark reverse: staging their grand exhibitions of status, they are perpetually on the brink of making an exhibition of themselves. The most dramatic transformation of the site of their triumph into the site of their humiliation happens at the very party that is meant to boost their floundering reputation. Shortly after the success of the magnificent confectionery, Nicholls causes a reckless row with the unsavoury Mr Isaacs, who has come to serve him with a writ, producing the most entertaining spectacle for the most receptive audience the couple have ever attained in the circles they aspire to. The debacle marks the end of their social career. The Nichollses provide similar entertainment for humbler audiences as well. Though they consider their neighbours in St. John’s Wood unworthy of their full pomp and ceremony, they treat them to a spectacle of another kind. As the neighbourhood’s tradesmen are alerted that the couple are about to move, and despair of receiving their long-overdue payment, they lay a concerted siege to the Nichollses’ house. The “free exhibition” is a delight to the entire street, with the buttermilk’s passionate ranting inspiring “the select audience on the reserved steps” to encourage even greater abuse (pp. 124-25).

The line between public triumph and public disgrace can be precariously thin, the novel suggests. This point is made most strikingly through the preparations for the party that will signal the couple’s social demise. On the night before the party, immediately after the house has been through an auction, Mrs Nicholls’s major concern is that all traces of that humiliating display should be removed – the disarranged furniture must be restored to its proper place, and everything must be thoroughly cleaned “lest ‘Lot 20’ should be left on the back of a chair or in the corner of a glass, and be detected by the company on the following evening” (p. 152). Mrs Nicholls as stage manager, then, works desperately against the auctioneer as stage manager; in the end, the latter will prove the more powerful of the two, staging the definitive performance of public disgrace that will end all performances of status.

¹¹ The use of servants as accessories falsely attesting to one’s long-standing eminence is also ridiculed in *Dombey and Son*. The ever ambitious Mrs Skewton adds glamour to Edith and Dombey’s wedding by hiring not only two “very tall young men in livery,” but also a “silver-headed butler” who looks like “an ancient family retainer” (Dickens, 1846, p. 300).

Mrs Nicholls's concern about erasing certain signs is an aspect of the novel's broader interest in the use and abuse of social signs, and their reading and misreading. The Nichollses' social failure, the novel suggests, is to a great extent the consequence of their inability to read social signs. For all their careful manufacture and deployment of signs of status, they are often oblivious to the meaning of signs offered by others and helpless to tell an imitation from the genuine article. At the ill-fated party, for instance, Mrs Nicholls fails to see what the entire party and the reader both see – that Mr Isaacs is a money-lender – and presses her husband to introduce her to the "great city capitalist" she imagines him to be (p. 154). She is taken in, it is clear, by Isaacs's frilly shirt and flashy jewellery; at the same time, she ignores all other tell-tale signs, including his distinctive lisp. (Isaacs is a caricature of the Jewish money-lender as he appeared to the Victorian popular imagination.) Likewise, though she instructs her brother in the conventional white lies of fashionable etiquette, she fails to see the true meaning of Lady Verulam's amazement that the Nichollses have not received the wedding invitation she sent them such a long time ago and of the hasty invitation she then issues in person. Despite her claims to sophistication, Mrs Nicholls is, in fact, a less skilled reader of signs than her rustic brother, who can tell at a glance that the Nichollses could not possibly own all the fancy furniture they have installed in their house. Far from deceiving the Verulams of the world, the couple's inept imitations cannot deceive a simple farmer from Farnham.

