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The Means of an End:  
A Study of the Serial Endings in *Bleak House*

By

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A Master's Essay submitted to the faculty of the  
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## ABSTRACT

Perhaps more so than any other writer of his era, Charles Dickens knew how to tell a story that would draw readers in and keep them wanting more. This was especially important in a novel like *Bleak House*, which was originally published in nineteen monthly installments between March 1852 and September 1853. This essay examines the endings of the serial numbers in *Bleak House* and evaluates the extent to which Dickens used these endings to propel story, heighten physical or emotional drama, and keep readers engaged. By conducting a distant reading of the text and building on existing research, I will show that when the number endings are not suspenseful, they function in other ways—most notably to promote sympathy.

Like other writers of his era, Charles Dickens's texts were often first published in serialized numbers. Dickens's readers would purchase the latest edition of his novels each week or month, consume its handful of chapters, and wait patiently for the next installment to be published. Unlike modern-day readers who might devour an entire Dickens novel in days or perhaps hours, Victorian readers didn't always have this option. For them, breaks were typically a built-in part of the reading experience—and those breaks provided an opportunity for reflection, discussion, and anticipation. As Mark W. Turner writes about the nineteenth-century serial, "In the breaks in the narratives of periodicals and in the lapses in time—over a day, over a week, over a month—is where meaning resides. That pause is when the interaction and communication occurs, and that period of waiting and reading is the link between the past and the future."<sup>1</sup> That Charles Dickens was highly skilled at making his readers wait is indisputable, but this had as much to do with the mode by which his novels were published as it did his storytelling abilities. For Dickens's earliest readers, there was no way to get around it—the act of waiting was central to how they interacted with his work.

*Bleak House* was first published in twenty numbers from March 1852 to September 1853, with the last installment being a double number. To maintain his readers' attention over the year-and-a-half span, Dickens filled his novel with an extensive array of characters and locations, and he wove them together with stories that at times meandered slowly and at other times raced to suspenseful denouements. Throughout the decades, Dickens's method of storytelling in *Bleak House* has been widely studied. What has received less attention is how Dickens chose to end each number in the novel and the purposes those endings serve. This paper examines variations in the endings of the numbers in *Bleak House* and explores possible meanings—obvious or subtle—behind them. I will build on existing research to show that when the endings of the

twenty numbers in *Bleak House* are not suspenseful, they function in other ways—most notably to promote sympathy.

### **The Endings: More Than Cliffhangers**

At the outset of this project I assumed that most, if not all, of the numbers in *Bleak House* would end with cliffhangers—this despite the fact that the term “cliffhanger” didn’t become popularized until well after Dickens’s death.<sup>2</sup> What exactly is a cliffhanger? Although the meaning of the term is generally understood by people today, settling on an exact definition is challenging because opinions vary across eras and media. One of the most original explanations is from *New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum, who calls a cliffhanger “a climax cracked in half,” with the first half of the climax happening at the end of one part in a story and the second half at the start of the second part.<sup>3</sup> Because cliffhangers are a plot device that writers will sometimes use to add excitement to an otherwise-lackluster story, they are often associated with formulaic writing and potboilers. This was a view held by Dickens as well, at least early in his career. As Jennifer Hayward points out, Dickens purportedly despised the cliffhangers that were common in penny dreadfuls, but in his later novels he “continually and unapologetically made use of such techniques himself.”<sup>4</sup>

Cliffhangers have endured as storytelling devices for the same reason serials themselves have endured: the human desire for closure. What psychologists call the Zeigarnik Effect is the process that happens in people’s brains when they engage in an activity, for example reading a book or watching a television series, that is suddenly interrupted. Typically, people will dwell on the unfinished event until they can return to it.<sup>5</sup> This is why the serialized story can be so hard for readers to resist—once they start reading, they are innately drawn back to it until its conclusion.

Or as Henry John Pratt writes, “The felt need to see narrative strands closed creates a loyal, repeating audience.”<sup>6</sup> A skilled serial writer will exploit this human characteristic by leaving readers with unanswered questions at each installment’s ending, which is the moment that is most likely to linger in the audience’s minds during the story’s hiatus. Building on Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund’s definition of a serial as “a continuing story over an extended time with forced interruptions,” a cliffhanger is when the writer places that forced interruption at a precise moment of unresolved narrative tension.<sup>7</sup> This leaves readers in a heightened state of emotion as they are left wondering how the situation will be worked out.<sup>8</sup> For many readers, part of the pleasure that comes from reading a story with cliffhangers is guessing how the cliffhanger will be resolved and then waiting to find out if their guess was correct. Although there are myriad ways writers use cliffhangers to create this feeling of emotional suspense in readers, they typically do it by placing a character in physical jeopardy or emotional turmoil. By this standard, Dickens does include cliffhanger-like endings in *Bleak House*, but he doesn’t do it consistently. Several numbers in the novel end in distinctly unexciting, non-cliffhanger-like ways. In fact, there are some numbers that conclude in such a low-key manner that it’s as if Dickens was purposely trying *not* to create suspense.

