

“I KNOW . . . THROUGH MY EYES AND EARS”:
CHARLES DICKENS’S ARTISTIC VISION IN
BLEAK HOUSE

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Abstract: Despite using two different narrative voices to construct the story in *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens nevertheless ensures unity within the novel by creating a self-contained narrative painting. The various linguistic and visual details that Dickens includes in *Bleak House* work conjointly to advance his narrative goal as he employs recurring images and symbolic motifs in both his textual narrative and the accompanying illustrations to form a thread that connects different parts of the story. These details often compel readers to engage more intimately with the story that he tells by allowing them to visualize and participate in the rhythm of his narrative. Through his artistic creation, Dickens exercises his narrative authority over readers by subtly shaping their perception throughout the novel.

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Robert William Buss accurately captured Charles Dickens's artistic vision as a writer in his unfinished painting *Dickens's Dream* (1875) that depicts Dickens sitting in his library with his eyes closed, surrounded by pictorial illustrations of his characters and stories. While painstakingly inventing himself as a writer and a novelist, Charles Dickens has inadvertently emerged as an artist who paints a detailed picture for his readers.¹ Discussing the influence of Victorian art on Dickens's narrative style, Donald H. Ericksen suggests that "*Bleak House* . . . appears to represent the first full realization of Dickens's powers as an artist" (31). Through his meticulously crafted narrative, Dickens brings to life the characters, events, and landscapes in *Bleak House* and bids his readers to participate visually, and at times, even auditorily, in the fictional world that he has created. In his work, *Subjective Criticism*, David Bleich argues that readers' experience of engaging with a text actualizes its symbolic existence.² Dickens thus realizes his story by compelling his readers to engage themselves in the process of interpreting and interacting with the text by piecing together the details that he uses to construct his narrative. Setting the story against the relentless legal suit of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce, Dickens unites recurring visual images in both his text and the illustrations, a carefully established rhythm, and ingenious linguistic manipulations to forge and sustain an atmosphere of bleakness that becomes the overarching theme in *Bleak House*.

Dickens employs his textual narrative much like a paintbrush or a camera to capture visual images from a desired perspective and present them to his readers. In his discussion of how the narratee serves as a mediator between author and reader, Gerald Prince identifies "dialogues, metaphors, symbolic situations, allusions to a particular system of thought or to a certain work of art [as] some of the ways of manipulating the reader, guiding his judgments, and controlling his reactions" (21). Dickens, then, purposefully uses visual and symbolic representations to situate

his readers in the position of the narratee.³ Expounding on Dickens's "visual narrative technique," Ericksen explains that the writer tends to "create set scenes, pictures, or tableaux in which objects or people are arranged or blent so as to create montages or images that can be 'read' like the arrangements of similar details in narrative paintings" (35).⁴ Using this technique, Dickens pieces together specific objects and images to construct his narrative. Therefore, just as Mr Bucket, having found Esther's handkerchief in Lady Dedlock's drawer, interrogates it and urges it to tell its own story—"Hum! Let's have a look at *you* . . . What should *you* be kept by yourself for? What's *your* motive? Are you her Ladyship's property, or someone else's? You've got a mark upon you, somewheres or another, I suppose?" (861)—Dickens likewise paints with his words and allows the images and motifs that he embeds in his text to tell a story of their own. In an in-depth study of the use of "word-painting" in Victorian novels, Rhoda L. Flaxman observes that, in *Little Dorrit*, "Dickens fuses description with narration by utilizing the visual as symbolic subtext to narration" (3).⁵ Visual symbolism thus becomes the spine that holds the narrative together in many of Dickens's works. Using this narrative technique in *Bleak House*, Dickens drives the story forward by zooming in on specific, but seemingly minute, images and specific objects that capture the cyclical movement of events in the novel and echo the bleakness of the characters' circumstances.

One of the most distinct images that recurs throughout the novel is that of Jo's moving on. After introducing Jo for the first time at the inquest into Nemo's death, Dickens pursues this image of moving on upon every subsequent mention of this destitute little crossing-sweeper. Readers encounter Jo for a second time when Lady Dedlock, disguised as a servant girl, approaches him to be her guide. Her charge to him during their nocturnal excursion—"Go before me . . . Go on before! . . . Go on to the next . . . Go on to the next!" (261-62)—advances the motif of constantly moving on. Dickens draws his readers' attention directly to this motif in the chapter not coincidentally titled "Moving On" when the constable apprehends Jo and brings him to Mr

Snagsby's shop because "[t]his boy, . . . although he's repeatedly told to, won't *move on*" (308; emphasis added). In response to the constable's order, Jo exclaims with frustration, "O my eye! Where can I move to!" (308). The constable's own reply acknowledges the limitation and the irony of his orders: "My instructions don't go to that . . . My instructions is that this boy is to move on" (308). Jo's profession as a crossing-sweeper is also significant because he works at a place of constant movement—a place that leads one to a destination but is never a destination in itself. Therefore, when Esther meets him at Tom-All-Alone's and asks where he is going, Jo wearily replies and says, "I'm a going somewheres . . . Somewheres . . . I have been moved on, and moved on, more nor ever I was afore . . . And I'm a going somewheres. That's where I'm a going" (491). Repeating the word "somewheres"—an adverb that indicates indefinite locality—three times, Jo also provides an answer that begins and ends with the same statement—"I'm a going somewheres" (491)—thus mimicking his act of incessantly moving on, a cyclical movement that leads to no particular end.

