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Our Mutual Friend

CHARLES DICKENS

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

OUR MUTUAL FRIEND

Charles Dickens

With illustrations by

MARCUS STONE

Introduction and Notes by

DEBORAH WYNNE

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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OUR MUTUAL FRIEND

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

Written in the final decade of a long and successful career as one of the most popular nineteenth-century writers, *Our Mutual Friend* is Dickens's last completed novel. In it he presents a disturbing vision of Victorian society fissured by class divisions, greed and government mismanagement. Dickens had treated these themes in a number of his previous novels; indeed, no writer so thoroughly and so effectively exposed the social problems and institutional abuses of British society. The fact that he did this by means of some of the most compelling and comic stories ever written indicates his extraordinary power as a writer. However, *Our Mutual Friend*, as many critics have noted, diverges significantly from Dickens's earlier novels. As J. Hillis Miller has suggested, the novel is poised 'on the threshold' of the twentieth century in its exploration of modernity, particularly the 'peculiar conditions of urban life'.[1] *Our Mutual Friend* portrays a London of wastelands, of disconnection and alienation, and a society dominated

1 J. Hillis Miller (1958), p. 293

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by financial speculation and commodity fetishism. Dickens uses the image of the dust-heap, mounds of waste material collected for profit, to comment upon the instability of a society centred on money and commodities. His narrative combines biting satire and dark realism, fairytale and fantasy, resulting in a novel which integrates a complex discourse on the condition of modernity with a cautionary tale warning against the moral dangers of greed and materialism.

Our Mutual Friend first appeared in monthly instalments from May 1864 to November 1865. Dickens's two previous novels, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Great Expectations* (1860–1), were considerably shorter and had also been published as serials in the popular weekly journal *All The Year Round*, which Dickens owned and edited. For the first time since *Little Dorrit* appeared in 1857, Dickens was able to concentrate on the development of a long multiplot novel. Yet this freedom was daunting, as he confessed to his friend and colleague Wilkie Collins: 'I felt at first quite dazed in getting back to the large canvas and the big brushes.'[2] Dickens, now in his early fifties and at the height of his powers and popularity, was not 'dazed' for long, and created a novel which dramatically raises some of the most important issues of his day.

The contemporaneity of *Our Mutual Friend*, which opens with the words, 'In these times of ours', contrasts with the historical focus of Dickens's two previous novels.[3] This choice was made not only because Dickens needed to comment directly upon the ills of modern society, but also because readers were demanding novels with up-to-the-minute settings. During the 1860s the reading public became fascinated with a new genre, the 'sensation' novel, characterised by thrilling mystery plots and depictions of middle-class transgression set in the modern world of fast railway travel, urban expansion and telegraphic communications. Dickens may have been influenced by Wilkie Collins, whose sensation novel, *The Woman in White*, was published in *All The Year Round* from 1859 to 1860. *Our Mutual Friend* displays traces of the Collinsian plot with its various mysteries, lost identities, hidden wills, corruption in suburbia and episodes of violence.[4] However, although Dickens catered to the popular literary tastes of the 1860s in the plot design of *Our Mutual Friend*, he did not limit himself to any generic formula.

Dickens rejected generic conformity for the same reason he rejected

2 Pilgrim Letters, x, 24 January 1864

3 *A Tale of Two Cities* is set during the late eighteenth century while *Great Expectations* is loosely set in the 1820s.

4 For a discussion which links *Our Mutual Friend* to the sensation genre, see Lisa Surridge (1998).

a unified narrative voice. Aware of the fragmentariness of modern industrialised society, he found that disconnection could not be represented in terms of a coherent fictional world. Like one of the novel's characters, Sloppy, who has a talent for reading aloud the Police News 'in different voices' (p. 186), the narrator of *Our Mutual Friend* makes use of a variety of tones, ironic and flippant, serious and comic, to convey the instability of a world which can only be adequately represented 'in different voices'. This narrative diversity is evident in the dramatic contrast between the first two chapters.