The Nichollses' social and consumer ineptitude can also be seen in their susceptibility to bargains. That, along with other weaknesses and vanities, is skilfully exploited by both tradesmen and social acquaintances, feeding the couple's circuit of desire. And this circuit is strikingly self-perpetuating, to borrow a formulation from Andrew Miller (1995, p. 30). The opera-box, for instance, becomes especially attractive after the acquisition of the diamonds, as a splendid site for their display; the frequent trips to the opera make it seem imperative that the couple own a carriage rather than hire one; and the horse and carriage make necessary a larger house with stables in a more fashionable area for the couple's increasingly lavish lifestyle to gain maximum visibility. The Nichollses justify their engagement in this circuit through extravagant rationalization: diamonds, for example, may seem pricey but, being such a good investment, are really quite cheap. When all is said and done, the Nichollses believe that all their "looking-glasses, and ottomans, and tables, and china ornaments, and what not, are as necessary to [them], in [their] station, as [Reuben's] ploughs, and carts, and horses are to him" (p. 20).

The desire both to consume and to offer oneself as an object of visual consumption pervades the most private spaces of the home, and it does so not just through the copious display of static objects – as in the clutter of glitter in Sir Giles's house – but also through the fashionable display of emotion. Even when alone with her husband in her boudoir, Mrs Nicholls can only express her distress about the impending financial catastrophe through a highly contrived

and expensive performance, throwing herself back “in a graceful attitude of grief,” daintily holding “a handkerchief of the most delicate texture,” “dipp[ing] a corner into a scent-bowl [...] on the table beside her,” and “gently, very gently, bath[ing] her temples” (p. 150). She carefully constructs herself as an object of visual consumption – a compelling spectacle of “fashionable anxiety” – in a *mise-en-scène* just as carefully constructed from a range of luxury objects of which she is the primary consumer: the chair and the dressing-table, the handkerchief, the scent-bowl, the eau-de-cologne sprinkled on the carpet, the “purple satin robe negligée” (p. 148).

The most private events in the novel, too, are utilized for the purposes of the public display of status and are converted into social currency. At the news of Sir Giles’s death, not only are the Nichollses unable to conceal their relief that, as they think, they will now be saved from ruin, but they also immediately look for whatever symbolic capital they may derive from the death. The obituary notice in the papers must say that “the bereavement has plunged several distinguished families into mourning” (p. 167); the mourning livery for the servants will provide fresh evidence of the couple’s prosperity; and the colour of Mrs Nicholls’s mourning outfit is carefully chosen to highlight her complexion and so enhance her value as spectacle.

Living for Appearances can, then, be seen to reflect a whole host of economic and moral anxieties provoked by the new consumerism. In the first place, it is concerned with such practices as the abuse of credit, the use of false credit and false names, and the accumulation of debt; with usury and bankruptcy. These are as central to the novel as they are to *Our Mutual Friend*, for instance, where the economic and social downfall of the Veneerings and the Lammles is a crucial element in the novel’s narrative and moral arc. Like Dickens’s Lammles, too, the Nichollses demonstrate how a marriage can degenerate into a mere economic partnership, a joint effort at surviving on credit. (If the Nichollses do not quite try to “live well on nothing a-year” [Thackeray, 1848, p. 321], they certainly try to appear to live well on a pittance.) More vitally still, *Living for Appearances* is concerned with the dangers of materialism and unbridled social aspiration, with social imitation and social inflation, and with the specularization of the self through the performance of status and through the self’s construction as a privileged object of visual consumption, enhanced or sustained by other objects. This, too, is a concern the novel shares with a number of major mid-Victorian novels, just as it shares some of their key motifs and tropes. The high-society parties in both *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, for example, are carefully contrived visual performances in which mirrors and reflections play a crucial part. For the Dedlocks’ grand dinner, “[a]ll the mirrors in the house are brought into action”; and the guests themselves specialize in “put[ting] a smooth glaze on the world” (Dickens, 1853, p. 112). The Veneerings’ parties are fascinating instances of *trompe-l’œil*, in which a huge mirror reflects the “high varnish and polish” of the couple’s spurious wealth, making it both more dazzling and

more unreal; and the guests are similarly "dyed and varnished" for the occasion (Dickens, 1865, pp. 5, 90).

