

Title	Who knows who the Veneerings are? : gossip and middle-class society in Our mutual friend
Sub Title	ヴェニアリングの正体を誰が知る：『共通の友』におけるゴシップとミドルクラスの社会
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Publisher	慶應義塾大学藝文学会
Publication year	2023
Jtitle	藝文研究 (The geibun-kenkyu : journal of arts and letters). Vol.124, (2023. 6) ,p.249 (12)- 260 (1)
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Journal Article
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-01240001-0249

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Who Knows Who the Veneerings Are? Gossip and Middle-Class Society in *Our Mutual Friend*

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Since its publication, Charles Dickens's last completed novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65) has been criticised. Many critics consider this work to indicated his decline as a novelist. In his review of the novel, Henry James wrote the following: 'we are convinced that it is one of the chief conditions of his genius not to see beneath the surface of things. If we might hazard a definition of his literary character, we should, accordingly, call him the greatest of superficial novelists' (159). James's review had a large influence on the evaluation of *Our Mutual Friend* and even partly Dickens himself until some critics, including J. Hillis Miller, reevaluated Dickens and his later works in the 1960s.¹ A number of reasons explain why this work has been received such mixed reviews for such a long time, one of which is its complicating features, including many exaggerated characters, multiple plotlines and stages. What links these complicated fragments is gossip, especially gossip about the Harmon murder. Although the gossip is shared by everyone in *Our Mutual friend*, scenes in which people actually gossip take place mostly within the Veneering circle. While describing the waterside living of the lower classes, Dickens emphasised the superficial features of middle-class society such as the Veneering circle. It is notable that at the end of the story, the collapse of such a middle-class society is anticipated by the narrator. Middle-class society is unstable and fragile because it only values appearances. What is closely related to the middle class's superficial culture is gossip. In *Our Mutual Friend*, gossip plays a crucial role in propagating middle-class society, which is only maintained by superficiality, however, Dickens does not criticise such a superficial society as he does in previous novels, leaving perceptions of such a society to

individual judgement.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens describes a wide range of people living in different strata of society, who would not normally come into contact or share common concerns. As Miller pointed out, it seems that Dickens rejected 'the idea that the world has a unity in itself' in this novel (292). However, gossip connects these different group of people. Just as the shadow of the Court of Chancery and fog appears everywhere in *Bleak House* (1852–53), gossip is pervasive in the world of *Our Mutual Friend*. The story of John Harmon, the man from somewhere, first told by Mortimer Lightwood, a lawyer assigned to the Harmon murder case, becomes gossip in the next chapter. Gossip can be told by anyone, even those who have nothing to do with the incident, so it spreads quickly and widely. The narrator describes how gossip about the murder spread:

Thus, like the tides on which it had been borne to the knowledge of men, the Harmon Murder—as it came to be popularly called—went up and down, and ebbed and flowed, now in the town, now in the country, now among palaces, now among hovels, now among lords and ladies and gentlefolks, now among labourers and hammerers and ballast-heavers, until at last, after a long interval of slack water it got out to sea and drifted away. (*OMF* 31)

Gossip propagates among people of all ranks and throughout the land. Engaging in discussion of same topic, these people are all invisibly linked and connected in the world of *Our Mutual Friend*. The working-class Lizzie Hexam and the middle-class Eugene Wrayburn would never have met had it not been for the gossip about John Harmon. Thus, one of the functions of gossip in *Our Mutual Friend* is to connect the different classes.

Everyone comes to know the names of the people involved in the Harmon murder through gossip. On the one hand, a name is only superficial information that refers to an individual, but on the other hand, it is also an essential part of one's identity. The problem produced by the gossip here is that, people only knew the name of someone they had never met; thus, the name was separated from the body and its existence. Rogue Riderhood complains when the stranger Bradley Headstone guesses

his name. Riderhood says that his name 'seemed to be made public property on', and 'every man seemed to think himself free to handle his name as if it was a Street Pump' (551). The word *property* is defined as a 'thing belonging to a person, group of persons' and 'possessions collectively' ("Property"), and a 'street pump' was a common tool used to supply water in Victorian England. That his name became 'public property', like a 'street pump', implies that many people had said his name during gossip and can freely use it as if his name were their property. His words show that gossip transforms people's names into objects of possession. The power of gossip to possess names is also used on other characters, such as John Harmon and Bella Wilfer. Nobody knows who John Harmon is, but everyone knows his name. His name has become objectified.

