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The Idolization of Wealth and the Moral Decline in Our Mutual Friend by Charles Dickens

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Abstract

This study explores Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* as a critique of Victorian society's idolization of wealth, arguing that money replaces traditional moral and religious values, leading to widespread social and moral decay. Dickens illustrates this shift through his complex characters from the upper and lower classes, including Lizzie Hexam, Eugene Wrayburn, Rogue Riderhood, and John Harmon. Through an analysis of their character arcs, this paper examines how their pursuit of wealth distorts their values and leads to ethical compromises, pushing them to extremes in their search for social status and personal gain. By using close readings of key passages and character interactions, this study reveals how the era's fixation on material wealth undermines the moral fabric of society. The findings suggest that Dickens employs his characters as a mirror to reflect the dangers of this societal idolization,

positioning wealth as the ultimate force shaping personal and collective behavior. The paper argues that Dickens ultimately critiques not just individual moral failings, but the societal structures that allow such corruption to flourish. This analysis encourages readers to reconsider the values that shape our own contemporary world, particularly in terms of the ethical implications of wealth and social status.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, Victorian Society, Wealth, Morality

Introduction

In the sprawling, grimy backstreets of Victorian London, Charles Dickens paints a world where dust—often the last remnant of decay—has become the foundation of wealth. The streets are filled with scavengers and dust sifters, characters who sift through society's waste, extracting whatever remains of value from what others have discarded. In this world, fortunes are scraped together not from glittering shops or grand mansions but from what is cast away, revealing a darker, grittier side of the city. Dickens introduces this reality in the novel's opening, describing a boat drifting on 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" (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 1-2)*. This vivid imagery captures the lives of those who inhabit the outskirts of Victorian society, relying on what others have discarded to create livelihoods. In Dickens's London, wealth is often won from the refuse of the privileged, revealing a social order that idolizes wealth regardless of its origins. Through the characters of

Gaffer and Lizzie Hexam, Dickens critiques the material obsession of the Victorian era, showing how value is found in decay and waste, and how wealth—no matter how it is acquired—has replaced more meaningful pursuits. This world of dustmen and scavengers exposes Victorian society's paradox: wealth is found not only in polished, high-society spaces but in the discarded, grimy remnants of urban life. Through these characters, Dickens critiques a society in which even death and waste are commodified, and turned into a source of income for those at the very bottom. It is a cyclical and paradoxical process; what is dead or discarded is sifted, repurposed, and reborn, embodying the concept of *renovatio*—a rebirth achieved through degradation.

Through inverting traditional symbols of prosperity, Dickens presents dust itself as a new idol, replacing the Victorian reverence for gold. Whereas biblical narratives, like that of the Golden Calf, depict gold as an idol worshipped in the absence of spiritual values, Dickens twists this symbol. Here, dust—crushed and disintegrated—rises as a new source of aspiration and identity. Dust becomes a reverse "Golden Calf," a commodity of worship in an age where wealth is elevated above all else. The passage, "For dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19, New International Version), captures this irony: Victorian society finds its 'resurrection' not in spiritual salvation but in recycling and repurposing material waste, suggesting a moral drift from its religious and ethical foundations.

In the gritty alleys and dust heaps of London, we see Victorian materialism laid bare—where everything, from clothes to trinkets to social identities, can be reinvented if it holds any promise of profit. This mirrors the moral decay Dickens critiques, as wealth becomes an idol that

reveals and corrupts character. Figures like Nicodemus Boffin, the "Golden Dustman," inherit and manipulate the dust wealth for both good and gain, portraying Dickens's critique of a society that has elevated riches to the status of gods. The concept of *renovatio* suggests the potential for change, yet it also exposes the troubling decay that accompanies the worship of wealth over virtue. Through this twisted respect for dust, Dickens exposes the emptiness of materialism, urging readers to confront a world where moral decay is simply recycled and rebranded for profit.