To address all these anxieties, *Living for Appearances* resorts to well-trying, reliable moralistic and didactic schemas like the fairy-tale juxtaposition of the good and the wicked and the fairy-tale punishment of hubris. Taking pride in one's place, no matter how humble that is, is good; status-hunting and the greed for glitter are wicked, and are punished accordingly. But above all, of course, the novel is a satire. It exposes and ridicules the errors and vices of its time in order to remedy and correct them; and it revolves around such time-honoured satirical subjects as vanity, hypocrisy, and greed.

Though also satiric, *The Greatest Plague of Life* is not didactic – its use of a 1st-person narrator protagonist makes it nicely ironic; its moral juxtapositions are clear, but not conspicuous; and it is richer in nuance and detail. It also offers a gendered – rather than general – version of consumerism and social pretension. It is Caroline, the narrator protagonist, who aspires to a higher status through the deliberate acquisition and deployment of commodities, while her husband Edward has a much more modest taste and is not particularly concerned with image. The novel is thus representative of the new material culture, in which the woman consumer was seen to play an especially prominent – and disturbing – role. Women, in fact, may have "provided the driving force" for the new consumerism (Whitlock, 2016, p. 3). By the 1860s, shopping had become "a fully articulated form of middle-class women's leisure"; the emergence of the department store further served to institutionalize a distinctly female "urban sphere of consumption" (Lysack, 2008, pp. 2, 12). The new part which shopping played in women's lives caused a number of moral concerns. Most importantly, those were concerns about idleness and compulsion which breached the "decorum of domestic middle-class femininity" (Lysack, 2008, p. 3). But excessive female appetite, linked to the nation's precarious industrial health, could also be presented as a threat to the nation (Lysack, 2008, pp. 2-3); and its anarchic vulgarity could be seen as "the barbarian at the gate" of civilization (Miller, E. 2008, p. 178). Despite its universal appeal, even the Great Exhibition was perceived to have a specifically dangerous appeal to women's fantasies and desires (Miller, A. 1995, pp. 64-70). Finally, female consumerism caused particular concern when linked to retail fraud and crime – such as shoplifting – in an even more flagrant breach of middle-class feminine propriety (Whitlock, 2016, p. 3; Graham, 2008, p. 8).

Caroline is not a criminal. As a married woman, she sets out to establish her own "proud [domestic] empire" and become its "lovely" ruler (p. 11). She aspires, in other words, towards the Victorian ideal of the genteel housewife who supervises others' work but does not work herself, demonstrating her husband's economic and social success. In Veblen's terms (2007), the only work that the genteel wife performs is of a non-productive, "ostensibl[e]" kind which consists in the "painstaking attention to the service of the [husband], or to the maintenance

and elaboration of the household paraphernalia.” Such “[c]onspicuous abstention from labour” is the accepted sign of both “superior pecuniary achievement” and “reputability”: more than just “a honorific or meritorious act,” it comes to be regarded as “a requisite of decency” (pp. 42, 30-31).

The chief means by which Caroline aspires to enhance the household’s social standing is the acquisition of a “large retinue of servants” (p. 274); her control and management of servants is also the aspect of her imperial power that she prizes above all others. Domestic service was, of course, increasingly necessary to the Victorian middle classes. This was not only because the wife had become “virtually functionless,” but also because the large families, the large cluttered houses, and the large-scale entertainment – all indices of status – generated enormous amounts of work (Burnett, 1994, pp. 137, 128). It is, however, significant that Caroline’s most cherished ambition is to acquire men servants in particular, rather than just a “pack of females” (p. 242); more specifically still, she is determined to obtain a footman. Men servants in Victorian England were paid more than women servants, and there was a tax on their employment; they were thus an index of greater status. In broader cultural-historical terms, men servants are especially suited to provide evidence of conspicuous consumption and enact vicarious leisure – “[m]en, especially lusty, personable fellows ... are obviously more powerful and more expensive than women,” and thus attest to “a larger waste of time and of human energy” (Veblen, 2007, p. 42). The perfect embodiment of such conspicuous consumption and vicarious leisure is the footman, whose physical appearance is particularly striking and whose duties are essentially ceremonial. Indeed, as Veblen (2007) points out, in being exempted from productive labour and entrusted solely with the performance of vicarious leisure, the footman occupies a position similar to the wife’s. The dyad of “the lady and the lackey” is thus a particularly powerful index of the husband’s status (p. 42).

