Gothic Elements of the Novels of

Charles Dickens

An Examination of Ghosts, Memory, and Self/Other Relations in

David Copperfield, Bleak House, and Great Expectations

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(without whom this would not have been possible)
I. Gothic Fiction: A Trip to Your Unconscious

Upon hearing the word "Gothic," the mind might immediately conjure up visions of ghost stories; of creepy, foreboding settings; perhaps even of Frankenstein's monster or Dracula. While Gothic can be thought of as consisting of these elements, it can also be so much more. Helene Moglen, Professor Emerita at the University of California Santa Cruz, teaches a class every year entitled "The Gothic Imagination in Fiction, Film, and Theory." In her class, she builds a theoretical framework which establishes a unique vision of the "gothic mode"--a framework which she then encourages her students to use in order to gain a greater understanding of the examined texts, of the world around them, and of their own individual lives (the final assignment is to create a gothic journal which creates a sort of gothic review of independent reading, real world events, personal experiences, etc.).

Moglen's framework is the one which inspires my own conception of the distinction between "realist" versus "gothic" texts. Nineteenth century works of realism were accepted as representations of real, actual events and happenings; or, at least of events and happenings that had the potential to take place in the world, examined on the surface level of consciousness. Gothic texts, on the other hand were considered a different literary breed altogether. The infamous libertine philosopher the Marquis de Sade had these words to share on the emerging gothic genre--that, while "it was the necessary offspring of the revolutionary upheaval which affected the world of Europe," the, "only merit, more or less [of the new novels], consists of their reliance on witchcraft and phantasmagoria." These sentiments are from de Sade's "Essay on Novels," and in his review, while he has nothing but the highest praise for a work which he
considers to be the height of the gothic genre--M.G. Lewis's *The Monk*--he makes it clear that he considers the highest form of literature to be the one which can most accurately represent the complete, true experience of man. De Sade has this to say about the broader genre of the novel (or *roman*):

> [the writer] must catch nature, he must capture the heart of man, that most singular of her creations, and not virtue, because virtue, however fine and necessary it may be, is only one of the manifestations of that astounding heart which every novelist must make his deepest study, and because of this the novel, if it is to be the faithful mirror of the human heart, must of necessity reflect all its crests and troughs. (de Sade, 12-13)

He is, of course, likely making the claim that this is the highest form of literary achievement because he feels that it is something which he himself to managed to accomplish in his own highly controversial body of work (see: *Juliette, Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom*, etc.). Whatever value judgment is being imparted, the implication here is that the work which can convey the essence of human nature is, in a sense, the only one which can be considered literature. While,

> The historian's pencil can draw a man only in his public roles, when he is not truly himself: ambition and pride cover his face with a mask which shows only these two passions and not the man entire. The novelist's pen, on the other hand, captures his inner truth and catches him when he puts his mask aside, and the resulting sketch, which is far more interesting, is also much truer. (de Sade, 13)

Though de Sade is describing his ideal novel, something which he considers distinct from the gothic genre, his distinction captures the essence of the difference between "realist" and "Gothic" as I see them. A *realist* text behaves like a history, even if it describes events which never actually occurred. Texts which operate in the realm of the realist lens focus on the surface, on the workings of the conscious mind, on events and actions. A *gothic* text, on the other hand, delves deeper, and examines the workings of the unconscious. While the "realist" can capture
the chronology of a story, and even superficial meaning, the "gothic" delves deeper into the psyche of the individual. While the realist text is capable of capturing some sense of psychological motivation, it does not delve beyond the bounds of the conscious mind; it stays away from the "crests and troughs" which de Sade describes. The gothic lives in these crests and troughs, and gives us glimpses into aspects of the human condition which would defy description in the realist mode.

The convention of the realist text provides a naturalization of gender roles, of normative heterosexuality, and of class structure--basically, it seeks to tie up the loose ends which would be a threat to the healthy functioning of the conscious mind. The gothic novel, however, presents us with a profound questioning of these same topics. A novel with gothic elements, while it may or may not contain fantastic ghosts and other supernatural occurrences, always features a depiction of the rich interiority of its characters. The supernatural so regularly co-occurs with fantastic elements because these uncanny spectres are external manifestations of forces at work within the unconscious. In the gothic text, everything and everyone is depicted in relation to a relativistic self, and every ‘other’ of this self is understood to have his or her own ‘others.’ The gothic presents with maddeningly self-obsessed individuals, giving us a glimpse behind the lens of politeness which they might front to the world, and into the often dysfunctional manners in which those individuals interact with and perceive the world around them.

While it is useful to establish what “gothic” means by constructing it in a binary opposition with the notion of realism, this is something of an oversimplification. “Realism,” as it were, is not exactly a concept which corresponds directly with something in the real world; it is a theoretical construct, and while I have implied that the contrary “Gothic” construction is
somehow its opposite, this is not a representative distinction. The gothic paradigm to be adopted for the purposes of this analysis is merely one which seeks to delve beyond surface examinations of elements of the conscious, and into the depths of the unconscious in order to see what makes individuals “tick.” According to this broader definition, it is entirely possible to deconstruct the so-called realist text and examine its component gothic parts; the conscious does not, cannot operate, independently; there are always deeper motivations hidden beneath the surface, and the gothic mode of literary analysis seeks to unearth these deeper elements even from works where they might not necessarily be apparent on the surface.

Given just this broad conceptualization, it might seem that this gothic I describe does no more than literary analysis itself, but there are a number of aspects previously unmentioned which set it apart. The gothic seeks not merely to delve beneath the surface for just any deeper explanation it can latch onto at random; instead, it seeks to delve into the self, and, very often, the depths which tell the most truth are the ones which are characterized by relations of the self to the self and others that are not necessarily healthy. It relies on much psychoanalytic framework, and, as it is often the case that examination of healthy, stable individuals yields little progress in that field, so too is it the case that the preferred gothic subjects (and objects) are those who are themselves unhealthy in some way, whether the illness manifests in excessive self-obsession or some other symptom. There are a number of devices by which the gothic framework seeks to do this work of deeper analysis. I will detail the relevant paradigms in a sort of gothic lexicon, to follow.
**First Person**

Gothic fiction nearly always employs the use of first person narration. As the reader identifies with the narrator--a narrator who is often driving himself mad with obsessions and other instances of mental instabilities--he or she is placed inside of the madness. As, in many ways, identification with this obsessive, narrative intelligence is inescapable. This first-person narrator becomes the hero of the story, as he or she is the point of focalization. A ‘realist’ hero is an individualist too, but this is surface individualism, and it is a personality trait that can be captured by a history book (like the histories we read of great world leaders, revolutionaries, etc.). The gothic version of this hero is self-obsessive, constrained within his or her own head, by the biases and anxieties which lurk there. In Moglen’s Gothic Imagination course, she posits that the Dickensian hero is this sort of realist hero, and perhaps that may be true to an extent; however, in his first person novels, which are the texts I will be examining--namely *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, and *Great Expectations*--the gothic nature of these heroes is immediately apparent, from beginning to end. Even as one narrative is produced, another narrative is always simultaneously created; examination of the narrative of interiority is the one in which the gothic is interested.

**Self/Other**

Gothic stories attempt to map the basic structure of otherness and its relation to the self. They are stories of divided, fragmented selves, between two people or between two opposing forces within a single self.

In Lacan’s paper “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I”, we are treated to a conception of the development of awareness of the body, and of consciousness, which is
integral to the understanding of gothic notions of the self/other distinction. The infant experiences the body in pieces, as fragile, and discontinuous, as hands and feet and thought, as one with the mother, with the others who are its caregivers. When the infant sees himself in the mirror for the first time, the recognition of this image of this self, which is radically different from the previous awareness of the self, leads to the beginnings of a differentiation between the internal and external world, between the self and the other. But a recognition of lack on account of this untimely separation with previous notion of the self remains, and, in later stages of development, this recognition leads us to search for a sense of permanence and stability. When the self is conceived of as vulnerable, fragile, and insufficient, it looks toward the other for definition, and this reliance on the unconscious relation of the self to the other in order to determine self-identity can either be supportive or threatening.

Subject/Object

The gothic seeks to chronicle a whole host of interesting subject/object relations. One of the easiest ways to determine the differences between subject and objects is through the examination of the interaction of the gaze. The gazer is the subject; gazing is an act which asserts of a form of power over the observed, which transforms the individual being examined into an object. The gazee is thus the object of the gaze, and the experience of being objectified can cause the object to feel dominated by the viewer, as a result of shame or guilt, with the world of the object’s desires, and perhaps of their entire being, laid bare for examination. Or it can cause a moment of recognition, which entails feelings of acceptance through a dismantling of the subject/object dynamic for a mutuality of recognition where objectification is absent (though this second form is not often present in the gothic). The imbalance of the subject/object relationship
is almost always the dynamic which is captured in gothic texts, and the obsessive compulsive, constant, recurring struggle to move from subject to object position is recurring theme. In a first person narrative, this objectification is often automatically achieved by mere virtue of the fact that the personal narration is itself a form of this gaze, wherein characters outside of our focalization point in the narrator him/herself are relegated to object positions by virtue merely of the fact that they are being examined by the narrator; the effect that the distance of time created by retrospective narration has on the depiction of these objects is also something which must be considered.

