

Intertextuality and the context of reception: *Our Mutual Friend* - chapter 56 by Charles Dickens

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Lesson plan

Resources

- ❖ Copies of *Our Mutual Friend* texts
- ❖ **Resource A** – Extract from *Our Mutual Friend* chapter 56
- ❖ Highlighters
- ❖ **Resource B** – Film Clip of *Our Mutual Friend*
- ❖ **Resource C** – Critical theory task sheets.

Learning objectives

- ❖ To analyse Lizzie's rescue of Wrayburn
- ❖ To apply multiple interpretations and different critical theories to an extract
- ❖ To consider Dickens' use of biblical imagery and messages.

Starter activity – the river setting/considering different interpretations

- ❖ Create a class mind map (by skim reading through the novel) of all the events of the story so far which take place at – or are symbolically connected to - the Thames River. This is also a good chance to sum up the story so far. (E.g. the body supposedly of John Harmon is found in the river; Gaffer Hexam works and socializes on/by the river; Hexam is drowned in the river; Lizzie escapes her suitors by escaping up river; and now Lizzie rescues Wrayburn from the river, etc.)
 - What could the river represent? (a number of things – a physical geographical setting the reader can relate to, danger, livelihood for some of the characters, cleansing and new life/hope [as in baptism, and the emergence of Wrayburn and later John Harmon], etc.)
 - Establish that an aspect of a text can symbolically represent lots

of different things, or be interpreted in different ways.

Main activity 1 – analysing the extract/modelling interpretations

- ❖ Read the extract from chapter 56 [**Resource A**].
 - Establish the events of what happens in the extract by creating a list of bullet points or a flow diagram (e.g. Lizzie hears sound of blows, a groan; someone falls into river; Lizzie runs towards sound and sees blood, etc.)
 - This is a literal interpretation of events i.e. what happens.
 - Readers can also appreciate Dickens' craft on an aesthetic level i.e. how well written it is. Students use highlighter pens to find and annotate examples of how Dickens makes the passage tense and exciting (e.g. sentence types, appealing to the senses, use of sibilance, pace, repetition, etc.)
 - Feed back examples.
- ❖ The way a reader interprets a passage can also depend on a reader's starting point. Watch the film clip [**Resource B**]. Working in pairs, students make notes on the links between the good Samaritan story and the Lizzie and Wrayburn story
 - Discuss: How does this biblical interpretation change the significance of the extract?
 - What messages might Dickens be communicating about the characters through the parallel to the Bible story? (E.g. Lizzie is not only brave, she is also doing God's work; highlights Lizzie's selflessness and care; possibility of reward for Lizzie?; emphasises the social divide between Lizzie and Wrayburn [like the divide between the Jew and the Samaritan]; etc.)

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Main activity 2 – group work on interpretations

- ❖ Divide students into groups and allocate a critical theory and a task sheet [**Resource C**]. More able students could be asked to take responsibility for leading a group and presenting their findings
 - Feed back and make notes.

Plenary – reflections

- ❖ Discuss: Of the different interpretations considered today (symbolic, religious, aesthetic, feminist, gender, Marxist), which interpretation do we think:
 - Is most convincing?
 - Is most helpful at opening up new ways of viewing the meaning of the text?
 - Is most like what Dickens intended?
 - Is closest to the typical response of a Victorian reader?
 - Is closest to the typical response of a modern day reader?

Homework

Write up an analysis of the extract using a particular interpretation.

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Resources

Resource A

***Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens**

[Lizzie], too, was turning homeward, when she heard a strange sound.

It startled her, for it was like a sound of blows. She stood still, and listened. It sickened her, for blows fell heavily and cruelly on the quiet of the night. As she listened, undecided, all was silent. As she yet listened, she heard a faint groan, and a fall into the river.

Her old bold life and habit instantly inspired her. ... She ran towards the spot from which the sounds had come. ... At length, she reached a part of the green bank, much and newly trodden, where there lay some broken splintered pieces of wood and some torn fragments of clothes. Stooping, she saw that the grass was bloody. Following the drops and smears, she saw that the watery margin of the bank was bloody. Following the current with her eyes, she saw a bloody face turned up towards the moon, and drifting away.