Caroline herself indulges in a rosy vision of the lady and the lackey; she imagines growing old with a faithful footman in her attendance – a tall, handsome man in a powdered wig who would add glamour to her lifestyle by performing such ceremonial services as following her to church or opening the door to visitors. Her vision rests, too, on an implicit assumption of a footman’s particular “facility in the tactics of subservience” (Veblen, 2007, p. 44), although she imagines herself, rather than her husband, as the primary recipient of subservience.¹² Determined to achieve her dream, Caroline overcomes Edward’s reluctance to incur unnecessary expense; she overcomes, too, his reluctance to go to the extra expense of livery. Edward does not understand why a footman cannot wear plain clothes; but to Caroline the entire point of having a footman is having someone in clothes as gaudy as possible “publish” the family’s prosperity as loudly as possible – “as conspicuously,” in her words, “and in as many colours, as a Vauxhall posting-bill”

¹² As it happens, Caroline is sorely disappointed in her expectations of both added glamour and conspicuous subservience.

(p. 252). If Edward is opposed to livery because it is a "badge[...] of servitude," Caroline insists on it for that very reason. In fact, she would love to "put a beautiful brass collar round [the footman's] neck, with [the family's] name and address nicely engraved on it, so that he might go about like a Newfoundland dog, and people know whose property he [is]"; only it isn't the fashion (p. 251). Livery is similarly described by Veblen (2007) as a supreme "badge of servitude" (p. 56); in going a step further and reducing her servant to dog-like "property," Caroline performs one of the most egregious acts of commodification in Victorian fiction – more calculated and self-serving, for instance, than Gradgrind's utilitarian reduction of Sissy Jupe to "Girl number twenty" (Dickens, 1854, p. 12).

Livery is also a classic example of vicarious consumption (Veblen, 2007, p. 49); and indeed, Caroline regards her footman as a kind of mannequin – a convenient object for the display of clothes she loves but cannot wear herself. She repeatedly refers to the footman's livery as *her* livery – e.g. "my dress livery" or "my beautiful white coat" (pp. 270, 271). She also describes it in loving and lingering detail, using the same terms of endearment that she uses for her baby daughter: "I ordered the tailor to make me a love of a white coat, and a pet of a canary waistcoat, and a perfect duck of a pair of bright crimson plush knee what-d'ye-call-'ems" (p. 252). She views her page, too, as a dummy for the display of "my lovely livery" and "my bluchers" (pp. 224, 225); and she describes his outfit in the same rapturous manner, using culinary terms that highlight its status as an object of consumption:

I think it looked the sweetest thing I ever set eyes upon in all my life. The jacket was a claret, with three rows of sugar-loaf buttons, as close together as a rope of onions; and there were a pair of nice quiet dark-coloured pantaloons, running rather into the port wine than partaking of the claret (p. 223).

The mass of shiny buttons is a point of particular pride for Caroline; it is another version of the clutter of glitter we saw in the description of Sir Giles's home in *Living for Appearances*. Like a wall or a tabletop, a page's body provides a convenient surface for the display of status, and is even more efficient – Sir Giles's static display is available only to visitors to the house, while a page is a walking advertisement spreading the message of affluence among a wide audience.¹³

Above all, of course, Caroline is an avid consumer of clothing in her own right. In the first place, the purchase of clothes plays an important part in the power dynamics of her marriage. Caroline is always trying to "prevail" on her husband to buy her new clothes (p. 3); after a row, she manipulates him into making up with her through the present of a fine dress; and she would like to buy some of the most expensive dresses she can find in order to teach him a lesson. In other words, she uses clothes not just as a ready status symbol reflecting her husband's economic power, but also as a means of asserting her

