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The Case of Bella Wilfer *in Dickens's* **Our Mutual Friend**

Dickens's failure to create convincing heroines as can be found in the novels of such clear-sighted writers as Jane Austen, George Eliot, or Charlotte Brontë is no doubt a shop-soiled topic. Indeed, his female figures are often a source of disgust and even revolt, not only for the highly trained critic but for the unsophisticated, common reader as well. They are often weak characters, deprived of realism, lacking in complexity, in psychological depth and physical attractiveness. For instance, David Copperfield's first wife, Dora Spenlow, does not deserve a word because she can hardly be said to exist at all; his second wife, Agnes Wickfield, is as irritating and dull as Esther Summerson or Amy Dorrit. All these young women are presented as perfect little housewives, the incarnation of wisdom, generosity, humility, gratitude, kindness, and innocence, but they do not have a physical presence. However, they are rewarded at the end of the story: they all marry the men they love, are allowed domestic bliss and live happily ever after.

Dickens's inability to create satisfactory heroines can be explained by certain difficulties. Some are no doubt personal, but others are historical and thus beyond his control. Besides his "extreme" conception of happiness and love and his contradictory views on the society of his day, Dickens had to deal in his fiction with limitations — which spoiled so many Victorian novels — such as sexual censorship, the prevalent idealistic view of womanhood, not to mention the moral obligation to provide happy endings (see Wilson).

It is only when Dickens had matured as a man and as an artist that he succeeded in creating probably his only satisfactory heroine —

Bella Wilfer, the delightful figure of *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), undoubtedly the most complex of his novels. As Sylvère Monod brilliantly argues:

In the persons of John Harmon and Eugene Wrayburn, *Our Mutual Friend* possesses two heroes. The latter marries Lizzie Hexam and the former Bella Wilfer, for the role of heroine is also distributed between two characters. But while Lizzie Hexam resembles Esther in her cold faultlessness, and Amy Dorrit in her tendency to poeticize the humble realities in whose midst she lives, Bella Wilfer is a creation of the very first order. In contrast to the gallery of artificial characters in [the previous novels], now stilted, now hysterical, one comes across her with a shock of surprise (Monod 418).

In his portrait of Bella, Dickens seems to seek more realism and intricacy than in his former fictitious women. Unlike his other female characters, Bella looks real, both as a girl and as a young woman: she is lively, changeable, attractive, emotional, impulsive, passionate, and coquettish. Moreover, she is far from perfect, being not only generous, self-denying, and loving but also selfish, self-willed, haughty, and mercenary.

When Bella appears for the first time, the reader may be surprised to be in the company of a little, mercenary wretch who is as monstrous and disgusting as the birds of prey with which the novel is peopled, and who illustrate efficaciously Dickens's bitter satire of the corrupting power of money. Bella is indeed introduced as an angry young woman, deeply dissatisfied with the humble conditions in which she lives with her family, a mean creature whose hunger for wealth and power lies beyond imagination. She makes no bones about declaring her mercenariness: "I love money, and want money — want it dreadfully. I hate to be poor, and we are degradingly poor, offensively poor, miserably poor, beastly poor" (I, IV, 38). She regards poverty as an offence, a shame of which she wishes to be liberated, and she strongly believes that only money can "smooth" away the awkwardness of her situation.

Even when she is adopted by the Boffins because of her unfortunate marriage, she does not cease expressing the same preoccupations and nourishing the same ambitions. On one occasion, she is described strolling in the fields, reading a novel not about love but "more about

money than anything else" (I, XVI, 178). The seriousness of her emotional disorder is made manifest by the growing arrogance with which she treats John Rokesmith, the man she takes to be Mr. Boffin's humble secretary. When he reminds her that a social call to her family may be welcome, she replies sharply: "I beg leave to ask you, Mr. Rokesmith . . . why you took that liberty?" (II, XIII, 323). In the same way, when he tries to tell her about his passion for her, she violently and indelicately refuses his advances: "Preposterous! . . . I have far other views in life" (324; 325). These views are indeed clearly expressed in one of her conversations with 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."

R.W. cast up his eyes towards her, as well as he could under the operating circumstances, and said in a tone of remonstrance, "My dear Bella."

"Have resolved, I say, Pa, that to get money I must marry money. In consequence of which, I am always looking out for money to captivate."