This analysis engages with established scholarship, such as Lina Alzouabi's exploration of how wealth drives characters toward immoral behaviors and Efraim Sicher's examination of moral transformation amidst societal degradation. However, I offer a unique perspective. Where Alzouabi primarily focuses on the criminality associated with wealth and Sicher analyzes specific character arcs, I extend the discussion to the broader narrative. I argue that Dickens's entire social tapestry illustrates the idolization of wealth across all classes, revealing that even characters with virtuous intentions are not immune to the corrupting influence of materialism. In doing so, I aim to contribute a fresh lens to the ongoing discussions surrounding *Our Mutual Friend*, highlighting the moral implications of consumer culture as depicted through the lens of *renovatio.*

Section 1*: *Lizzie Hexam, Bradley Headstone, Eugene Wrayburn, and Charley Hexam

In Charles Dickens's portrayal of Lizzie Hexam, her brother Charley Hexam, Eugene Wrayburn, and Bradley Headstone, we see how social pressures surrounding wealth impact

personal relationships and moral choices. Lizzie, who views Wrayburn as “too good” for her, embodies the internalized belief that social class dictates worth. This belief goes beyond being an abstract idea; it deeply shapes her personal decisions. Lizzie’s rejection of Wrayburn stems from her conviction that a relationship with him would be morally wrong, as she perceives herself as unworthy of him due to her lower status. Her mindset reveals how Victorian society equates value with wealth, a theme Dickens explores through Lizzie’s internal conflict.

An evident illustration of Lizzie's internal struggle appears when she speaks to Charley: “It may easily be so, Charley, but I cannot marry him” (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 332).* Here, Lizzie acknowledges Charley’s perspective—that her decision to reject Headstone and her hesitation toward Wrayburn stem from trivial impulses that, in Charley’s eyes, harm her chances for a better future. Yet, Lizzie is guided by a moral compass skewed by class expectations. Her confusion reflects her belief that to pursue Wrayburn would be to ignore social boundaries, a decision she views as morally wrong within the Victorian worldview.

Charley Hexam reinforces these rigid class values by urging Lizzie to marry Headstone. He insists, “As Mr. Headstone's wife you would be occupying a most respectable station... nothing could be better or more desirable” (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 394-395).* Charley’s insistence reveals his prioritization of wealth and status over genuine emotional connection, showing how even familial bonds are shaped by social aspirations. While Charley’s values are more mercenary than Lizzie’s, they both share a moral compass dictated by wealth and class status. His

desperation for Lizzie to accept Headstone's proposal reflects his desire to elevate their family's social standing, further emphasizing how financial considerations shape their decisions.

In contrast, Headstone's obsession with Lizzie and rivalry with Wrayburn lead him down a path of moral degradation and violence, underscoring his inability to rise within the strict social hierarchy. His rage and despair are fueled by his realization that, despite being a schoolmaster, he is unable to compete with Wrayburn's class advantage. This frustration is indicated when Headstone says, "With Mr. Eugene Wrayburn in my mind, I have been set aside and I have been cast out" (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 331).* His fixation on social status and perceived rejection by Lizzie highlight the self-destructive path that results from idolizing wealth and status. In contrast, Wrayburn, who grows morally throughout the story, represents the possibility of rising above social divisions. Through the contrasting arcs of these characters, Dickens critiques a society that places wealth above genuine connection, showing that those who worship status often suffer moral corruption, while those who resist it can find redemption.

Section 2: The Lammles

Throughout the novel, Alfred and Sophronia Lammle are a unique duo. Their relationship emphasizes the transactional nature of Victorian marriages, which often prioritized social status and financial gain over genuine affection. Their union, depicted in the chapter titled "A Marriage Contract," highlights the societal trend of marrying for money rather than love, reflecting the broader theme of wealth replacing moral values among the Victorian leisure classes.

From the start, it is clear that the Lammles are drawn together not by romantic love but by the belief that each possesses significant wealth. Mr. Veneering, their so-called matchmaker, creates this illusion, inadvertently setting the stage for their eventual downfall. As they exchange vows, the marriage is marked not by the merging of two souls but by the calculation of two greedy wallets. Dickens writes, “Mr. and Mrs. Lammle have walked for some time on the Shanklin sands, and one may see by their footprints that they have not walked arm in arm... and that they have walked in a moody humour” (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 101).* This description underscores the difference between their expectations and the reality of their union, which is without any affection.

The moment they learn of each other's lack of wealth, their relationship quickly deteriorates, revealing the hollowness of a marriage predicated on financial motives. Dickens captures this disillusionment: “You sought me out—... Why should you and I talk about it, when you and I can’t disguise it?” (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 103)*. Their growing animosity illustrates a critique of Victorian consumerism. Rather than forming a partnership based on mutual respect and love, Alfred and Sophronia’s marriage becomes a contract defined by financial interests, emphasizing how wealth and social appearance dictated the values of their time.