### **Methodology: Analyzing Serial Endings in *Bleak House***

Curious about the types of number endings Dickens uses in *Bleak House*, I did an analysis of the text’s serial parts. My study was partly inspired by the work of scholars Brahma Chaudhuri and Robert L. Patten. In an article in *The Dickensian*, Chaudhuri argues that Dickens structured the plots in *Bleak House* so that the various storylines would peak at precise moments in the novel. He writes:

Dickens devised a unique structural plan to achieve, on the one hand, a continuous readership-interest, and on the other, a thematic unity of the entire novel. He succeeded in arousing the interest of his readers by presenting a very promising inaugural instalment, and sustaining that interest by intensifying the action of the novel in each quarter of its serial structure—in Number V, the middle Numbers, and Number XV.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, according to Chaudhuri, the most significant moments in the novel occur roughly quarterly. Robert L. Patten similarly argues that “the midpoint of any twenty-part novel is number 10; there are subsidiary midpoints in the two halves, at numbers 5 and 15. . . .

Identifying these structural ‘keystones’ can lead to other discoveries.”<sup>10</sup> In Chaudhuri and Patten’s view, the most significant moments in *Bleak House* happen every five segments.

With this in mind, I began my analysis by determining whether the number endings in *Bleak House* corresponded with the patterns that Chaudhuri and Patten identified—specifically, whether there were especially significant endings to Number V, Number X (the mid-point of the novel), and Number XV. As a way of entering into my study, I examined whether these three numbers ended with cliffhangers. Before conducting my analysis, though, I had to define what qualified as a cliffhanger—and what did not. It was not as clear-cut as it might seem. For example, is a cliffhanger any moment that ends with a situation left unresolved? If so, then the ending of every number in *Bleak House*—or in any serial, for that matter—would have to be considered a cliffhanger simply because the story isn’t finished. Clearly, this definition is insufficient. Is a cliffhanger then a moment where a character is in jeopardy? If so, what if it’s a minor character? And does that jeopardy always have to involve physical danger or would a more emotional situation qualify?



At the heart of every cliffhanger is the element of suspense. When conducting my study, I looked closely at the end of each number to determine if suspense was central to the narrative break. For example, is there unresolved tension? Is a character in a physically perilous or life-threatening situation? Does the ending incorporate a shocking revelation that comes to light with the potential to change the trajectory of the story's narrative? If any of these were true, I considered the end of the number to be a cliffhanger. I then divided the cliffhanger endings further: between major cliffhangers and minor cliffhangers. Although the dividing line between these categories is admittedly subjective, I considered a cliffhanger to be "major" if the ramifications of that moment were destined to affect multiple characters. An example of a major cliffhanger in *Bleak House* is the end of Number XI, when Lady Dedlock realizes that Esther is her assumed-dead daughter. With this one discovery, readers are left wondering, among other things, what will become of Lady Dedlock's reputation and high-profile marriage, as well as Esther's future with Tom Jarndyce at Bleak House. Conversely, if an ending has an element of suspense but the stakes were relatively low, I considered it to be a minor cliffhanger. An example of a minor cliffhanger in *Bleak House* is the ending of Number II, when Mrs. Rouncewell tells Rosa and Watt about the mysterious footsteps that she sometimes hears on the Ghost's Walk at night. Although this moment certainly has an element of suspense and hints at the gothic undercurrents that run throughout the novel, the reader doesn't get the sense here that Mrs. Rouncewell and her young companions are in imminent danger.

With these criteria in mind, I studied the final moments of the twenty numbers in *Bleak House* and gave each a rating: major cliffhanger, minor cliffhanger, or no cliffhanger. As table 1 shows, only four of the numbers end with what I would call a major cliffhanger. Most numbers

end with minor cliffhangers. The remaining numbers fall into an entirely different category, which can most easily be described simply as non-cliffhangers.

