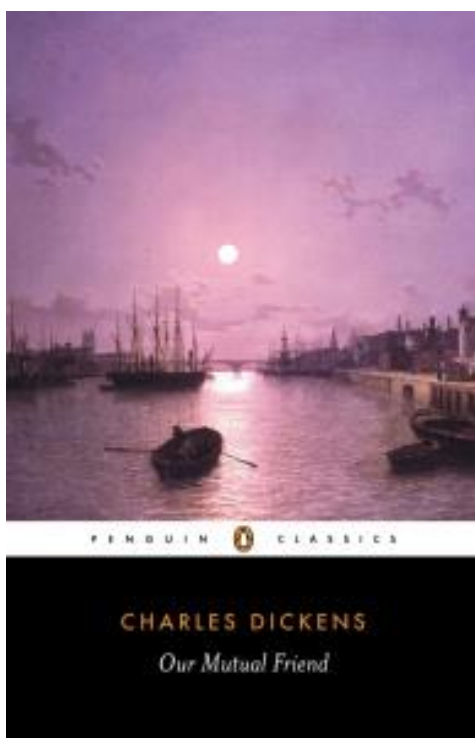


## Human Relationships in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*

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### Abstract

Charles Dickens, the top novelist of the Victorian Age created human relationships and took keen interest in portraying the life of London city and also its pleasure in his novels. Various kinds of relationships i.e. the relationship between lovers, relationship between Master and servant, the relationship between caretaker and boarders, relationship between friends, etc. are dealt with in the novel. He himself had the experiences of life of the London streets for which he was regarded as the first genuine story teller of London life. He not only came up precisely at the right time in the history of English novel on the literary side but also on the other social issues. In his novels he brought about all classes of people living in different social strata which London city had during the reign of Queen Victoria and relationships between individuals. The novelist tactfully sketched all sections of society including women and children who struggled for existence and survival for fittest in the London society. And he never tries to modify the facts to go well with the existing standards

of society. The paper talks about Dickens' human relationships and see how he keeps the relationships among the characters which might have existed in the Victorian society.

**Key words:** Charles Dickens, Victorian Age, London streets, portrayal, human relationship, struggle, survival for fittest.

## Introduction

Charles Dickens was born on 7 February 1812. His mother taught him privately. The novels which he obtained from his father includes: *Roderick Random*, *Humphry Clinker*, *Tom Jones*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Don Quixote*, *Robinson Crusoe*, etc. When the family faced with financial crunch, a friend of John Dickens offered his son, Charles Dickens work in a blacking business at Hungerford Stairs where Charles started work at the age of twelve, labeling bottles for six shillings a week. There he suffered unbearable mental torture for the unskilled work of washing and labeling blacking bottles. When John Dickens was taken to the Marshalsea Debtor's Prison for debt, Charles Dickens spent his Sundays with his father in the prison and on other days at the warehouse as usual. After three months of imprisonment, his Charles's father was released on receipt of a bequest from his mother, who died leaving an amount of four hundred and fifty pounds for him. Some weeks later, John Dickens withdrew Charles from his work and sent him to school. Again at age fifteen, Charles Dickens began to work in the office of a firm of Gray's Inn attorneys. These painful experiences of life form background for the creation of his many children characters. Meanwhile he taught himself shorthand and started working as a freelance reporter in the court of Doctors' Commons.

## Charles Dickens Writing

Charles Dickens began his writing career with *Sketches by Boz*. He started publishing his works in various periodicals which he subsequently republished as *Sketches of Boz*, *Illustrative of Every Day Life* and *Every-Day People* (1836-37). *The Pickwick Papers* were published in 1836-37. He married Catharine in April 1836. Then, Charles Dickens published *Oliver Twist* (1837-38) followed by *Nicholas Nickleby*, (1841). Dickens and his wife visited America in 1842. His 'American Notes' (1842) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44) caused much uproar in America. With the publication of the series of Christmas books brought him immense popularity. *A Christmas Carol*, appeared for the first time in 1843. *Dombey and Son*

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(1844-46) and *David Copperfield* (1849-50) were serious in theme and more carefully planned than his other early works. He published *Bleak House* in 1853 followed by *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-61), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65). In 1858, he was separated from his wife, Catharine. Charles Dickens died on 9 June 1870 before completing his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