¹³ In the end, however, both the footman and the page thwart Caroline's intentions: each makes his livery a disgrace, and she is ashamed to have them escort her in the street.

own power over him within her domestic empire. In addition, she habitually uses housekeeping money to buy herself trinkets, and sometimes rationalizes that the household cannot afford to waste money on this or that, especially as by making appropriate economies, she can get “a few little odd things” for herself without bothering Edward (p. 66). This approach to finance casts doubt on the soundness of Caroline’s imperial rule; in fact, her practices amount to petty domestic fraud – a small-scale version of the consumer crime that in the 19th-century was particularly associated with women. Her attitude also reflects one of the contemporary concerns about the new (female) consumerism discussed at the beginning of the paper: Caroline is an illustration of the selfish, vulgar emulation that drives a woman to prize a new bonnet or a flashy party over her family’s comfort.

But beyond the way in which Caroline uses clothes to assert her power, she is enthralled by their material properties – by their colour, texture, and shape. In the description of her clothes, even the clothes she wears reluctantly, we find at work a kind of cataloguing gaze making a meticulous inventory of individual items. With her favourite clothes and accessories, we find her using, again, a kind of language of love. Caroline’s most passionate affairs are those with “my best bonnet (a black velvet one, with a black bird of Paradise in it)” or “my sweet white muslin skirt and black velvet body” (pp. 7, 266). She even apostrophizes her clothes:

When I saw my beautiful Swiss cambric again, with its sweet pretty little, bright-red flower upon it, and its rich skirt and four rows of deep flounces, I couldn’t for the life of me help saying to myself, ‘Oh, you are a perfect love, I declare! And when you’re nicely clear-starched you’ll look superb, with my pink drawn silk bonnet and green shot-silk scarf, next Sunday at church’ (p. 208).

There is, furthermore, no scene so tense that Caroline cannot interpolate a description of “my beautiful lace bonnet and love of a poplin dress – salmon shot stuff” (p. 262). Finally, she uses her accessories to add drama to a scene: during one family row, she buries her face in a “sweet pretty cambric handkerchief, with a very rich imitation Valenciennes border” that gives her sobbing extra style (p. 245). Like Mrs Nicholls and her *mise-en-scène* of luxurious grief, Caroline deliberately constructs herself as the object of visual consumption.

In fact, Caroline speaks fondly of all objects that make up her genteel household – from the “little duck” of a house and the “darling pet of a dear” piano (p. 152) to “my beautiful queen’s-pattern plated coffee-pot, with silver edges” (p. 271) and a “beautiful white satin pincushion, with a superb lace border” (p. 110). In addition to appreciating their aesthetic qualities, she is keenly aware of their value as status symbols. The pincushion, for instance, is especially precious because it is a gift from a posh family whose friendship Caroline wishes to cultivate; and she is proud to have a particular type of toast rack because it is used “in the best of families” (p. 176).

The one object she uses most assiduously to elevate her status is the piano. To begin with, she needs a piano because it will provide her with a genteel occupation and save her from the utilitarian, ungentle mending of clothes. This is also an occupation that can easily be transformed into social ritual and add glamour to her at-home days. Finally, the acquisition itself can be used as the occasion for a grand event: such an important object needs proper inauguration. Indeed, Caroline regards entertaining as a "moral obligation" and "common honesty" in the conventional exchange of supper for supper and dance for dance (p. 153). Social entertainment, to Veblen (2007), is a particularly effective form of conspicuous vicarious consumption (pp. 53-54), and Caroline aspires to make her party as effective as possible. She makes elaborate preparations to enhance the most attractive features of her house and disguise the least attractive ones; she also devises an extensive menu which will make the table look appropriately "crowded" (p. 154) and which includes fancy confectionery that, like the Nichollses', is meant to be looked at rather than eaten. (She must be very careful about that because she only has it on hire.) In the event, however, a series of comic accidents – the result of Caroline's efforts to save money and show off at the same time – make the party a complete fiasco before it has even begun. Like the Nichollses' attempts at the performance of status, this too is a dismal failure. Far from enhancing her social standing, the thwarted party undermines it, as Caroline is forced to literally turn her visitors from the door.

