‘Old Love’, as the title suggests, is a love story revolving around two extraordinarily intelligent university students, William Hatchard and Phillipa Jameson who “hated each other from the moment they met” in the highly scholarly setting of Oxford university. After a long rivalry during which time, “the one tried to outdo the other,” the relationship between the two grows into one of lasting friendship and love, culminating in marriage. The verbal battles, and display of humour and intellect at every stage of their relationship greatly add to the charm and appeal of the story.

It is perhaps due to their both being extremely passionate about their subject, English language and literature that they are eventually attracted towards each other. They are so preoccupied with the spirit of competition that they find themselves constantly thinking about each other. They work harder during their vacation, imagining the other would be “doing a little more”. When they return for the second year, they find that “absence had made the heart grow even more hostile”. However, beneath the desire to get an edge over the other, lies a sense of appreciation. They both realise that the other is equally, and sometimes even more hardworking.

The two rivals, who are both “awarded alphas in every one of their nine papers” become aware of the attraction that they feel for one another soon after the demise of Philippa’s father. It is at this time that William learns of all that Philippa’s father had sacrificed to send her to Oxford. When Philippa tells him that it was for the sake of her father that she had wanted to win the much coveted Charles Oldham prize that she and William had been vying for, William finds himself no longer wishing to make her “climb down from that high horse of hers”. Wanting to support Philippa in her time of grief, William escorts her to her father’s funeral where Philippa realises that William “actually wanted her to win the Charles Oldham”.

William tries not to leave Philippa alone and even takes her on a day out to Stratford to cheer her up. He feels happy “when her competitive streak seemed to be returning” and their rivalry changes from friendship to something much deeper. The fact that names like “that silly woman” and “that arrogant man” that were earlier meant to discredit each other are the same names that they start to use affectionately for each other cements their love story.

This is revealed when William asks Philippa to marry him when their car stalls while returning to Oxford. Though Phillipa at first declines, she agrees to his proposal that she should marry him if he wins the Charles Oldham. She claims to have agreed because “there is absolutely no fear of that happening” and so William, who is desperate to know the result of the competition, has no idea “how much Philippa wanted him to win”.

When they both jointly win the prize, Philippa quotes Shakespeare and says that she is willing to “honour my undertaking” because she realises that she loves William just as much as he loves her.
After their marriage, the passion continues but on a completely different level as the fierce competition that once fueled their “mutual loathing”, matures into mutual admiration ensuring that the reader does not become bored with the inevitability of it but relishes it. The two continue to have constant clashes of wit, even during their honeymoon. However, underneath their verbal battles lies a deep-rooted love which is why William tells Phillipa that he has “to spend the rest of my life with you”.

Being intellectuals who share a deep love of learning, the two work even harder and longer after getting married as if they still have something to prove, if only to each other. They not only obtain doctorates but move on to college teaching fellowships. Though they “never let up their pretended belief in the other’s mental feebleness”, they are undeniably very proud of each other. Hence, when Philippa is invited to deliver lectures at Yale, William takes a “sabbatical so that he could be with her” and when William is awarded an honorary doctorate at Princeton, Phillipa “proudly sat in the front row”.

It is perhaps because their intellectual competitiveness forms the basis of their marriage that when William makes a move into cipher-breaking during World War II, Philippa “demanded to be recruited as well”. It is for this reason that Philippa claims that the books written by her are of “considerable distinction” while William declares that his works are of “monumental significance”. Always wanting to have “one up on her husband”, Philippa completes ‘The Times’ crossword even before William finishes shaving, much to his chagrin. When Philippa does not get a word one morning, William fills it in and the two have an argument about the existence of the word ‘whym-wham’. Each resolves to make the other “eat humble pie” after the Oxford English Dictionary has been checked. However, soon after William leaves for work, Philippa dies of a heart attack. When William learns of his wife’s death, he perhaps feels that in her absence, his life would be meaningless. He thus puts an end to his life leaving behind an explanatory note that states that “he had to let her know”.

It is at this point that one truly realises the profundity of the ‘old love’ that William and Phillipa shared which never allowed them “to be apart for more than a few hours”.