Chapter I involves the reader in a macabre story of a boatman preying upon the human corpses he finds floating in the Thames:

> Allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state, this boat and the two figures in it obviously were doing something that they often did, and were seeking what they often sought. Half savage as the man showed, with no covering on his matted head . . . with such dress as he wore seeming to be made out of the mud that begrimed his boat, still there was businesslike usage in his steady gaze . . . But it happened now that a slant of light from the setting sun glanced into the bottom of the boat, and, touching a rotten stain there which bore some resemblance to the outline of a muffled human form, coloured it as though with diluted blood.
>
> [pp. 3–4]

Gaffer's dubious, grisly 'businesslike' trade in corpses constitutes the lowest level of the British commercial system, aligning him with savagery and 'the slime and ooze'. The narrator's sombre tone and dark symbolism, his disturbing images of the living preying upon the dead, leave us unprepared for the coldly ironic satirical voice of the next chapter.

Chapter II ascends from the river's murky depths to the spectacular surfaces of a society dinner party. Slipping into the present tense and mimicking the clipped, lazy speech of the rich and privileged, the narrator describes the reflected image of the Veneerings in their dining-room mirror:

> Reflects Veneering; forty, wavy-haired, dark, tending to corpulence, sly, mysterious, filmy – a kind of sufficiently well-looking veiled-prophet, not prophesying. Reflects Mrs Veneering; fair, aquiline-nosed and fingered, not so much light hair as she might have, gorgeous in raiment and jewels, enthusiastic, propitiatory, conscious that a corner of her husband's veil is over herself. [p. 11]

The narrator's inventory of the Veneering qualities suggests that they are, as their name suggests, all surface, incomplete, utterly without depth. The display of commodities constitutes the limits of the Veneering world, although Veneering's 'sly, mysterious, filmy' bearing also hints at darker qualities, linking him with the 'sly' Gaffer. Thus from the beginning Dickens makes connections between the murky depths and the glittering surfaces, employing a diversity of voices to reveal each as part of a continuum within British society. Gaffer's dark business and the Veneering display of finery are presented as two aspects of an unsatisfactory commercial system based upon the relationship between predator and prey.

Our Mutual Friend suggests that this system has culminated in a society made up of fragmentary people and a material world characterised by disconnection. Dickens's attempt to gather these fragments together and make some sense of them is given a comic analogue in the novel in the figure of Mr Venus, an articulator of skeletons and taxidermist, who creates 'life' in the dead things that he sells. Venus, like Dickens, possesses 'patient habits and delicate manipulation . . . skill in piecing little things together' (p. 286). This point has been emphasised by Juliet McMaster, who sees in Mr Venus 'Dickens's parody of his own major and serious concerns . . . In the shop the themes of death and dust and disintegration meet and are put into play.'[5] Ironically, Venus's skeletons and preserved foetuses in bottles seem to possess more depth and 'life' than the Veneerings and their acquaintances. Mr Venus can transform a bag of human bones brought over from France into a distinctly characterised 'French gentleman', who seems to listen to Venus's conversations with Wegg, blinking in the firelight with 'a grin upon [his] ghastly countenance' (p. 550). The exchange of commodities, on which British wealth and power were based, is grotesquely echoed in Venus's trade, and some of the most hilarious moments in the novel occur when Silas Wegg attempts to buy the bones of his amputated leg, now owned by Venus. The latter boasts, ' "if you was brought here loose in a bag to be articulated, I'd name your smallest bones blindfold equally with your largest, as fast as I could pick 'em out, and I'd sort 'em all, and sort your wertebrae, in a manner that would equally surprise and charm you" ' (p. 77). Wegg wants to 'invest' in ownership of his bones to avoid being ' "dispersed, a part of me here, and a part of me there" ', preferring ' "to collect myself like a genteel person" ' (p. 77). Dispersal is, however, an ever-present

5 See Juliet McMaster (1987), p. 202.

threat in this novel of disintegration; when he plans to blackmail Mr Boffin, Wegg complains, ' "I shall fly into several pieces. I can't contain myself when I look at him" ' (p. 549).