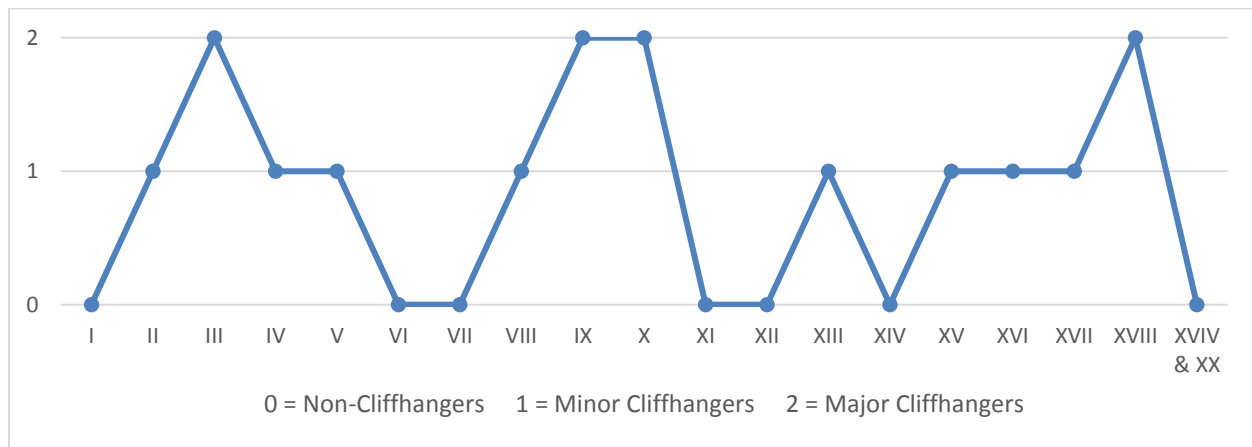


Figure 1: Endings in *Bleak House* by installment number.

What is immediately apparent from table 1 is that there is no clear correlation between the level of intensity in the cliffhangers I identified in *Bleak House* and Chaudhuri's and Patten's theory that significant moments in the novel happen quarterly. Although the midpoint number of *Bleak House* does end with a highly suspenseful and sensational cliffhanger (Krook's spontaneous combustion), this is less true for the endings of Number V (when Mrs. Rouncewell tells Rosa she heard footsteps on the Ghost's Walk) or Number XV (when Inspector Bucket arrests George for Tulkinghorn's murder), both of which I categorized as minor cliffhangers. This is not to suggest that these endings are underwhelming or uninteresting—but they aren't among the most suspenseful endings in the novel.

### The Major Cliffhangers

There are four endings in *Bleak House* that I consider to be major cliffhangers. They are the end of Number III, when Tulkinghorn creeps into Nemo/Captain Hawdon's darkened room and sees his figure on the bed right before Tulkinghorn's candle goes out; the end of Number IX, when Lady Dedlock realizes Esther is her daughter; the end of Number X, the midway point of the novel, when Krook spontaneously combusts; and the end of Number XVIII, when Esther discovers her mother's lifeless body lying on the steps of a locked gate of a London graveyard. Each of these suspenseful moments contains elements of physical danger or life-altering revelations, and the impact on other characters is unarguably significant.

One major cliffhanger that bears closer examination is the end of Number X, which involves the spectacular death of Krook. In this scene, Guppy and Tony Jobling have just entered Krook's room to discover a strange haze lingering in the air. It takes them only a few seconds to realize what has happened: Krook has spontaneously combusted, and the letters from Captain Hawdon that Krook promised to turn over to Guppy have ostensibly disintegrated along with him. This ending was immediately controversial when Number X was first published. At the time, Victorian society was awash with superstitions and crackpot scientific theories. Many Victorians doubted the validity of spontaneous combustion, while others fervently argued that it was possible for a body to suddenly explode and disappear. George Henry Lewes, a philosopher and literary critic, reprimanded Dickens for promoting bad science and called up on him to "make some qualifying statement in the preface to *Bleak House*, so as to prevent the incident of Krook's death from promulgating an error."<sup>11</sup> The *North Wales Chronicle and Advertiser for the Principality* simply noted that Krook was discovered "burnt to death in his room," perhaps choosing to sidestep the controversial details of how Krook really died.<sup>12</sup>

But Dickens wasn't swayed by the naysayers. He responded to Lewes and other critics by starting Number XI with the inquest into Krook's death, which included a list of scientific authorities who attested to the validity of spontaneous combustion. In addition, the 1853 edition of *Bleak House* included a preface from Dickens in which he provides further "proof" that spontaneous combustion was possible. No doubt Dickens knew that Krook's death by spontaneous combustion would be memorable and controversial—and would leave his audience eager to read the next number. As many recent scholars have noted, the ending could also be read as a metaphor for Victorian England's ills, from its unjust and corrupt legal system to its lack of services for the poor and disadvantaged. A nation so rife with inequities and injustices was destined to explode like Krook. Janice Nadelhaft argues that "Krook is the embodiment of Dickens' warning to ailing England, a warning that includes the ruling classes, the Dedlocks of this world, as well as the Lord Chancellor."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, James Buzard posits that "this sickening destiny of Krook's, occurring at the heart of the novel, offers up the figure who undergoes it as the defining antithesis of the model culture and self, his 'inborn, inbred' death a travesty of culture's autotelic order. Literally dispersed, the essence of crookedness can now taint 'everyone.'"<sup>14</sup>