This motif of moving on characterizes the rest of Jo's life as portrayed in the novel and ultimately culminates in his death—the final act of moving on that leads him out of this world and into the hereafter—"wen [he] was moved on as fur as ever [he] could go and couldn't be moved no fuder" (731). Pursuing the same motif, Dickens aptly uses the image of a cart trudging on heavily along a road to symbolize Jo's slow but steady journey towards his imminent death. Instead of rendering a direct description of Jo's physical condition, Dickens describes a cart gradually approaching the end of its journey: first, "that cart of his is heavier to draw, and draws with a hollower sound" (728); then, readers witness Jo's worsening condition—"For the cart so hard to draw, is near its journey's end, and drags over stony ground. All round the clock, it labours up the broken steeps, shattered and worn. Not many times can the sun rise, and behold it still upon its weary road" (731)—before seeing Jo struggle to retain the last strand of life in him as "[t]he cart had very nearly given up, but labours on a little more" (732). Dickens finally reveals

the undoing of Jo's character as the cart becomes undone: "The cart is shaken all to pieces, and the rugged road is very near its end" (733). Like the cart arriving at the end of the road, Jo also arrives at the end of this life and is compelled to move on into the afterworld. By portraying an image of a moving cart, Dickens not only allows his readers to visualize Jo slowly approaching his death, but he also creates a dramatic effect by compelling readers to experience Jo's gradual but imminent progression towards death. Dickens thus successfully places his readers in the position of what Walker Gibson identifies as the "mock reader" (2).⁶

Yet Jo is not the only character in the novel who is constantly moving on but never arrives at a fruitful end. In his pursuit of Lady Dedlock, Mr Bucket likewise embarks on a seemingly ceaseless pursuit with Esther in tow. Heading first in the direction opposite from London, Mr Bucket and Esther subsequently turn and drive back towards London upon realizing that their previous mistake has led them on a wild goose chase. Throughout their journey, Mr Bucket frequently calls out to his driver, "Get on, my lad!" (869). The repetition of this charge throughout the eighteenth installment establishes a rhythm of constant movement in the narrative as they embark on their insistent quest. At first, Esther describes this charge as "business-like" as Mr Bucket gives it with "his watchful, steady face" (881). However, this scene gradually takes on an increasing sense of dreariness and futility. Mr Bucket's confidence begins to erode as Esther notes, on the next page, that "he seemed perplexed now, when he said, 'Get on my lad!'" (882). Despite his lack of certainty, Mr Bucket nevertheless gives the order to "get on," thus indicating the inevitability and the necessity of their constantly moving on even if it is to no avail. Although Mr Bucket and Esther eventually arrive at their destination, they nevertheless fail to obtain the desired outcome. Like Jo, their journey also ends at the burying ground with the discovery of a lifeless body. In both instances, the characters confront the bleak reality of death when they arrive at their final destination.

This leitmotif of constantly moving on to no specific destination thus establishes the

rhythm for the wider framework of the novel, particularly in Dickens's portrayal of the inefficiency of the legal system. Immediately after the constable tells Jo to move on, Dickens, in his authoritative voice as the narrator, hints sardonically at the failure of those in authority to set an example of moving on purposefully: "Do you hear, Jo? It is nothing to you or to anyone else, that the great lights of the parliamentary sky have failed for some few years, in this business, to set you the example of moving on" (308). This aimless wandering reflects the unproductive court proceedings, particularly the lawsuit pertaining to the case of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce, in which, for years, nothing has been decided and nothing is done. When Richard complains to his attorney, Mr Vholes, "Again nothing done! . . . Nothing, nothing done! . . . Why, what *is* done?" (623), the latter suggests that "[t]he question may branch off into what is doing, what is doing?" (623). Rejecting the perfect aspect of the verb "do" in favor of the progressive aspect, Vholes disturbingly echoes the voices that tell Jo to keep moving on. His preference for the progressive aspect suggests a constant movement reminiscent of Jo's act of moving on to no specific destination: the lawsuit is constantly "doing," just as Jo is constantly "moving on," and Mr Bucket and Esther are constantly "getting on" in their journey. Yet ultimately nothing gets done, and the characters never arrive at a specific destination except for the accursed burying ground. Vholes nonetheless attempts to reassure Richard that something is being done in the lawsuit although his promise rings with a note of ambiguity:

Yes, sir, . . . a rock. That's something. You are separately represented, and no longer hidden and lost in the interests of others. *That's* something. The suit does not sleep; we wake it up, we air it, we walk about it. *That's* something. It's not all Jarndyce, in fact as well as in name. *That's* something. Nobody has it all his own way now, sir. And *that's* something, surely. (626)

His repetition of the indefinite pronoun "something" evokes Jo's repeated use of the indefinite adverb "somewheres" (491): both words hint at the lack of definiteness and certainty in

their circumstances. This sense of aimlessness is a pervasive theme throughout the novel: not only does it characterize the Jarndyce v. Jarndyce lawsuit, it also haunts Jo's life and infects Richard's character, eventually killing both of them.

Besides the use of symbolic motifs, Dickens also meticulously pieces together seemingly stray bits of details to construct his narrative. Ericksen argues that, by focusing on the details, Dickens adopts the same narrative technique as that of a Victorian narrative painting, in which "[t]he arrangement of concrete details often produced a puzzle or a 'problem picture' with the physical details or clues forcing the viewer to 'read' the painting in order to understand its dramatic, emblematic, symbolic, or moral significance" (32).⁷ Like Dickens's works, "what most distinguishes these Victorian paintings is their 'literary' quality or emphasis upon story telling" (32). Dickens undeniably develops his narrative through his portrayal of specific details and images. Like Mr Bucket who personifies Esther's handkerchief, Dickens brings the objects in his novel to life and endows them with a narrative voice to foretell major events in the story.