Underlying the comedy of Wegg's obsession with his 'lost' leg is Dickens's need to explore the disconnection and confusion of the modern urban environment. Away from the surreal interior of Venus's shop, the London of *Our Mutual Friend* is characterised by a grim monotony, the endless middle-class suburbs, dreary working-class districts, and the criminality and danger of the riverside. The colourful diversity of London that Dickens offered in the early novels has been totally abandoned in his later work. Within the anti-community of the modern metropolis, identities are tenuously held and easily lost, as the experience of the novel's hero, John Harmon, indicates. Harmon returns to London from an exile abroad to claim the inheritance left by his father, a miserly but incredibly wealthy 'dust' contractor. However, when a corpse resembling John Harmon is discovered in the Thames he is presumed dead and his father's faithful servants, Mr and Mrs Boffin, inherit the fortune. Harmon abandons his identity as the heir because he is unsure about fulfilling the condition of his father's will, namely marriage to the unknown Bella Wilfer. Harmon brings himself 'back to life', first as Julius Handford, then as John Rokesmith. Even Mr Boffin fails to recognise the lonely child he once comforted. Rokesmith introduces himself with the words, ' "I am lost" ' (p. 22), and later, ' "I am nobody" ' (p. 89), sharp indicators of his disorientation. Mr Boffin's reference to him as ' "Our Mutual Friend" ' (p. 105) is an attempt to fit this misfit into a community. However, Harmon/Handford/Rokesmith's mysterious disconnection epitomises an alienation that has come to be associated with modernity.[6]

One of the main pressures upon individuals and their ability to form satisfactory relationships is, according to Dickens, the desire for money. Respectability and social identity in *Our Mutual Friend* have become destructively linked to the consumption of commodities.[7] The novel also satirises the nation's obsession with financial speculation which dramatically increased in the 1860s, causing concern about negative impacts on the economic stability and moral health of the nation.[8] In this climate of get-rich-quick schemes and conspicuous

6 See Juliet McMaster (1987), pp. 193–4.

7 See Andrew H. Miller (1995) for a discussion of *Our Mutual Friend* in relation to Victorian commodity culture.

8 M. Cotsell (1984), p. 126; see also Poovey (1995).

consumption, Dickens raises questions about the importance of money and commodities: how do we recognise or measure value? what should we invest in? what sort of property should we own? how can we gain the best returns on our investments? These questions were already being raised by a number of mid-Victorian commentators, including Ruskin and Arnold, who warned against the dangers of an all-pervasive money-culture. The urgency of such moral issues was strongly felt at this period and Dickens's own response highlights the ways in which an obsession with material possessions undermines more satisfying investments in friendship and love. However, Dickens was not just offering a didactic warning against moral danger. For him, the world of 'fancy', a rich, grotesque, colourful, exciting place, the world of his fiction, was itself under threat from the unimaginative money-worship of the modern world. A too heavy investment in materialism could lead to an abandonment of 'fancy', Dickens's term for both the imagination and spiritual life. In order to illustrate his idea of a 'bad' investment, Dickens delights in dismantling the well-padded, heavily ornamented homes of the Victorian middle class, where 'everything was made to look as heavy as it could, and to take up as much room as possible' (p. 123).

In *Our Mutual Friend* he explores the 'death' of objects through the central image of the dust-heap, demonstrating that the material world inevitably disintegrates into 'dust'. Objects are rarely stable in a Dickens novel; sometimes they can be uncannily animate and vocal. A striking example of the mutability of matter is offered when Dickens ridicules the 'hideous solidity' of the possessions of Mr Podsnap, the smug, 'eminently respectable' (p. 121) representative of the British middle class. His 'massive furniture' and ugly plate deny their own solidity when, in a remarkable passage, they speak for themselves: ' "Here you have as much of me in my ugliness as if I were only lead; but I am so many ounces of precious metal, worth so much an ounce; wouldn't you like to melt me down?" ' (p. 123). The fact that these dazzling objects of desire can threaten to revert to their original form or, as Dickens elsewhere indicates, simply decay into dust, suggests the transitoriness of the carefully constructed fabric of 'respectable' Britain, which is merely an elaborate and pretentious show, part of society's overvaluation of surfaces and appearances.

