

What Lies Beneath the Dust: The Duality of Deception in *Our Mutual Friend*

by Kenia Coyoy

From its descent into the murkiness of the Thames to its wanderings in London's heavily polluted fog, *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens' last completed novel, obscures the truth from its characters and its readers. Dickens explores the idea of deception by using it to advance the novel's action. In doing so, the novel does not unilaterally condemn deception. Rather the novel presents characters that use deception to achieve both virtuous and selfish ends to showcase the duality inherent in deceiving someone. While the Boffins and John Harmon use deception as a vessel of transformation and rebirth, the Lammles maintain the fraud of their marriage to continue to defraud others. Thus, as the novel portrays deception as either benevolent or ill-intentioned, *Our Mutual Friend* generates the readers' own moral confusion about deception, as they are alternatively repelled and persuaded by the necessity of deception for survival, power and transformation in the world of the narrative.

The novel symbolically represents the notion of deception through atmospheric details that surround, and therefore unite the many characters of the work. Even as class hierarchies divide London, the river, the fog, and the dinginess of the city connect the different members of these groups. The novel uses these traces of the Industrial Revolution to symbolize the city's growing lack of both literal and metaphorical sight. The river that runs through the novel, weaving its way among socialites and scavengers, is a soiled vein of water. As most sewage leads directly to the river, the river becomes the final resting place for all sorts of foul things—dead bodies included. On “a boat of dirty and disreputable appearance,” the readers meet Gaffer Hexam and his daughter Lizzie as they watch the slime on the river's surface for possible signs of corpses (*Our Mutual Friend*, 1). The passage dramatizes the disconcerting experience of

peering into water , usually clear and transparent, made murky by the grime of its surface. Similarly, the “heavy and dark” fog that hangs over the city turns a “rusty-black” the deeper one penetrates into the heart of the city (*OMF*, 420). The novel seems to suggest that just as characters can barely see through the literal fog, they also barely see through the fog of lies they generate and circulate as they blink and wheeze, struggling against the polluted air. The novel’s vivid descriptions of the city’s unhealthy atmosphere highlight the need for physical and spiritual hygiene. The novel seems to suggest that in their eagerness to automate lives, its citizens left London “at its worst . . . a black shrill city . . . such a gritty city; such a hopeless city . . . such a beleaguered city” (*OMF*, 145). The novel’s depiction of the increasing obscurity of the fog and the river at the heart of the city represents the increasing difficulty one experiences in telling truth from lie. Similarly, this novel employs a parallel experience for the reader who likewise becomes increasingly aware of the deceptions the characters employ.

The novel introduces ambiguity in the notion of deception through its positioning of couples like the Lammles and John Harmon/Bella Wilfer. The novel introduces Alfred and Sophronia Lamble, respectively and repeatedly, as a “mature young gentleman and lady” (*OMF*, 10, 11, 14, 114, 115, 127). The novel does not fully reveal their identities, however, until they marry under false pretenses, as they mistakenly believe in the fortunes of each other. The labels that the novel uses to describe them become ironic because they turn out to be not very mature at all. The novel also uses the Lammles as a foil to another couple that marries under false pretensions: Bella Wilfer and John Harmon. In both cases, the novel depicts the brides as greedy, driven by the need to marry for money. Bella self-deprecatingly calls herself “the most mercenary little wretch that ever lived in the world” and Sophronia married Alfred thinking he was “a man of property” (*OMF*, 320; 123). Both brides are also ultimately deceived. Yet the

effects of the deception diverge. While Alfred's pretense at being rich results in perpetuating the scheming, unscrupulous and treacherous natures in the both himself and Sophronia, Harmon's pretense at poverty brings out Bella's "gold" (*OMF*). The novel creates opposing effects through these pairs. By introducing the concept of a wicked pair at the beginning, the novel subtly suggests that marrying someone without knowing the truth about them results in disillusionment and anger. However, this novel goes on to contradict this suggestion through John Harmon and Bella Wilfer's union. The novel opposes the two brides' reactions. The Lammles' outrage at each other's lies contrast with Bella's gratitude for Boffins, as she declares her thankfulness to them for "show[ing] her how much misused and misprized riches could do, and often had done, to spoil people" (*OMF*, 775).