Caroline's party menu suggests that she is as attentive to food as she is to household possessions. But while a woman is allowed and even expected to be fond of dainty coffee-pots and pretty pincushions – it is, after all, the genteel wife's responsibility to attend to the paraphernalia of the home (Veblen, 2007, p. 42) – she is not expected to enjoy her food too much. Indeed, she is not expected to be quite corporeal. In Veblen's terms (2007) again, the fact that a woman is "infirmly delicate, translucent, and hazardously slender" dispels all suspicion of productive labour; it attests to the vicarious leisure she performs for her husband and bestows gentility (p. 98). In 19th-century England in particular, middle-class women were exhorted to restrain their natural "love of self-indulgence"; those of them who felt an "affinity between culinary operations, and the natural tone and character of their own minds" were considered especially dangerous. By favouring the kitchen over the parlour and devoting themselves to the service of "mere animal appetite," they were responsible for lowering the nation's moral tone (Ellis, 1839, pp. 45, 41). As regards literary representation, although the dinner table plays an important narrative role in Victorian fiction, and although it is easy to find in it detailed descriptions of male characters' meals, references to women eating are markedly absent; despite the genre's scrupulous realism, women's appetite was banished from the Victorian novel (Michie, 1987, pp. 12-13).

The Greatest Plague of Life is different: it describes without restraint Caroline's unrestrained appetite. To a great extent, the protagonist's life revolves around food. She times her visits to family and friends with an eye to getting a

good meal. Faced with the choice of lamb sweetbreads or a round of beef, she buys both. Often, she rationalizes her exuberant appetite – she uses the adage “feed a cold” to sanction her gorging on meat; she pretends that she is having a certain dessert made for Edward, when it is one of her own favourites; she justifies her passion for gooseberry pudding by claiming she is observing religious ritual; she uses the fact that she is nursing to drink as much porter as she likes. But Caroline can also be quite unabashed about her gluttony. “[I]t was so beautiful to sit there,” she says of one meal, “eating that heavenly cold baked rice-pudding till I was afraid I should make myself ill” (p. 204). The novel abounds in detailed descriptions of meals, in which Caroline’s cataloguing gaze is once again at work. She cannot make a simple sandwich without specifying which particular side of the round of beef and what particular type of bread she is using. Just as with clothes, there is no subject so important that she cannot make a culinary digression. She may, for instance, mean to report a crucial conversation with Edward, but there is very little of the conversation in her report; instead, there is a lot of parenthetical discourse on the preparation of bread pudding and the happy combination of sage and onions in mutton stuffing.

And as with clothes, again, Caroline is tempted to buy treats for herself using household money and thus commits petty domestic fraud. But she also commits petty theft. During a visit to a pastry-shop, she consumes two lemon waters, three Bath buns, two raspberry puffs, two gooseberry tarts, and “at least six” almond cakes; when the waitress at the counter asks her what she has had, she cuts the number of almond cakes to “three or four” (p. 247). As usual, she rationalizes: “pastry cooks know very well that ladies never can, or, at least, never will tell them exactly to a paltry penny cake or two what they have had,” so they adjust prices accordingly (p. 247). The scene reflects Victorian anxieties about female compulsion and female consumer crime. Even more importantly, Caroline’s rationalization reveals a disturbing connection between norms of feminine propriety and crime: it is to disguise their deficient femininity that female consumers resort to theft.