Gossip is not a one-way transfer of information. Patricia Meyer Spacks examined 'the characterization of the variety of gossip' and 'the question of purpose' for gossiping (6). According to her, gossipers have various purposes. Gossip, thus, is an interactive act; it is an act of exchange, through which people trade information with purpose and accrue some benefit. Names, then, become objects of exchange and objects of possession. As a name is essential for one's identity, to make it the object of exchange also means to make one's identity the object of exchange. This exchange of identity for something else can be regarded as a kind of commodification of identity. Sean Grass, who discussed the commodification of subjectivity in the Victorian era, claimed that Victorians used the word *identity* 'to cover the aspects of conscious selfhood', which is defined by the word *subjectivity* today (7). He also claimed that the commodification of subjectivity 'provoked intense anxiety' among the people in the early and mid-nineteenth century and it 'began to appear a natural thing' in *Our Mutual Friend* (6–7, 165).² Based on this argument, the commodification of identity is the same as the commodification of subjectivity, and gossip is one way through which subjectivity can be commodified. Thus, the name is apart from one's body and existence. The names of the people involved in Harmon's murder circulated throughout the land via gossip. In *Our Mutual Friend*, gossip provides a site for the commodification of subjectivity, which was of great concern to people at that time.

The circulation of gossip in *Our Mutual Friend* raises the question of what is fact and what is fiction. Critics have discussed these problems. U.C. Knoepfelmacher,

for example, claimed that 'Dickens does his best to persuade the reader that the real is unreal and that the unreal is "real"' (143), while Mizuki Tsutsui pointed out that 'the conception of reality itself is nothing more than a matter of interpretation' (160). It is gossip that provokes these problems. Gossip works against the concept of nature and truth and blurs the distinction between fact or truth and fiction, nature and appearance, as well as the real and unreal.⁹ In *Our Mutual Friend*, gossip infiltrates every corner of the novel's world and forms the centre of the narrative and frames the story.

Although gossip transcends social boundaries, it is more essential to the middle class than to the working class. In depicting the living conditions of different social classes, Dickens succeeded in capturing the characteristics of the structure of each stratum of society. These differences are reflected in the use of gossip. Subjectivity commodification through gossip also occurs among the working class, but they do not use the information provided by the gossip as it is. Instead, they always seek to reattach the commodified subjectivity to the body and to existence. Truth is easily identifiable in the working-class society of *Our Mutual Friend*. Fanny Cleaver created her imaginary world by naming herself Jenny Wren and treating her father as her little child. However, that this is her fantasy is obvious to everyone inside and outside the novel. Jenny's true name and the true relationship between Jenny and her child readily become clear. Shortly after the name Janny Wren appears, the narrator explains, 'Her real name was Fanny Cleaver; but she had long ago chosen to bestow upon herself the appellation of Miss Jenny Wren' (*OMF* 233). Similarly, when Eugene does not understand who Jenny Wren's child is, Lizzie tells him that it is Jenny's father 'with her lips only, shaping the two words' (240). Jenny seems to maintain her fantasies throughout the story, but everyone knows what the truth is. This shows that the appearance, which is imaginative role-playing for Jenny, is easily attached to truth in a working-class society. Such features of society make it possible to exchange gossip for money.

It is important to identify and reattach the information provided by gossip to the truth to make money through gossip, as the following examples demonstrate. Riderhood is a clear case of this. When a bounty is promised to whomever helps

solve the Harmon murder, Riderhood tries to frame Gaffer Hexam by accusing him of murder for the reward. George Radfoot demonstrates another example. Asked for help by John Harmon, Radfoot plots to cheat him with his accomplices. They plan to steal John Harmon's inheritance using what Harmon told Radfoot—gossip. Although Radfoot is killed because his accomplices misidentify him as John Harmon, it is notable that the actions of both Riderhood and the murderers are carried out based on the same intention. Using the identifiable features of the working class, they tried to earn money from gossip: they identified someone appearing in gossip and plotted to make money from them. This shows how the content of gossip is important for them. To make money from gossip, they need to find the truth from the superficiality of gossip. Therefore, working-class people use gossip in practice, and ascertaining the truth is essential for them to earn a living from gossip.