The novel's portrayal of Bella's response to deception implies that deception in this case is both justified and constructive. Her particular deception, employed by the protagonist, John Harmon, and his eventual co-conspirators, the Boffins, complicates the readers' eventual conclusions about deception. Harmon's and the Boffins' deception unfolds as a play to a trusting audience, who believe that the previously kind Mr. Boffin has morphed into a miser. This abrupt and unexplained change in demeanor perplexes both Bella and the reader. When the novel postpones an explanation, the reader becomes a deceived party alongside Bella. Though the Boffins mean well—they want to reveal that Bella is "true golden gold at heart"—this does not change the fact that they all manipulated her through their "acting" (*OMF*, 772). The fact that Bella places "perfect faith" in John and declares herself grateful to the Boffins illustrates a disparity between the values the characters are said to have and the actions they take to achieve their goals (*OMF*, 745, 756, 758). Furthermore, the Golden Dustman's ruse and his refrain from using one on other occasions add moral confusion to the idea of deception. Though he leads Silas

Wegg on, for example, he refuses to deceive the Lammles because “to lead [them] on, or even at all to let [them] go on of [their] own selves, wouldn't be the right thing” (*OMF*, 646). This begs the question: what are the criteria for “ethical” deceptions? This question raises doubt in the readers’ minds as we may eventually conclude that despite the various scenarios, the intention to deceive remains the same—the characters do not merely deceive to see people’s reactions, they deceive to gain something from their lies. Thus, the ambivalence in deception in the novel showcases the self-interest that ultimately drives human actions, be the gain money or love.

Deception also advances the novel’s own development, its own “gain”, further troubling the readers’ reactions to the work. For instance, John Harmon’s deception essentially connects the characters. Without his assuming a double identity, characters like Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood would not have crossed paths with the Hexams. Harmon’s deception also catalyzes the changes and actions of other characters. When Harmon realizes that his “willed” marriage to Bella would have been “a shocking mockery,” he decides to remain as Rokesmith (*OMF*, 372). One could interpret his ruse as a selfish one that he keeps up to “prove” his wife’s worthiness. He asks Bella to have “perfect faith” in him even when he may be possibly accused of murder (*OMF*, 745, 756, 758). When the novel reveals the truth about Rokesmith to Bella, readers feel a potential disconnect from Bella who previously had been very relatable. One could wonder at how Bella takes the news too well, considering the alarming and criminal nature of Rokesmith’s possible secrets. In his monologue, John Harmon questions his existence but does not question the potential harm his actions may cause. He thinks it a “revolting truth that [he] should have purchased [Bella],” but he does not consider that lying to her may be just as reprehensible (*OMF*, 373). Much like the river in which he almost drowns, Harmon’s ruse is murky. Even though it moves the novel’s action and unites the characters through a mutual

friend, his subterfuge remains quite suspect.

The novel's motifs of obscurity and deception set the stage for the ultimate deception of the novel. Boffin's miserly persona, along with the accumulated deceptions that advance the novel, breaks the fourth wall by catching the readers by surprise. The more the readers immerse themselves in the work, the more the novel surprises. Thus, the fourth wall that separates readers from the characters disappears, as readers become the ones who also do not see the truth so quickly. Just as the fog in London darkens as one trudges through to its center, the deceptions in *Our Mutual Friend* begin to add up until it culminates in a reversal of dramatic irony. Instead of readers knowing a crucial piece of information at the beginning with which they can safely evaluate the novel's characters, readers only learn the truth as they invest in the story. This strategy reveals that the novel itself conspires. Whereas most stories prepare readers by reassuring them about what is going on (or giving them a fair idea of what can happen), this novel throws a curveball that leaves the reader reeling, questioning the nature of trust in all storytelling. What this ultimately suggests is that deception comes down to power, a play for control wherein the deceiver holds the truth out of reach from the deceived. Therefore, a deceived reader is under the power of the work, questioning his or her assumptions about characters, and by extension, himself or herself.

In short, deception does more than move characters or the novel forward. Deception keeps the readers on their toes. The novel's obscure atmosphere, its dualistic exploration of deception's ambiguity as practiced by both virtuous and vicious characters, and its final trick on the reader herself—all reflect the novel's ambivalence about deceit, secrets and lying. The novel's effect of making deception morally gray prompts the reader to ask questions about their own views about deception. It also forces them to face the fact that no matter how well meaning,

deception is a strategy in the power play of manipulation. It gives the reader material, like the dust heaps, they themselves must sort through, as they look for subtext, reading between the lines for what lies beneath the dust. Instead of taking the story at face value, *Our Mutual Friend* compels the reader to notice the paradox of fiction: how it must deceive in its quest to tell a convincing story.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Our Mutual Friend*. Ed. Michael Cotsell. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.