**History**

The gothic sets up interesting notions of time and historiocity. The historical past can be used to create a sense of remoteness from the present, and this construction can be used in order to write about contemporary ideas. This is something which Dickens undertakes in many of his novels, and not just the first-person ones. He often set his stories in the not-so-distant past. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*¹, for example, the trajectory of Nell and Grandfather’s journey into the undeveloped, pastoral country, is akin to a journey into the past itself, and when they at last re-enter the industrial, monolithic city, the change in time-setting is all the more jarring.

Realistically, this novel is also set in a time probably slightly before the time during which it was actually written; the primary mode of transportation in the novel is one which is unmechanized--walking itself, which tears Nell apart, is the one which is employed most often in the story, and Quilp’s ability to dart around the country, and the story, with uncanny speed sets

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¹ *The Old Curiosity Shop* is Dickens’s fourth novel, published in 1840 in the serial *Master Humphrey’s Clock*. It follows Little Nell and her Grandfather on their cross-country journey to escape the evil Quilp. It is often criticized as being far too sentimental for modern audiences, but even in this novel there are traces of the Gothic.
him apart from the “heroes” in many important ways, with a large distinction being his temporal distance from them. There is a sense of remoteness created between the antagonistic force of Quilp and our protagonists, which creates the previously mentioned sense of remoteness from the present.

*Uncanny*

The uncanny, as it is represented within the gothic framework, is a psychological term originally coined by Freud which seeks to describe the uncomfortable experience of recognizing something which is simultaneously both foreign and familiar, which is at once both attractive and repulsive. When we confuse others with ourselves, when we equate our own needs with the needs of others, when we fear madness and the loss of rationality, we are responding to feelings of the uncanny.

*Sublime*

The sublime describes the feeling of being overwhelmed, of being touched by something which is truly later than one’s self. It is descriptive of a truly interior experience, which can be delightfully positive or frighteningly, overwhelmingly negative. To characterize the sublime, the experience of the recipient of the feeling must be examined; to examine the sublime is to understand the way in which characteristics of some object (beautiful, grotesque, uncanny, etc.) are able to effect the interior experience of some observing subject, and the ways in which they do so, the feelings which are evoked through this realization of something greater than oneself. The feelings aroused in the observer are given due consideration, and the subject’s expressivity is tantamount. Edmund Burke characterized the experience of the sublime in terms of pleasure and pain, as an excessive strain on the nerves and senses which pushes our senses to the breaking
point. The experience of the sublime is not one which can be logically produced (and which cannot be intentionally reproduced). Though it may be possible to intentionally expose yourself to something which has the potential to create a sublime experience, the experience itself, the visceral, unconscious reaction, is not a guarantee. The desire for the sublime constitutes a wish for liberation from the trappings of logic and consciousness, and it has important implications for the conception of the sense of self. A positive, healthy relationship with the sublime can fulfill the desire for merging and connection with some other (another person, or a broader connection with the world or some aspect with it) that does not interfere with the sense of self; but an unchecked desire for the experience of the sublime can lead to total fragmentation of the self, to a fall out of meaning altogether, or to a complete reassignment of meaning and validation to forces which are outside of the self. This is, again, a dark side of narcissism and it can evolve into heights so catastrophic that the self desires to incorporate all that is outside of it into itself; to blur distinctions to such a point that destruction of the incorporated others is the result.

*Cultural/Collective Unconscious*

The cultural/collective unconscious is an important aspect of gothic analysis. The cultural unconscious is determined by external forces; it is a repository of historical memory, and the things which haunt our collective memory are buried deep within it. For example, the memory of the slave system is buried deep within the global unconscious, and it is particularly haunting to the American cultural collective unconscious--tense race relations arise from this

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2 which can, again, be an element of realist fiction--healthy individuals who exert positive force on the world are, by necessity, a bit narcissistic; healthy narcissism can breed healthy individualism and self worth, and create assertive well-adjusted individuals, but there is a thin line between the healthy and the destructive forms of narcissism
repressed memory; it is often considered taboo to bring it up, even though it influences many of our everyday actions at the level of the unconscious.

**Sexuality/Sex**

Notions of sexuality and the gender system are highly ingrained in the gothic model. In the gothic mode, there often exists a fluidity of sexual identification and desire, constituting a departure from formulaic heteronormativity. In a heteronormative society, it is forbidden to feel sexual desire for a member of the same sex with which one identifies; er go, a male ought not have another male as his object of desire. In Dickensian novels, for example, which are very much commodity pieces, the heteronormative status quo must be maintained on surface level but there are definite slippages which undermine this realist demand, a demand that is fueled by the demands of virtue and common decency. Through close examination, we can see that the characters get away with exhibiting a much broader range of gender and sexuality identification than might at first meet the eye (see: displaced desire: the case of David and Steerforth in *David Copperfield*, among others).

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This is by no means intended as an all-inclusive repository of elements of gothic fictions, nor is it even entirely representative of the elements of gothic fiction which I myself will examine, but it provides a useful starting point that will serve to point in the general direction which my analysis will take (and will use some of them directly).
II. On the Couch with Dr. Dickens and Mr. Boz

While the comparison between the gothic and the realist was useful in order to shed light on what, exactly, the gothic is, it also serves as grounds for my upcoming analysis of Dickensian works by appeal to gothic theory. Dickens has often been praised as a writer of realist fiction, and for good reason. He was very adept at constructing works which served as targeted social commentary; his relations of the lives of the middle class asserted that they had lives worth valuing at all, and he draws incredibly poignant pictures of the perils of poverty and the ills of industrialization. But it is not this social commentary which afforded him such astounding success as a writer. His success arose, and continues to arise, from his ability to set this commentary, with fantastic prose and wry humor, as a backdrop, as the scaffolding of a world from which his marvelously well-formed characters take their lives. And what lives they are! At the risk of committing characterological metalepsis, it seems incredibly important to note that, even now, after the bicentenary celebration of Dickens’s birth, the characters of Dickensiana continue to live and breathe as important figures in our society. How many versions of *A Christmas Carol* have you seen? Have you ever thought of someone as a Scrooge? Even people who have never read *Oliver Twist* are capable of relating to his iconic plea for more. There is a contemporary magician who at age sixteen came to call himself, and to be called, David Copperfield after the title character of a Dickens book which he claims never to have even read, though he obviously thought the name would generate enough recognition to make adopting it a

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3 A concept brought up by Helena Michie during “A Round Table on *Supposing Bleak House*” during the 2013 “Dickens Universe” conference on *Bleak House* at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Essentially refers to the logical error of conceptualizing signifiers (characters) of fiction as having actual lives as signifieds (real-world entities) beyond the domain of the text.

4 “David Copperfield Biography.” A+E Network. 2013
wise decision. While a lot of specific characters remain buried within the pages of his books, just begging to be re-discovered by the modern reader determined enough to unearth them from its pages. Dickens has left a legacy of strongly characterized figures, who range from the horrific to the hysterical, whose presence in the literary canon has definitely influenced the formation of new stories. It is his large playbill of characters that gives Dickens so much continued resonance with a modern audience; Nell, David, Oliver, Scrooge, Esther, Swiveller, Quilp, and so many others continue to live on because they are so well characterized, because they are fleshed out entities of substance with richly characterized interiorities.