"My dear Bella!"

"Yes, Pa, that is the state of the case. If ever there was a mercenary plotter whose thoughts 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 are deliciously fluffy, Pa, and in a state to astonish the waiter and pay the bill."

"But, my dear Bella, this is quite alarming at your age."

"I told you so, Pa, but you wouldn't believe it," returned Bella, with a pleasant childish gravity. "Isn't it shocking?"

"It would be quite so, if you fully knew what you said, my dear, or meant it."

"Well, Pa, I can only tell you that I mean nothing else. Talk to me of love!" said Bella, contemptuously: though her face and figure certainly rendered the subject no incongruous one. "Talk to me of fiery dragons! But talk to me of poverty and wealth, and there indeed we touch upon realities" (II, VIII, 277-78).

It becomes clear that only two words have meaning in Bella's universe, two words which represent in her eyes the sole realities that exist: "poverty" and "wealth." Like Mr Gradgrind's children, Tom and Louisa, in *Hard Times* and Mr Smallweed's grandchildren, Bart and Judy, in *Bleak House*, Bella refuses the solace of imagination; she dismisses love and

feelings as illusory and even goes as far as to consider them in the same light as “fiery dragons” of fairy tale and romance. Her intention not to marry out of love but out of interest reduces her to some hideous bird of prey, not different from Rogue Riderhood and Gaffer Hexam, the two repulsive body-snatchers, or the Veneerings, the Lammlles and the Podsnaps, that gang of fortune-hunters who have devoted their lives to preying on others as sources of their incomes.

However, as the reader can feel, Bella is a different kind of monster: she is not made of the same clay as these characters. Unlike them, she is deeply concerned with her own corruption, though she keeps on denying it. Her reference to herself as “a mercenary plotter whose thoughts and designs [are] always in her mean occupation” and as “the most mercenary little wretch that ever lived in the world” (276-77), as well as her frequently repeated bitter self-criticism, are convincing evidence that she does care.

Yet, Bella is not devoid of kindness and generosity. On various occasions, she displays a sympathetic character. For instance, in the course of her visit to see the feverish Johnny, she is so much affected that she does not hesitate to kneel on the brick floor to hold the unfortunate child in her arms. Her behaviour is described then as “very tender and very natural” (II, IX, 282). It is true that she looks “a little spoilt,” but she is, as Mrs. Boffin reports of her husband’s remark, “true golden gold at heart” (IV, XIII, 660). The inexperienced young woman is simply in need of a teacher to open her eyes and to help her realise that her conception of love is wrong, that the exaggerated importance she gives to money will make her journey in life unbearable and will inevitably lead to her ruin.

These points are successfully settled by Mr. Boffin. He pretends to develop a sudden fondness for and interest in money. He urges Bella to go with him to bookshops in quest of miser literature, and encourages her to read on misers and their tragic lives. He also grows cruel and arrogant with Rokesmith. He no longer treats him as his son but as a slave who must be in attendance on him whether there be anything to do

or not. When the young man evokes his salary, Mr. Boffin harshly retorts: "Don't be above calling it wages, man. . . . What the deuce! I never talked of *my* salary when I was in service" (III, V, 398). He goes as far as to compare him to an animal:

"A sheep is worth so much in the market, and I ought to give it and no more. A secretary is worth so much in the market, and I ought to give it and no more. . . . Then we put the figure . . . at two hundred a year. Then the figure's disposed of. Now, there must be no misunderstanding regarding what I buy for two hundred a year. If I pay for a sheep, I buy it out and out. Similarly, if I pay for a secretary, I buy him out and out" (399).

Bella herself does not escape his humiliating remarks; he treats her like a piece of merchandise, as can be understood from these laudative statements: "you have no call to be told how to value yourself" and "you'll make money of your good looks" (400).

Mr. Boffin's cruelty culminates in an angry dispute with Rokesmith when he discovers his secret affection for his protégé. He accuses him of mercenary intentions and discharges him from his services. Their quarrel has the effect on Bella which Mr. Boffin had calculated. She attacks him, confesses her passion for his secretary, renounces hunting for money and returns to her humble social milieu. Later on, she accepts to marry Rokesmith although she knows that he has neither fortune nor job. When he asks her if she aspires to be as rich as Mr. Boffin, she answers: "I should be almost afraid to try, John dear. Was he much the better for his wealth? Was I much the better for the little part I once had in it?" (IV, V, 582). Bella is deeply convinced that nothing can equal her domestic happiness at Blackheath. However, she is eventually rewarded as she discovers that her husband is no other than John Harmon, the legal inheritor of the Harmon fortune.

