Dickens Our Mutual Friend Essay, Research Paper

Gender and Money: Limitations for Women in the Victorian City

If money is the ascribing of value to valueless matter, the basis of its power for evil over man is his forgetting of this fact. Our Mutual Friend is about a whole society which has forgotten. Instead of seeing that man has made money of dust and is the source of its value, this society takes money as the ultimate value-in-itself, the measure and source of all other value. As one of the Voices of Society says, “A man may do anything lawful for money. But for no money! Bosh!” The novel is a brilliant revelation of the results of this false worship of money.

J. Hillis Miller, “Our Mutual Friend”

How fair is this statement made by J. Hillis Miller concerning Dickens’ Our Mutual Friend? Miller suggests that the novel is singularly a testimony about the corruptive powers of money. The individual, argues Miller, becomes objectified by his or her financial value and distinction, and that distinction replaces the true identity of the individual. I agree that this notion is demonstrated in the text, and I also agree that the characters often times only regard one another based upon their financial value. For this reason, characters do lose a sense of their true individuality, as money becomes a determining factor of their status in society. But is there another factor, besides money, which also contributes to the formation of these “fake” identities? Yes, and Miller fails to take this into account. Money is not the only signifier of status and character in the novel; gender, also, determines roles and place in society for the individual and prevents certain characters from the freedom of their “true” identities. We see both men and women in the novel wrestling with money and greed, but we also see women caught in a society that places severe role restrictions upon them. I would like to look at two women from the novel, Bella Wilfer and Lizzie Hexam, and investigate certain aspects of the roles that these two played in London society. I would also like to briefly delve into some investigations about the historical moment of the Victorian City. The latter is based upon the historical descriptions of Victorian London that describe the segregation that existed between gender in the work environment. When we take these conditions into consideration, it becomes clear that women suffered not one, but two inhibitors of freedom. They, like the men are caught in the “money talks” universe, which J. Hillis Miller accurately describes; but, unlike men, these women also suffer from the oppressions of being a woman in the Victorian city. As a result, we are more understanding, and, perhaps, are not as harsh on female characters of the novel as J. Hillis Miller wants us to be.

It is first important to note the effect that money has upon the characters of the novel. We need to establish that the characters are corrupted by money, and, more importantly, we need to demonstrate the difference between male corruption with money and female corruption with money. J. Hillis Miller claims that “Dickens shows people turned into objects made by money” (Miller). This is true in the sense that characters view other characters by their wealth and social stature. Melvin Tremlow, though a minor character, is a perfect example. His acceptance in the Veneering quarters and at their dinner parties is directly linked to his status as cousin to Lord Snigsworth. Tremlow does not have to reside on the Veneering property nor does he have to attend their parties. His choice to do so, however, demonstrates how he is manipulated by the Veneerings. His stature and name is a Veneering trophy and his willingness to play that role points to his acceptance of that manipulation. Dickens has presented an example of a character that lacks “true” identity because the only identity that Tremlow obtains is based off the non-substance of wealth and stature. Miller supports this, stating, “in Our Mutual Friend all things and people have the mediated worth of a piece of paper money” (Miller).

In the same sense, Bella Wilfer is manipulated into a piece of property who is “willed away, like a horse, or a dog, or a bird.” Yet, when we consider the status of lower class women in Victorian London and the limited financial opportunities that were available to them, we no longer can look at the issue in such a black and white frame of mind as we could with Tremlow. This leads us to acknowledge the historical condition of women in the city during the Victorian Era. Wilson s chapter “Cesspool City: London” from his work Sphinx in the City addresses urban London during the Victorian Era. Much of his discussion is concerned with the limited economic roles that women could play during the time period. Wilson states, “the condition of women became the touchstone for judgements on city life” (Wilson). Women were heavily scrutinized. Moreover, what was considered proper behavior for middle class women was extremely narrow. Wilson points out that even in the most liberal cases, a woman working a man s job was never condoned. Women were encouraged, for the most part, to play the role of mother and wife. Therefore, women like Bella Wilfer have little choice but to succumb to the pressures of society. Not only are women forced to contend with the mighty buck, but they must also do so within an extremely rigid system.

What does this say about Dickens and his view of women? As Wilson mentions, Dickens worked to instill proper, middle class values into women. His home for women, Urania Cottage, is testimony to this claim. Yet, it is difficult after reading Mutual Friend to uncover exactly what Dickens thought these values should be. We have two heroines who both assume the role of the dutiful and nurturing wife at the novel s conclusion. In this case, Lizzie Hexam is extremely interesting when we consider her occupational transition from the novel s beginning to its conclusion. Her work along the river, a man s job, is replaced by her responsibility to her new husband (we can consider the latter as an occupation). Is Dickens advocating such a transition? On one hand, we may think so. Dickens may in fact be suggesting that marriage responsibilities are a “step up” from manual labor implying that the later is improper for a woman of Lizzie s character. This, I think, would be an easy take on Dickens considering, again, his role with the home for women. Yet, on the other hand, Dickens may be suggesting that it is possible for a woman to do a man s work and still maintain her virtue (this is still extremely male chauvinistic as a man is defining what is “virtuous” for a woman). After all, Dickens portrays Lizzie s innocence and selflessness as the strongest elements in her character. Perhaps Dickens is suggesting that a woman s occupation and financial circumstances do not factor into her character. Based upon Wilson s accounts of the historical moment, this would have been a very bold statement by Dickens. I think, however, the fact that Lizzie eventually assimilates into the middle class role of the dutiful wife indicates Dickens belief that a “proper” woman must be taught to emulate middle class values.

I opened this discussion with the excerpt from J. Hillis Miller s essay on Our Mutual Friend, entitled “Our Mutual Friend”. In the essay, Miller contributes money as the soul factor in the determination of the individual s worth and status in society. I included Miller in the discussion for two reasons: one, he misses the boat concerning the gender s role with social status, and two (which goes along with reason one), his essay served as the afterword for the 1964 Signet Classics edition of Dickens Our Mutual Friend. Therefore, my discussion deals with female oppression on three possible levels. The first, and most definitive, is the double standard that existed for women in the Victorian City. They are subjected to the same pressures for money as men, but, unlike men, they also have extremely limited access to money. In most cases, women were required to assume the role of mother and dutiful wife in order to secure financial stability and social favor. The second level of female oppression concerning the novel is more of an inference about Dickens personal attitude toward the standards for middle class women. It is possible that he assumes that class and money have nothing to do with a woman s character (Lizzie Hexam). His personal undertakings, however, to establish a school of middle class values and proper behavior for women (Urania Cottage) indicates that Dickens probably believed that there was specific criteria (a curriculum) required to achieve these “proper” standards. The third level of female oppression that our discussion deals with is the ignorance of J. Hillis Miller. It is extremely interesting to see a critical piece–written one-hundred years after Dickens published Our Mutual Friend–contain similar aspects of female oppression that, at least, existed in the historical moment of the novel and, quite possibly, in the mind of Dickens as well.

J. Hillis Miller, 1964. “Our Mutual Friend”. Taken from Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays. Martin Price: Editor. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ. 1967

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