By embedding his social commentary about the state of England into a scenario certain to create a furor—and placing it at the midpoint of the novel—Dickens creates an electric ending to the number that was almost guaranteed to create a sensation. Reader reception was enthusiastic, at least judging from this December 27, 1852 column in *The Sun*:

Krook, the Lord Chancellor of the Rag-and-Bottle Warehouse is dead—has "gone off" in spontaneous combustion. The chapter in which the latter occurrence is described is one of the most frightfully powerful passages even Charles Dickens

has ever penned. It reads like a fragment from one of the French Romanticists. It smacks of the hideous vigour of the *Feuilleton*. It savours of de Balzac in a moment of distraught imagination. As you turn over the pages a vague horror comes over you—you shudder as at the approach of some detestable and evil phantom.”<sup>15</sup>

With its over-the-top phrasing, this review describes the effect that a truly sensational cliffhanger could have on readers. Surely, this is the response that Dickens hoped the ending of Number X would provoke. During the month between the publication of Number X and Number XI, readers would discuss and debate this ending, forming their own theories and meanings behind Krook’s death. In this way, the ending lived on long after the reader finished reading, which demonstrates how a cliffhanger ending can leave an audience in a state of heightened emotional suspense.

Another example of a major cliffhanger in *Bleak House* comes at the end of Number XVIII, when Esther finds her mother’s dead body. This ending is suspenseful not only because of what it portends but because it merges *Bleak House*’s major storylines. Dickens had been building to this moment for several chapters, as Esther and Inspector Bucket raced through the streets of London in search of Lady Dedlock. When Esther approaches the figure of a woman lying at the gates of the graveyard, she assumes it’s Jenny until she gets close enough to the body to see who it really is: “I passed on to the gate, and stooped down. I lifted the heavy head, put the long dank hair aside, and turned the face. And it was my mother, cold and dead.”<sup>16</sup> At this point the number abruptly ends, leaving the reader to wonder what happens to Esther next. But this moment is also significant because it is the point at which two stories converge. Until this moment, the two major storyline tracks—one with the third-person narrator and the other told from Esther’s point of view—had been mostly independent of each other, although the storylines

did occasionally intersect. Here, the stories come crashing together. Just inside the gate of the graveyard lies the freshly buried body of Captain Hawdon, Esther's father, whose true identity was the focus of much mystery and speculation, while on the outside of the gate is Lady Dedlock, Esther's mother, whose secret has caught up with her in a most tragic way. It is a moment that provides an emotional catharsis, both for Esther and for the reader.

Here, as Esther discovers her mother's lifeless body, the story reaches an important milestone that serves to bring closure to a set of storylines while also leaving the reader with new unanswered questions. What will become of Esther now that she will never truly know the woman who she only recently discovered was her mother? Will Lady Dedlock's connection to Esther be revealed to the public? If so, what will this mean for Esther's relationship with Mr. Jarndyce and for Sir Leicester's reputation in the community? These questions linger in readers' minds well after the end of the number, which is one of the primary functions of a cliffhanger, according to Luke Terlaak Poot: "When a cliffhanger interrupts a developing situation, we anticipate how that situation will resolve because the text has refused to do it for us."<sup>17</sup> Dickens's decision to end Number XVIII with Esther discovering her mother's body shows his skill not just as a writer capable of mining the emotional depths of his characters, but as a writer who can deftly bring discordant stories together in a suspenseful way.

### **The Minor Cliffhangers**

In *Bleak House* there are eight numbers, by my accounting, with endings that meet the general requirements of what I'm calling a minor cliffhanger. With these eight cliffhangers, Dickens injects enough suspense in the ending to keep readers enticed, but the moment's impact on the story is relatively low compared to the major cliffhangers. An example of a minor cliffhanger in

*Bleak House* is the end of Number XIII. In this scene, Tulkinghorn has summoned Hortense to his London offices, where he threatens to have her thrown into jail if she contacts him again. After Hortense departs, Tulkinghorn pours himself a glass of wine, sinks down into a chair, and looks up at the mural on the ceiling of the Roman figure pointing downward. Unquestionably, there is emotional suspense to this moment as readers are left wondering if Hortense will do as Tulkinghorn has ordered or if she will further complicate his schemes. But what's missing from this scene is a sense of urgency and immediacy. There is the *potential* for Hortense's life to be in jeopardy if she doesn't comply with Tulkinghorn's demands, but in this moment she's not in actual danger. And whether the narrative has been significantly altered by anything that happens in this ending is also unclear; readers must keep reading to find out. Still, this scene works as a cliffhanger because it dangles enough unanswered questions in front of the reader that they are motivated to keep reading. And what the novel's original readers wouldn't have realized is that in this scene Dickens is foreshadowing jeopardy for a character, but the character is Tulkinghorn rather than Hortense. Several chapters after this one, Dickens will describe that same Roman figure pointing down from the ceiling at Tulkinghorn's body after he has been murdered by Hortense. David Ben-Merre writes that "a reader with access to the novel in its entirety would be able to pinpoint narrative patterns across pages and months of text. By juxtaposing these two passages, such a reader could . . . see the meaning behind the [figure's] gesturing [at the end of Number XIII]—that the Roman was pointing at Hortense" as the would-be killer.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the original readers of *Bleak House* would have had no way of grasping the true significance of this moment; only someone reading or re-reading the novel in its complete form would have the advantage of this viewpoint. This demonstrates how readers can have changed understandings of

a serial's installment endings when they are read consecutively without the forced interruptions that Hughes and Lund describe.