As A. E. Dyson underlines, her decision to put love before money, heart before head not only saves her from being "numbered with Mr. Veneering, Mr. Podsnap, Mr. Lammle and Mr. Fledgeby, Mr. Wegg and Mr. Riderhood, among those who deride, sell or kill their fellows for

gold” but it also allows her to “[join] that *élite* in [Dickens’s] novels who, marrying for love, are thereby ennobled: an *élite* among whom the most unlikely, paradoxical, touching and ill-fated member is Sir Leicester Dedlock, and the most favoured member Bella herself” (254-55).

Noticeably, not only is Bella “alive” and vivid, but she conveys some sexual warmth too. This is of course suggested through her physical beauty, her “potential ability to sell the sexual goods” (Flint 127-28), and mainly through her relationship with her father, the cherub Rumty. Several times in the novel, both daughter and father are described flirting together, exchanging open caresses, tender kisses, and sweet words. The intimate tête-à-tête dinner which she enjoys so much at Greenwish is called an “innocent elopement,” and Dickens keeps on insisting on Bella’s immense delight to be in the company of her father whom she overtly treats like a lover. The whole scene illustrates the point but is too long to be quoted here entirely; for convenience’s sake, here is a fragment of it:

Everything was delightful. The park was delightful, the punch was delightful, the dishes of fish were delightful, the wine was delightful. Bella was more delightful than any other item in the festival; drawing Pa out in the gayest manner; making a point of always mentioning herself as the lovely woman; stimulating Pa to order things, by declaring that the lovely woman insisted on being treated with them; and in short causing Pa to be quite enraptured with the consideration that he *was* the Pa of such a charming daughter.

And then as they sat looking at the ships and steamboats making their way to the sea with the tide that was running down, the lovely woman imagined all sorts of voyages for herself and Pa. (II, VIII, 275-76)

Dickens habitually resorts to taboo objects of desire such as fathers, brothers, and pets in order to suggest the physicality of his characters without challenging the Victorian institutions. In *David Copperfield*, David falls into an agitated reverie when Dora holds Jip, her inseparable companion, in her arms, rests “her dimpled chin upon his head,” and calls him “my pet” (XXVI, 322). In *Chuzzlewit*, after having found new lodgings in Islington, Ruth and Tom Pinch behave as a newly-married couple:

Ah! It was a goodly sight . . . to behold Tom and his sister trotting round to the baker's, and to the butcher's, and to the grocer's, with a kind of dreadful delight in the accustomed cares of housekeeping; taking secret council together as they gave their small orders, and distracted by the least suggestion on the part of the shopkeeper! When they got back to the triangular parlour, and Tom's sister, bustling to and fro, busy about a thousand pleasant nothings, stopped every now and then to give old Tom a kiss. (XXXVI, 473-74)

The instances are abundant and Dickens's readers know them very well. We can also mention Amy Dorrit's behaviour with her father, Hellena Landless's relationship with her brother, Neville, and Mr. Varden's love for his daughter, Dolly. However, some critics are reluctant to accept the presence of any repressed incestuous sentiments in Dickens's novels. Alexander Welsh, for instance, argues that such gestures as kisses, caresses, and hugs do not hide any repression of sexuality; according to him, they are simply further instances of the succouring function of women, consolidating the pleasures of hearth and home to which the novelist was strongly attached:

The main error of reducing all the varieties of incestuous sentiment in Victorian fiction to repression, of seeing the triangular parlours of Victorian culture as evasions of sexuality, is that this negative explanation conceals from view the positive aim of such arrangements. The pressures on hearth and home are such that much more is longed for than sexual pleasure, much more is hoped for than domestic comfort. The heroines of hearth and home bear the modern burden of a relationship that has been construed in Christian times as incompatible with sex.

The point of transmuting sweethearts and wives into sisters and daughters, or of living snugly with sisters and daughters as well as wives, was not necessarily to substitute one for the other female relation, but ideally to enjoy both, or all three relations in the enclosure of the hearth. (155)

One may suspect that Welsh fails to grasp in these lines the very nature of Dickens's insight. By discarding the Freudian interpretation which highlights the role of repression, he misses one of the most crucial points in Victorian fiction. His explanation, however pertinent, not only sounds somewhat superficial but also terribly naïve.