Dickens was a prolific author, writing sixteen major novels over the course of his career. I will examine three works in particular, all of which are novels written relatively late in the chronology of his works—*David Copperfield* (1849-50), *Bleak House* (1852-53), and *Great Expectations* (1860-61). These three works are united by the fact that they are all first person narratives, a fact which distinguishes them from the other novels of the sizable Dickensian corpus. While gothic novels are themselves largely first person, as previously established, I do not mean to imply that these three novels are an isolated experiment in the gothic for Dickens; the gothic is definitely present in his larger corpus of work, and it remains present in the third person sections of *Bleak House*. But the very fact that these works are all first person lends them something of a deeper connection with the gothic from the first utterance of the first person singular pronoun. The use of the "I" allows for unmediated access to the self, and focus on the self is of paramount importance to the gothic. First person is criticized by some who characterize the point of view as one which has inevitably unreliable narrators, but this is gross oversimplification. The first person narrator is not unreliable as such; he (or she) can be
depended upon to reliably relate his (or her) personal perception of the world. Even if a narrator is intentionally misleading, deliberate prevarication or unintentional ellipsis can reveal a lot about events, a character, and even a character's relations to his or her self and others. *David Copperfield, Bleak House,* and *Great Expectations* employ the gothic mode of interior exploration in order to reveal relationships between subject and object, between memories and ghosts, past and present, conscious and unconscious, self and other, and even, perhaps, between life and literature.
III. *David Copperfield: The Gothic Imagination of Charles Dickens*

Dickens is often praised for his success as an author of realist narrative works. Victorian realism strove to portray characters and events as they actually were (to the extent that one can do this for a fictional character), and to display the motivations of the conscious mind at work. The Dickens realist hero is said to be a striving, competitive individual whose egotism is full blown. The realist hero is a staunch individualist; he is a striving and competitive figure. Dickens is incredibly skilled at writing characters who fulfill these criteria, but he delves deeper into the psyche than many give him credit for. The Gothic version of this hero has these individualist tendencies, but they are tainted by self-obsession--realist healthy self-obsession deepens and gives rise instead to narcissism. Whereas the realist novel is concerned with the workings of the conscious mind, the gothic model is famous for its ability to give insight into the realm of the unconscious. The gothic comes to life in Dickens’s seminal classic *David Copperfield*. Though *David Copperfield* fits the criteria of the realist novel in many ways, there is a distinct gothic subtext that can be traced from the beginning to the end of the novel, in the ghosts of memory come to life, in the doubles and projections of David which fill the self-reflective pages, and in the unresolved melancholic obsession which lingers (in the subtext if nowhere else) to the final pages of the novel.

Memory is one of the great wonders of the human mind. It allows for the preservation of the precious moments of the past, and for the indoctrination of valuable lessons. Memory is something that we value, that we rely on, that we even cherish; however, it also is something of which we must be suspicious. In some cases, remembering can be a dangerous process--to remember oneself in a situation encourages temporary regression to a past unconscious state in
order to retrieve repressed material. Hidden wishes and repressed memories can find expression in the present. Feelings that were once associated with people from the past can be projected onto those who are in the present, or they can be rekindled to the detriment of the remember-er, who will have nowhere to direct these loaded feelings except inward. Memories of those who are lost to us (whether as a result of mortality or some other separation) can evoke either joy for what was lost or the unbearable sadness of melancholia, depending on the state of the unconscious at the time of remembering. The process of writing a memoir (which shares a linguistic root with the word memory), a literary mode of recording memory, necessitates a delicate balancing act on the part of the first-person retrospective narrator. In *The Personal History, Adventures, Experience, and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery (Which He Never Meant to Publish on Any Account)*, the component parts of the layered chronology—the timeline of the remembered David and the timeline of the narrator David—are given different levels of attention. The reader must navigate the departures and intersections of these timelines skillfully in order to be a careful, skilled reader. David-the-narrator has good reason, specifically his adherence to the conventions of good storytelling, to reveal the events of his life in a particular order. His relation of the story of David the character follows a relatively linear trajectory, for the most part. We trace David the character from birth (and slightly before), through childhood and adolescence, then bachelorhood, and the trappings of matrimony, all the way to a huge, disruptive, defining moment, a “flashbulb memory,” which occurs in Chapter LV, entitled “Tempest.” “Tempest” opens with these lines:

I now approach an event in my life, so indelible, so awful, so bound by an infinite variety of ties to all that has preceded it in these pages, that, from the beginning of my narrative, I have seen it growing larger and larger as I advanced, like a great tower in a plain, and
throwing its forecast shadow even on the incidents of my childish days” (*David Copperfield* 733).

For David-the-narrator, the memory of the approaching storm is so strong that it is introduced in the present tense, distinct from the tense of most of the rest of the narrative (save the retrospectives⁵). The remembered self has been traveling blindly on a trajectory toward this event; but the memory of the event will weigh/has weighed so heavily upon David that the aftershocks of the impact of future memory have infiltrated the progression of the earlier course of the narrative as foreshocks. David’s narration has been haunted by the ghostly spectre of the winds since the opening of the novel. If the novel were a purely realist text, the impact of the storm would be confined to the time immediately surrounding it. David would be able to deal with the loss of Steerforth and move on, but the events of the storm have colored the way in which he remembers the events of his past. Examination of the events of “Tempest,” and those that follow, allows a retrospective re-evaluation of the impact that this particular memory has had on the narrator’s recollection of previous events—the narrative becomes an exercise in learning how to integrate the inescapable effects of trauma into the psyche without becoming overwhelmed by them.

When loss occurs in the realist novel, that loss is effectively mourned and dealt with, but the gothic story is unable to assimilate loss healthily into the psyche, and loss results in the development of melancholia. At the point within the chronology of the events of David-the-character’s life when “Tempest” occurs, we are already aware that Ham Peggotty—a member of the delightful family who treated David so well in his childhood—is a man who is haunted by

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⁵ These are the shorter chapters of the novel, wherein David moves through large chunks of time in a mall amount of textual space. They are written in present tense, distinct from the normal narrative flow of the “normal” chapters.
the memory of his “little Em’ly,” to whom he had been affianced prior to her being spirited away in the course of the Steerforth debacle. After her whereabouts are discovered by her heroic father figure Mr. Peggotty, Ham shares his feelings about Emily: “I loved her—and I love the mem’ry of her—to be able to lead her to believe of my own self as I’m a happy man. I could only be happy—by forgetting of her” (David Copperfield 689). Outwardly, this is a healthier attitude toward uncontrollable loss than those found in traditional gothic texts. Emily’s desertion hurt Ham, but he has taken time to deal with the loss of her—to effectively mourn the memory of her as she was and not resent her for the present state of her existence; or, at least this is something which he verbally professes to have done. In the build up to the storm, when David is speaking with his old nurse Peggotty, we learn what others have observed of how Ham has been handling his loss of Emily to Steerforth: “She described to us how tenderly he had taken leave of her, and how manfully and quietly he had borne himself” (David Copperfield 733). Just as the characters in the novel are fascinated with how Ham is bearing himself in light of his personal tragedy, so, too are we the readers interested in how David the character will conduct himself in the aftermath of his own impending tragedy, and seeing what David the narrator has been secretly carrying within himself throughout the course of the narrative. However, even given Ham’s outward behavior early on, there is definitely evidence that Ham does ultimately “snap” and allow himself to be destroyed by the loss of Emily—his “murder” of Steerforth constitutes a form of suicide, which is not an action that someone in healthy mourning would take. Healthy mourning involved integration of the lost other into the self, but Ham, in his forgetting, experiences a kind of disassociation. Ham was obviously overwhelmed by the weight of depression at some point—this is something which we mostly infer from his actions, since we
are not given direct access to Ham’s thoughts in the way we are given with David. The event “grows larger and larger . . . like a great tower in a plain” (David Copperfield 733) as we approach the beginning of the tempest, and Dickens’s fervent audience waits impatiently to see what monumental event has been reserved for the effective climax of the story of David’s life. We have been tracking the development of a pseudo-realist narrative over the course of the previous installments, and the events of “Tempest” will reveal the source of the uncanny element running through the narrative which has prevented its classification as strictly realist.

Emily describes the contents of Ham’s farewell message to her as being “sharp thorns, but . . . such comfort” (David Copperfield 734). Memories of Steerforth for David are like Ham’s unwilling words of rejection for Emily—painful, but comforting and something both wish to “keep till they die” (David Copperfield 734). The difference between David and Emily here is that Emily is allowed to hold on to her memories of Ham and remain part of the realist narrative—socially speaking, Emily herself is effectively dead already, so there is no real problem with her remaining in mourning. This particular situation for Emily is not one that will result in a paralytic inability to move beyond loss because she is already lost herself. She is the object of the gothic, not its subject. However, for David to hold onto the memory of Steerforth (even unconsciously) would preclude the possibility of his becoming (or remaining, at least) the middle-class hero he so longs to be.

The eye of the storm which will haunt David’s future memories approaches with this description:

It was a murky confusion—here and there blotted with a colour tossed up into the most remarkable heaps, suggesting greater heights in the clouds than there were depths below them to the bottom of the deepest hollows in the earth, through which the wild moon seemed to plunge headlong, as if, in a dread disturbance of the laws of nature, she had lost
her way and were frightened. There had been a wind all day; and it was rising then, with an extraordinary great sound” (David Copperfield 735).