### ***Our Mutual Friend***

The novel, *Our Mutual Friend* was the fourteenth and the last of Charles Dickens' completed novel appeared in parts of nineteen monthly instalments that ended in November 1865. Mei Chin remarks that "*Our Mutual Friend* is the most radical of Dickens' novels, for in it the classes merge and remain merged." (Harold Bloom: 2003:84)

J. Hillis Miller remarks:

"The narrator of *Our Mutual Friend* is in exactly the same position as the characters of the novel in relation to one another. For the narrator, the characters' inner lives are there, available, in what he can see and hear of them, their bodies, gestures, behavior, and surroundings ... Dickens keeps the objectivity of the third person narrator." (Miller, 1958:290)

*Our Mutual Friend* is "the story of two people who marry each other for money then find out that each was crushingly mistaken in estimating the other's fortune." (Bloom, 2003:52)

### **Different Personal Relationships**

In the investigation, among many characters, we find different personal relationships such as the relationship between Bella Wilfer and her father R. Wilfer, the relationship between Bella and John Harmon, and the relationship between Lizzie Haxam and Eugene Wrayburn etc. About the characters in the novel, J. Hillis Miller gives his remarks: "All the characters in *Our Mutual Friend* are perfectly self-aware. We hear almost all of them, even the more or less unintelligent characters like Betty Higden, talking about them, or even see him from the inside in soliloquy. The self-consciousness takes a special form: the characters

are shown as aware of their situations, of their given engagements in the world.” (Miller, 1958:282)

### **The Theme of Corruption**

Corruption is one of the themes of the novel. The main character, Bella Wilfer always thinks of herself to become a rich person by marrying moneyed man or a rich man, John Harmon who is heir to the Harmon estate. “The character feels that his life is altogether ridiculous because every move in it has been decided beforehand, and he is prevented from acting because he feels that, for him, all human relationships are doomed to failure.” (Miller, 1958:300) “There is no central protagonist in *Our Mutual Friend*.” (Hillis Miller, 1958:281) “Apparently, then, *Our Mutual Friend* is a multi –plotted novel presenting a collection of unrelated lives each fulfilling itself privately, enclosed in its own personal world. The novel seems to be a large group of impenetrable milieus with characters buried untouchably at their centers. These milieus exist side by side, but do not organize themselves into a larger whole.” (Miller, 1958:284)

### **Marry for Money**

In the investigation, the relationship between John Harmon and Bella Wilfer found in the novel is another kind of personal relationship in which Bella loves Harmon for his wealth as he is the heir of the Harmon estate. His father Old Harmon wishes his son to marry Bella Wilfer who is beautiful and mercenary. Being born in poverty, Bella wanted to be rich and a lady of property by marrying money for which she and her father always often talked about to become rich. She had two sisters and a brother. She dreamed of marrying a wealthy man, John Harmon whom she never had seen before but heard about him. And John Harmon wished to marry Miss Wilfer for his father Old Harmon liked her for him. Being born in poverty and a big family to support fallen in her hands so she had emotional feeling for love, but had to marry for money, because according to her, money cannot be begged or borrowed or stolen. She says to her father:

*“I have made up my mind that I must have money, Pa. I feel that I can’t beg it, borrow it, or steal it; and so I have resolved that I must marry it.”.... ‘My de-a-r Bella!’ ‘Yes, Pa, that in the state of the case, If ever there was a mercenary plotter whose thought and designs were always in her mean occupation, I am*

*the amiable creature. But I don't care. I hate and detest being poor, and I won't be poor if I can marry money. Now you deliciously fluffy, Pa, and in a state to astonish the waiter and pay the bill.” (OMF,1960:334)*

Though she was crazy for money, she later underwent a significant moral change and not for money but for love married to John Rokesmith who was another name of John Harmon which was changed after his incidence of drowning into the deep sea in which he was thought to be dead but was saved by one Gaffer Haxam, a Thames waterside man. After the incident in which he was declared to be dead, all his property was inherited to their employees Mr. and Mrs. Boffins which results in changing master and servant roles i.e., the employees become the owner of the estate and the owner, employee. However, John Harmon later changed his name as John Rokesmith for he wanted to watch all the works of his estate done by Mr. Mrs. Boffins and Bella's nature as well. “Thus John Harmon turned into John Rokesmith feels like a lonely ghost returned from the grave. He lives a shadowy life which is undetermined by his awareness of its falsity.” (Miller, 1958:324) He served as their confidential Secretary and man of business without salary. Nobody knew him that he was John Harmon because he was thought to be dead after the incident. He felt something different when he remembered his past. He said:

*“I remember there were poles and pushed out of upper windows on which clothes were drying and I remember a low public – house, and sound flowing down a narrow passage belonging to it of the scraping of a fiddle and the shuffling of feet. But here are all these things in the lane, and here are all these things in the alley. And I have nothing else in my mind but a wall, a dark doorway, a flight of stairs, and a room.” (OMF,1960:379)*

All these circumstances made Bella Wilfer lose her hope of marrying John Harmon. In the mean time she was recognized by John Rokesmith that she was the woman whom his father told him to marry. And he also wanted to perform the will of his father for which he one day proposed Bella but she denied it as she did not know him that he was her John Harmon. As she always thought of money and contrary to this, John Rokesmith, as a poor employee working at the same estate under Mr. and Mrs. Boffins, she declined to his proposal. One day Rokesmith told Mr. Boffin how he began taking interest in Miss Bella Wilfer. He said to Mr. Boffin:

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*“My interest in Miss Wilfer began when I first saw her; even began when I had only heard of her. It was, in fact, the cause of my throwing myself in Mr. Boffin’s way, and entering his service. Miss Wilfer has never known this until now. I mention it now, only as a corroboration (though I hope it may be needless) of my being free from the sordid design attributed to me.”* (OMF, 1960:614)

### **Bella and John Rokesmith – Finally Marry for Love and Not for Money**

As the time progress, Bella had to leave Mr. Boffin’s place for he had been so miser, and worst, day by day as a result of becoming rich with all the Harmon’s inheritance. During Rokesmith’s stay as a secretary with Mr. Boffin he watched the works of Mr. and Mrs. Boffins and found that they began to treat him cruelly and looked in contempt and he would also watch Miss Bella Wilfer’s nature. The behavior and nature of Mr. Boffin made John Rokesmith sympathy for Bella Wilfer. At the same time, Bella also felt sympathy for John Rokesmith for he had been treated badly and dismissed him for aspiring to marry Bella Wilfer, which resulted in Bella’s stand for John Rokesmith. She came back to her father and was followed by John Rokesmith as he wanted to save Bella who was in despair. Then they three, Bella, Rokesmith and R. Wilfer met together and he (Rokesmith) told excitedly and joyfully R. Wilfer all his will for Bella.

*“Mr. Wilfer,’ said John Rokesmith, excitedly and joyfully, ‘Bella takes me, though I have no fortune, even no present occupation; nothing but what I can get in the life before us. Bella takes me!’.....‘You don’t know, Pa,’ said Bella, ‘what a shocking creature I was growing, when he saved me from myself!’ ‘You don’t know, sir,’ said Rokesmith, ‘what a sacrifice she has made for me!’.....‘Yes, do, Pa, do!’ urged Bella, ‘I allow you, and my will is his law. Isn’t it \_\_\_ dear John Rokesmith?’”* (OMF,1960:627)

Afterwards, Bella would marry Rokesmith for love not for money. She soon conceived. Bella says:

*“Do you remember, John, on the day we were married, Pa’s speaking of the ships that might be sailing towards us from the unknown seas? ‘Perfectly, my*

*darling!’ ‘I think ..... among them ..... there is a ship upon the ocean  
..... bringing.... to you and me ..... a little baby, John.” (OMF, 1960:712)*

### **Bella and Her Father**

There is another personal relationship found between Bella Wilfer and her father, Reginald Wilger. Her father is a poor henpecked clerk in the story. Their relationship though they are father and daughter, is that of friendship. The two are rather close than her mother or her sister or brother.

As Bella and her father were close friends and she would treat her father as her school boy and her father too behave so. She sometimes treated as if she was a mother of her father in the relationship of a mother and son. She always accompanied with her father sharing all the sorrows and happy moments they encountered.