Perhaps one of the most prominent objects in *Bleak House* is the "famous clock" (747) that foretells Mr Tulkinghorn's death. Although readers do not explicitly discover Mr Tulkinghorn's murder until the very last sentence of chapter 48, much of the latter part of this chapter serves as a harbinger of his death. Upon declaring to Lady Dedlock that "I am going home," Mr Tulkinghorn stops in front of "a splendid clock upon the staircase" to check the time, and Dickens mischievously uses this "famous clock" to hint at the horrific fate that awaits him later in the night (747). Seizing upon Mr Tulkinghorn's last words and his question to the clock—"And what do *you* say? . . . What do you say?"—Dickens surmises, "What a famous clock, hereafter . . . if it ticked in answer 'Don't go home!'" (747). Repeated five times within three short paragraphs, this foreboding admonition eerily echoes the ticking of the clock, suggesting that the remnant of Mr Tulkinghorn's time is likewise slowly but steadily ticking away. Moreover, the final variant of this warning—"Don't come here!" (748)—rings out like a shout to

prepare readers for the atrocity that is about to take place. Using the image of the ticking clock, Dickens subtly but effectively foreshadows the murder, for he establishes a portentous rhythm that is ultimately broken when the horrible deed is carried out, just as Jo's incessant moving on establishes a rhythm that leads ultimately to his death. Examining how Dickens shapes his readers' emotional response through his use of allusions, Stephen C. Gill posits that "[Dickens's] art is to move the reader by subtle direction rather than urgent appeal . . . Dickens is always searching for methods of moving the reader unawares" (145-46). Therefore, instead of employing his own authoritative voice as the narrator, Dickens allows the ticking of the "famous clock" (747) to advance the narrative. Consequently, the ominous repetition of this seemingly puzzling prohibition generates a vague sense of inevitable doom for readers and creates suspense leading up to the discovery of Mr Tulkinghorn's body.

In revealing the murder, Dickens also uses his narrative like a camera to simulate a dramatic effect. Immediately after an extensive paragraph saturated with words that emphasize the peacefulness of the night—"quiet," "solitude," "stillness," "repose," "quieter," "still," "murmuring," "whispering," "rest," "softened," "tranquilly" (748-49)—Dickens interrupts the rhythm of the narrative with a short paragraph that poses three abrupt and brief questions: "What's that? Who fired a gun or pistol? Where was it?" (749). These agitating questions interrupt the narrative much like the gunshot that breaks the silence of the night. Yet Dickens does not bring his readers at once to the scene of the crime; instead, his narrative camera focuses on the resulting disarray in the streets. Moving from "the few foot-passengers [who] start, stop, and stare about them" to the "[t]errified cats . . . [and] the dogs" and then to "the church-clocks [that] . . . begin to strike" (749), the narrative pans like a camera to capture the tumult in the streets. Serving as a contrast to the paragraph that precedes the gunshot, the detailed descriptions in this later paragraph capture the momentary chaos brought about by the eruption of the gunshot, using words like "loud," "rattled heavily," "shook," "aroused," "bark vehemently," "scamper,"

“howling,” “startled,” “swell into a shout” (749). By placing these contrasting details in such close proximity, Dickens effectively juxtaposes the stillness of the night against the chaos on the streets after the gunshot, and this juxtaposition dramatically intensifies the effect of this shocking turn in the story.

Although Dickens eventually restores calmness by settling on “the fine night, the bright large moon, and multitudes of stars” (750), this superficial stillness of the heavenly hosts is merely the calm before the storm, for then the narrative shifts its attention to Mr Tulkinghorn’s chamber and, particularly, to the singular image that is featured most prominently—the Roman with its pointing finger that becomes the centerpiece of this passage of narrative:

For many years, the persistent Roman has been pointing, with no particular meaning, from that ceiling. It is not likely that he has any new meaning in him tonight. Once pointing, always pointing – like any Roman, or even Briton, with a single idea. There he is, no doubt, in his impossible attitude, pointing, unavailingly, all night long. Moonlight, darkness, dawn, sunrise, day. There he is still, eagerly pointing, and no one minds him. (750)

Much like the ticking of the clock, that the word “pointing” is repeated five times within this short paragraph not only foreshadows the events and emphasizes that the figure of the Roman does indeed have an unusual tale to tell tonight; it also serves as a signaling device that directs readers’ gaze to the atrocity awaiting them. Following the direction of its outstretched forefinger, the textual narrative then examines the objects to which the Roman is seemingly pointing: “He is pointing at a table, with a bottle (nearly full of wine) and a glass upon it, and two candles that were blown out suddenly, soon after being lighted. He is pointing at an empty chair, and at a stain upon the ground before it that might be almost covered with a hand” (750). Presenting this elaborate description of the crime scene from the perspective of the Roman and subsequently

depicting the reaction of those who enter the room—“looking up at his outstretched hand, and looking down at what is below it, that person shrieks and flies” (750)—Dickens generates greater suspense by withholding explicit information about the murder until the very last sentence of the chapter: “Mr Tulkinghorn’s time is over for evermore; and the Roman pointed at the murderous hand uplifted against his life, and pointed helplessly at him, from night to morning, lying face downward on the floor, shot through the heart” (752). The figure of the Roman pointing accusingly from the ceiling is thus instrumental in the discovery of Mr Tulkinghorn’s body. Revealing the murder in this manner, Dickens heightens the sense of inevitable doom for his readers. Beginning his narrative by describing the scene on the street and then moving on to trace the figure of the Roman on the ceiling from its pointing forefinger to the subject at which it points, Dickens also ensures a tight continuity in his narrative. The physical positioning of the Roman, along with the emphasis on its pointing finger, then seamlessly and artistically links the narrative to the discovery of Mr Tulkinghorn’s dead body.