Dickens does not normally explore the gothic interior in the way that authors like Shelley and Stoker do, but the experience of the Dickensian interior can be read in the manifestation of metaphor and descriptive language. This passage serves as an allegory of the experience of the gothic interior. The “murky” confused sea—the endless heaps of cloud with “greater height” than the depths of the ocean; all are indicative of the depth of the mental landscape on which the narrative takes place that extends beyond the conscious surface. And the use of subjunctive⁶ “[the wild moon] had lost her way and were frightened” in a retrospective narrative, where the ending is predetermined from the start, points to the persistence of unresolved issues, to a longing for things to be/to have been other than as they are/were. The very beginning of the novel asserts that David will not be a mere realist subject (even if he himself does not believe it to be true); his birthing nurse proclaimed that, because David was born at midnight on a Friday, he “was destined to be unlucky in life [and] privileged to see ghosts and spirits” (David Copperfield 9). David-the-narrator has this to say about the nurse’s claim: “Unless I ran through that part of my inheritance while I was still a baby, I have not come into it yet” (David Copperfield 9). This is an absurd claim on David’s part; he constantly sees ghosts throughout the course of the narrative. He brings the ghosts of his memories to life with his words, and they are given new life through his summoning of them from the depths of his conscious and unconscious mind. The people who are dead and buried at the point of this retrospective are just as alive in the telling as those who endure; when David buries his first wife, Dora, he speaks remarkable truth when he says that there are parts of her that cannot be buried. Speaking from a gothic

⁶ A linguistic mood used to express an aspect of wishful unreality.
perspective, when we interact genuinely with others, we form within ourselves versions of those others; we form an idea of that person that does not correspond to anyone else’s notion of who that person is (not even that individual’s self-conceptions of him/herself) that we hold inside of our own minds; this notion cannot be completely obliterated by the small reality of a person’s passing from the physical world, but the nature of the psychic shadow is complicated by the absence of that other from the physical world.

In the opening chapter of the novel, David’s mother and Peggotty glanced outside at the wind blowing through the trees at Blunderstone Rookery, when

The evening wind had made such a disturbance just now, among some tall old elm-trees at the bottom of the garden . . . as the elms bent to another, like giants who were whispering secrets, and after a few seconds of such repose, fell into a violent flurry, tossing their wild arms about, as if their late confidences were really too wicked for their peace of mind, some weather-beaten old rooks’-nests burdening their higher branches, swung like wrecks upon a stormy sea” (David Copperfield 11)

Mentions of wind in the book exist is an state of anomalous temporal ambiguity—for the narrator to claim that the evening wind had made a disturbance “just now” creates an odd syntactic construction of different tense markers. David was not himself present for these events, so the past-construction is built from hearsay (from a number of possible sources—from his mother, from Peggotty, from the doctor, etc.). It is already a stretch to read first-person narration of events prior to the narrator’s birth, but the bleeding into the writing of the present construction “just now” is particularly notable. As it is likely not a deliberate slip on David’s part, it is instead an unconscious manifestation of one of the ghosts that David claims never to have seen; it shows that the impact of this phantom wind was/is/will be inescapable in the telling of the story. The wind is particularly violent and chaotic, and it serves as a foreshadowing of “Tempest.”
language of the stormy sea is present even in the opening chapter of the novel; the spectre of the “wreck” on the horizon beckons to David’s unconscious mind like a siren.

Later, as David struggles forth toward the tempest, ostensibly to deliver Emily’s letter to Ham, he shares his experience: “As we struggled on, nearer and nearer to the sea, from which this mighty wind was blowing dead on shore, its force became more and more terrific. Long before we saw the sea, its spray was on our lips, and showered salt rain upon us” (*David Copperfield* 736). As David journeys on nearer and nearer to Yarmouth, the place where Steerforth committed the acts which occasioned their falling out, the force of Steerforth’s memory’s struggle to emerge from David’s unconscious into his living memory becomes “more and more terrific.” And long before David lays eyes on Steerforth-at-sea, the “spray” from the Steerforth who lives within David’s psyche causes David to think of him. It is never explicated, but Steerforth is the root cause of David’s current stint as mailman, and what is about to occur ensures that, even if David-the-character were not thinking of Steerforth in that particular moment, David-the-narrator must of course be thinking of Steerforth given his foreknowledge of what is about to take place on that tumultuous sea. It is notable that even though this chapter, “Tempest,” is the one in which Steerforth ultimately perishes, he is not mentioned by name a single time. When David sees the man about to perish in the wreck, he notes that the figure “brought an old remembrance to [his] mind of a dear friend” (*David Copperfield* 742). The chapter ends with this passage:

> He led me to the shore. And on that part of it where she and I had looked for shells, two children—on that part of it where some higher fragments of the old boat, blown down last night, had been scattered by the wind—among the ruins of the home he had wronged—I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school (*David Copperfield* 743).
Though Steerforth is never mentioned by name, first his mental and then his physical presence haunt the scene. This is also the scene in which David’s childhood friend, a far better man than Steerforth by all accounts, meets his demise, and David all but ignores that tragedy in the wake of his personal loss of the man he desires even as he is forced to loathe him. Emily is present at the scene of Steerforth’s death too; the ship which breaks under him, which causes him to sink into the watery depths of the sea and drown, is christened the “Little Em’ly;” here she is the instrument of Steerforth’s destruction in much the same manner as he was of hers. Steerforth washes up upon the broken remains of the Peggotty family home, now himself as broken as he has made them. The sea is the domain of the Peggottys which Steerforth intruded on when he took Emily away in his ship. Emily’s experience of the sea, even after Steerforth’s ruination of her reads like this: “It was a pleasant afternoon when she awoke; and so quiet, that there warn’t a sound but the rippling of that blue sea without a tide, upon the shore” (David Copperfield 679).

The sea is calm and welcoming for the Peggotty family, but Steerforth’s inexcusable violation of that tranquility results in his unceremonious, violent rejection from the sea, and from mortal coil. This is the same sea that David once thought it might have been better if Emily had flung herself into, but Emily is a fisherman’s daughter, born and bred to withstand the might of the ocean; every haunted mention of the winds, of the sea, has been leading up to this remarkably anticlimactic moment with Steerforth lying dead on the sand. Steerforth’s actual death is not violent; the sea is content once it has finally expelled him from its depths. The sea welcomes Ham into its depths, and gives him a noble hero’s death, but this is not Steerforth’s fate. Just as David did not take Steerforth’s abandonment of him for Emily well, he does not take this death with particular grace either.
Mourning is the healthy process of dealing with a lost object. It is the process of working through a lost relationship, and of reabsorbing the energy that was previously used to sustain that relationship. Melancholia is defined by a paralytic inability to move beyond one’s attachment to a lost object. It is characterized by a focus on the lost object, and a repetitive reenactment of the dynamics of that relationship, in any number of ways. When David goes to tell Mrs. Steerforth of her son’s death, he finds her already living in a state of melancholia: “She was in his room, not in her own. I felt, of course, that she had taken to occupy it, in remembrance of him . . . She murmured, however, even in her reception of me that she was out of her own chamber because its aspect was unsuited to her infirmity; and with her stately look repelled the least suspicion of the truth” (David Copperfield 745-746). Mrs. Steerforth has been living in the definitive state of paralytic inability to move beyond her attachment to her son, whom she has lost as a result of his elopement with a lower-class girl. In a later scene, in addition to setting herself up in Steerforth’s room, Mrs. Steerforth refuses to even believe that he is truly dead; she repeatedly enacts her former relationship with Steerforth by behaving as if he is still around, just gone away from home for a while. The truth that Mrs. Steerforth hopes to conceal—that she is unable to endure in a healthy, functional manner without her son, that she is no longer a realist subject but a purely gothic one, is not masked for any perceptive audience by her “stately look.” David continues to reenact his relationship with Steerforth as well, but he finds a different outlet for his own melancholic obsession.