Unlike working-class people, the middle class is more concerned with appearance. Communities formed around the Veneerings and the Boffins symbolically represent the middle-class culture in the Victorian England.⁴ The Veneering circle provides the important stage for the narrative of the novel. However, the behaviour of the people in the circle does not directly relate to other plots in the story, except for the marriage of the Lammles. They have dinner parties and gossip about what is happening outside their circle, such as the Harmon murder, and they are never directly involved in the matter. If they actually take action for something, it is carried out within the circle, as when Veneering was elected. This is an essential characteristic of the Veneering circle: it appears to have a great influence on the world of *Our Mutual Friend*, when, in reality, it has little. The name includes the term *veneer*, highlighting the superficiality and the appearance of things being utmost importance to the Veneering circle. Lady Tippins precisely explains what the Veneering circle is:

And who is the dearest friend I have in the world? A man of the name of Veneering. Not omitting his wife, who is the other dearest friend I have in the world; and I positively declare I forgot their baby, who is the other. And we are carrying on this little farce to keep up appearances, and isn't it refreshing! Then, my precious child, the fun of it is that nobody knows who these Veneerings are, and that they

know nobody, and that they have a house out of the Tales of the Genii, and give dinners out of the Arabian Nights. . . . Come and dine with “em. . . . We’ll make up a party of our own, and I’ll engage that they shall not interfere with you for one single moment. (*OMF* 249–50)

People in the circle actually have little interest in the family itself, despite they frequently attend dinners held by Veneering, and support him when he decides to run for the election. They do not gather to see the Veneerings themselves, but only ‘to dine with one another’ (618). All members of the society, including the Veneerings themselves, pretend to be or to have something. The Veneerings pretend to have something worthy and be an eminent people, and the others pretend to be interested in them and be their close friends. Although it is unclear whether all members of the Veneering circle realise ‘[t]he superficiality and essentially fraudulent nature of the Veneerings’ (Gurney 233), as Lady Tippins does, creating such an appearance is essential for the middle class to maintain its community. Truth has little meaning to them, so the people in the circle are not concerned with whom Veneerings actually are. Twemlow poses the question of ‘whether he was Veneering’s oldest friend, or newest friend’, which questions the essence of the Veneering circle (*OMF* 7). No one can answer this question because all activities that take place in the Veneering circle are only a pretence.⁵

The people who gather around the Boffins are the similar to those who are in the Veneering circle. Since the Boffins inherited the Old Harmon’s estate, many people attempted to get acquainted with them. The narrator describes them as ‘all manner of crawling, creeping, fluttering, and buzzing creatures attracted by the gold dust of the Golden Dustman’ (209). They see only the surface of the Boffins. People surrounding the Veneerings and the Boffins show how the middle class benefits from the appearance of things. These features of middle-class society allow John Harmon to hide his identity under the assumed names Julius Handford and John Rokesmith. Among the middle-class members of *Our Mutual Friend*, it is not difficult to conceal or distort one’s identity because people only judge others by appearances and are unconcerned with the truth. To ‘keep up the appearance’ is of the utmost importance

for them (249).

What Lady Tippins tells her acquaintances and what makes people gather around the Boffins is gossip. Since the middle class deeply values appearances, gossip is important to their society. According to Spacks's classification of gossip, there is a kind of gossip for 'protecting themselves from serious engagement with one another' and for 'involving little consideration of the issues its discourse touches' (5). This is what the middle class in *Our Mutual Friend* uses gossip for. When Podsnap asks Veneering to talk about the Harmon murder again with follow-up reports, 'Veneering was more than ready to do it', the narrator states, 'for he had prospered exceedingly upon the Harmon Murder, and had turned the social distinction it conferred upon him to the account of making several dozen of bran-new bosom-friends' (*OMF* 134). For Veneering, the Harmon murder only involves his employee's daughter, and he himself is totally irrelevant to the actual incident. Therefore, he can use gossip about the Harmon murder as a tool for social intercourse because it never harms him or protects him from having his personal affairs discovered. This is why the middle class enjoys gossiping. It is an essential activity for them to create appearances because they sustain a superficial society.

