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23 Nov 2022

A Close Reading of Tulkinghorn's first encounter with Krook in *Bleak House*

The passage analysed here (Dickens, 2003 [1853], pp. 163–5) describes Tulkinghorn's first visit to Krook's shop and is part of the third of twenty monthly instalments in the original publication of *Bleak House*. While this extract focuses tightly on Tulkinghorn's discovery of Nemo, the complete instalment (published in April 1852), comprised Chapters 8 to 10. Chapters 8 and 9 are in set in the countryside, at Bleak House, use Esther's first person, past tense, narration and are concerned with showing the reader Esther's social situation, her relationship with her cousin and guardian, and her kind and sweet nature. Chapter 10 returns to the heart of London and the use of the third person omniscient narrator, again in the present tense (which adds immediacy and involvement), and in which Snagsby guides Tulkinghorn to Krook's shop where Nemo, the law-writer lodges. Chapter 10 ends as Tulkinghorn finds Nemo's apparently comatose body, thus setting up an effective and engaging cliff-hanger. In this way Dickens prompts the reader not only to ask: Who is Nemo? but also encourages the reader to buy the next instalment.

The extract considered here opens with a paragraph of just two sentences. The first sentence: "It is quite dark..." (p. xxx) is short and simply descriptive, quickly inviting the reader into the narrative. The second sentence is however complex both syntactically and in meaning and is fifteen times longer than the first. Its first few sub-clauses use the image of a tide of people that the lawyer (Tulkinghorn) and the law-stationer (Snagsby) must swim against, e.g., clerks, counsels, attorneys, plaintiffs etc on their journey to a "rag and bottle shop". The anaphoric repetitive use of "against..." builds up a sense of the pair fighting their way through an opposing horde made up of the various participants of the legal process. Dickens often uses similar rhetorical techniques - by associating "diving through law and equity" with the "kindred spirit of street mud which is made of nobody knows what" Dickens is showing that Tulkinghorn and Snagsby have some unique goal, outside the normal legal environment, and their motivation is of dubious morality. The long second sentence expresses the difficulties required to pursue that goal, even though the physical journey to Krook's shop is relatively short.

Having arrived, but still within the second sentence, the narrator gives the briefest of description of the shop environment, merely hinting at its inferior relation to the infrastructure of law, it being a: "general emporium of much disregarded merchandise, lying and being in the shadow of the wall of Lincoln's Inn". This is quite different to the comprehensive and detailed description given by Esther in Chapter 5, when she is guided there by Miss Flite (pp. 67-72). In the darkness Tulkinghorn does not see Nemo's advert in Krook's window. The reader however knows it is there because Esther described it in Chapter 5: "wanting engrossing or copying..." (p. 67). Dickens is an early exponent of this technique, used in much later detective novels, that allows the reader to know more of the situation being depicted than the characters in the novel know. This increases reader

involvement as the readers can 'watch' the characters develop, as they gradually gain the knowledge that the readers already have. Thus, Dickens moves freely between the genre of nineteenth century realism and crime writing. This first paragraph literally ends by reaching the word 'Krook' thus providing a satisfying end to both the paragraph and the reader's observation of Tulkinghorn's journey.

It is worth noting Dickens's propensity for choosing names befitting his characters' personalities. The name Krook suggests a scoundrel, a criminal, with a hard, unsympathetic view of life. The spelling with a 'K' also suggests that Krook is illiterate, as indeed he is. It perhaps also hints that Krook is like a shepherd's crook – shepherding and protecting his livelihood, the flock of legal papers he has accumulated in his shop. On the other hand, the name Esther Summerson, with its sibilant alliteration, suggests gentle femininity and matches her selfless, affectionate nature. Tulkinghorn, with its 'ing' element suggests an active character, perhaps an energetic hunter of information or men being implied by the 'horn' element in his name.