The *nouveaux-riches*, aptly named Veneerings, only exist in relation to their 'brand-new' home full of 'brand-new' (p. 7) objects. Society's crass association of material wealth with moral superiority inspires some of Dickens's most bitingly satiric scenes where the well-to-do Podsnap and Veneering give their meaningless dinner parties not to

reinforce the bonds of friendship with their guests, but to consolidate their social positions by impressing as many people as possible. In Veneering's home, 'all things were in a state of high varnish and polish' (p. 7), and even the guests themselves become extentions of Veneering's possessions. The meek Twemlow, for example, is 'an innocent piece of dinner furniture' (p. 7); Veneering's baby is 'that new article' (p. 9) and his wife, 'gorgeous in raiment and jewels' (p. 11), exists only as an object to display her husband's wealth. Similarly, Mr Podsnap believes his daughter, Georgiana, could be 'put away like the plate, brought out like the plate, polished like the plate, counted, weighed, and valued like the plate' (p. 134). 'Respectability', in this novel, is associated with an inability to view people as anything other than objects or property to be controlled and possessed.

Our Mutual Friend's 'dust' plot centres on the notion of property as a weapon of control. Harmon's dust-mounds, a 'small estate' of waste products, 'coal-dust, vegetable-dust, crockery-dust, rough dust and sifted dust' (p. 14), become a rich legacy through which a father tries to control his son's actions after death. Although the dust-heaps are made up of society's discarded 'useless' material, they are in fact extremely valuable, and Harmon, by recycling this waste, has made a vast fortune. On his death, the 'dust' (and it is worth bearing in mind that one of the meanings of the word 'dust' is 'money') is transformed by the 'Golden Dustman' (p. 436), Mr Boffin – 'Golden' not just because of the money he now possesses, but also because he is able to transform a dirty world into a golden one. Under Mr and Mrs Boffin, the 'dirty' inheritance of dust is landscaped into a pleasant 'serpentining walk' with 'a lattice-work Arbour' (p. 53). This ability to make even London's dirt and waste 'pleasant' is in sharp contrast to the middle-class desire to transform money into oppressive, ponderous objects which exist only to impress and intimidate.

While the Boffins are unsullied by their dusty inheritance, characters like Mr Podsnap and the Veneerings are contaminated by their materialistic desires. Some of the poorer members of society also share this corrosive greed for money. When Gaffer Hexam retrieves a corpse (presumed to be that of John Harmon), his first action is to rob the body, his second to wash both the money and his 'wet and dirty' hands in the 'filthy water' of the Thames (pp. 4–5). Yet there is no possibility of coming clean from this dirty trade in death. Indeed, the dirt sticks to Gaffer until his own drowning in the river from which he extracted and robbed so many corpses. His body, dragged on shore, is left 'soaking into this filthy ground' with the 'flying impurities' (p. 163) of London's litter blowing on to his face. Gaffer's determination to rob the dead

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before claiming the coroner's reward for the body means that he can never really cleanse himself of the impure lust for money which Dickens sees as one of the main sources of corruption in British society. However, other characters who pursue immoral paths for monetary gain do manage to wash themselves clean. Mr Venus, for example, in a melancholy moment joins the villainous Silas Wegg in his plot to blackmail Mr Boffin. Venus later repents of this partnership, withdrawing from what he calls ' "this dirt" ' and regretting that at one point his ' "hands were not . . . quite as clean as I could wish" ' (p. 744).

It is significant that in this soiled world based on 'filthy lucre', two of the poorest and most morally upstanding characters make their living from washing things clean. Betty Higden, the elderly washerwoman, and her faithful helper at the mangle, Sloppy, both value friendship and love above money. Although Betty lives in the 'complicated back-settlements of muddy Brentford' (p. 184), far removed from the glittering streets of 'Stucconia', the suburb in which the Veneerings live, she works to keep her world clean of the forces sullying their more socially elevated lives. When Mrs Boffin offers to adopt Betty's great-grandson, she refuses all offers of financial help for herself, insisting, ' "I couldn't sell that love . . . It's a free gift" ' (p. 191). This is in sharp contrast to the numerous parents and carers who try to 'sell' the children under their care when they hear that the Boffins wish to adopt an orphan. Dickens sees this 'sale' of children in the same light as the transactions on the financial markets, 'The suddenness of an orphan's rise in the market was not to be paralleled by the maddest records of the Stock Exchange' (p. 183).

Betty's moral integrity continues to the moment of her death, as she flees from the prospect of the workhouse as a place of shame and defilement. Dickens, drawing upon his central image of the dust heap, exposes the 'dust-shovelling and cinder-raking' of the government who have erected 'a mountain of pretentious failure' in the form of their inability to aid women like Betty and prevent the poor from 'starving to death in the midst of us' (p. 476–7).