Dickens subsequently sustains this image of the forefinger in his portrayal of Mr Bucket, the detective. When readers encounter the detective again at Mr Tulkinghorn’s funeral, Dickens deliberately opens the chapter with a description of his forefinger: “Mr Bucket and his fat forefinger are much in consultation together under existing circumstances” (803). This opening sentence of the chapter seemingly presents Mr Bucket and his forefinger as equals, suggesting that the two are almost interchangeable or that they are in fact one and the same. Not only does Mr Bucket’s forefinger symbolically represent his character in the novel, it also seems to take on a life of its own and acts as Mr Bucket’s counselor and aide:

When Mr Bucket has a matter of this pressing interest under his consideration, the fat forefinger seems to rise to the dignity of a familiar demon. He puts it to his ears, and it whispers information; he puts it to his lips, and it enjoins him to secrecy; he rubs it over his nose, and it sharpens his scent; he shakes it before a

guilty man, and it charms him to his destruction. The augurs of the Detective Temple invariably predict, that when Mr Bucket and that finger are much in conference, a terrible avenger will be heard of before long. (803)

Just as he endows the “famous clock” at the Dedlocks’ with a voice (747), Dickens likewise portrays Mr Bucket’s finger as an independent character. Defining “bodily synecdoche” as “using a part of the body to stand for the whole” (48), Elana Gomel observes that Dickens often uses this technique in his works, thus producing the effect of “fragment[ing] the body” (49).⁸ When Mr Bucket investigates the murder of Mr Tulkinghorn, Dickens refers to his forefinger so frequently that the man and his finger become inseparable in the mind of the readers: when readers think of Mr Bucket, they inevitably visualize his accusatory forefinger as well. Dorothy Van Ghent also notes that, in many of Dickens’s works, “people are described . . . by such an exaggeration of or emphasis on one part of their appearance that they seem to be reduced wholly to that part, with an effect of having become ‘thinged’ into one of their own bodily members” (377). This intense concentration on his forefinger impersonalizes Mr Bucket’s character and reduces him to a type. Mr Bucket’s forefinger thus symbolically represents his functional role in the novel: like the figure of the Roman, his role is also to point out Mr. Tulkinghorn’s murderer.

Consequently, this recurring image of the pointing finger associates Mr Bucket with the figure of the Roman. Dickens even establishes this connection explicitly by stating that, “[a] few hours afterwards, [Mr Bucket] and the Roman will be alone together, comparing forefingers” (803), suggesting that Mr Bucket and the Roman both possess privy knowledge to the murder of Mr Tulkinghorn. Throughout the novel, Dickens portrays Mr Bucket as a character who seems to know everything, for when Dickens introduces him into the novel, Mr Snagsby observes that “[f]or the most part Mr Bucket notices things in general” (358). Upon receiving the letter that bears the words “LADY DEDLOCK,” Mr Bucket also says to himself, “Yes, yes . . . But I could have made the money without this anonymous information” (806), thus hinting that he already

knows the identity of the murderer. During his interview with Sir Leicester the next morning, the latter explains, “I am subject to – gout . . . [and] was going to say indisposition, and would have said it to anybody else,” but then he decides to withhold further explanation as Dickens’s narrative voice interjects and adds that “Mr Bucket palpably knows all about it” (817). This description of Mr Bucket’s omniscience echoes the description of the Roman as an all-knowing figure on account of its strategic position right above Mr Tulkinghorn’s desk: “It happens surely, that every one who comes into the darkened room and looks at these things, looks up at the Roman, and that he is invested in all eyes with mystery and awe, as if he were a paralysed dumb witness” (752). In a similar fashion, Mr Bucket also seems to know more than he lets on at first. However, unlike the Roman, Mr Bucket is not a “dumb witness” (752), and readers grasp the full extent of his knowledge during his private interview with Sir Leicester when he finally confronts Mademoiselle Hortense, the woman responsible for Mr Tulkinghorn’s murder, with his forefinger: he “shakes the finger at her” (831), “repeats [his words] . . . making no demonstration, except with the finger” (831), and “inaugurates what he is going to say with one ghostly beat of his forefinger in the air” (833). Bringing together Mr Bucket and the figure of the Roman, the image of the finger thus constitutes the thread that traces Mr Tulkinghorn’s murder from its execution all the way to the arrest of his murderer. Yet like the act of relentlessly moving on that never fails to bring the characters in the novel to the burying ground, the pointing forefingers also direct readers to other deaths that take place in the novel, thus reinforcing the atmosphere of bleakness in the world of *Bleak House*.

While Dickens uses his text to produce a narrative picture for his readers, the accompanying illustrations, on the other hand, uses pictorial representation to further Dickens’s textual narrative.⁹ The illustrations that accompany each installment likewise perpetuate the motif of cyclical movement and sustain the bleak atmosphere that dominates much of the novel. Instead of functioning independently, the illustrations often complement and further develop the themes