Other examples of minor cliffhangers are the end of Number VIII, when Mrs. Snagsby lurks in the shadows watching her husband and Jo; the end of Number XV, when Inspector Bucket arrests George for Tulkinghorn's murder; and the end of Number XVII, when Inspector Bucket is preparing to go into the night to search for Lady Dedlock. These endings aren't particularly exciting or memorable—they aren't likely to stay with readers long after they've finished the serial—but they are tantalizing enough to keep readers intrigued. Moreover, these minor cliffhangers serve the important function of propelling the story forward and motivating readers to continue reading without overwhelming or deceiving them. Had Dickens ended each number of *Bleak House* with a major cliffhanger, his readers would likely have grown tired of the device and come to regard it as a narrative gimmick. This is because not every cliffhanger can live up to its potential—sometimes characters in a cliffhanger really *do* fall off the edge of the cliff, but more often they are rescued or find a way to save themselves. Authors must strike the right balance between cliffhangers that truly portend something ominous and cliffhangers that turn out to be false alarms. Luke Terlaak Poot writes that authors who overuse cliffhangers risk making their readers feel cheated if the payoff doesn't meet their expectations: "Cliffhangers always appear to mark the events they interrupt as significant with respect to the unfolding story, so in cases where such events end up not, in fact, mattering, the reader will feel manipulated. The cliffhanger promises a relevant payoff, but does not always deliver it."<sup>19</sup> Minor cliffhangers, such as the ones I mentioned, create a sense of narrative tension without drawing attention to themselves as devices meant to manipulate readers' experience of the text. With a minor cliffhanger, readers understand that the stakes are not always going to be high at the end of any



given installment but that each part of the serial is building toward the payoff that is sure to come.

### **The Other, Non-Cliffhanger Endings**

Intriguingly, there are some numbers in *Bleak House* that end without any kind of cliffhanger. They don't involve characters in physical jeopardy or emotional turmoil. There is no shocking revelation that threatens to change the course of the narrative. Indeed, there's no element of suspense whatsoever. Although these endings might have been appropriate for the end of a chapter *within* a number, it is curious that Dickens sometimes chose to place them at the end of a serial installment. But these endings still serve at least one important purpose: they promote sympathy.

During the mid-Victorian period, writers often had to balance suspense with sympathy. In her study of novels from this period, including Mary Braddon's *Eleanor's Victory* (1863), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853), and Gaskell's *A Dark Night's Work* (1863), Erica Haugtvedt found that for a novel to be suspenseful, readers need to be adequately invested in the characters and have sympathy for them. This requires that there be ample "slow" periods between moments of suspense. This is also true of *Bleak House*, where we see Dickens's method of alternating between numbers that end with high suspense, others with low suspense, and still others that lack suspense entirely but are emotionally resonant. As Haugtvedt puts it, "Suspenseful serials *cannot* proceed without sometimes relying on sympathy as a means of occasionally slowing down the panicked pace of suspense. While sympathy can operate in the absence of suspense, suspense depends on sympathy as a strategy of affective contrast."<sup>20</sup> As examples, Haugtvedt points out how Elizabeth Gaskell ends some installments of *Cranford* in

mundane ways, like by having characters fall asleep or say goodbye to each other. But even these so-called slow moments serve a purpose, according to Haugtvedt, because they signal future plot developments without clearly foreshadowing them. And it's in these simple, everyday moments that readers can relate to characters with whom they might otherwise feel they have little in common.

One example of an anticlimactic ending in *Bleak House* that promotes sympathy comes early in the novel at the end of Number I. This conclusion is intriguing to study because at first glance it doesn't seem like much of a conclusion at all. The number ends abruptly, with Esther waking up after her first night in the Jellyby house to find Peepy, the youngest Jellyby child, standing by her bed watching her:

The purblind day was feebly struggling with the fog when I opened my eyes to encounter those of a dirty-faced little spectre fixed upon me. Peepy had scaled his crib, and crept down in his bed-gown and cap, and was so cold that his teeth were chattering as if he had cut them all.<sup>21</sup>

By almost any measure, the end of the first installment is one of the most pivotal moments in any serial. At this point, the author has introduced the audience to at least some of the story's main characters and settings. In addition, the author has started, at least preliminarily, to reveal the early stages of the core storylines. In the first installment, the creator must set the stage enough to whet the audience's appetite for more. The ending is critical, which makes the understated—some might even call it underwhelming—finale of the first number of *Bleak House* so surprising.