It is at Betty's funeral that Bella Wilfer, the socially ambitious young woman named in Harmon's will, first meets Lizzie, Gaffer Hexam's beautiful and morally upright daughter. Lizzie has fled into the country from two lovers. The first, Eugene Wrayburn, is an indolent upper-class barrister whose love she returns, although the barriers of class present an obstacle to their union. The second is Bradley Headstone, whom she distrusts and fears, not least because he has threatened to kill Eugene. She removes herself from both, working for her living and abandoning all hope of meeting Eugene again. Lizzie offers Bella an

example of disinterested love, a love which does not ' "seek to gain anything" ' (p. 499). Impressed by 'the deep unselfish passion' of Lizzie, Bella begins to question her own ambitions and her previous admission that she has ' "money always in my thoughts and my desires" ' (p. 435). Like a number of major characters in the novel, she is deeply divided, asking herself, ' "Why am I always at war with myself?" ' (p. 446).

Bella's dilemma offers us an insight into the position faced by many middle-class Victorian women who desired a romantic attachment yet often found themselves inextricably bound up in a marriage market which reduced them to property and encouraged them to see men as the only route to an 'establishment'. The commodification of women is made particularly evident when Bella is 'bequeathed' in Old Harmon's will, ' "like a dozen of spoons" ' (p. 35). Male admirers also view her as property to be bought, 'a compound of fine girl, thoroughbred horse, well-built drag, and remarkable pipe' (p. 444). Bella finds herself colluding with the values of the marketplace, nervously fearing she would ' "sell" ' her ' "very nature" ' if the price was high enough (p. 447). Bella's first indication that love should be disinterested comes from Lizzie's example. This is reinforced when Mr Boffin, pretending to become a miser, bluntly states Bella's position towards matrimony in the most unflattering terms, ' "This young lady was looking about the market for a good bid; she wasn't in it to be snapped up by fellows that had no money to lay out; nothing to buy with" ' (pp. 557–8). His financial analogies bring Bella to a realisation of her mistaken belief that money guarantees happiness. Bella's war with herself, however, like Mr Venus's unease about his partnership with Wegg, indicates the possibility of redemption, for the true villains of *Our Mutual Friend*, the insensitive Podsnap, superficial Veneering, corrupt Silas Wegg and criminal Rogue Riderhood, are incapable of self-doubt for their self-righteousness prevents them from perceiving a world beyond their own narrow interests.

For Dickens, a way of avoiding the abyss of greed and selfishness is to maintain a childlike belief in the power of stories and storytelling. Indeed, *Our Mutual Friend* shows that stories, associated with childhood pleasures, imagination and an ability to move beyond the self, redeem people by keeping them alive to the values of love and friendship. Many of the novel's storytellers are women. Lizzie Hexam, illiterate because of her father's prejudice against education, uses her imagination to create stories as a way of transcending her dreary life. Her ' "library of books is the hollow down by the flare" ' (p. 29) of the fire, a place where her pictures of the future emerge, pictures which allow her to maintain

a bond with her ambitious, unimaginative brother, Charley. He is also hungry for images of another life, yet incapable of imagining anything apart from his own social rise to respectability. The more he progresses in his ambition to become a teacher, the more he becomes suspicious of Lizzie's stories, telling her to ' "control your fancies a little; on my account" ' (p. 215). Charley's mentor, his teacher Bradley Headstone, also sees storytelling as an impediment to getting on in the world: ' "I don't like that" ' (p. 217), he says dismissively when Charley describes his sister's powers of imagination. Dickens's view that fancy, or the ability to create stories, enables people to rise above the spheres of business and respectability into a magical, more emotionally satisfying, alternative world, is most apparent in the case of the doll's dressmaker, Jenny Wren. A disabled child, she imaginatively transforms her whole world in order to cope with her pain and the poverty and shame imposed upon her by her drunken father. Jenny abandons her real name, Fanny Cleaver, for a more romantic one of her own choosing, trying to gain some control over her life by reversing the roles between herself and her hopelessly disintegrating father, whom she treats as her own ' "bad child" ' (p. 226). Despite her indigence, lack of parental support, and inability to enjoy normal childhood pleasures, Jenny keeps her identity and self-respect intact through her creative role-playing and her love for Lizzie Hexam, who is ' "more to be relied upon than silver and gold" ' (p. 220). As she sits at work in her cramped home in the East End, she can ' "smell miles of flowers" ' (p. 224) and encounters the beautiful and angelic children of her fancy who, she says, alleviate her pain: ' "they took me up, and made me light" ' (p. 225). In recounting the memory of her own imaginary realm she appears 'ecstatic', 'quite beautiful' (p. 225), transformed from the 'quaint little shrew' who scolds her 'bad child' (p. 229). Jenny's alternative world is shared with Lizzie and their Jewish friend Riah (Jenny's kindly 'fairy godmother'), all of whom sit in a rooftop garden above the 'City's roar' envisaging the tranquillity and freedom of another world, a life beyond the grave (p. 264).