Any work of fiction in which a character divides is a fiction in which the character doubles. The divided and double selves define the gothic text; an individual can simultaneously act as his own self and his other. Always in the course of the story, the self and the other are
made into aspects of the narrating self. At times, the narrator and the subject of narration can collapse into one (a certainty in narration about the self by the self--this is, after all, David's autobiography). Rosa Dartle becomes a sort of replacement object for David’s attachment to Steerforth; a fact which is not surprising given the realization that she is the only person close enough to Steerforth to be an appropriate object of Victorian male lust. She is a female, and she is related very clearly to Steerforth--there is a physical, concrete memory of Steerforth permanently etched into the trajectory of her face in the scar from the hammer he threw at her in a fit of childish anger. She is also very like David’s schoolboy friend in her exhibitions of Steerforth-esque rage, and in her fits of pique and selfishness. David and Rosa have a shared anger toward Emily for her monopolization and ultimate destruction of Steerforth (which are not really her fault objectively speaking, but are definitely attributable to her by those who love Steerforth). David's anger toward Emily exists on the level of his unconscious, to the point that he is not even really aware of it; his anger finds expression instead in Rosa Dartle. There is a reason he only "almost" intervenes in Miss Dartle's dressing-down of Emily in Martha's room; on some level, he feels that Emily deserves the abuse that is being heaped upon her because, like Rosa Dartle, he too questions whether Emily “ever think[s] of the home [she has] laid waste” (David Copperfield 672).” The signifier "home" in Rosa's utterance represents something different for every character present in the scene--for Rosa, it obviously represents the Steerforth family, consisting of James, herself, and Mrs. Steerforth; Emily thinks of the damage she has done to her own family, the Peggotty family; and David thinks of the damage Emily has done to his own relationship with Steerforth. Emily made it impossible for David to continue pursuing his desire for Steerforth, because Steerforth has brought ruin upon the Peggotty family, to which
he is very close. David does blame her for this on some level, even though she is definitely more victim than plotter (though she is definitely responsible for her own actions). When David was speaking to Rosa Dartle in the Steerforth home while listening to the news of Emily's whereabouts from Littimer, Rosa says she hopes Emily has died after escaping from Steerforth, and David responds with these words: " 'To wish her dead,' said I, 'may be the kindest wish that one of her own sex could bestow upon her. I am glad that time has softened you so much, Miss Dartle" (David Copperfield 532). This statement can be viewed as a kind of sarcastic attack on Rosa Dartle; it seems ridiculous for any thinking person to wish that a woman had actually died rather than be ruined, but David does appear to think that it might have actually been better for Emily to have died, in some ways. It would have been better for him, because he would have been able to pursue his ill-advised attachment to Steerforth freely (though this would have led the novel in a very different direction; David would never have been able to become the middle class hero he is at the end of the novel if he had continued to pursue the man whom Agnes calls his “bad angel”). It is Agnes who ultimately pulls David out of his melancholic obsession with Steerforth, who shifts the course of the novel back toward the mode of the realist instead of the gothic. But she may not be entirely successful. In the final lines of the novel, David shares these words: “But one face, shining on me like a Heavenly light by which I see all other objects, is above them and beyond them all. And that remains” (David Copperfield 821). This face could very well be the face of Steerforth, returned to haunt David, and to drag him back down to the depths of gothic melancholia. But he immediately summons to his consciousness the image of Agnes’s face, the iconic image of her pointing upward, and she is able to banish the image of Steerforth back to the depths of David’s unconscious (for the time being anyway). Dickens
asserts a realist ending to the text to maintain the demands of Victorian conservatism, but leaves a trail of a gothic excess which gives David a depth that a pure realist conclusion would not.
IV. History and the Supernatural At Work in *Bleak House*: The Haunting Spectre of Memory in the Dickensian Unconscious

In *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories*, Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert contend that "The Victorians excelled at telling ghost stories. In an age of rapid scientific progress, the idea of a vindictive past able to reach out and violate the present held a special potential for terror" (Cox, x) Charles Dickens's great novel *Bleak House* allows Esther, a great storyteller, to attempt to exorcize the ghost story of her memories. It is a work which is filled with the presence of ghosts. From the opening sentence, with its reference to a prehistoric "Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill" (*Bleak House* 13), elements of the past exert undeniable influence on the present. I would like to argue that ghosts serve for the Victorians as an external manifestation of the residual, paralyzing psychic energy exerted by the lingering trace of traumatic events; in this way, ghost stories represent a more universal recapitulation of the processes which are at work in the interiority of many of the characters of *Bleak House*, and I would like to examine the effects of the uncanny, even supernatural, haunting force of memory on Lady Honoria Dedlock and Esther (Summerson and Woodcourt) specifically.

In considering the larger effects of ghosts and ghost stories, it is useful to establish a concrete understanding of what a ghost is, and what function it serves. Ghosts are often remnants of things--people, places, ideas, etc.--from the past. A ghost is a representation of a memory as something which continues to roam the world after its natural time. To be a ghost is to be a haunting anachronism, and one which is uncanny and startling for this unexpectedness. The Gothic mode (which, as previously stated, I here treat as a theoretical model and literary genre which focuses on the interiority of individuals and the unconscious, as opposed to the
focus of the conscious mind in a contrastive Realist model), shows the haunting effects of memory through the representation of internal experience. A primary point of manifestation of this Gothic mode in Victorian literature is that which is present in the form of ghost stories. The haunting force of memory for the individual is an internal experience which often surfaces in unintentionally revealing phrases which arise from the unconscious (Exhibit 1: Esther). The haunting force of collective memory still manifests from the unconscious—in this case the reservoir of collective unconscious—but it is a somewhat more self-aware phenomenon. People may share a story of something which haunts them (a ghost story), but often leave unexplored the motivations which lead them to hold onto a particular memory, and this leaves plenty of room for exploration of the collective interiors of these storytellers.

Toward the beginning of the narrative of Bleak House, when we are still unaware of the exact nature of the connections between Esther and the characters who inhabit the third-person portions of the narrative, Mrs. Rouncewell shares the Dedlock ghost legend with her grandson and the beautiful Rosa:

In the wicked days, my dears, of King Charles the First, I mean of course, in the wicked days of the rebels who leagued themselves against that excellent King—Sir Morbury Dedlock was the owner of Chesney Wold. Whether there was any account of a ghost in the family before those days, I can't say. I should think it very likely indeed. Mrs. Rouncewell . . . considers that a family of such antiquity and importance [as the Dedlocks] has a right to a ghost. She regards a ghost as one of the privileges of the upper classes; a genteel distinction to which the common people have no claim" (Bleak House 112)

Mrs. Rouncewell's deferentially respectful assertion that ghost stories are unique to the upper class is well-meaning but misguided. Esther’s ambiguous social status places her somewhere on the stratum between the Middle Class and the Gentry—she is at once illegitimate (which makes her a social pariah in the eyes of many) and educated to the level of a middle- or upper-class girl;
she is the housekeeper of the Jarndyce household, which makes her a high-level servant, and she
also companion to Ada, which connotes her some status as gentry. Given these complicated
facts, Esther, while she cannot exactly be defined as a common person, is hardly one whom Mrs.
Rouncewell would consider in possession of "antiquity and importance" on par with the
Dedlocks. Esther, however, in violation of Mrs. Rouncewell's edict, has a very real claim to a
ghost story of her own. Esther-the-narrator--or, to borrow John Jordan's far less awkward label
from Supposing Bleak House, Esther Woodcourt (in contrast with the younger Esther
Summerson) (Jordan 4)--is living the reality of a sort of ghost story. Hers is an existence which
is haunted by the ghosts of her absent mother and father, by the ghost of the uncaring relation
who raised her without compassion, by the ghost of her Dolly--who was once her only friend,
and whom she buried and left behind at the first unwelcoming home she ever knew. She is
haunted by the memories of a life full of pain which was never given appropriate response by an
individual who cared for her. And, most dangerous of all to Mrs. Rouncewell's belief in the
aristocratic nature of haunting, Esther is haunted by the fact that hers is an existence which has
the potential to bring revolutionary ruin to the established social order (in that the discovery of
her origins can literally topple a regime--namely, the lofty position of the Dedlocks in society).
Hers is a sort of continuation of the ancestral Lady Dedlock's revolutionary leanings; even as
Esther attempts outwardly to make everyone around her happy by being as outwardly
conventional and conservative as possible. Her very existence as an illegitimate child who is
given opportunity to climb up the social ladder, and who is not immediately ostracized, threatens
the very fabric of Victorian social convention, in a manner parallel to the Lady Dedlock who
haunts the Ghost Walk and who sought to support the revolutionary Parliament, in open defiance
of her aristocratic husband's military support for Charles the First (in effect, but not necessarily intention). Charles the First is not a Dickensian subject unique to *Bleak House*. He infiltrates the memoir of Mr. Dick, in *David Copperfield*, and can only be temporarily exorcized with a good round of kite-flying. There, he serves as an allegory for losing one’s head; here, the allegory of his war serves to tell a story of revolution and class struggle.

After the original Lady Dedlock's laming of the horses had been discovered by Lord Dedlock, and after her own laming and subsequent live haunting of the terrace-walk, at the moment when she is about to slip loose from mortal coil, Sir Morbury's Lady invokes a virulent curse upon the Dedlock household with these words:

"I will die here, where I have walked. And I will walk here, though I am in my grave. I will walk here, until the pride of this house is humbled. And when calamity, or when disgrace is coming to it, let the Dedlocks listen for my step!" (Bleak House, Chapter 7, "The Ghost's Walk," 113)

Herein lies the origin of the Ghost Walk at Chesney Wold. This Lady Dedlock’s is an influence which is felt throughout the course of the narrative of *Bleak House*. Mrs. Rouncewell can hear the steps upon the Ghost’s Walk, and, through her narration, her grandson and Rosa are able to hear them as well. This results from a conscious belief in the continued presence of a figure from the past. Lady Honoria Dedlock hears the steps upon the Walk from the house, and “cannot shut it out” (*Bleak House* 114). She is haunted by the steps, and for good reason. The present Lady Dedlock has the potential to bring “calamity” and “disgrace” to the Dedlock household single-handedly; the sound of the steps is a symbolic and metaphoric manifestation of this potential.

