THE TWEED RING IN THE POLITICAL CARTOONS
OF THOMAS NAST IN HARPER’S WEEKLY

Directions
For several years, cartoonist Thomas Nast had pilloried the graft, corruption, and outright
theft carried out by the Tweed Ring and Tammany Hall in his memorable images published
articles detailing the political machine’s abuses, and naming the most powerful of its leaders.
Nast redoubled his efforts to spotlight the perpetrators through his powerful cartoons. In fact,
Tweed reportedly exclaimed, “I don’t care a straw for your newspaper articles; my constituents
don’t know how to read, but they can’t help seeing them damned pictures!” The voters swept the
Tweed Ring from power in the November election of 1871, and trials and prison followed shortly
thereafter for Tweed and his henchmen. When Tweed escaped from prison in 1875 and fled to
Spain, he was captured in Spain because the police there recognized him from Nast’s cartoons.

Analyze the cartoons on the following pages and answer the questions for each image. Then
prepare for a class discussion of the importance of a free press in republican government.

1. THOMAS NAST, HARPER’S WEEKLY, JANUARY 14, 1871
Note: For a clear and detailed digitized image, search Princeton University Digital Library (www.pudl.princ-
eton.edu) for “Tweedledee and Sweedledum”

In Thomas Nast’s cartoons, he of-
ten represented William M. Tweed as
“Tweedledee” and fellow Tammany Hall
Democrat Peter B. Sweeny as “Sweedle-
dum.”

1. Who are the people represented in
the drawing? Who is the “clown”
with the $15,500 diamond stick-
pin?

2. What is the clown doing with the
public treasury? How does this
break his trust as a public servant?

3. How does Thomas Nast’s political
cartoon demonstrate the vice of
avarice? How does it demonstrate
corruption?
2. THOMAS NAST, HARPER’S WEEKLY, OCTOBER 21, 1871

Note: For a clear and detailed digitized image, search Princeton University Digital Library (www.pudl.princeton.edu) for “The Brains”

1. Who is the figure represented in the above political cartoon by Thomas Nast? What clues help reveal the identity of the person?

2. How do you know that the cartoon is a commentary about the vice of avarice?
3. THOMAS NAST, HARPER’S WEEKLY, NOVEMBER 11, 1871

Note: For a clear and detailed digitized image, search Princeton University Digital Library (www.pudl.princeton.edu) for “The Tammany Tiger Loose”

As is the case in most of his work, Nast uses rich symbolism in this image. Tweed himself had selected the snarling tiger as the symbol for the firemen’s company that he established, but Nast used Tweed’s own symbol against him. The tiger is shown mauling the female figure, Republic, whose helmet (the ballot) and sword representing power, lie broken nearby. The banner of Law and the American flag are tattered beneath her. The other female figure represents Justice, with her broken scales and sword at her side. The male figure represents Mercury, Roman god of commerce, with his winged helmet smashed at his left side. The arena is filled with a large audience taking in the spectacle, and the Tweed Ring’s members look on with determined attention.

1. What does the tiger represent about Tammany Hall and the Tweed Ring?
2. Who is the corrupt emperor seated above in the stands? What clues does the cartoonist, Thomas Nast, reveal about the identity of the emperor?
3. Judging by the figures that have been mauled and killed by the tiger and what they represent, what is Nast’s commentary about the health of government and civil society?
4. THOMAS NAST, Harper's Weekly, August 19, 1871

Note: For a clear and detailed digitized image, search Princeton University Digital Library (www.pudl.princeton.edu) for “Two Great Questions”

1. Cartoonist Thomas Nast drew all of the major figures in the Tweed Ring in the above cartoon. Why are they all pointing at each other?

2. How does the writing and the cartoon show a commentary about the vice of avarice in the Tweed Ring? To what extent do any of the figures take responsibilities for the wrongs they are committing?