Dickens, like his storytelling women, uses fairytales as a way of exposing the mundane world and this can be both funny and alarming. When the social-climbing imposter, Mr Lammle, is angry, he 'engaged in a deed of violence with a bottle of soda water, as though he were wringing the neck of some unlucky creature, and pouring its blood down his throat', wiping 'his dripping whiskers in an ogreish way' (p. 251). Ogres, wolves, pumpkins transformed into gorgeous coaches, giant beanstalks and talking knives and forks are invoked by Dickens to dismantle and distort the carefully constructed material world of

respectable Britain, providing an important counterbalance to the inevitability of entropy, the reduction of the world to dust.

It is surely this anarchic spirit of the fairytale which underpins Dickens's depiction of Mr Boffin's self-transformation from a cheerful elderly *ingénu* into a flinty miser in order to help his protégée, Bella, free herself from her mercenary ambitions. Like a couple of fairy godmothers, the Boffins make the world of dust which they inherit bright and useful, magically transforming the lives of those around them and bringing about remarkable twists and turns of the plot. In the tradition of all good fairytales, the Boffins' magic culminates in the happy marriage of the heroine and hero; but this fairytale ending is deeply problematic because it trivialises the problems that Bella has faced.

Triumphantly rejecting the dusty realm of money for the 'golden gold' of love, Bella is eventually led into her new home in a fashionable area of London full of 'all manner of wonders' (p. 727), 'jewels' and 'rainbows' (p. 736), a fantasy reward for her virtue. Bella's rejection, and unexpected regaining, of money might seem to make a neat moral twist, but many readers are left deeply unsatisfied that property and wealth, so difficult for Victorian women legitimately to attain, are 'magically' bestowed upon a heroine whose anxieties centred around her economic dependence.[9]

Bella's situation highlights society's commodification of women. Her awareness of the marriage market and her understandable desire to escape the poverty of her parents' home make it very difficult for her to reject the only path that she can take out of her dead-end life at home, namely marriage to a wealthy man. Mrs Wilfer's horror when her daughter engages herself to a 'Mendicant', the mysterious, apparently unemployed Rokesmith, is a comic indication of the serious problem of women's financial dependence. Bella's fantasies about the gorgeous possessions she desires are symptomatic of her dilemma. Does she sell herself to the highest bidder, or marry for love on an inadequate income? Lacking control of her own economic situation, her main refuge is in the stories that she shares with her father; here she can take control, accepting and rejecting at will numerous imaginary husbands. When she and her father travel to Greenwich to escape the oppressive domestic atmosphere of the Wilfer household, Bella's storytelling offers her this illusion of control. Her fantasies shape themselves in terms of imperialist aggression, a plundering of the wealth of other countries to solve the problem of her own powerlessness. At first her

9 See Hilary M. Schor (1999), pp. 182–5 for a discussion of Bella and her 'reward'.

father plays the hero as a ship-owner, 'going to China in that handsome three-masted ship, to bring home opium . . . and . . . silks and shawls without end for the decoration of his charming daughter' (p. 300). However, as the story progresses, Bella imagines a husband to play the hero – first John Harmon, returned from the dead to inherit his fortune, then 'a merchant of immense wealth', or 'a mighty general, of large property', and finally 'an Indian Prince . . . who wore Cashmere shawls all over himself, and diamonds and emeralds blazing in his turban' (p. 301). At this point Bella wishes that her stories would come true, because she is 'always looking out for money to captivate' (p. 303), men and money being interchangeable things in her view.