My initial reaction to this ending was to assume that Dickens chose to finish the number this way simply because he could; he knew that his loyal audience would read the next installment with or without a suspenseful ending. Dickens wrote *Bleak House* in the second half

of his career as a novelist, well after he had become hugely successful. Sales of the first installment of *Bleak House* in England were about 38,000, roughly 10,000 copies more than the first installment of its predecessor *David Copperfield*.<sup>22</sup> Thus, perhaps the simplest explanation for why the first number ends the way it does is simply because Dickens assumed readers would be hooked on *Bleak House* no matter what. John O. Jordan had a different perspective on this ending. He posits that Dickens uses the ending of the first number in *Bleak House* to set a gothic tone that he will revisit throughout the novel. In his book *Supposing Bleak House*, Jordan highlights the many ways that ghosts appear or are alluded to throughout the story, including characters who skulk in the shadows, the footsteps Mrs. Rouncewell insists she hears on the Ghost's Walk at night, and dead people whose auras still linger in rooms. Jordan points out that Dickens gives readers an important clue about what the rest of the novel will be like when he describes Peepy as a "spectre." Though Jordan never disputes that Peepy is very much alive, he calls the character one of the novel's "unlikely" ghosts, resembling Jacob Marley visiting Ebenezer Scrooge.<sup>23</sup>

Jordan's argument is compelling, but it overlooks what I believe was Dickens's true intent with this ending. Despite its lack of suspense, in this moment Dickens wants his readers to have sympathy for Peepy, but that's only part of what's going on here. Peepy is, at best, a secondary character. Although Esther will cross paths with him several times in the novel, he is always on the periphery of her scenes, never her focus. But Peepy and Esther still have a connection, which is evident from the moment Esther arrives at the Jellyby house earlier in the first number. When Esther first encounters him, he has gotten his head stuck between the bars of a railing because he wasn't being watched. As Esther settles into the Jellyby house and observes Peepy, she notes that he's a filthy child who wears ill-fitting clothes and who is constantly at risk

of getting injured as he runs around the Jellyby home. Although Peepy has a place to sleep and food to eat, he and his siblings are largely neglected by their mother, Mrs. Jellyby, who is more concerned about the welfare of strangers in Africa than she is about her own children. Later in the first number, Peepy tumbles down a flight of stairs. When Mrs. Jellyby scolds him for wanting to be comforted, Esther takes the child in her arms to console him. Dickens writes that Peepy is astonished by this gesture, indicating that he is not used to being shown affection. So, at the end of Number I, when Esther awakens in the middle of the night to find Peepy standing by her bed so cold that his teeth are chattering, it's yet another example of how the boy isn't being cared for properly—and it demonstrates that, despite their brief relationship, Peepy has already come to see Esther as a caring, mother-like figure who fills the role that Ms. Jellyby won't.

Esther's concern for Peepy in the first number of *Bleak House* demonstrates how she puts others' welfare ahead of her own. Even though she's in the middle of transitioning from the life she knew with her godmother to a new, unknown life at Bleak House, Esther is not preoccupied with her own situation. Instead, she's thinking about Peepy, Caddy, and their unfortunate situation. With this background as context, the end of Number I takes on deeper meaning. It's not only about a lonely and cold Peepy waking Esther in the early morning hours, it's about the fact that Peepy sees Esther as someone who will take care of him—and by giving his readers sympathy for Peepy, Dickens is also giving them sympathy for Esther.

A second example of a number in *Bleak House* with an anti-climactic ending that fosters sympathy is the end of Number VI. In this moment, the character of Jo has left the Snagsby home after being brought there by a police officer for loitering. While he was at the Snagsbys', Jo was interrogated about the mysterious woman who paid him to show her where the dead law writer, Nemo, slept and worked. After Joe has achieved his usefulness, the group gives him some