Esther is haunted by the steps on the Ghost Walk too, and hers is the truest manifestation of the interior nature of the haunting force of memory. Mr. Boythorn shared the account of the
Ghost Walk with Esther, and so, when she ultimately comes to the realization that Honoria Dedlock is really her mother, Esther experiences a sort of paradigm shift:

So, encountering presently a sweet smell of limes, whose rustling I could hear, I turned with the turning of the path to the south front, and there above me were the balustrades of the Ghost's Walk and one lighted window that might be my mother's. The way was paved here, like the terrace overhead, and my footsteps from being noiseless made an echoing sound upon the flags. Stopping to look at nothing, but seeing all I did see as I went, I was passing quickly on, and in a few moments should have passed the lighted window, when my echoing footsteps brought it suddenly into my mind that there was a dreadful truth in the legend of the Ghost's Walk, that it was I who was to bring calamity upon the stately house and that my warning feet were haunting it even then. Seized with an augmented terror of myself which turned me cold, I ran from myself and everything, retraced the way by which I had come, and never paused until I had gained the lodge-gate, and the park lay sullen and black behind me. (Bleak House 325)

The original Lady Dedlock’s “tread is an echo,” (Bleak House 114), and its presence is felt across generations. So too, does Esther feel this ghostly chill when she realizes that the very reality of her existence has the power to fulfill this outlandish prophecy. Hers becomes the “dreadful truth” of the Ghost Walk; the sound of her own footsteps echoing on the pavement signal the bringing of ruin upon the Dedlock household. Esther’s experience brings to the surface the previously dormant, unconscious threat of the former Lady Dedlock. Hers is the manifestation of past and present, and approaching trauma (for the curse Lady Dedlock invoked was colored with dark portent of the future), and, “seized with an augmented terror of [herself]” she is unable to cope with it. This point of realization of the identity of her natural mother, an association which has been colored from her childhood by the forced association of shame which Miss Barbary gave it, causes Esther to have a primal identity crisis, to attempt to literally (and figuratively) run from herself, because the reality of her existence is just too traumatic. She retraces her steps, but she cannot retrace them to the beginning of her existence; in that direction lie only ghosts and ruin.
In the encounter immediately preceding Esther’s flight, wherein all was revealed to Esther, Honoria Dedlock tells her, "I will outlive this danger, and outdie it, if I can." (Bleak House 325). These Lady Dedlocks’ desire to endure after their time, and seek to inflict their presence upon the world even after they have passed from it, is in open defiance of the natural order. In this way, these women exert a power over the realm of the living even after they have slipped loose from mortal coil—to become haunting spectres, to ingrain themselves as enduring forces in the unconscious of any who are still living after one has died is the exercise of an incredible affective power. People live on as spectral others in the unconscious realms of those in whose lives they played a role, true, but these promises to haunt the walk outside the house, and to “outdie” the present danger lend a sense of intentionality to the creation of a ghost of memory which is not typically present. However, true to her luck, Esther’s fate is not to haunt, but to be haunted.

When Esther encounters the corpse of her mother in the graveyard, much is revealed by the manner in which she chooses to share her feelings on the matter. Esther takes some time to come to the realization that the person lying dead in the graveyard is in reality Lady Dedlock, and not Jenny, “the mother of the dead child.” As she slowly becomes aware of the truth, Esther narrates:

I saw, but did not comprehend, the solemn and compassionate look in Mr. Woodcourt’s face. I saw, but did not comprehend his touching the other on the breast to keep him back. I saw him stand uncovered in the bitter air, with a reverence for something. But my understanding of all this was gone. (Bleak House 915)

Esther sees, but the traumatic shock of the realization of the true identity of the woman lying dead on the ground precludes comprehension of anything further. Esther can still see the things that are happening in the world in real time, but she is unable to process anything deeper than
their surface meanings, anything more than that people are still moving and acting in the realm of conscious perception, because she is too far absorbed in processes below the surface, in processes at work in her unconscious. Chapter fifty-nine, “Esther’s Narrative” ends with this brief passage as Esther finally approaches the corpse:

‘Shall she go?’
‘She had better go. Her hands should be the first to touch her. They have a higher right than ours.’
I passed onto 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. (Bleak House 915)

This passage, as previously mentioned, is brief, but it is all the more powerful for being so. In a narrative constructed entirely of rich, elaborate, descriptive prose, any deviation into more sparse sentence structure is noticeable. That the deviation takes place in a scene of devastation and loss is no accident. First, it allows the reader to feel his or her own emotions fully; instead of being shown outright a daughter’s reactions to her mother’s death, and being able to share in these explicit emotions, a personal emotional reaction to loss must be produced and processed individually. Second, and more profoundly, the bare prose, the minimal sentence structure, is
indicative of a shutting down on Esther’s part. The passage is situated opposite a dark plate engraving entitled “The Morning,” shown left. This is the morning which finds Lady Dedlock dead in the graveyard; she is pictured in her morbid repose in the illustration. The image complements the accompanying text. We can see the scene, but it is difficult to comprehend its contents. There are no real distinguishing features present in the illustration which identify the figure on the ground as Lady Dedlock.

There is an ambiguity here which must be decoded, which must be worked through in order to process the magnitude of the events which have just occurred in the narrative; the reader must see and work to comprehend as Esther does. There is also another notable ambiguity—the illustration is entitled “The Morning,” which, while orthographically unambiguous, is homophonic with mourning. This [moʊˈɪŋ] is the only expression of grief present in the text. It is a ghostly representation of the emotional response Esther must have to having come so close to another reunion with her mother, only to have the opportunity taken from her by the unfortunate limitations of mortality. Had Lady Dedlock lived, there could have possibly been a happy ending; Sir Dedlock forgave Honoria after he was made

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7 International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcription of the pronunciation of both morning and mourning.
aware of her scandalous past, but she went to her death without ever being aware of this fact.

Esther is haunted by ghosts of the past--by the ghost of her dead mother, by the ghost of her childhood, buried in her unconscious like her dolly beneath the tree. But, more strikingly, she is also haunted by the ghost of an unrealized future, of a course of events that might have come to pass, but which were precluded by forces beyond her control.

There is something over which Esther exerts total control, even in the face of utter tragedy--the narrative. Chapter Fifty-Nine ends with the words “And it was my mother, cold and dead.” These words are immediately followed by this passage from Chapter Sixty, entitled “Perspective:”

I proceed to other passages of my narrative. From the goodness of all about me, I derived such consolation as I can never think of unmoved. I have already said so much of myself, and so much still remains, that I will not dwell upon my sorrow. I had an illness, but it was not a long one; and I would avoid even this mention of it, if I could quite keep down the recollection of their sympathy.
I proceed to other passages of my narrative. (Bleak House, 916)

Esther, having shared so much of herself, chooses to keep the ghost of her sorrow at losing her mother private from her audience. Traces of it are definitely there, in her mentions of her sorrow, so it is merely absent from the narrative construction, not nonexistent. But why doesn’t Esther report her full reaction to the death of her mother? If she were well-adjusted, it could be because she has already dealt with the mourning by the time of her writing as Esther Woodcourt, but this explanation leaves much unresolved. Esther doesn’t share her reaction to the death because, even years later, it is likely that she has not been able to fully process the death, and melancholia, however mild--her own emotional issues are themselves unresolved. The mantra, “I proceed to other passages of my narrative,” is repeated in a manner akin to the repetitious appearances of the many ghosts present in the novel.
These notions of the cyclicity and reemergence of memory and other forces as ghosts encapsulate recurring phenomena, and, beyond the bounds of the text in question, can also be observed within the broader Dickensian canon, and within literature itself. In *Bleak House*, the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case is one such example of these other forces at work. The case spans generations--a technicality, an issue with a will wreaks havoc upon the lives of the characters involved. The Ladies Dedlock vow that the force of their memories, a lingering essence of themselves will live on after they are gone, but the Jarndyce whose will originated the suit takes a different approach. His legacy lives on as a direct result of the influence which the law is able to exert on the lives of living, breathing subjects. That the case is tied up in the courts interminably is a way in which this Jarndyce is able to live on. His will continues to have a direct effect on the world even after his departure. If the goal of the gothic hero is to subsume the place of the heir and live forever, this Jarndyce has found a manner in which to endure even beyond death. By naming conflicting heirs, this Jarndyce of times past ensures that no one is really able to truly assume his place. Just as Miss Flite’s own family was destroyed in Chancery, so too is the Jarndyce clan on course to follow suit. It may not have been this Jarndyce’s conscious intention to bring about such a result, but the fact of the matter is that he did this thing.