Through the Lammles, Dickens critiques a society that encourages individuals to prioritize financial identity over personal virtue. In stark contrast to the genuine love that ultimately unites Lizzie Hexam and Eugene Wrayburn, the Lammles' union collapses, showcasing the moral bankruptcy that can arise when greed overshadows human connection.

Dickens uses their story to highlight the dangers of a transactional approach to marriage, suggesting that such arrangements lead not only to personal unhappiness but also to a broader moral decline in Victorian society, aligning closely with the idea that wealth replaced religion as the guiding idol of the era's leisure classes.

Section 3: Bella Wilfer, John Harmon, and Rogue Riderhood

The characters of Bella Wilfer, John Harmon, and Rogue Riderhood reveal varying responses to the temptations of wealth. Bella's transformation, particularly in her views on wealth and self-worth, mirrors Dickens's broader commentary on the corrosive nature of wealth. Initially drawn to money for the status it promises, Bella finds herself grappling with the unsettling consequences of such aspirations. Her journey shifts from a superficial admiration of wealth to a more self-aware critique of its impact. In a conversation with her father, she confesses, "I shall not be able to keep my greediness for money out of my eyes long, and when you see it there you'll be sorry" (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 381)*. Bella acknowledges that her obsession with money is altering her perception of herself. This foreshadows her growing fear that wealth may overpower her true values, leading to her realization of the "fascination of money."

As Bella observes Mr. Boffin's changing behavior due to his newfound fortune, she reflects on her own moral struggles, admitting, "'And now, Pa,' pursued Bella, 'I'll make a confession to you. I am the most mercenary little wretch that ever lived in the world.'" (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 265*). This admission reveals her growing awareness of the corrupting influence of wealth, exposing her vulnerability in a society obsessed with social status. Bella's recognition of

her mercenary tendencies emphasizes how money's power can distort even the most sincere intentions. Through her insights, Dickens underscores the insidious nature of materialism.

Ultimately, Bella's journey illustrates Dickens's critique of society's obsession with wealth, which has replaced religious values as the guiding principle for many individuals. Her story serves as a reminder that true fulfillment lies not in material gain but in moral integrity and emotional sincerity. This perspective aligns with John Harmon's similar realization. Through Bella, Dickens argues that the quest for wealth can overshadow one's moral compass, echoing the biblical notion that one cannot serve both God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24). This idea reflects how the idolization of wealth diminishes ethical standards within the Victorian leisure classes. Yet, through self-awareness, Bella demonstrates the potential for *renovatio,* or renewal, showing that individuals can resist the destructive pull of materialism and reclaim their moral values. Dickens, therefore, stresses that while wealth may dominate society, it is through personal reflection and moral courage that one can transcend its corrupting influence.

John Harmon, too, undergoes a significant transformation, similar to Bella's. Initially fixated on his inheritance and the material wealth that comes with it, Harmon represents the idle pursuits of the Victorian leisure classes. However, his experiences lead him to confront the emptiness of a life driven by financial gain. As he interacts with characters like Bella, he begins to realize the corrosive effects of money on human relationships. Harmon's eventual rejection of the mercenary values that once defined him marks a crucial moment of self-realization. His journey reflects Dickens's overarching theme that true worth lies in moral values, not material

possessions. In this way, Harmon's journey aligns with the idea of *renovatio*, suggesting that through self-reflection, individuals can reclaim their moral compass and seek authentic fulfillment beyond wealth. This transformation shows Dickens's argument that the idolization of wealth not only replaces spiritual values but also ultimately leads to moral decay, a notion that resonates deeply within the context of the Victorian society he critiques.

Rogue Riderhood represents the extreme consequences of allowing wealth to dictate one's actions and moral compass. Driven by a desperate need for financial gain, he consistently engages in betrayal and deceit, showing how poverty can push individuals to morally wrong actions when wealth becomes an idol. His character can be seen as Dickens's clearest example of "irredeemable villainy," a man willing to compromise his integrity for the sake of money and personal gain. Throughout the novel, Riderhood's interactions with characters in the book reveal a man devoid of loyalty, entirely driven by self-interest. He plans to betray Gaffer Hexam by accusing him of murder, even offering to "drop round under the Fellowships and tip [a] whistle" to signal the authorities, exposing his ruthlessness (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 138)*. Here, Dickens emphasizes how Riderhood is unbothered by the consequences for others, so long as he can continue profiting from his deceptions.