... She was away ... to the landing-place under the willow-tree, where she also had seen the boat lying moored among the stakes. A sure touch of her old practised hand, ... and she was in the boat. ... Another moment, and she had cast off (taking the line with her), and the boat had shot out into the moonlight ... She saw the drowning figure rise to the surface, slightly struggle, and as if by instinct turn over on its back to float.

...

Firm of look and firm of purpose, she intently watched its coming on, until it was very near; then, with a touch unshipped her sculls, and crept aft in the boat, between kneeling and crouching. Once, she let the body evade her, not being sure of her grasp. Twice, and she had seized it by its bloody hair.

It was insensible, if not virtually dead; it was mutilated, and streaked the water all about it with dark red streaks. As it could not help itself, it was impossible for her to

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get it on board. She bent over the stern to secure it with the line, and then the river and its shores rang to the terrible cry she uttered.

But, as if possessed by supernatural spirit and strength, she lashed it safe, resumed her seat, and rowed in, desperately, for the nearest shallow water where she might run the boat aground. ...

She ran the boat ashore, went into the water, released him from the line, and by main strength lifted him in her arms and laid him in the bottom of the boat. He had fearful wounds upon him, and she bound them up with her dress torn into strips. Else, supposing him to be still alive, she foresaw that he must bleed to death before he could be landed at his inn, which was the nearest place for succour. ..

She rowed hard--rowed desperately, but never wildly--and seldom removed her eyes from him in the bottom of the boat. ...

The boat touched the edge of the patch of inn lawn, sloping gently to the water. There were lights in the windows, but there chanced to be no one out of doors. She made the boat fast, and again by main strength took him up, and never laid him down until she laid him down in the house.

Surgeons were sent for, and she sat supporting his head.

Resource B – <http://www.crossref-it.info/articles/490/Our-Mutual-Friend-~-Vol-4,-ch-6>

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Resource C – critical theory task sheets

Feminist theory

Feminist theory looks at the presentation of female characters, particularly thinking about how female characters conform to or challenge stereotypical weak female qualities.

Discuss the following questions and make notes:

1. How many examples can you find of Lizzie behaving in a brave and fearless manner?
2. How does Dickens present Lizzie as being skilful and practical?
3. Where is Lizzie shown to be physically strong?
4. How is Lizzie presented as being quick-thinking and determined?
5. Is there any evidence of Lizzie having more typically weak, 'womanly' characteristics?
6. To what extent would a feminist approve of the characterization of Lizzie?
7. What might Dickens' message be through the character?

Gender theory

Gender theory looks at the presentation of male and female characters, and to what extent characters perform according to their gender role.

Discuss the following questions and make notes:

1. Who has more power – Lizzie or Wrayburn?
 - a. In how many ways is this shown?
2. Find examples of active verbs to describe Lizzie's actions (e.g. 'ran', 'seized', 'lashed').
 - a. What effects are created?
3. How are Wrayburn's movements described? (E.g. 'fell', 'drifting'.)
 - a. What effects are created?
4. Consider the image created by the final line of the extract
 - a. What effects are created?
5. How does Dickens create a surprising contrast between the two characters?
6. What might Dickens' message be about gender stereotypes?

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Marxist theory

Marxist theory looks at the socio-economic and political circumstances which make the text, and considers to what extent characters are predetermined by their social status.

Discuss the following questions and make notes:

- a. Look back through previous chapters and consider how Lizzie and Wrayburn's social statuses (their jobs, position and wealth) are presented. For example:
 - b. Why does Lizzie's brother Charley leave home?
 - c. Why does Bradley Headstone think Wrayburn won't marry Lizzie?
2. How does Dickens present social divide as a big issue/problem in the Victorian world of the novel?
 3. Does social status affect the events of this extract?
 4. How do Lizzie's past experiences, her knowledge of - and skill of working with - the river help her?
 5. Consider the image created by the final line of the extract
 - a. What effects are created?
 6. What might Dickens' message be about social divisions?