What could have triggered off such a change in Dickens's view of women to make him produce such a heroine? Many critics have attributed it to his secret relationship with Ellen Ternan, a young actress whom he met while acting in Wilkie Collins's play *The Frozen Deep* in 1857, and with whom he was desperately in love at the time he wrote the novel (see Ada and Nisbet). Ellen did not love him and refused to submit to his wishes. At least until 1862, he was unable to conquer her heart; she kept him away from her emotional life, as we can infer from one of his letters to Collins in the autumn of that year: "I have some rather miserable anxieties which I must impart one of these days when I come to you or you come to me. I shall fight out of them, I dare say, being not easily beaten — but they have gathered and gathered" (quoted in Pearson). The young woman is said to have been cold but beautiful. Her shadow can be seen behind the portrait of Estella in *Great Expectations*; Estella says: "Oh! I have a heart to be stabbed in or shot in, I have no doubt . . . and, of course, if it ceased to beat I should cease to be. But you know what I mean. I have no softness there, no — sympathy — sentiment — nonsense" (XXIX, 525). Which is uncannily reminiscent of Bella's declaration: "I am convinced I have no heart as people call it; and that I think that sort of thing is nonsense" (III, V, 404).

Dickens's passion for Ellen also altered his conceptions of love and lovers. His male characters Eugene Wrayburn, Bradley Headstone, and John Rokesmith are not presented in the old vein; they are not, for instance, as fatherly, as mature, and as steady as some previous lovers and husbands, such as Arthur Clennam, Allan Woodcourt, or Jarndyce. Dickens, as Monod remarks, seems to have been "rejuvenated," to have found "a youthfulness of the heart" (418-19). He no longer wished to carry on playing with women the role of the kind father, of the generous uncle and honest friend; he wanted another status. As he had got rid of his clumsy, irritating wife, he could now live a romance with a young and beautiful woman. He was ailing and middle-aged but as is the case with Arthur Clennam in *Little Dorrit*, the flame of love was still burning in him: he had still much to give and much to receive. The intensity of Dickens's passion is conveyed through the characters of Headstone, and later

Jasper, two protagonists who are considered by critics such as Edmund Wilson as Dickens in disguise.

Of all Dickens's female characters, Bella remains the only character who is portrayed with intensity, vigour, and effectiveness. She is free of "melodramatic speech," a device which has spoiled many Dickensian characters, both male and female. Only once does she grow melodramatic, when Rokesmith is insulted and turned down by Mr. Boffin:

"Oh, Mr. Rokesmith, before you go, if you could but make me poor again! Oh! Make me poor again, Somebody, I beg and pray, for my heart will break if this goes on! Pa, dear make me poor again and take me home! I was bad enough there, but I have been so much worse here. Don't give me money, Mr. Boffin, I won't have money. Keep it away from me, and only let me speak to good little Pa, and lay my head upon his shoulder, and tell him all my grieves. Nobody else can understand me, nobody else can comfort me, nobody else knows how unworthy I am, and yet can love me like a little child. I am better with Pa than anyone — more innocent, more sorry, more glad!" So crying out in a wild way that she could not bear this, Bella dropped her head on Mrs. Boffin's ready breast (III, XV, 510).

But there are numerous scenes throughout the novel where Bella is endowed with a poetical aura which touches the most indifferent of readers and disarms the most stubborn and carping of critics. The following paragraph is both pleasant and successful:

Bella met the steady look for a moment with a wistful, musing little look of her own, and then, nodding her pretty head several times, like a dimpled philosopher (of the very best school) who was moralising on Life, heaved a little sigh, and gave up things in general for a bad job, as had previously been inclined to give up herself (III, IX, 448-49).

This passage, as well as a good number of others, enhances and embellishes the character of Bella, and raises her status in comparison to that of the rest of Dickens's heroines. As to her final happiness with her husband, contrary to what some critics have written, it does in no way mar the reader's pleasure or affect the novel's objective, for it is far

from being too sweet or beautiful to be true. Bella's eventual success is handled with great care, deep insight, and mainly strong realism.

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