Riderhood's eventual fate—drowning alongside Bradley Headstone—represents Dicken's view of the ultimate price of moral corruption. Dickens parallels Riderhood's literal "descent" into the river with his moral descent, using Riderhood's death as a biblical allusion to divine retribution. By drowning in the same waters where he betrayed and manipulated others,

Riderhood's demise echoes the theme of *renovatio*, suggesting that moral degradation inevitably leads to one's downfall. This scene serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of idolizing wealth, echoing the biblical notion that "those who live by the sword shall die by the sword." In other words, Riderhood's relentless pursuit of wealth leads him, inevitably, to his destruction.

Section 4: Silas Wegg, Mr. Boffin, and Fledgeby

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens examines how the corrupting influence of wealth affects not just the upper classes but also the working class, with characters like Silas Wegg, Mr. Boffin, and Fledgeby embodying varying responses to the allure of money. Wegg, a character marked by opportunism and self-interest, seeks to climb the social ladder through morally dubious means. He is initially presented as "a knotty man, and a close-grained," with "just as much play of expression as a watchman's rattle" (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 37)*, emphasizing his unremarkable, untrustworthy nature. Mr. Boffin's kindness initially tempers Wegg's aspirations, as he is hired to read to Boffin, who mistakenly perceives him as a literary man. However, Wegg's true intentions soon surface as he devises a plan to exploit Boffin's generosity. His manipulation of Mr. Boffin becomes evident when he proclaims, "Oh! You employed him, Boffin? Very good. Mr. Venus, we raise our terms, and we can't do better than proceed to business. Bof—fin! I want the room cleared of these two scum" (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 651).* This statement not only underscores Wegg's attempt to assert dominance over Mr. Boffin and his associates, but it also reveals his arrogance in dismissing others whom he perceives as beneath him. His growing greed serves as a critique of the moral decay that wealth can bring, highlighting how the pursuit of money corrupts relationships and personal integrity. The concept of *renovatio*, or renewal, stands in contrast to

Wegg's actions, highlighting the need for a return to ethical principles and a rejection of the ruthless ambition that defines the lives of many characters in the novel. Wegg's transition from gratitude at the beginning of the novel to greed demonstrates how the desire for wealth can corrupt the bonds of gratitude. The biblical notion of wealth as a potential root of evil is echoed in Wegg's actions, as he falls prey to the insatiable craving for more, reflecting Dickens's overarching theme of wealth leading to moral decay. However, Wegg's plan to take advantage of Boffin backfires, leaving him penniless, a fate that underscores Dickens's message about the destructive nature of craving wealth.

Mr. Boffin, however, embodies the ideal of using wealth as a tool for moral testing, distinguishing himself from those consumed by greed. He treats money as a means to reveal true character rather than an end in itself. His interactions with Bella and John Rokesmith exemplify his belief in the goodness of individuals beneath superficial flaws. As he observes, "I lay my life that she's the true golden gold at heart" (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 640)*, Boffin expresses his unwavering faith in Bella's character when he is finally aware she has transformed as a person, beyond her initial spoiled nature. This perspective reflects Dickens's hope for *renovatio*—a renewal of moral integrity through the sensible use of wealth. Mr. Boffin's approach contrasts sharply with characters like Wegg, who seek to exploit wealth for personal gain. Instead, Boffin creates opportunities for others to demonstrate their true natures, reinforcing the notion that wealth should serve a higher purpose rather than corrupt its possessor. This moral examination exemplifies Boffin's role as a character who navigates the complexities of having a big fortune with a commitment to goodness and the formation of authentic relationships. His actions

illustrate that true wealth lies in character and integrity, inviting a collective reflection on the transformative potential of money when wielded with wisdom and compassion.

Furthermore, his conscious choice to engage with Bella in ways that challenged her character reflects Dicken's broader critique of the Victorian leisure classes, who often viewed wealth as a means of self-elevation. By emphasizing character development over materialism, Boffin subverts the era's tendency to idolize wealth. This not only serves as a contrast to the mercenary motivations of many figures but also offers a blueprint for how wealth can be used for personal growth and moral goodness. In doing so, Boffin invites readers to reconsider their own values and the role that money plays in their lives, challenging the idolization of wealth that often superseded moral considerations in Victorian society. Through his character, Dickens illustrates a hopeful narrative that suggests it is possible to navigate the pitfalls of wealth with integrity and purpose, thereby providing a pathway toward moral renewal in a society fixated on material gain.