of the novel. Discussing “Victorian Illustrators and Illustration,” Lynn Alexander suggests that “the illustrations were also sometimes used as mnemonic devices as well as a means of heightening reader involvement. But the illustrations of serialized novels are not confined to the vivid instances of character or mood; rather, they can develop a novel’s themes subtly, delicately, and powerfully” (39). The illustrations in *Bleak House* thus serve as an extension of Dickens’s textual narrative.¹⁰ In his biography of Dickens, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst points out that Dickens “was not prepared to play a secondary role” (196) in relation to his illustrators. Although Dickens may not have dictated every single detail to his illustrator, Hablot Knight Browne (better known as Phiz), his adamance in maintaining some degree of authorial control over the illustrations nevertheless indicates that he considered the illustrations to be just as important as the text itself. Discussing the relationship between Dickens and Phiz, Michael Steig makes the case that “the illustrator is at once collaborator, attempting to express the author’s intention visually; interpreter, offering his own comments on the meaning of the work; and perhaps even an *artist*, sometimes creating independently valuable works of art” (3). Therefore, the illustrations “are at once an expression of Dickens’ intentions and Browne’s interpretations, at once a visual accompaniment to the text and a commentary upon it” (5). In his study of “Serial Illustration and Storytelling in *David Copperfield*,” Robert L. Patten begins by proclaiming that “[i]llustrations are not mimetic. They are not the text pictured” (91).¹¹ Such is indeed the complementary role of illustrations in Dickens’s works. In her article “Dickens and Illustration: A Matter of Perspective,” Sarah Solberg asserts that “[the illustrations] for Dickens went hand in hand with [his novels’] composition” (128).¹² The graphic illustrations and the textual narrative in Dickens’s works are thus interdependent as they complement each other to construct the story as a whole.

The choice of illustration directs readers’ attention to specific scenes in the novel and highlights them as important details within the larger context of the whole story. Solberg observes that the illustrations “provided an indication to the reader of the writer’s emphasis: they

reinforced what he had to say” (128). Although the illustration that appears in chapter 5 (see fig. 1) may seem to be merely an exact visual representation of the textual narrative, that this scene is illustrated draws readers’ attention to the significance of the event within the larger context of the novel: this illustration subtly prefigures the existence of the documents that indirectly condemn Lady Dedlock to her death later on in the novel. While the faces of both characters in the illustration, Mr Krook and Esther, are darkened by shadows, an external light source curiously illuminates the wall towards which they are facing and highlights the writing that Mr Krook has produced on the wall: a capital letter “J” (77). Readers learn from the textual narrative that he proceeds to spell out the words “JARNDYCE” and “BLEAK HOUSE” without knowing what they mean (76). With the fully illuminated written signs lining the right side of the picture, this illustration seems to draw readers’ attention to the written word. Along with its caption, “The Lord Chancellor copies from memory” (77), this illustration suggests that Mr Krook must have seen these words somewhere and is reproducing them from memory. Like Mr Krook, the readers now possess bits and pieces of information the significance of which will only be revealed in time when Mr Tulkinghorn gains possession of these papers later in the novel. More than a mere replication of the text, this illustration in fact foreshadows one of the major events of the novel.

Because the illustrations in Dickens’s works were produced and published in black and white, light and shadow become effective artistic techniques that the illustrator utilizes in order to highlight or intentionally obscure certain elements of the illustrations. Tracing the etymology of the word “illustrate” to its Latin ancestor “*illustrare*,” Patten asserts that the root word “performs three kinds of verbal work: it can illuminate, enlighten, light up; it can expound, elucidate (bring light out), even embellish; it can set off, render famous or illustrious (luminous, shining)” (91).¹³ It is perhaps not coincidental that all the words Patten uses somehow evoke the connotation of light. The use of light, shadow, and above all, darkness in the illustrations solidifies the tone of dreariness that dominates the plot of the novel. In his discussion of Phiz’s techniques of

illustration, Michael Steig notes his use of dark plates that is very prominent in *Bleak House*. As though to complement Dickens's textual description of the fog and mud and dreariness that plague Chesney Wold and also much of the novel, Phiz's use of the dark plates substantiates the same mood: "allow[ing] for much more subtle uses of light and shades of dark . . . [the dark plate] contributes greatly to the dark and pessimistic atmosphere of the text, and among other things enables Browne to suggest the insignificance and helplessness of individuals in an institutional world, with an effectiveness scarcely possible by any other method" (Steig 15). The contrast of light and darkness becomes a dominant element in the illustrations that accompany the novel.



Fig. 1 The Lord Chancellor copies from memory

The illustration in *Bleak House* that most explicitly and efficaciously demonstrates the use of light is perhaps that in chapter 48 of the novel. Captioned "A new meaning in the Roman"

(751), this illustration (see fig. 2) depicts Mr Tulkinghorn's room with the Roman figure on the ceiling along with everything at which he points. The illustration in this chapter complements Dickens's narrative technique through the discreet manner in which it portrays the crime scene while enhancing his textual narrative by similarly drawing readers' attention to the Roman figure. Although much of the room is shrouded in shadows, the Roman with his pointing finger is clearly visible because the illustration portrays the figure in a lighter shade on the ceiling of the room. This image of the Roman thus becomes the center of attention in the illustration. Yet through his outstretched forefinger, the Roman diverts the attention that he has garnered to the spot at which he is pointing—the spot where Mr Tulkinghorn's body would have lain but is nevertheless missing from the picture. The stream of light pouring in from the opposite window likewise highlights the same empty spot by illuminating it. Like a spotlight, this eerie stream of light



Fig. 2 A new meaning in the Roman

directs readers' gaze to the missing body and heightens the sense of mystery surrounding Mr Tulkinghorn's death just as the description of the Roman's pointing finger and the repetition of the word "pointing" in the text direct readers' attention to the murder.

Dickens also sustains this contrast between light and dark in his textual narrative and utilizes light as an ominous sign in the novel, as evidenced in the images of light that serve as a premonition of Mr Tulkinghorn's death. As though reenacting Macbeth's famous declaration that "all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death" (5.5.22-23), Mr Tulkinghorn makes his way to meet his death "with the blazing shop-lights lighting him on . . . [and] [t]he stars . . . shining as they shone above the turret-leads at Chesney Wold" (748). The "bright large moon, and multitudes of stars"—a description that is repeated three times in the same chapter—ultimately culminate in the ray of light that penetrates the window of Mr Tulkinghorn's chamber to highlight the stain of his blood on the floor (748). Mr Tulkinghorn thus joins the ranks of Jo and Richard who move inevitably on towards their death.