It is obvious that gossip about a topic does not continue perpetually. When the gossip stops, middle-class society faces a crisis in *Our Mutual Friend*, which affects how the novel ends. One of the main characteristics of novels written in the early or mid-nineteenth century is that they happily end with a marriage, and two couples marry in the last part of the story: Bella Wilfer and John Harmon, as well as Lizzie Hexam and Eugene Wrayburn.⁶ However, *Our Mutual Friend* does not end with these happy marriages; it closes the story with a description of the Veneering circle on the brink of bankruptcy, which will result in 'a resounding smash' (*OMF* 815).

Curiously, Dickens's descriptions of the middle class in *Our Mutual Friend* seem to echo Oscar Wilde's in *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1890), which was published more than 20 years later. The aristocratic adversary of the middle class, Lord Henry Wotton says, 'People say sometimes that beauty is only superficial. That may be so, but at least it is not so superficial as thought is. To me, beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances' (*PDG* 64). This idea

is similar to what happens in middle-class society in *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens' s middle-class characters, as well as Lord Henry Wotton, only see the appearance of things and believe it to be their essence. The Veneerings and the Boffins, and Dorian Gray who never changes his appearance are symbols of their belief in superficiality. However, beautiful young Dorian Gray is ruined, and he dies with an ugly appearance when he damages the picture of himself. Thus, it is the truth that killed Dorian Gray. Similarly, the superficially sparkling Veneering circle collapses when the truth finally reaches it. In these two works, truth destroys the belief that highly values appearance.⁷

The key to examining the collapse of the Veneering circle is, therefore, the uncovering of the truth. The marriages of the two couples exemplify this. Lizzie and Bella are treated as commodities on the marriage market (Grass 170, 180). Bradley Headstone's marriage proposal to Lizzie is not only motivated by his desire but also encouraged by her brother, who hopes to receive rewards from Headstone. Thus, she is commodified by her brother as an exchangeable object. Bella is also commodified by Old Harmon, who directed his son to marry Bella as 'a condition of his legacy' in his will (Grass 168). Those who commodified Lizzie and Bella are not their suitors whom they married. Eugene decided to marry her only after he became ill, which proves that they marry not for money or sexual desire but for true love. John Harmon declared his feelings for Bella in his monologue: 'To come into possession of my father's money, and with it sordidly to buy a beautiful creature whom I love—I cannot help it. . . . What a use for the money, and how worthy of its old misuses!' (*OMF* 372). This shows his aversion to marriage for money and his longing for marriage based on true love. The marriages between these two couples emphasis true love. This endangers middle-class society because these marriages are based on truth rather than appearances.

Nicodemus Boffin's plot supports the marriage of Bella and John Harmon. Dickens elaborated this part to prevent the reader from discovering that Boffin is pretending to be a mercenary (*OMF* 821), but this is controversial and 'has generally been considered as the novel's crucial flaw' (Tsutsui 166). However, this plot is not only a means to make Bella and John Harmon marry but also a way to terminate

gossip about the Harmon murder. When the truth of Boffin's plot is revealed to Bella, all the affairs of the Harmon murder become public as well. Although the readers have already known the truth since John Harmon's monologue, this is the official resolution to the incident within the world of the story, which stops all gossip about the Harmon murder. There is another example of gossip ending. Gossip about the Veneerings, which has been told and spread by members of the Veneering circle, finally ends with the announcement of 'the next week's book of the Insolvent Fates' (*OMF* 815). It reveals the true affair the Veneerings were engaged in and ends their illusionary appearances. As discussed earlier, gossip is an essential activity for the middle class. Therefore, it has a great influence on society. The property Boffin inherited is handed over to the new Harmons, and the circle around the Boffins disappears. The Veneerings lose everything. Thus, when gossip vanishes, society starts to crumble.