Imaginary husbands and relationships proliferate in *Our Mutual Friend*. Indeed, the thought of marriage produces remarkably vivid fantasies in the minds of the socially imprisoned female characters. The schoolmistress, Miss Peecher, fantasises about Bradley Headstone, where his image as an indestructable lover haunts her geography class, 'He would come triumphantly flying out of Vesuvius and Etna ahead of the lava, and would boil unharmed in the hot springs of Iceland, and would float majestically down the Ganges and the Nile' (p. 319). The downtrodden Pleasant Riderhood, proprietor of an East End pawn-shop for sailors, also has 'a touch of romance in her', a 'romance' which resembles Bella's imperialist fantasies of possession. Pleasant enjoys 'vaporous visions of far-off islands in the southern seas . . . where it would be good to roam with a congenial partner among groves of bread-fruit, waiting for ships to be wafted from the hollow ports of civilisation' (p. 331). Central to this dream is a steady supply of sailors to be exploited, 'For, sailors to be got the better of were essential to Miss Pleasant's Eden' (p. 331). Jenny Wren's plans about life with her future husband are equally aggressive, as she imagines herself taking control in a way that she is unable to do with her father. The fantasies created by Jenny, Bella and Pleasant transform them into free agents, offering illusions of power and, significantly, economic independence.

The illusion of control is as much as the majority of women can hope for in a society which commodifies and trivialises them. The inescapability of this is ironically emphasised by Dickens's own inability to treat Bella as an autonomous person. He describes her happily devoting herself to her roles of wife and mother in terms of 'a sort of dimpled little charming Dresden-china clock' (p. 704), and a 'most precious and sweet commodity' (p. 646), as though once her inner conflict is (apparently) resolved she becomes merely a desirable object within the home. A similar reduction of Lizzie takes place when she marries Eugene and shrinks into her new rôle as nurse to her invalid husband.

Yet this is not to say that men have an easy time in *Our Mutual Friend*. Most of the male characters are involved in violence, many of them are drowned, or nearly drowned, and both of the heroes, John Harmon and Eugene Wrayburn, are victims of murderous attacks. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has noted in her discussion of the violent nature of the male homosocial bonds in the novel, 'men are always dragging each other into the river'.[10] While the dust-heaps represent the dominance and mutability of the material world, the river serves an equally important function as a place of transformative power, of death, or near-death, and rebirth. The 'drownings' of John Harmon and Eugene Wrayburn effect dramatic changes in their perceptions of the world and themselves. The river is also where the conflict between men takes place, their violence functions as a displacement of the ruthless social warfare which underlies the 'respectability' of the Podsnaps and Veneerings.

The central conflict between men concerns the rivalry between Eugene Wrayburn and Bradley Headstone. Ostensibly, this is a dispute about which of them should 'possess' Lizzie Hexam; yet actually, as Sedgwick has argued, the tension between them is really an issue of social and political power.[11] When Headstone first meets Lizzie, he is planning to assess her suitability as a companion for his protégé, Charley. However, he becomes sexually interested in her when he sees 'a gentleman', Wrayburn, pursuing her in the street with a 'lazily arrogant air' (p. 216). Headstone's ambition to become a 'gentleman' is stimulated by his overwhelming, even pathological, desire to possess what a 'gentleman' desires. From the outset, Headstone's passion for Lizzie appears to be bound up with Eugene's desire for her, and this strange triangular relationship forms the darkest and most violent of *Our Mutual Friend*'s plots.

In many ways, Headstone is one of the most interesting characters in the novel, partly because of the complexity of his self-tormenting passion and partly because, despite his unpleasantness, he evokes sympathy in the reader. Wrayburn always humiliates the clumsy Headstone in their verbal exchanges, and the former's cruel taunts and unbearable arrogance sharply delineate the nature of the barriers which prevented the advancement of the working class in society. Headstone, a ragged orphan who disciplined himself to rise into the ranks of the middle class, is in many ways a product of the Victorian ideology of

10 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), p. 172
11 ibid., p. 162

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