Dickens also uses the image of light, albeit in a slightly different way, to hint at Richard and Ada's secret marriage. Detecting an unpleasant emotional change in Ada, Esther observes twice in chapter 50 that "there was the same shade between me and my darling" (775).¹⁴ Esther's observation conveys to readers a mysterious sense of imminent trouble. The "shade" (782) of secrecy is only figuratively lifted when they visit Richard at his lodging, during which Esther declares, in a one-line paragraph, "A light shone in on me all at once" (786). This paragraph disrupts the rhythm of the narrative much like that which announces the gunshot that killed Mr Tulkinghorn. However, after the shade is lifted, the light does not shine in to reveal a happy marriage; on the contrary, it shines in on Esther who discerns the bleak reality of their situation, thus casting a gloom upon the newly-weds. Upon learning of their marriage, Esther reflects, "I was so sorry . . . I pitied them so much . . . I never had experienced such painful and pleasurable emotion at one time . . . But I was not there to darken their way" (786-88). Later on, as Esther

relates the news to John Jarndyce, the latter “[catches] the light upon [Esther’s] face” and observes, “You have been crying” (790). The image of light thus serves as a foil to emphasize the darkness that forebodes the characters’ troubles.



Fig. 3 Light

The illustration (see fig. 3) that accompanies chapter 50 is perhaps not coincidentally captioned “Light.” Portraying Esther, Ada, and Richard in the latter’s apartment, this illustration uses light and shadow to elucidate the reality of their circumstances. Despite the absence of a light source, the illustration nevertheless portrays the characters in full lighting as though a spotlight is shining upon Esther who stands looking at Ada and Richard, while another is shining upon Ada who is holding Richard in her arms. On the one hand, this portrayal substantiates Esther’s figurative declaration that “a light shone in on [her] all at once” (786) because she is no longer in the dark with regards to their secret marriage; on the other hand, it also symbolically shows that Ada and Richard’s secret has been exposed and brought to light. Yet as their

surroundings are shrouded in the shadows cast by the light source, this light ironically highlights the bleakness of Richard and Ada's circumstances, for Esther says, now that they are married, "[her] dear girl's little property [along with Richard's] would be absorbed by Mr Vholes" (782). Like the light that leads Mr Tulkinghorn to his death, this light also illuminates the grim reality that awaits Richard and Ada as they begin their life as a married couple.

That the subsequent illustration (see fig. 4) is captioned "Shadow" (815) suggests that Dickens may have intended to juxtapose the two illustrations in this installment. Both illustrations portray a woman whose back is turned towards viewers. Although Esther's face is not visible in the first illustration, the illustrator has nevertheless rendered a clear outline of her figure. On the contrary, the second illustration presents a rear view of Lady Dedlock's indistinct figure as she



Fig. 4 Shadow

stands on the top of the staircase with her face turned away. As its caption portends, much of this illustration is engulfed in shadows, and Steven Dillon explains that “it is one of the ‘dark plates’ Phiz developed late for this kind of Gothic-spooky effect” (73). Examining this illustration as a representation of the plot’s development up to this point, Dillon posits that “[t]he double plot of *Bleak House* removes the shadow from sunny Esther Summerson . . . and sends Lady Dedlock (her mother, the shadow) into a black hole” (73). Therefore, by placing these two illustrations side-by-side as contrasts in installment 16, Dickens indirectly juxtaposes Esther and Lady Dedlock, the daughter and the mother.

By portraying Lady Dedlock amongst dark shadows and even reducing the lady herself almost to a mere shadow, the latter illustration also foreshadows her eventual death in the novel. In spite of the darkness that envelops the lower half of this illustration, the upper half is partially illuminated, and the objects that occupy the top of the staircase—the plant on the ledge, the painting of an angelic figure holding an infant, and the clock mounted high up on the wall—thus stand out most distinctly. Picking up on these details and noting the use of light in this illustration, Dillon asserts that, “[o]n the left half of the picture, [there is] a kind of ladder from hell to heaven: murderous statuary in the black shadows on the bottom, a plant on a ledge in the center, a protecting angel floating in a sphere of light above” (73). Hence, that Lady Dedlock mounts the stairs symbolically represents her journey heavenward—a symbol that both hints at her death and suggests that her previous fall from grace has been, or will be, redeemed. Installment 18 certainly sees to the fulfillment of these two prophecies. Dillon also notices that, although this part of the text makes no mention of a clock, Phiz nevertheless includes it in the illustration and even positions it at an interesting spot—“on the stairway between Hell and Heaven, although asymmetrically and dynamically pitched well up the wall” (73). Identifying it as the clock that has accurately foretold Mr Tulkinghorn’s death—the “splendid clock on the staircase, famous . . . for its accuracy” (747)—Dillon postulates that “Phiz . . . reinvokes this

splendid staircase clock—famous for its ominousness—such that the shadows are obviously foreshadowings” (73). By including this ominous clock in the scene, the illustration subtly foretells Lady Dedlock’s death, just as the clock has accurately predicted Mr Tulkinghorn’s.