This ability of the probate court to wreak havoc on behalf of the deceased is not an anomaly, so perhaps on some unconscious level this was a deliberate gothic act. Jarndyce’s family curse--though enacted in a different manner than the curse placed upon the Dedlock family--is just as, if not more, effective at tearing the family asunder as is Lady Dedlock’s. The lovable Miss Flite is a veteran member of a family that was itself destroyed by complex litigation from beyond the grave in a case very similar to Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The birds she keeps
caged in her home--called “Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach!” are interesting specimens. They are representations in the real world, they are signifieds, of the unconscious signifiers of the negative emotions that are buried within the psyches of those who have had/will have their lives destroyed by forces beyond their direct control. And the new additions to her flock, the Wards in Jarndyce, representative of Ada and Richard, are trapped in much the same way as Hope, Youth, Peace, and the others, doomed to become spectres of their former selves by the close of the narrative, for no bird living long in a cage can possibly adjust healthily to life after liberation. The gothic struggle for power within the family dynamic necessarily engenders some interesting coping strategies in the losers. The probate creators win even though they have lost their struggles with mortality. The losers are forced to pick up the pieces of their own lives in the aftermath of court. Miss Flite copes by attempting to mitigate the damage that the court can have on another family, but by the time the case is over, it is too late. The only parties left standing are John Jarndyce and the widowed Ada--Richard Carstone was utterly consumed by his struggle against the case, and the survivors are left to pick up the pieces of his tragedy; these ghosts of litigation are added to the body count of the others present in the lives of the characters of *Bleak House*.

At the very close of the narrative, after Honoria Dedlock meets her unfortunate fate, after Chesney Wold is finally given completely over to ghosts, after Esther has apparently shelved many of her issues to live a conventional life with her dashing Mr. Woodcourt, she ends her tale with the words “even supposing--,” (*Bleak House* 989), and that highly loaded piece of punctuation--the dash. But what is she supposing? Is she supposing that, even after her apparent
disfigurement, she actually is beautiful? Is she supposing that she doesn’t actually deserve happiness? Is she supposing that, like Lady Dedlock at Chesney Wold, she is terminally bored in her outwardly happy domestic situation? Or, and this is my belief, is she supposing that she is still haunted, all these years later, by the ghosts of her memories, by the ghosts of her mother and the original Lady Dedlock, by her contribution to the unfortunate fate of Chesney Wold? Esther has never been able to properly mourn anything in her life, damaged as she is, and we can read this “supposing” as her own lingering ghost story. Her story is tainted with the force of melancholy, and she could not escape from it even if she wanted to (which is not something I actually believe she wants to do). These ghost stories serve as her only real connection to the family of which she was never able to be a true part, and, as they are her only connection, she holds onto them selfishly (and, let’s face it--Esther really deserves to be selfish, even in this tragic way).
V. *Great Expectations*: Contagion and the Unconscious, or, Expectations as Infections Disease

*Great Expectations* is one of Dickens’s best known novels, read today by secondary school students the world over. Because it is often the first introduction to Dickens, it can come as a bit of a surprise to realize that, in terms of the chronology of his works, it is one of his final novels. This was certainly my experience; *Great Expectations* was my first taste of Dickens, and in a lot of ways, it feels like it might be an earlier novel. It is shorter than a lot of the tomes that come before it, and it is less formally complex if judged solely by surface examination. However, this novel represents Dickens at the height of his craft. It is not bogged down by excessive formalism, and is therefore capable of doing the complex work of gothic realism. This is Dickens’s third and final first person novel, and it is an incredibly sophisticated portrayal of realistic gothic interiority.

The hero of the novel, and its narrator, Pip, creates his sense of identity completely based upon people and forces that exist outside of himself, and in so doing he incorporates them into his unconscious. This is what makes Pip such an interesting gothic subject; he yields his own substance to the expectations of those around him, from Pumblechook to Magwitch to Miss Havisham, and in a way, even though he is definitely the subject of his story (given, after all, that he is the narrator, and his words are the locus through which we are given access to the story), he becomes a sort of gothic object. From the very beginning of the novel, Pip constructs his internal reality in response to external stimuli, crafting the character of his family based upon the shapes of the tombstones and the little stone lozenges. This sort of construction demonstrates, in a touching manner, the amazing creative power of the child’s mind. The child mind operates with iconic symbols; Pip’s true family consists of the gravestones in the churchyard, and the
ironed leg of the fugitive will haunt his trek toward fulfillment of his great expectations. The entire first section of the novel which portrays Pip as a child is so incredibly well constructed that it reads like an incredibly linguistically adept child could have in fact written it. When Pip’s sister admonishes Pip and her husband very early in the novel, saying, “I may truly say I've never had this apron of mine off since born you were,” she demonstrates the fundamental interpersonal dynamic with which Pip will relate his story. Mrs. Joe uses the apron to project outwardly, in a very unsubtle way, the interior "suffering" she believes herself to unselfishly undertake in the raising of her kid-brother. This is a way in which Dickens fits characters into rigidly defined caricature-like roles The use of these caricatures as offset to the characters who are more fully developed--in the first person narratives, these are typically the narrators themselves, serves to bring the multidimensionality of the deeper characters into sharper relief. The one-trick characters allow aspects of Pip to come to the foreground as he relates to them, in whatever manner--in opposition to them, through sympathy, through recognition, and a number of other devices, and through his relations to them, even the seemingly less-developed characters become more real. These notions of interpersonal relation populate the landscape of the novel.

There is one brief passage in particular which stands out to me as the one which sums up tone of the entire novel:

I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before; but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair. *Her contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it.*

She won the game, and I dealt. I misdealt, as was only natural, when I knew she was lying in wait for me to do wrong; and she denounced me for a stupid, clumsy laboring-boy. (*Great Expectations* 46).

This passage is incredibly telling of the mental landscape which Pip constructs for himself early on, and that lasts him for the rest of the novel. He had never thought of himself, or his station, as
being things which were problematic, until he became enamored of Estella and began to sculpt
his mental landscape around every flawed human characteristic that her tragic existence
represents. Pip comes to idealize the flawed, damaged girl Miss Havisham constructed out of the
embers of her own rage and bitterness; he comes to construct within himself the framework of an
other of Estella, who is herself an other of Miss Havisham. Pip’s quest to fulfill his great
expectations is undertaken in order that Estella might think better of him. He hates his own
coarseness, and all relics of it (even the people who gave him comfort while he was in this
coarseness, like Joe). The infectious self-contempt which Pip catches from Estella propels him
to abandon the life which she so looks down upon. He defines his self worth by the metric of
those who judge him, and in so doing he adopts these projected value systems (which may not in
actuality line up with what he views them to be). This notion of contempt, of the emotions and
judgments of others as being infectious or contagious is a powerful one, and a strong element of
the gothic landscape of the novel. Perhaps Estella is just putting on a show of contempt that is
far more vitriolic than what she actually feels in order to please her keeper, Miss Havisham, but
Pip takes this perceived qualification of inadequacy as gospel and runs with it, into a life in
which he tries to play at the role of a gentleman, even though this true self-identity may not be in
line with the true nature of his unadulterated conscious and unconscious selves.

Reflecting on one of his many encounters with Estella, Pip cites that:

Truly it was impossible to dissociate her presence from all those wretched hankerings
after money and gentility that had disturbed my boyhood,—from all those ill-regulated
aspirations that had first made me ashamed of home and Joe,—from all those visions that
had raised her face in the glowing fire, struck it out of the iron on the anvil, extracted it
from the darkness of night to look in at the wooden window of the forge, and flit away. In
a word, it was impossible for me to separate her, in the past or in the present, from the
innermost life of my life. (Great Expectations 184)
Pip here confirms to himself what the vigilant reader has already realized—that he has, for better or worse, intentionally or inadvertently, thrown his lot in with Estella and ensured that his source of self-definition will reside, to some degree, with her forevermore. Pip saw visions of Estella’s face in the blacksmith’s forge—and the contemplation of her seeing him at his “coarse work” causes him as much anxiety as the prospect of her showing up in his physical presence causes turbulent, excited anticipation. And Estella is present in this way even from the time of Pip’s retrospective narration, for he cites that it was impossible to separate her from the innermost of his life, past or present. This indicates that he has incorporated a projection of her into his mind, which he is unable to healthily incorporate into his psyche and instead he holds onto his projected vision of her in perpetuity. Pip’s early childhood tutor and friend Biddy is a potential healthy avenue by which Pip could have exercised his desire for connection with another; she and he are truly alike in situation and character. The imbalances that exist in Pip's relationship with Estella would not plague a similar relationship with Biddy (though they would not be a problem between Pip and Estella if that pair would stop thinking of them as such). Pip’s and Biddy’s could have been a happy union, with a mutual recognition of each other rather than the imbalanced, one-sided relationship of Pip and Estella where one party—Pip—is the only one capable of feeling, and so has to feel for the both of them. Pip’s mind is filled with his own feelings, but it is also filled with his unconscious projections of the feelings Estella would be capable of having for someone who so loved her had Miss Havisham refrained from her unique mode of "protection." Pip has a kind of madness in this, an obsession which the reader inevitably identifies with. As we identify with Pip’s madness, we can identify traces of it in our own lives that are parallel with the experiences of this crazed narrating intelligence. Charismatic
figures can enthrall an individual, and exert enormous influence over that individual’s thoughts and actions.