The novel also genders one of consumerism’s chief follies: susceptibility to bargains. All its central female characters are guilty of that. Whether it is incredibly cheap Epsom salts sold at an obscure chemist’s, or a camphine lamp that costs “a mere nothing” and will save one a fortune on candles (p. 38), or an old family portrait cheaply revarnished and reframed – all these are hunted out and treasured as good bargains. All of them, too, cause or contribute to some of the novel’s most comic domestic disasters, and amount to a satiric comment on the female consumer’s greed and lack of discrimination. The secondary character Dick Farden, who is in the bargain business, also explicitly targets female consumers and exploits their tendency to buy goods they do not need, and buy them at regular prices, as long as the goods are offered to them as bargains. These “angels of women,” he suggests, resemble owls in their irresistible attraction to the ruins of failed businesses (p. 148).

The women in the novel are also deeply involved in imitation and adulteration. At the most basic level, Caroline's maid Susan copies her caps using cheaper materials, and the cook disguises the fact she has drunk the cherry brandy by filling the bottle with cold tea and unripe cherries. Many of Caroline's own prized possessions are at least part imitation. The dainty handkerchief she sobs into for effect has "a very rich imitation Valenciennes border" (p. 245); her Shetland shawl and ermine tippet, too, are imitations; and her plate is only British (i.e., the silver is alloyed with nickel). The shiny buttons on the page's livery, of which Caroline is so proud, are also imitations: when the silver comes off, it leaves the buttons "as coppery looking as the plated ornaments on the harness of a hackney coach horse" (p. 227). In fact, her page and her footman are imitation goods to begin with – because the family is not as well-off as Caroline would like, she has to get her page from the workhouse, and she can only afford a footman who is fairly slim. And when, preparing for her piano party, she transforms the staircase-window into a gaudy imitation of stained glass, she is only doing what Susan does in copying her caps: she engages in a bit of DIY, cutting out flowers from an old chintz curtain and gluing them to the glass. Like the good bargains, many of these imitations ultimately result in debacle and loss of face for Caroline.

Imitation and adulteration are, indeed, a recurrent theme in the novel, reflecting a host of contemporary anxieties. One character's suspicion of tea – "the green [is] made up of verdigris" and "the black [is] all coloured with lead" (p. 101) – may be comically exaggerated, but is not unfounded and points to the widespread adulteration of foods in the 19th century.¹⁴ Dick Farden's father, a barber, produces for his customers a range of hair balms which he advertises as made of bear grease and which are made of pig fat; his clever contrivances and advertising tricks result in an extremely profitable business. Farden himself works in an ingenious combination of the bargain, imitation, and smuggling lines. He sells English-made fakes as foreign contraband – his "prime smuggled Havannas," for instance, come from "the extensive cabbage plantations of Fulham" (p. 143). His customers are especially susceptible to his stories of peril and adventure, which add glamour and provenance to their purchases. This, too, reflects contemporary practices: the widespread trade in supposedly stolen or smuggled goods was premised on the allure of the illicit (Graham, 2008, pp. 8-9). Finally, Farden's experience shows that while the taste for smuggling is universal, women are, once again, particularly susceptible. In the most explicit linking of women and crime, he claims that, with their "natural propensity" and their voluminous clothing, women make the best smugglers (p. 144).

As regards Caroline, because her entire social life consists in the pursuit of "the look of the thing," she is profoundly implicated in the imitation business. But despite her extensive practice contriving various signs of status, she – like the Nichollses – sometimes fails to tell the genuine from the fake in others. Looking for a replacement footman, Caroline interviews an extremely agreeable, pious

¹⁴ For examples of common practices of food adulteration, see Graham (2008), p. 60.

man who for many years served with a bishop. Greedy for the reflected glamour and provenance this would add to her household – rather like Bounderby in *Hard Times*, who feels it exalts him to be served by a housekeeper with aristocratic connections – Caroline does not see that the man is too good to be true. When she visits the bishop's wife, she again fails to read a number of signs. Caroline does think the woman's dress rather gaudy and her manners rather uninhibited, and she does notice her make-up, but in the end lets herself be persuaded and congratulates herself on her find. Her treasured footman, however, is quick to steal all the silver plate in the house and vanishes without trace. Showing more discrimination than Caroline, he leaves the British plate behind.