money and scraps of meat and sends him on his way. As the chapter ends, Jo is sitting in the shadow of St. Peter's cathedral, eating and staring up at the spire that seems "out of reach."<sup>24</sup> He is feeling peaceful—at least until a passerby comes along and orders Jo to "move on." Jo's reverie is broken and he starts on his way. Why would Dickens choose to end a number in this way? Michael Slater suggests it's because when characters in *Bleak House* tell Jo to move on, they are asking him to do more than just move from one place to another: "Jo cannot roam freely like the young Dickens or the young David Copperfield when off duty. . . . He is always in fear of the ubiquitous Mr. Bucket and his myrmidons who keep ordering him to 'move on.'"<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the phrase "move on" appears fourteen times in the novel, always in relation to Jo. Earlier in the text Dickens writes that being told to move on is "the one grand recipe" of Jo's life, "the be-all and end-all of [his] strange existence upon earth."<sup>26</sup> It is clearly the phrase that Dickens wants to be closely associated with Jo, a character who is marginalized and ignored by others. Because Jo is a homeless, family-less, and pedigree-less street urchin, the middle- and upper-class characters in *Bleak House* would prefer to have him move out of their sight so they don't have to be confronted with Jo's plight and the uncomfortable reminder that Jo is one of only thousands of children like him. As Michael Lesiuk writes, "Most people would prefer the great gulf between themselves and Jo to remain in place, for Jo is not only dirty and disagreeable to the senses but disease-ridden. We *want* there to be great distance between us and Jo, but there just isn't, which is why he is constantly being told to 'move on'."<sup>27</sup> By ending the number this way, Dickens leaves his readers with the mental image of a pitiable boy whose hardships are not of his own doing, similar to the child characters in previous novels by Dickens, such as Oliver and Pip. This engenders compassion in the reader for Jo, and, by extension, for other children—fictitious or real—who are in similar situations.

A third example of an ending that lacks suspense and instead emphasizes sympathy is Number XI, but here it is done through a character's internal struggle. In this scene Esther, whose face was recently disfigured by an unnamed disease, has just learned that Woodcourt, who had been presumed dead, survived his shipwreck in the Indian Ocean. Esther is relieved, but not only because Woodcourt is alive. She's also thankful that Woodcourt never confessed his love for her before leaving for his voyage, because if he returned to England and saw how frightening Esther now looks he might feel obligated to stay with her. Still, Esther longs for Woodcourt and dreams of the day when the two of them can be together in heaven:

With a great pang mercifully spared me, I could take back to my heart my childish prayer to be all he had so brightly shown himself; and there was nothing to be undone: no chain for me to break or for him to drag; and I could go, please God, my lowly way along the path of duty, and he could go his nobler way upon its broader road; and though we were apart upon the journey, I might aspire to meet him, unselfishly, innocently, better far than he had thought me when I found some favour in his eyes, at the journey's end.<sup>28</sup>

Here at the end of Number XI we see an Esther who is trying to put her feelings for Woodcourt behind her and accept the reality of her new appearance. But this moment also exemplifies how Esther, throughout the novel, seems to resign herself to a less-fulfilling life in the hope that true joy awaits her after death. As Tyson Stolte writes, “This construction of the afterlife as a new birth into a new world—as opposed to a long-deferred body resurrection—is one to which Dickens has Esther constantly return.”<sup>29</sup>

The reason Esther longs for the afterlife is that the life she has been given on Earth has been so difficult. When we first meet Esther in chapter three, she describes herself as “not

clever,” and when she arrives at Bleak House she tells Jarndyce that she hopes she will not be a disappointment to him.<sup>30</sup> More than anything else, Esther fears being regarded as a burden. This sense of low self-worth continues when, after learning Lady Dedlock is her mother, Esther wishes she had never been born. And we see it here, at the end of Number XI, when she is grateful that Woodcourt had never professed his love for her—even though readers no doubt suspect Esther is merely trying to convince herself. As Alex Zwerdling writes about the end of Number XI, “In such passages Esther tries to construct a possible life out of the elements of duty, selflessness, and the hope of a heavenly reward. She struggles to convince herself that they will do; but they will not.”<sup>31</sup> Like the previous example involving Jo, Dickens uses the ending of this number to create sympathy for a character. But unlike that ending, the sympathy is a result of a character’s choice to put others ahead of herself. As readers, we know that Esther deserves better, that she is as entitled to happiness and fulfillment as anyone else—perhaps even more than anyone else because of how she puts others’ needs ahead of her own. But Esther resigns herself to the life she has and dares not hope for anything more—at least in this present life.

### **Conclusion**

*Bleak House* is a novel of contrasts. It’s both a satire and a tragedy. It’s both a romance and a mystery. It’s both an urban ethnography and a portrait of pastoral England. This array of motifs helps to give the novel its textured feeling, like a patchwork of characters and stories that have been stitched together to create an epic saga. The same multi-faceted, multi-layered aspects can be said of the novel’s number endings. They are at times highly suspenseful, at other times understated and low-key. Most of the numbers in *Bleak House* end with minor cliffhangers. These cliffhangers serve to entice readers to keep reading, without barraging them with one

highly suspenseful ending after another. For the original readers of *Bleak House*, these minor cliffhanger endings raised unanswered questions that kept them intrigued during the month-long break between numbers. Slightly less often, the numbers in *Bleak House* end with no element of suspense. These non-cliffhangers allowed readers to develop sympathy for the characters—and they functioned as slower moments that gave readers a mental respite between cliffhangers. Surprisingly, major cliffhangers are relatively rare in *Bleak House*, but when Dickens does use them, they are used for maximum dramatic effect. Dickens seems to have understood that overusing shocking, highly suspenseful endings can make them feel like gimmicks.