Having established the dark and potentially amoral atmosphere of the scene, the third-party narration (which has a strong male voice, in contrast to the intimate, feminine first personal narration of the previous two chapters) becomes simpler and concentrates on dialogue to advance events and develop the characters. When Snagsby comments "This is where he lives, sir," this statement is simply mirrored by Tulkinghorn, who naturally wishes to reveal nothing of his intentions. When Snagsby becomes more interrogative, Tulkinghorn simply dismisses him. Dickens's third-party omniscient narrator cannot resist reminding the reader of Snagsby's lower social position, commenting: "Mr. Snagsby lifts his hat and returns to his little woman and his tea". Such an all-knowing narrator has the advantage it can reveal any of the characters' thoughts to the reader, and make social, political or other comments on the events unfolding. However, Dickens is careful not to overuse this viewpoint in a simply journalistic way. The narrator leaves enough work for the reader to interpret and decode the narration in a way that encourages the reader's engagement. Rather than telling the reader about the conversation between Krook and Tulkinghorn, the reader is shown it in the form of detailed dialogue. While *Bleak House* investigates many themes including the predatory and unjust nature of the law, passion, obsession, philanthropy, social responsibility and justice, guilt and destiny it is the themes of identity and appearance that are the subject of this brief extract. Tulkinghorn is careful, as he questions Krook about the identity of Nemo, not to reveal anything of himself or his feelings. Here the narrative style is very different to the opening paragraph of this passage. Krook's wary nature and carefully but reactive response to Tulkinghorn is shown by the use of short sentences and an indirect, literal and conspiratorial style as the narrator takes the reader into the narrator's confidence: "Mr. Krook has eyed his man narrowly. Knows him by sight. Has an indistinct impression of his aristocratic repute" (p163).

Just as he did with Snagsby, Tulkinghorn spars verbally with Krook, and although initially Krook answers question with question, Krook eventually defers to Tulkinghorn's superior position (both physically on the stairs and socially) and reveals the nature of Nemo: "my lodger is so black-humoured and gloomy that I believe he'd as soon make that bargain [with the devil] as any other" (p. 164). Dickens's depiction of Krook's cat's bad temper at Tulkinghorn: "The cat expands her wicked mouth and snarls" (p. 164) is perhaps symbolically suggesting an element of the supernatural. Perhaps, the cat is Krook's familiar. Although Dickens, as the controller of the third-party narrator, knows that Nemo is already dead, he could simply say "Tulkinghorn went upstairs and found Nemo dead in his bed". That would lack any dramatic interest or involvement for the reader. The narration instead gradually builds to a climax (in which the reader finally supposes that Nemo has died from an opium overdose). At the end of the passage under consideration, the narration uses simile

and metaphor to foreshadow decay and death in several ways. The simile used for the portmanteau that “collapses like the cheeks of a starved man” suggests an aura of poverty. The “blot-headed candle”, which spreads more darkness than light due to its faulty wick, the “two gaunt holes pierced” in the shutters (a metaphor for the eyes of famine), the matt that “lies perishing upon the hearth”, the “yellow light” of the “spectral darkness” of the Nemo’s candle with its waxen “winding-sheet above it” (a metaphor for a burial shroud) and the juxtaposition of the open but lifeless eyes of Nemo with the symbolic two eyes in the shutter all foreshadow death and heighten the drama of Tulkinghorn’s discovery of Nero’s demise.

[1319 words]

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Selected Victorian critical views of *Bleak House*

Collins suggests that Victorian literary critical opinion saw *Bleak House* as a significant point in Dickens's achievements, either marking the start of the "dreary decline of the author of *Pickwick*, *Chuzzlewit* and *Copperfield*" or "opening the greatest phase of his achievement" (Collins, 1996, p. 281). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the latter view only became properly established when critics had time to look back on the entirety of Dickens's oeuvre, as, for example in Stott's analysis (Stott, *Contemporary Review*, 1869). Here, we will examine contemporary reviews from *The Spectator* and *The Eclectic Review* which provide two very different and immediate responses to *Bleak House*. Both reviews were written in the three months following the publication of the 20th and final instalment of *Bleak House* in September 1853.

The Spectator was established in 1828 as a weekly journal of news and politics with an "outspoken literary section" (Butterfield, 2018). George Brimley, a librarian of Trinity College, Cambridge and a regular contributor as lead book reviewer to *The Spectator* published a highly critical but anonymous review of *Bleak House* in September 1853. This review was in line with the paper's ongoing view of Dickens as a popular, rather than a serious, writer who amused "the idle hours of the greatest number of readers; not, we may hope, without improvement to their hearts, but certainly without profoundly affecting their intellects or deeply stirring their emotions." (*The Spectator*, 1853c, p 925).

