

British Independence, Rather Perverted: The Problematic Independence of Betty Higden
in Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*

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Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* dramatizes the oppression of the poor among its many other explorations of the ills of Victorian society. The novel reveals the effects of society's oppressive forces through characters—from major characters like Lizzie Hexam, to minor characters like Betty Higden. The novel uses Betty Higden in particular to highlight the humanizing, yet isolating effects of oppression on the individual. The novel's complex characterization of Betty relies on such techniques as irony, repetition, and paradox, ultimately presenting Betty as both an independent woman, and a woman consumed by her own pride. The novel thus valorizes a woman's independence, but also reveals how problematic it can be. As a whole, Betty Higden's character demonstrates *Our Mutual Friend's* concern with esteeming an individual's need to overcome her oppression while simultaneously criticizing the social attitudes towards the less fortunate that only perpetuate the suffering of the poor.

Throughout the novel, one might view Betty Higden's independence as both admirable and problematic. The novel convinces the reader about her strength, a strength that the novel attributes in part to her good nature, and in part to her defiance of social expectations for the poor. We first meet Betty Higden in her small home, after John Rokesmith has conducted a search for an orphan for Mrs. Boffin. In that passage, the novel introduces Betty's work: "I keep a Minding-School. I can take only three, on account of the Mangle. But I love children, and Four-pence a week is Four-pence" (*Our Mutual Friend*, 199). The irony of Betty's generosity despite her poverty highlights her strength. Although Betty herself has been virtually abandoned

by her society, she continues to nurture and protect others that that society has casted off. Betty Hidgen welcomes Toddles, Poddles, Johnny and Sloppy into her home, even though others would not receive her herself.

In addition to her generosity, the novel highlights Betty's independence through Betty's continual references to her constant walking, and the novel's own repeated use of the word "bright" in describing her. In passages about Betty, the words "walking" "running" "creeping" and "going afoot" occur more than eight times, including three occurrences of the phrase "I can still walk twenty mile" (*OMF* 200, 203, 382, 383, 505). The novel relies on these verbs and phrases to portray Betty's energetic tenacity. Furthermore, this constant movement suggests that Betty, as a symbol of the poor, represents the toil of the poor who must walk, run, and go afoot constantly, even to perform the simplest of tasks, in contrast perhaps to the rich who ride in carriages, and who buy her wares in privileged detachment. Furthermore, the novel uses the word "bright" in reference to Betty, in particular to her eyes (*OMF*, 198, 203, 328, 384, 505). As "windows" to her soul, Betty's bright eyes suggest her cheerfulness and resilience. Instead of bright jewels, Betty's value lies in her eyes, which truly point to her soul.

The novel contrasts these demonstrations of strength with Betty's fear of Victorian poorhouses. Betty does not even name the place, alluding to it as "--the house--" (*OMF*, 199). She despises the poorhouses so much that even mentioning them poses difficulties and hesitation. For Betty, the poorhouses represent surrender and isolation. The options for the poor as Betty understands are presented as either living in a poorhouse, or dying in the streets. The novel shows us how Betty is clear about her preference: "Dislike the mention of it? Kill me sooner than take me there. Throw this pretty child under cart-horses feet and a loaded wagon, sooner than take him there. Come to us and find us all a-dying, and set a light to us all where we

lie and let us all blaze away with the house into a heap of cinders sooner than move a corpse of us there” (*OMF*, 199). In contrast to Betty’s impassioned rejection above, the passage continues with the narrator’s comment to an imagined audience of the elite social classes: “A surprising spirit in this lonely woman after so many years of hard working, and hard living, my Lords and Gentlemen and Honorable Boards! What is it that we call it in our grandiose speeches? British independence, rather perverted?” (*OMF*, 199). The passage continues with these sarcastic asides from the narrator to the “Gentlemen and Honorable Boards.” The narrator uses this dialogue to point out the insensitivity and detachment in social attitudes towards the plight of the poor, mocking the supposed “remedy” the “Lords and Gentlemen” are providing. While the “Honorable Boards” think that these poorhouses alleviate the conditions of the poor, the reader, along with the poor, discover the opposite. The Victorian poorhouses are in fact punishing and dehumanizing prisons. The “Honorable Boards” have not created a refuge for people like Betty; instead, they have narrowed her options and displaced her onto a path of self-destruction.

As the novel depicts Betty’s admirable resilience and defiance of poorhouses, the work also portrays how her independence transforms into a refusal to accept help from others. While admirable, this choice isolates her from the world. The novel shows Betty turning more and more often to the notion of death as the ultimate freedom she can attain independently, especially as she cannot fathom the thought of falling victim to the destiny awaiting her in the poorhouse. Before departing on her voluntary pilgrimage away from the Boffins, Rokesmith seeks to persuade Betty to stay. However, Betty refuses, saying, “you know very well, that your lady and gentleman would set me up like a queen for the rest of my life . . . I’ve never took charity yet, nor yet has any one belonging to me. And it would be forsaking of myself indeed, and forsaking of my children dead and gone, and forsaking of their children dead and gone, to set up a

contradiction now at last”(OMF, 383). The repetition of the phrase “dead and gone” emphasizes the loyalty Betty has to the dead in her vow to never accept charity. The repetition also suggests that for Betty, independence is linked with death. Betty’s refusal to accept help, in a way, is praise-worthy. However, her unwillingness to seek help results in the death of one of her orphan children, Johnny, and ultimately her own death. When Mr. Rokesmith and Mrs. Boffin finally go to visit Betty Higden at Sloppy’s urging, Betty cries out: “Stand away from me, every one of ye! I see what you mean now. Let me go my way, all of ye. I’d sooner kill the Pretty, and kill myself” (OMF, 327). In fact, Betty’s use of the word “kill” is notable as it is repeated in her various declarations against the poorhouses (OMF 199, 203, 327, 384). She would rather “kill” little Johnny, and even herself, before submitting to others, whom she has equated with the poorhouse. The novel suggests that Betty, like many who are poor, are forced to live on the defensive, almost combatants in a war zone, always watching out for themselves and for their comrades, on the move and alert.

Betty Higden’s problematic independence finally leads to her death in her last pilgrimage. In the passage that deals with her passing, the novel depicts the river seductively calling out to Betty with the lure of death: “Come to me, come to me! When the cruel shame and terror you have so long fled from, most beset you, come to me!” (OMF, 504). The novel personifies the river as the “Relieving Officer appointed by eternal ordinance” who will liberate Betty from her earthly imprisonment. The paradox of Betty prizing death makes the reader realize that the novel ultimately wants to criticize the ill will felt toward the poor. The poorhouse, a place for rescue, ironically makes a character choose the rescue of death. The so-called “solutions” of those more fortunate than Betty do nothing more than encourage the less fortunate

to perish on the streets. Paradoxically, the novel depicts how the society turns Betty's life long struggle, in the end, into a surrender to death.

The poor of *Our Mutual Friend* struggle to emerge from the oppression brought down upon them. These oppressive forces mold different characters into different shapes, some sharper, and some stranger, than others. The novel shows how these forces have molded Betty Higden's independence into a trait both life sustaining and destructive. She fights her entire life to surpass society's expectations until that fight destroys her. The novel uses her character to portray her heroism while also highlighting her plight. Her will to do her best with what she has places her as one of the most commendable of the novel's characters. However, these alienating social attitudes towards her, and those like her have "perverted" independence. What Betty fails to realize, and hopefully, what readers do, is that a society's oppression can warp even the best of individual virtues.

Works Cited

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