It is notable that none of the three types of endings are dominant in the text. Rather, they are artfully, if not evenly, balanced. Chaudhuri's and Patten's theory that significant moments happen about every quarter in *Bleak House* may be true, but, as I suggested earlier, this does not directly correlate to the number endings. If it did, the highest points in figure 1 would all be on or around numbers V, X, and XV, but this is not the case. Also, it's important to note that Chaudhuri's and Patten's respective analyses were based on their subjective interpretations of what qualifies as significant. As demonstrated in Haugtvedt's study, less-suspenseful moments can still have their own significance, even if that significance is not always obvious. Ultimately, the endings of the numbers in *Bleak House* do not align with Chaudhuri's and Patten's findings because the endings serve a particular purpose. The endings do not just *conclude* the numbers; they are also meant to sustain the reader's interest and occupy their attention in the space *between* the numbers. Mark W. Turner's argument that there is meaning in the breaks between serial installments would be lost on most modern-day readers of *Bleak House*, who are more likely regard the text as a novel comprised of 67 chapters instead of 20 numbers. Like today's television audiences who "binge" the latest Netflix series on their own schedules, stopping and



starting wherever they choose, someone reading *Bleak House* today would probably have no idea how Dickens intended the experience of reading his novel in serial installments to unfold.

Because for *Bleak House*'s first mid-Victorian readers, it was in the periods between the publication of each installment that readers could ponder what they'd read, discuss the story with others, and form their own theories about how the narrative would progress. Since each number in the novel contained three or four chapters, readers had plenty of material to think about—and the number's ending served as a sort of capstone. The endings were Dickens's way of saying to the reader, "During the time we are apart from each other, I want you to pay special attention to this." There were some months when Dickens wanted the number's final moment to leave his readers breathless with anticipation, which is when he ended the installment with a major cliffhanger. Other months, he wanted his readers to develop sympathy for the characters, so these numbers ended with "heartbeat" moments intended to provoke an emotional response. And most of the endings fell somewhere in between those two poles. Ultimately, the number endings in *Bleak House* function to not only entertain but to act as signposts that guide readers through the novel and stay with them as they eagerly waited for the next installment.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Turner, "Periodical Time in the Nineteenth Century," 194.
- <sup>2</sup> Nussbaum, "Tune in Next Week," 70.
- <sup>3</sup> Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures*, 39.
- <sup>4</sup> Austin, *Useful Fictions*, 66-67.
- <sup>5</sup> Pratt, "Why Serials are Killer," 267.
- <sup>6</sup> The term "cliffhanger" was popularized in the early twentieth century with the rise of silent films, which were often shown in weekly chapters. Typically, each episode ended with a hero or heroine in a precarious situation. Louise M. Ackerman and G. Thomas Fairclough. "Cliffhanger," 157.
- <sup>7</sup> Hughes and Lund, *The Victorian Serial*, 12.
- <sup>8</sup> Hagedorn, "Technology and Economic Exploitation," 7.
- <sup>9</sup> Chaudhuri, "Dickens's Serial Structure in *Bleak House*," 68.
- <sup>10</sup> Patten, "Plot and Plot of *Bleak House*," 92.
- <sup>11</sup> Lewes, "Spontaneous Combustion. Two Letters to Charles Dickens," 163.
- <sup>12</sup> "Our Library Table," 6.
- <sup>13</sup> Nadelhaft, "The English Malady, Corrupted Humors, and Krook's Death," 238.
- <sup>14</sup> Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction*, 131.
- <sup>15</sup> "Literature," 3.
- <sup>16</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, 915.
- <sup>17</sup> Poot, "On Cliffhangers," 53.
- <sup>18</sup> Ben-Merre, "Wish Fulfillment Detection, and the Production of Knowledge in 'Bleak House'," 60.

- <sup>19</sup> Poot, "On Cliffhangers," 53.
- <sup>20</sup> Haugtvedt, "The Sympathy of Suspense," 159.
- <sup>21</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, 63.
- <sup>22</sup> Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 384.
- <sup>23</sup> Jordan, *Supposing Bleak House*, 116.
- <sup>24</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, 315.
- <sup>25</sup> Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 358.
- <sup>26</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, 308.
- <sup>27</sup> Lesiuk, "Reading the Mesh of Metonymy in *Bleak House*," 133.
- <sup>28</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, 570.
- <sup>29</sup> Stolte, "Putrefaction Generally." 415.
- <sup>30</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, 120.
- <sup>31</sup> Zwerdling, "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated," 435.

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