That middle-class society dissipates like this seems to be Dickens's criticism of its valuing only the surface of things. Dickens has been socially critical in other works. In *Bleak House*, for example, he criticises the law and the Court of Chancery that administers it as 'the true embodiment of everything that was pernicious' (Donovan 178). Even after the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case is dismissed, the Court of Chancery still reigns over society. In *Our Mutual Friend*, however, nothing but fragments of the dispersing middle-class society remain. The only meaningful thing left at the end of the story is Twemlow's statement. When he is asked his opinion regarding the marriage between Lizzie and Eugene, he states his position as follows:

[I]f such feelings on the part of this gentleman, induced this gentleman to marry this lady, I think he is the greater gentleman for the action, and makes her the greater lady. I beg to say, that when I use the word, gentleman, I use it in the sense in which the degree may be attained by any man. The feelings of gentleman I hold sacred, and I confess I am not comfortable when they are made the subject of sport or general discussion. (*OMF* 819–20)

While others express anger with Eugene for acting in the way that threatens their values,

Twemlow acknowledges Eugene's decision to marry Lizzie. However, he does not praise it. He says that he is 'not comfortable' to see others talking about it within the circle, but he does not demand that the other members of society should accept the value of the truth or nature. He does not judge what is right and what is wrong here; he only respects one's decision. This statement is the conclusion of the story, which cannot be linked to the social criticism Dickens offers in *Bleak House*. Instead of criticising middle-class society, what he does do is leave such judgements up to the individual. Although Dickens emphasises the superficial features of middle-class society in *Our Mutual Friend*, and he realises it is unstable and fragile because gossip sustains it, he does not choose to criticise it. That judgement, he leaves up to the reader.

Our Mutual Friend is a complicated multi-plot novel, in which Dickens describes a wide range of people from different social classes. They seem to have little connection with each other, but gossip about the Harmon murder connects them. Gossip pervades the world of *Our Mutual Friend* and offers a way for Dickens to discuss many different themes. Compared to the working class, the middle class values the appearance and the surface of things; gossip, therefore, occupies a more significant position in middle-class society. Dickens emphasises the superficial culture of this class. The dispersal of the Veneering circle by the novel's end seems to be Dickens's way of criticising the superficiality of this culture. By adopting the tool of gossip, Dickens attempts to present the state of society in *Our Mutual Friend*, as he did using other tools in his other works. However, his attitudes towards society in this novel differ from those in his earlier works. In his early career, he made direct social critiques in his novels. In *Our Mutual Friend*, in contrast, he leaves those criticisms up to the reader's judgement. Although his later novels have been considered to lack Dickensian energy, *Our Mutual Friend* highlights Dickens's transformation from a young, ambitious and passionate writer to a more mature one.

Notes

- 1 Miller evaluated *Our Mutual Friend* as follows: ‘If *Pickwick Papers* was a farewell to the eighteenth century, *Our Mutual Friend* is on the threshold of the twentieth’ (292–93).
- 2 The commodification theme in *Our Mutual Friend* was also discussed by other critics. For example, Pan Morris observed that ‘[w]ords in *Our Mutual Friend* are shown to be commodified in a system of surplus value’ (185).
- 3 This essay uses the words *fact*, *truth*, *nature*, and *real* to describe something essential, and the words *fiction*, *appearance* and *unreal* are used to describe superficiality.
- 4 Michael Cotsell argued that the plots of Podsnappery and Harmon appeared in Dickens’s memorandum in 1855 (xv). A few years later, in 1861, Dickens decided the title of the story (Forster 339). Thus, Dickens had developed the idea for his last completed novel about ten years before the serialization, so the story is full of insights that Dickens gained during that time. Although the narrator does not indicate ‘the exact year’, it can be estimated that ‘these times of ours’ indicates these ten years, from the mid-1850s to the year it was published (*OMF* 1).
- 5 Twemlow, who is a relative of aristocrat Lord Snigworth, is partly outside of middle-class society. This allows him to ask questions about the nature of middle-class society.
- 6 There are too many novels of this kind that it is not possible to mention all of them, so only a few prominent examples will be noted here: most of the works of Jane Austen, *Waverly* (1814) by Walter Scott and *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë. Dickens also made his own contributions with *David Copperfield* (1849–40), *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) and others.
- 7 Although the brief discussion about *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is only developing here, more in-depth studies are required to compare these works.

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