The *Eclectic Review* (1805-1868) was a monthly British periodical "aimed at the highly literate and thoughtful reader" but was intended to be "anything but elitist about the audience it sought" (Basker, 1983, p. 130). The founders deliberately set a low price (two shillings and sixpence (Hiller, 1994, p. 181) though this was substantially more than *The Spectator's* nine pence (*The Spectator*, 1853b, p 909)) so that many classes of people could purchase the journal. While *The Eclectic Review* reviewed books in many fields, including politics, science, art and philosophy it paid specific attention to literature and reviewed major works by authors such as Wordsworth, Byron and Dickens.

The two reviews differ strongly in tone. Brimley (*The Spectator*, 1853c, pp. 923-925) adopted a largely disapproving, dogmatic style, finding *Bleak House* to be "chargeable with not simply faults, but absolute want of construction" (p. 923). While Brimley's review is necessarily short (it is just one of many articles in the twenty four page *Spectator* format of the 1850s (*The Spectator*, 1853a, p. 909)), his style is one of personal opinion rather than considered intellectual debate and lacks any supporting evidence for his arguments based on the textual evidence in the work. In taking the view that Dickens "discards plot" with the consequence that "the absence of a coherent story is fatal to continuous interest" (*The Spectator*, 1853c, p. 923) and in stating that "the series of incidents which form the outward life of the actors...nor have they that higher interest ...which powerfully aid in modifying and developing the original elements of human character" (p. 923) Brimley accuses Dickens of failing to display the basics of narrative and character development. A disinterested reader of this criticism might then however wonder how Dickens had such commercial success, achieving a peak monthly instalment sale of 43,000 (Tomalin, 2011, pp. 245-6).

The *Eclectic Review* takes a more neutral, considered and unemotional standpoint. Nevertheless, in some places, like Brimley, it tends to subjective opinion. For example, it supposes that the method of serialised publication renders "it almost impossible to produce that which when completed shall be deemed a good book" (*The Eclectic review*, 1853, p. 665). The *Eclectic Review* goes further though recognising that the use of two different narrators and styles of point narrative point view give "special difficulty in the way of

preserving the unity of the work” (p. 666). In this case, unlike Brimley, the review provides a considered evaluation and states: “there was requisite the diversity of style proper to the fictitious historian, and a gentle lady” and backs this evaluation up with a further assessment that Dickens insight into Esther is “a stream of womanly thought and feeling [that] seems to have passed into his very heart” (p. 666). The *Eclectic Review* also uses numerous instances of Dicken’s text to illustrate its arguments. For example, Dickens general success in depicting “those who dwell amidst the murky gloom of England’s low life” (p. 672) is given detailed and specific illustration by several extracts from Dickens text that describe Jo’s journey from unwilling coroner’s witness to untimely death. This commentary on social justice views Jo as a “hapless representative of a class whose very existence from generation-to-generation cries shame on the land in which they dwell” (p. 672). Brimley, on the other hand, completely neglects the possibility that Bleak House is not only a simple narrative but a work of social commentary.

While largely broadminded and undoctinaire, the *Eclectic Review* criticises Dickens’s “evident attempt to bring odium on the pastors of unprivileged sects” (p. 676). While Mr Chadband is indeed the “epitome of selfish hypocrisy” (Bradbury, 2003, p. xxxi) this rather partisan view is perhaps not surprising, given the *Eclectic Review*’s strong association with the English Dissenters, a group that opposed state interference in religious matters and who founded their own churches, education establishments and communities.

[876 words]

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Bleak House – extract from Chapter 10

It is quite dark now, and the gas-lamps have acquired their full effect. Jostling against clerks going to post the day's letters, and against counsel and attorneys going home to dinner, and against plaintiffs and defendants and suitors of all sorts, and against the general crowd, in whose way the forensic wisdom of ages has interposed a million of obstacles to the transaction of the commonest business of life; diving through law and equity, and through that kindred mystery, the street mud, which is made of nobody knows what and collects about us nobody knows whence or how—we only knowing in general that when there is too much of it we find it necessary to shovel it away—the lawyer and the law-stationer come to a rag and bottle shop and general emporium of much disregarded merchandise, lying and being in the shadow of the wall of Lincoln's Inn, and kept, as is announced in paint, to all whom it may concern, by one Krook .