Her relationship with her father is more like that of a mother and her son as she always cares for him and calls him ‘cherub’. Her father also would agree with his daughter’s treatment of him like a child. Reginald Wilfer was a very kind, gentle and innocent. As the family was living below poverty line, she was insisted to get married to a wealthy man since she was small. She also thought of marrying for money with which she would manage her family. Therefore she was once proposed by one old Harmon for his son, John Harmon who would be inherited all the property of his father. “To reconcile love and riches in *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens is content with nothing less than the secret rebirth and double identity of Harmon Rokesmith; a second, more wayward hero, Eugene Wrayburn is subjected to near drowning, Doubledickenian marriage, and moral rebirth.” (Welsh, 1971:204)

However it was in vain after a shocking incident in which John Harmon was believed drowned into the deep sea. When she was about to be engaged with one John Rokesmith alias Julius Handsford who really was John Harmon himself, her mother was against her will but her father would consent with her will to marry Rokesmith, secretary to Mr. Boffin.

The beautiful relationship between a daughter and her father is portrayed by the novelist. Bella Wilfer and her father who were always attached with one another. She was very free to say anything to her father. She treated her father sometimes like her own brother to share anything.



*“I’ll tell you, pa, I don’t mind telling you, because we have always been favorites of each other’s and because you are not like a Pa, but more like a sort of a younger brother with a dear Venerable chubbiness on him.”* (OMF, 1960:333)

One day she was about to go somewhere near the garden up by the Trinity House on Tower with her father for a dinner. She told her father to take a leave for the rest of the day to pass with her for dinner to a very beautiful and quite place. For this, she had let her father promise and vow to be obedient, for she wanted her father do anything whatever she wanted to do.

This kind of father-daughter relationship is one of the important relationships found in the novel.

### **Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam**

Again, there is another personal relationship found among the various characters of which Mr. Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam is one of them. “Lizzie loves another gentleman Eugene Wrayburn and will eventually marry him. However, if Lizzie talked like her father, it is quite possible that Eugene would have never been attracted to her in the first place, or at least would have never pursued her with ultimately noble motives in mind. Lizzie would have become another Nancy.” (Harold Bloom, 2003:84) Lizzie Hexam was an affectionate daughter of Gaffer Hexam who saved John Harmon and charged him as accuse for killing John Harmon. Eugene Wrayburn is seen as second hero of the novel, who loves Lizzie Hexam, but she does not reciprocate to the proposal. Lizzie was always reproachful because she knew that they had a gulf of gap between Eugene Wrayburn and her in terms of social classes as she was a working girl. She said:

*“I don’t mean in that way. Think of me, as belonging to another station, and quite cut off from you in honour. Remember that I have no protector near me, unless I have one in your noble heart. Respect my good name. If you feel towards me, in one particular, as you might if I was a lady, give me the full claims of a lady upon your generous behavior. I am removed from you and your family by being a working girl. How true a gentleman to be as considerate of me as if I was removed by being a Queen!”* (OMF, 1960:716)



Lizzie was pursued romantically by both Eugene Wrayburn and one Bradley Headstone, a schoolmaster. But she was afraid of Bradley because of his violent nature. Therefore Bradley always hated Wrayburn and he never wanted Wrayburn to come near Lizzie. In the later part of the novel, Eugene Wrayburn was attacked by Bradley Headstone after he left Lizzie alone from his following her. She said while he was following her:

*“You will drive me away. I live here peacefully and respected, and I am well employed here. You will force me to quit this place as I quitted London, and – by following me again – will force me to quit the next place in which I may find refuge, as I quitted this.”* (OMF, 1960:717)

However by chance she saved Eugene who was nearly dead. Mei Chin opines on the novelist’s choice of hero in his novel: “It has been often said that, with the exception of Eugene Wrayburn, Dickens has never created a gentleman hero. Perhaps it is more appropriate to say that Eugene Wrayburn is Dickens’ only elite hero.” (Harold Bloom, 2003:85) From that moment on she began to think of Wrayburn and yearned for his love. Again Mei Chin remarks on the character, Eugene Wrayburn: “Eugene Wrayburn, gentleman in status, does not become a real gentleman until he redeems himself with Lizzie Hexham, and Lizzie Hexham has always been suited to be his wife because she has a genteel soul.” (Bloom, 2003:85)