Fledgeby, in sharp contrast, embodies the darker side of wealth. A character of greed and manipulation, Fledgeby exploits others for financial gain through his money-lending business. His actions exemplify Dickens's criticism of how wealth, especially when exploited, contributes to broader societal corruption. By showing both Wegg and Fledgeby as morally bankrupt, Dickens critiques the corrupting influence of capital on those willing to exploit others for personal gain.

Described as “the meanest cur existing,” Fledgeby epitomizes the lowest depths of human nature, where the pursuit of wealth trumps any ethical behavior. Dickens illustrates Fledgeby’s upbringing and motivations, revealing that he is a product of a corrupt environment, born into a legacy of financial exploitation. The narrative notes that Fledgeby’s father was a money-lender who took advantage of his mother’s vulnerable position, using financial pressure to secure her marriage. This early exposure to the manipulative power of wealth shapes Fledgeby’s adult behavior, which is characterized by exploitation.

In one notable interaction with Mr. Riah, his Jewish employee, Fledgeby displays his disdain for those beneath him. His aggressive demeanor is evident when he storms in, reprimanding the old man for taking a holiday: “What have you got to do with holidays? Shut the door” (*Dickens, 1865, pp. 228)*. This contempt not only showcases Fledgeby’s cruelty but also highlights how he wields his wealth as a tool for oppression rather than upliftment. The contrast between his “spruce appearance” and the “shabby” yet dignified Riah underscores the moral bankruptcy of Fledgeby; while he may maintain respectability, it is rooted in a profound lack of empathy.

Dickens uses Fledgeby’s interactions to emphasize the corrupting influence of wealth on character. By contrasting Fledgeby’s self-serving behavior with Mr. Boffin’s moral integrity, the narrative critiques how Victorian leisure classes often prioritize financial gain over ethical considerations. Fledgeby’s unethical practices exemplify how wealth can be used to manipulate and oppress others, aligning with Dickens’s overarching message that the idolization of wealth

replaces more noble pursuits, such as compassion. This portrayal reinforces the idea of *renovatio* by illustrating the consequences of using wealth for ill intentions. Ultimately, Fledgeby serves as a cautionary figure, embodying the biblical warnings against the worship of money and the moral decay that ensues when strays away from being a means of uplifting others.

Conclusion

Positioning My Analysis Within the Scholarly Conversation

In examining the themes of wealth and moral decay in *Our Mutual Friend*, my analysis contributes a distinct perspective to the ongoing scholarly conversation surrounding Dickens's critique of Victorian society. While Lina Alzouabi highlights how the pursuit of wealth drives characters like Headstone and Riderhood to immoral acts, I extend the discussion by exploring how even virtuous characters like Lizzie and Charley are not immune to the corrupting influence of wealth. Unlike Alzouabi, whose focus leans heavily on criminal behavior, my paper argues that wealth acts as a moral compass, guiding decisions across all social classes, whether they lead to noble or dishonorable outcomes.

Similarly, in "The Age of Veneer," the emphasis on consumer culture illustrates the superficiality of material possessions and their impact on moral values. While I agree that consumerism plays a role in shaping values, my analysis broadens the conversation to include how this obsession with wealth influences interpersonal relationships and individual choices, as seen in the dynamics between Lizzie, Charley, and Wrayburn.

Efraim Sicher's analysis of moral transformation amid societal degradation provides further insight, but my focus on the collective experiences of characters across the social spectrum distinguishes my work. Sicher focuses on the moral regeneration of Wrayburn and Harmon, but I argue that the idea of regeneration is complicated by how deeply the idolization of wealth is rooted in the characters' minds, influencing their decisions regardless of their intentions.

To conclude, while other scholars engage with the theme of wealth as a central value in Victorian society, this paper broadens the discourse by examining how both "good" and "bad" characters are shaped by their relationships with wealth. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of Dickens's critique, revealing that the moral framework of Victorian society is deeply intertwined with its mercenary values, affecting individuals from all walks of life.

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