Therefore, serving as a forerunner, this illustration, “Shadow,” visually mirrors that which later depicts Lady Dedlock’s death at the burying ground in installment 18 (see fig. 5). Both illustrations are characterized by the dominant presence of dark shadows; both are framed by an arch while containing another smaller arch within it—the ledge in the case of the former and the gate to the burying ground in the case of the latter; both feature a flight of stairs, with

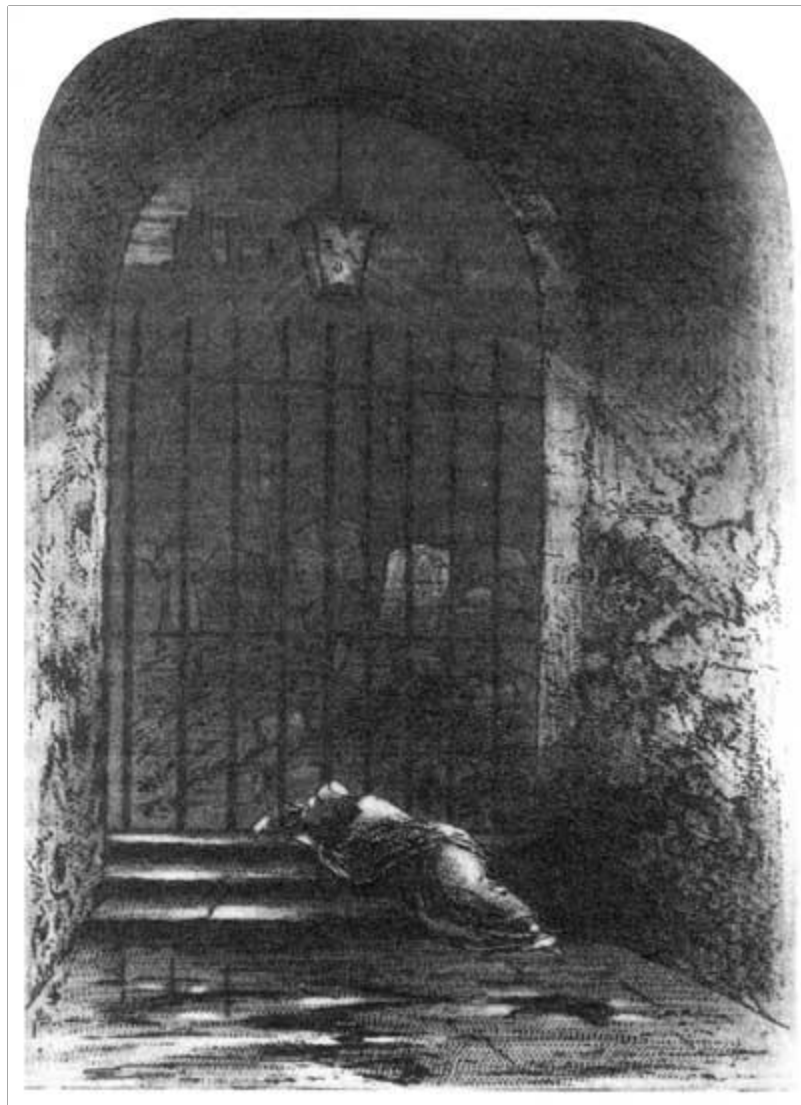


Fig. 5 The morning

Lady Dedlock mounting it in the first instance and with her lying face down upon it in the second. In both illustrations, Lady Dedlock's face remains hidden from view. However, the use of lighting in the later illustration captioned "The Morning" seems to be in reverse of that in its predecessor: the upper part of this illustration is shrouded in darkness, but a dim lamp that shines from above the gate faintly illuminates the steps along with Lady Dedlock's lifeless body lying upon it. If the light in the previous illustration guides her ascent to heaven, then the light in this later piece exposes her wretched state on earth as she dies in loneliness and destitution on a dark, cold, and wintry night, guilt-ridden and condemned forevermore to forfeit the knowledge of her husband's forgiveness. More than a creative visualization and a repetition of its textual counterpart, the graphic illustrations in *Bleak House* also constitute a narrative device that steers readers' attention and expectations throughout the course of the narrative. At times, through their careful and intentional depiction of certain scenes, these illustrations even propel the narrative towards an inevitable end, as in the case of Lady Dedlock's death.

Told in two narrative threads and published in 20 installments over the course of 19 months, Dickens's *Bleak House* nevertheless succeeds in maintaining a tight narrative unity. At the end of the novel, not only do all of his characters turn out to be connected in one way or another, the events and actions that take place in the novel also prove to be closely intertwined. Using a variety of narrative devices, Dickens has carefully constructed his narrative, both textually and visually, so that all parts come together to tell the same story. The rhythm, motifs, and images that Dickens establishes throughout the novel, both in the textual narrative and in the graphic illustrations, thus constitute the common thread that binds his narrative together while shaping his readers' perception. In *Bleak House*, Dickens exercises his artistic talent to paint a complete and singular narrative painting, the details and patterns in which all contribute to advance his narrative.

Notes

1. Dickens talks about his own artistic vision in a letter to John Forster, his biographer and friend, saying, “When . . . I sit down to my book, some beneficent power shows it all to me and tempts me to be interested, and I don’t invent it—really do not—but see it, and write it down” (qtd. in Forster 305).

2. Bleich, along with other reader-response critics, relocate the locus of meaning-making and the production of knowledge to readers’ engagement with and response to the text. Therefore, those who actively seek for meaning through textual interpretation actualize the meaning of the text in the process of doing so. Bleich asserts, “When interpretation is conceived as motivated resymbolization, the idea of response, which otherwise has an inapplicably wide range of minimal meanings, becomes specifiable in experience. Generally, response is a peremptory perceptual act that translates a sensory experience into consciousness. The sensory experience has become part of the sense of self, and in this way, we have identified it” (97).

3. The narratee, as Gerald Prince postulates, is a fictive creation of the author. Prince distinguishes the narratee from the reader, the virtual reader, and the ideal reader. Nevertheless, he does suggest that “the narratee can be a listener . . . or a reader” (19). Therefore, I attempt to demonstrate that Dickens’s use of visual elements in his narrative in fact mediates the gap between author and reader by situating readers in the position of the narratee.