Then after this incident, she married him. Though they belong to different social strata, Wrayburn always had a heart for her and was attracted for her good character and her inherent goodness which resulted in marital happiness. They soon got married before Wrayburn was not fully recovered from his injury. The novelist says:

*“As the bridegroom could not move his hand, they touched his fingers with the ring, and so put it on the bride. When the two plighted their troth, she laid her hand on his, and kept it there. When the ceremony was done, and all the rest departed from the room, she drew her arm under his head, and laid her own head down upon the pillow by his side.”* (OMF, 1960:776)

Then they lived a happy life. Eugene said after all the rest departed from the room:

*“Undraw the curtains, my dear girl,” said Eugene, after a while, and let us see our Wedding –day.”* (OMF, 1960:776)

## To Conclude

James R. Kincaid remarks on the novel: “Though Dickens has not perhaps quite come full circle, his last completed novel does recapture the humorous directness of his first. Laughter is used to expel the villains and make the new world safe for love.” (James R. Kincaid, 1971:252) Such kind of man-woman relationship is beautifully portrayed by the novelist. In short, we can note that Charles Dickens has portrayed various kinds of human relationships in this novel that make one of the most popular among his novels.

To bring a conclusion of our critical assessment of the famous English novelist, Charles Dickens will never be an easy task. He is not only a social reformer but also a humanitarian novelist. He constructed his plots found among the English people of London city and their relationships which ultimately became of universal significance. His novels provide a fine and vivid scene of London life which evolved after rapid industrial revolution of England. Arthur Compton-Rickett has rightly observed thus:

“The novel provides such a facile and attractive means of popular appeal, and is so adaptable to literary fashions, that its continued vitality will surprise no one.” (Compton-Rickett, 2012:661-662)

Charles Dickens along with his contemporary, W.M. Thackeray is able to provide a new genre of fiction for the fiction covers all over the world. Though Charles Dickens portrayed the London life of his age, his fame was not confined to England. It was of universal significance.

As his age was an age of industrial revolution, life in London was very hard with the rapid changes taking place in England. He knew the hard facts of life of the country thereby made him to depict these pictures so as to reform it to make a sustainable environment by waking up the authority's eyes. His novels have many characters starting from childhood to manhood as a society is comprised of children, men and women and other old people. All these characters are seen in his novels. Therefore, in such a situation, the human relationships have been fabricated throughout the novels. We know that one generation is replaced by another generation, and to see a generation, society starts from a child growing to manhood and womanhood which is seen in most of his novels. He experienced the hard life of children

and this is his main theme of novels. Many children are portrayed in his novels as a society consists of children and men and women together. Here to quote W.R Goodman's remark:

“In the crowd of human beings that throng these books there are many boys and girls. Often, indeed, a novel is the story of a child growing into manhood and womanhood; and no preceding novelist had written so much of the experiences of childhood.” (Goodman, 2010: 373)

He has produced about fifteen novels altogether including his last unfinished novel, *Edwin Drood*, with readers from different parts of the world from America to Russia. He was received warmly in America in streets by big crowds and welcomed by many, including politicians, judges and bishops. His child image is tactfully portrayed with miserable life of child as an orphan.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens introduces some characters who always were crazy about money. So, the theme of the novel is a kind of money crazy. Here, Bella Wilfer and her family wants money for according to them, money can do everything. Besides Bella there are other characters in the novel who always crazy about money. Mr. Boffin becomes worse than before after receiving all properties of Old Harmon in the absence of real owner who is supposed to be the only recipient of all inheritance of his father. The heroin, Bella though she thinks of marrying money as money can't be begged, or stolen, she ultimately changes her moral behaviour and get married to Rokesmith not for money but for love. Such kind of human relationships are employed in the novel and it is Dickens' contribution that has the new taste to novel readers. Through Bella, one can see the relationship between father and daughter, between man and woman, between lovers, between siblings and between friends in the novel.

Through such novels, Charles Dickens has achieved high ranks of reputation which his contemporary novelists can never achieve. He was popular with all classes in English society thereby creates for him a special place among the novelists. Analyzing the human relationships found in the novels of Dickens help us to acquaint ourselves with the types of people living in the age of Dickens and of their nature, and aspirations and also help us to deepen our understanding and appreciation of Dickens' novels.

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