The Greatest Plague of Life offers, then, a rich document of mid-19th century material culture and a critique of the new consumerism. It explores the nexus between aspiration and consumption, and reveals the processes of commodification at work in human interactions. It addresses the problem of imitation in the production of goods and social selves. It highlights the clash between consumer desire and accepted norms of middle-class femininity, and suggests how easily the improper may become the illicit. Finally, like *Living for Appearances*, it is concerned with the construction and consumption of spectacle for the purposes of social advancement.

Living for Appearances and *The Greatest Plague of Life* are part of the literary representation of a major development in the history of the 19th century: the emergence of a distinctive commodity and consumer culture. The repercussions of this development are immense – the commodity has remained “the one subject of mass culture, the centerpiece of everyday life, the focal point of all representation, the dead center of the modern world” (Richards, 1990, p. 1). Since the 19th century there has been, too, an extraordinary proliferation in the construction of the self as a social spectacle, made possible by a host of continually evolving technologies. The two novels thus amount to a valuable historical document and, at the same time, interrogate the way we live now.

References:

- Benjamin, W. (1969). *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Burnett, J. (Ed.) (1994). *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Chamberlain, E. D. (2014). Servants' Bright Reflections: Advertising the Body in Victorian Literature and Culture. *Dickens Studies Annual*, 45, 293-309.
- Cohen, D. (2006). *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Craik, D. (1859). *A Woman's Thoughts About Women*. London: Hurst and Blackett.
- Davidoff, L. (1974). Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England. *Journal of Social History*, 7 (4), 406-428.

Dickens, C. (1848). *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son, Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation*. London: Bradbury and Evans.

Dickens, C. (1853). *Bleak House*. London: Bradbury and Evans.

Dickens, C. (1854). *Hard Times*. London and Glasgow: Collins Clear-Type Press.

Dickens, C. (1865). *Our Mutual Friend* (Vol. 1). London: Chapman and Hall.

Ellis, S. S. (1839). *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*. London and Paris: Fisher, Son, & Co.

Fernandez, J. (2010). *Victorian Servants, Class, and the Politics of Literacy*. New York and London: Routledge.

Graham, K. (2008). *"Gone to the Shops": Shopping in Victorian England*. Westport, CT and London: Praeger Publishers.

Gurney, P. (2015). 'The Age of Veneer': Charles Dickens and the Antinomies of Victorian Consumer Culture. *Dickens Quarterly*, 32 (3), 229-246.

Humpherys, A. (1977). *Travels into the Poor Man's Country: The Work of Henry Mayhew*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Lysack, K. (2008). *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Mayhew, H. (1851). *1851: Or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and Family, Who Came Up to London to 'Enjoy Themselves,' and to See the Great Exhibition*. London: David Bogue.

Mayhew, H., Mayhew A. (1855). *Living for Appearances: A Tale*. London: James Blackwood.

Mayhew, H., Mayhew A. (1864). *The Greatest Plague of Life: Or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Good Servant*. London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge.

Michie, H. (1987). *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miller, A. H. (1995). *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Miller, E. C. (2008). *Framed: The New Woman Criminal in British Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press and University of Michigan Library.

Richards, T. (1990). *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Roddy, S., Strange, J-M., & Taithe, B. (2014). Henry Mayhew at 200 – the 'Other' Victorian Bicentenary. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19 (4), 481-496.

Thackeray, W. M. (1848) *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero*. London: Bradbury and Evans.

Veblen, T. (2007). *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Whitlock, T. C. (2016). *Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture in Nineteenth-Century England*. London and New York: Routledge.