"This is where he lives, sir," says the law-stationer.

"This is where he lives, is it?" says the lawyer unconcernedly. "Thank you."

"Are you not going in, sir?"

"No, thank you, no; I am going on to the Fields at present. Good evening. Thank you!" Mr. Snagsby lifts his hat and returns to his little woman and his tea.

But Mr. Tulkinghorn does not go on to the Fields at present. He goes a short way, turns back, comes again to the shop of Mr. Krook, and enters it straight. It is dim enough, with a blot-headed candle or so in the windows, and an old man and a cat sitting in the back part by a fire. The old man rises and comes forward, with another blot-headed candle in his hand.

"Pray is your lodger within?"

"Male or female, sir?" says Mr. Krook.

"Male. The person who does copying."

Mr. Krook has eyed his man narrowly. Knows him by sight. Has an indistinct impression of his aristocratic repute.

"Did you wish to see him, sir?"

"Yes."

"It's what I seldom do myself," says Mr. Krook with a grin. "Shall I call him down? But it's a weak chance if he'd come, sir!"

"I'll go up to him, then," says Mr. Tulkinghorn.

"Second floor, sir. Take the candle. Up there!" Mr. Krook, with his cat beside him, stands at the bottom of the staircase, looking after Mr. Tulkinghorn. "Hi-hi!" he says when Mr. Tulkinghorn has nearly disappeared. The lawyer looks down over the hand-rail. The cat expands her wicked mouth and snarls at him.

"Order, Lady Jane! Behave yourself to visitors, my lady! You know what they say of my lodger?" whispers Krook, going up a step or two.

"What do they say of him?"

"They say he has sold himself to the enemy, but you and I know better—he don't buy. I'll tell you what, though; my lodger is so black-humoured and gloomy that I believe he'd as soon make that bargain as any other. Don't put him out, sir. That's my advice!"

Mr. Tulkinghorn with a nod goes on his way. He comes to the dark door on the second floor. He knocks, receives no answer, opens it, and accidentally extinguishes his candle in doing so.

The air of the room is almost bad enough to have extinguished it if he had not. It is a small room, nearly black with soot, and grease, and dirt. In the rusty skeleton of a grate, pinched at the middle as if poverty had gripped it, a red coke fire burns low. In the corner by the chimney stand a deal table and a broken desk, a wilderness marked with a rain of ink. In another corner a ragged old portmanteau on one of the two chairs serves for cabinet or wardrobe; no larger one is needed, for it collapses like the cheeks of a starved man. The floor is bare, except that one old mat, trodden to shreds of rope-yarn, lies perishing upon the hearth. No curtain veils the darkness of the night, but the discoloured shutters are drawn together, and through the two gaunt holes pierced in them, famine might be staring in—the banshee of the man upon the bed.

For, on a low bed opposite the fire, a confusion of dirty patchwork, lean-ribbed ticking, and coarse sacking, the lawyer, hesitating just within the doorway, sees a man. He lies there, dressed in shirt and trousers, with bare feet. He has a yellow look in the spectral darkness of a candle that has guttered down until the whole length of its wick (still burning) has doubled over and left a tower of winding-sheet above it. His hair is ragged, mingling with his whiskers and his beard—the latter, ragged too, and grown, like the scum and mist around him, in neglect. Foul and filthy as the room is, foul and filthy as the air is, it is not easy to perceive what fumes those are which most oppress the senses in it; but through the general sickliness and faintness, and the odour of stale tobacco, there comes into the lawyer's mouth the bitter, vapid taste of opium.

"Hallo, my friend!" he cries, and strikes his iron candlestick against the door.

He thinks he has awakened his friend. He lies a little turned away, but his eyes are surely open.

"Hallo, my friend!" he cries again. "Hallo! Hallo!"

As he rattles on the door, the candle which has drooped so long goes out and leaves him in the dark, with the gaunt eyes in the shutters staring down upon the bed.