4. Raymond Lister defines Victorian narrative painting as a picture that tells a story or an anecdote by portraying the characters within the setting of the time (9-10). In her book *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image*, Julia

Thomas explores narrative painting as a definitive element of the Victorian period. Roughly understood, narrative paintings are pictures that tell a story. However, Thomas acknowledges the multiplicity that the term encompasses, explaining that “[n]arrative painting’ is, after all, an umbrella term for what the Victorians called ‘scenes from everyday life,’ ‘literary,’ ‘genre,’ ‘historical genre,’ ‘anecdotal,’ ‘domestic,’ or ‘subject’ pictures” (4).

5. Rhoda L. Flaxman explains that word-painting “refer[s] to extended passages of visually oriented description that are composed with attention to framing devices, recurrent iconographic and formal motifs, and a carefully established, consistent perspective” (1).

6. Walker Gibson distinguishes between the “real reader” and the “mock reader.” The former is “the ‘real’ individual upon whose crossed knee rests the open volume, and whose personality is as complex and ultimately inexpressible as any dead poet’s” (2) while the latter is “the fictitious reader . . . whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language. The mock reader is an artifact, controlled, simplified, abstracted out of the chaos of day-to-day sensation” (2). In articulating his concept of the “mock reader,” Walker Gibson thus shifts the emphasis of criticism from the text to the effects that the text produces in readers.

7. Ericksen further explains that “[b]y the term ‘read’ is meant the encouragement by the author or painter for the viewer or reader to infer, from the carefully arranged details, thematic and symbolic meanings, future consequences and past events, and moral significances” (35).

8. In his discussion of “Interpretation in *Bleak House*,” Joseph Hillis Miller likewise points out Dickens’s use of synecdoche in *Bleak House* to establish the novel as “a document about the interpretation of documents” (11). Miller suggests that “[i]n *Bleak House* each character, scene, or situation stands for innumerable other examples of a given type” (12).

9. Many critics have pointed out the hybridity of Victorian art that combines word and image to produce a narrative. Martin Meisel notes that the Victorian culture was one in which the different artistic genres converged while Alison Byerly analyzes the relation between various artistic genres during the Victorian era. Richard Maxwell also postulates that illustrations as we understand them today result from the destabilization of “traditional text-image relations” (45). Similarly, Julia Thomas also explores this collapse of word and image in the Victorian society. Contrasting Victorian narrative painting and illustrations, Julia Thomas nevertheless asserts that both artistic forms adopt a narrative stance by combining the textual and the visual: “I suggest, however, that there is one characteristic that unites them, even in their differences: they both combine the textual and visual, displaying the union between ‘pen and pencil’ . . . Illustration depicts, or ‘pictures,’ textual narratives, amalgamating word and image on the printed page, while Victorian paintings assume the role of ‘picture-narratives,’ telling stories and employing written devices, such as titles, quotations, and pictured words, that allow them to be ‘read.’ . . . Victorian narrative painting and illustration crossed the boundary between text and image” (5). The interaction between Dickens’s descriptive text (that mimics Victorian narrative painting) and the complementary illustrations that accompany each installment thus bridges this divide between the artistic forms.

10. Robert L. Patten suggests that the nineteenth-century illustrated book “mediated two competing systems of knowing and representing the world: the visual, powerful in the Renaissance, in science and cartography and religion and the inculcation of civic virtue, and the verbal, the medium of history and law and philosophy” (92).

11. Patten believes Victorian readers would have placed the text and the illustrations in a dialogue with each other as they read the illustrated book, thereby creating an ongoing discourse surrounding the story. Outlining the function of these illustrations, Patten states that they “may both precede and follow text, may suppose, support, subvert, explain, interpret, and critique its verbal partner, entering into a complexly reciprocal, interactive, and often compellingly persuasive dialogue” (92). Julia Thomas likewise echoes his assertion. When John Leech mistakenly drew Michael Warden eloping with Marion Jeddler in *The Battle of Life*, and it was later revealed in the subsequent installment that Marion had in fact fled alone, Patten argues that “the illustration functions perfectly as the representation of what all the characters and readers believe” (93). Dickens himself might have capitalized on this mistake, for he did not replace the illustration despite his outrage at the mistake. Patten suggests that it “may actually register his surprise that the illustrator would depict an event imagined in the minds of characters and readers, rather than the one the author will disclose in the fullness of time as the actual, ‘real,’ event” (93).

12. Solberg also comments on Dickens as a writer, noting that “[h]e was a keenly observant, visually sensitive writer even before he wrote for illustration; but monthly part publication meant that he had to conceive many scenes in visual forms . . . It is hardly too

much to say that each monthly part can sometimes be said to revolve around its pair of illustrations” (128).

13. Richard Maxwell also traces the use of the word “illustration” over the course of history: “During the late Middle Ages, ‘illustration’ meant spiritual or intellectual illumination. By the end of the sixteenth century the same word often denoted the action of making something clear, typically by providing an explanatory and confirming example; to illustrate was to use one text to shed light on another . . . Then, in the late eighteenth century, a third, now familiar, meaning gradually surfaced . . . ‘illustration’ might slip from meaning a certain kind of example to meaning a certain kind of picture. In effect, this coinage implies, a picture can be used as an example, substantiating a text roughly the same way that notes do” (1). Not only does Maxwell’s observation highlight the elucidative nature of illustrations, it also erodes the line between textual explanation and visual representation.

14. Dickens’s working notes indicate that he had originally chosen the word “shadow” (1007) instead of “shade,” but both words nonetheless imply that the source of light is obstructed.

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