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21 March 2003

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English 43 – The English Novel

Samuel Weller: The Satirical Source

Contrasted with the naiveté of Mr. Pickwick's middle class mannerisms is the practical and pragmatic voice of Samuel Weller whose primary role is used to represent Dickens' satire on the class structure in England. Throughout *Pickwick Papers*, the follies and adventures of the Pickwick Club are often results of class assumptions and conceptions whereas the appearance of Samuel Weller provides a cynical though sensible representation of his own background.

Samuel's presence serves to expose and satirize middle class tendencies and structure.

In several instances, Samuel's insight trumps Mr. Pickwick and the Pickwickians ignorance of worldly matters. Samuel's solidity and reliance resurfaces during the turning point of the trial Bardell vs. Pickwick. The widow's claim of a breach of promise arises from a scene of misinterpretation where Mrs. Bardell interprets Mr. Pickwick's intention to employ a manservant as a marriage proposal. Through his roundabout and polite approach mainly due to his middle class background, Mr. Pickwick inadvertently causes Mrs. Bardell to believe his intentions to be that of a matrimonial kind. However, as it progresses Mrs. Bardell sues, hence causing an immense amount of shock and disbelief on the part of Mr. Pickwick. Later, his fellow Pickwickians and Samuel are subpoenaed to appear as witness to the crime. In accordance to his honor, Mr. Pickwick refuses to pay any fees due to Mrs. Bardell or Dodson & Fogg if he were to lose his case. Though the declaration is brave and noble, little does Mr. Pickwick realize the true

conditions of prison unlike that of Samuel Weller. In court, the testimonies of the fellow Pickwickians prove disastrous because they failed to see the manipulations provided by the plaintiff. Samuel Weller is the saving grace that is able to salvage whatever destruction the others had created by “saying just as little respecting Mr. Pickwick as might be, which was precisely the object he had had in view all along” (Dickens 437). Despite the general know-how of Samuel and the bumbling ignorance of the Pickwickians, Mr. Pickwick is found guilty. The outrageous case of Mrs. Bardell is ridiculously won and the “breach of promise of marriage, from its ludicrous origin, to Pickwick’s eventual release...is one of the most acute pointes of satire upon English law” (T.H. Lister).

Furthermore, Samuel Weller provides the common sense know-how of the English class while judging the character of others and exposing the hypocrisy of many. In a sense “Samuel Weller introduces the English people” (Chesterton 4). As stated in the situation in the court case, Samuel provides the only worthwhile testimony in aiding Mr. Pickwick and creating a type of hilarious uproar in the court that can only be tolerated due to his position. In this scene, Samuel makes a reference to the avarice of Dodson & Fogg in a joking manner provided by the drunken Mrs. Bardell and her companions. His avoidance of serious questions and lightweight answers is a cunning strategy. On the other hand, such a dismal way of conduct would not have been accepted by supposed gentlemen like that of Mr. Winkle or Snodgrass. Due to his status as a servant, Mrs. Bardell and her companions let down their guard and loosened their tongues to someone that was not of any importance to them. Samuel’s position as a servant proves as a useful leverage in obtaining information that likely would not have been revealed in the presence of a gentleman. Due to his working class status, Samuel is almost unnoticeable to many of the Pickwickians until they soon realize the importance of his position. As a servant, Samuel was

able to approach Job Trotter and confront him about Mr. Jingle and Mr. Pickwick relied on his role in helping Mr. Winkle court Arabella Allen. Even when Mr. Pickwick had been carried away after the picnic, it was Samuel's common sense that prevailed and brought Mr. Pickwick out of a very troublesome situation involving imprisonment. Samuel is "Mr. Pickwick's courier and confidant in his dealings with the other club members, notably in the courtships that enable the Pickwickians to withdraw from the great, false world into their own convivial and loving community" (Axton 6).

For instance, Mr. Pickwick's stay in the debtor's prison once more demonstrates his lack of knowledge concerning the realistic issues of the lower class. Samuel, on the other hand, realizes the significance of his presence to Mr. Pickwick, therefore loyally following Mr. Pickwick to prison. During his imprisonment, Mr. Pickwick is exposed to a multitude of poverty. Sickly children and mothers, as well as elderly miserable men are strewn throughout Fleet Prison and after witnessing the horrors he vows to never venture forth and does not for three months. It is a testament to Mr. Pickwick's naïve innocence of the lower class when Pickwick despairingly states, "My head aches with these scenes and my heart too. Henceforth I will be a prisoner in my own room" (Dickens 578). It is in prison that Samuel stands in vigilance over Mr. Pickwick instantly doubting the characters of Mr. Smangle whereas Mr. Pickwick had not. In fact, "Sam Weller stands in a some ways for a cheerful knowledge of the world; Mr. Pickwick stands for a still more cheerful ignorance of the world" (Chesterton 4).

Moreover, it is discernable from the adventures of follies concerning the Pickwickians and the seriousness of Samuel Weller's own scenes that there is a certain amount of satire that occurs in *The Pickwick Papers*. The absurd disasters that the Pickwickians manage to entangle themselves occur from their pompous claims of pretending to know plenty about things they

nothing about. Mr. Snodgrass supposed poetic talents never really surface; Mr. Tupman's charms could not win him the heart of the widow; Mr. Winkles and Mr. Pickwick's amateur assertion of being an experienced rider and sportsman are quickly dissipated when he attempts to both ride and shoot; and Mr. Pickwick's claims as a learned scholar are false when he is unable to decipher the markings on the stone he discovered. Through these comedic adventures, the Pickwickians form a "grand type of the affectation and self-delusion of their society, and their various activities makes one ramified story that satirizes...a society dedicated to keeping up appearances and imitating conventional manners" (Axton 9). Yet Samuel's encounters often with his father are of a serious nature closely pertaining to the hypocrisy of both his mother-in-law and Mr. Stiggins. Although they consider themselves to be devout figures of the church, Mrs. Weller does not abstain from drinking alcohol and Mr. Stiggins is intoxicated to the point so that he arrives in a drunken stupor to a meeting where he was to appear as a guest speaker. Between the father and son, there occur many conversations concerning realistic issues about behavior and social observations. Dickens' critically examines the class structure of England by situating the middle class in absurd encounters while filling the moments between Samuel and his relations to a serious atmosphere. The particular mode and speech by which Samuel utilizes is indicative of his background. However the comparison that he often adds to the end of his sentences are often observations of the class disparagement. By portraying Samuel as the practical sense and Mr. Pickwick as the oblivious companion, Dickens critically challenges the structure of class. If not for the presence of Samuel, the Pickwickians would be wiped out in the dust of their own negligence and unsophistication to the rules that run the mill of realistic society.

A companion to the careless adventurer, Samuel serves as the eyes and ears of Mr. Pickwick. He provides solace, information, and loyalty to the bumbling and often unknowing

and oblivious members of the Pickwick Club. Stemming from his status and position Samuel provides a common insight to the unknowing middle class personages. Dickens' mocks the middle class by placing them in a constant stream of folly misadventures bred by decorum and rules inherent to the middle class. Though the Pickwickians are in a higher class structure, they are wholly ignorant of real world proceedings while those in the working class must suffer the distinctions of class separation and yet are superior to the upper class in knowledge.

Works Cited

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