Estella is not the only actor in the story; but she is the one in whom Pip places the most stock; she is his gothic object, and he constantly observes her behavior and the behavior of others in response to her. During the dinner scene at Satis House where Estella and Jaggers are present, Pip notes:

Anything to equal the determined reticence of Mr. Jaggers under that roof I never saw elsewhere, even in him. He kept his very looks to himself, and scarcely directed his eyes to Estella's face once during dinner. When she spoke to him, he listened, and in due course answered, but never looked at her, that I could see. On the other hand, she often looked at him, with interest and curiosity, if not distrust, but his face never, showed the least consciousness. (*Great Expectations* 189-190)

Jaggers is so secure in himself, in his own self-identity, that he cannot, or at least, will not allow himself to be affected by the likes of Estella, whose sole bred purpose in life is to wreak havoc on the lives of men, to cause instant self-consciousness and self-doubt by redefining her twisted whims as the mechanism by which they define themselves, by situating herself at the center of the male world as a destructive object to be forever orbited. It is interesting that we see examples where her apparent unlimited power is thwarted--e.g. in the opinions and actions of Jaggers and Herbert Pocket, but this could be because Pip could not long endure with companions who also define their world by Estella. Pip has made Estella into such a huge part of his own identity that sharing her with anyone else would be tantamount to a dismantling of the self, which explains his animosity toward Estella’s other suitors, particularly Drummle, whom he deems entirely unsuited for her (and correctly so). But, as is customary for Pip and Estella, Pip is the only party who has concerns for Estella’s happiness and well-being. The interpersonal relationships in the novel create contentious intrapsychic ones. On many occasions, Estella
shares that she knows very well the nature of the person she has been molded into. She speaks to Pip of his infatuation with her, his. “fancies,—I don't know how to call them,—which I am not able to comprehend. When you say you love me, I know what you mean, as a form of words; but nothing more. You address nothing in my breast, you touch nothing there” (Great Expectations 283). Estella is incredibly self-aware of her cultivated incapacity for positive human emotion. This is a result of Miss Havisham’s deliberate insertion of only certain bitter aspects of herself into Estella’s psyche, which Estella then carries with her throughout her life. The cultivation of this inability to care is, in a lot of ways, more monstrous than outright cruelty would have been; the system (or person) who engenders this sort of apathy is especially reprehensible.

There are many parallels that can be be drawn between this novel, written in 1861, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s overtly gothic Frankenstein. The story of Miss Havisham, and the havoc she wreaks upon the world in response to a grief which she cannot properly process is quite the homage to Victor Frankenstein and the monster whom he creates following the death of his mother. Miss Havisham is said to have been “too haughty and too much in love to be advised by any one. (Great Expectations 141) in the time leading up to her doomed nuptial ceremony with a man whom she thought loved her wholeheartedly. But she is ruined by the abandonment of her mercenary fiancé, and it warps her interactions with the world, and with herself:

"I'll tell you," said she, in the same hurried passionate whisper, "what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter—as I did!" (Great Expectations 188)

Havisham generalizes not her experience of love, but her personal experience of the consequences of love bestowed upon an ill-suited subject, her personal experience of the disappointment the imperfect other whom she created of Compeyson within her unconscious
caused when the real Compeyson behaved in a manner inconsistent with her personal distorted vision of him. Havisham’s narrative of her experience with Compeyson is inevitably vastly different from Compeyson’s depiction of the same events--Havisham’s vision of Compeyson is constructed from aspects of herself, and of her expectations and values, just as any person’s vision of any other is so tainted by contact with the self. And just as Victor Frankenstein does with his Emily, with his creature, and with others, so too does Miss Havisham enact various aspects of herself through others. She has wealth and social standing, and so is able to funnel her melancholic rage and anger at love and men into another--Estella. We learn that Estella was a victim of near-infanticide, but she came to Miss Havisham from Jaggers, and Havisham relates to Pip: “when she first came to me, I meant to save her from misery like my own. At first, I meant no more," but, as Estella grew beautiful, she “stole her heart away, and put ice in its place” (Great Expectations 312-313). She adopts a young-girl child, who she can bring up knowing of love only that it represents the blind devotion, the self-humiliation and submission that Miss Havisham herself underwent in her relationship with the criminal Compeyson.

Havisham teaches Estella to behave like this vision she holds of Compeyson, to assume the dominant, emotionally abusive and disconnected role she views as the only feasible method of avoiding hurt and heartbreak on par with her own experience. She teaches Estella that the only way to avoid the passive role of being hurt is to assume the active role of inflicting it, and in so doing commits the monstrous act of the creation of a cruel girl, incapable of feeling, and miserably self-aware of her own apathy. After Miss Havisham sends Estella abroad, to learn how more effectively to wreak havoc on the race of men, the distorted bride Havisham, upon Estella’s return,
was even more dreadfully fond of Estella than she had been when I last saw them together; I repeat the word advisedly, for there was something positively dreadful in the energy of her looks and embraces. She hung upon Estella's beauty, hung upon her words, hung upon her gestures, and sat mumbling her own trembling fingers while she looked at her, as though she were devouring the beautiful creature she had reared (Great Expectations 237).

In a lot of ways, Miss Havisham is actually more monstrous than Victor Frankenstein. The moment that Victor looks upon his creation and realizes the degree to which he has offended the natural world by creating something so at odds with it, he is repulsed; even as it is revealed that the creature represents so many aspects present in himself, he realizes that those dangerous aspects of human nature cannot be allowed to roam the world unchecked and seeks to hunt the creature down. Miss Havisham, by contrast, delights in the monstrous acts Estella commits, and sends her off to better learn and practice the ways of monstrous apathy. She rears Estella as an instrument of revenge upon the male sex, and in her blind quest for vengeance, fails to recognize that Estella is a person in her own right, that she might have (or at least might wish to have) more substance than merely that which she is filled with by others. Estella does have these realizations of her status as a projection of the vengeful part of Miss Havisham’s unconscious; her self awareness emerges in interactions like this one, during the meeting after her journey abroad: “‘What!’ said Miss Havisham, flashing her eyes upon her, ‘are you tired of me?’ ‘Only a little tired of myself,’ replied Estella” (Great Expectations 238). This response sends Miss Havisham into a fit of rage, but it is entirely representative of the naturally contentious relationship bred by the unnatural dynamic Miss Havisham created when she raised a child to be an extension of her own desires, rather than her own person. When she is away from Miss Havisham, Estella is away from the person who has constructed her identity for her entire life. This sort of paradigmatic shift, the sudden absence of the person who has carefully constructed
herself as the sole locus of Estella’s identity, would naturally be cause for discontent and emotional exhaustion. Miss Havisham sees it as personal rejection, and perhaps it is, but what these words represent is the assertion, at least in part, of some of the realist conception of self that Estella is able to foster abroad. Havisham has constructed creatures, and they are finally coming into their own lives. After his realization that Miss Havisham is not in fact his benefactor, Pip relates:

Miss Havisham’s intentions towards me, all a mere dream; Estella not designed for me; I only suffered in Satis House as a convenience, a sting for the greedy relations, a model with a mechanical heart to practise on when no other practice was at hand (Great Expectations 253-254)

Havisham created Estella to wreak havoc on the entire sex of men, and, because she brought Pip into this twisted environment at such a young age, she created in him the perfect specimen to be ruined. Great Expectations is a story of creation--Havisham creates Estella, and Estella creates in Pip an individual who will be crushed by her inability to return his love; Pip creates versions of both women in his head, and he fosters expectations within himself in response to the perceived and real expectations of others. There comes a point in the novel, after Estella’s marriage to Drummle, that Miss Havisham finally comes to the realization that her act of creation was actually monstrous; she says to Pip, "Until you spoke to her the other day, and until I saw in you a looking-glass that showed me what I once felt myself, I did not know what I had done” (Great Expectations 312). Havisham comes to this realization through her identification with someone who is a truly sympathetic other of what she once was, through identification with someone who has been harmed by love as she once was. She realizes that the image of the male sex she constructed in her head--an image that holds that it is in the nature of every man to commit such monstrous, unfeeling acts upon those who are hopelessly in love as the man
Compeyson committed to her--is an unfair overgeneralization. She comes to realize that the male sex has members with their own feelings to be hurt, who can fall prey to the same sorts of doomed infatuations as the one which she fell victim to. Pip looks at her in the moment she realizes how much of a monster she herself has become in her creation of another unfeeling monster, and he shares these observations:

That she had done a grievous thing in taking an impressionable child to mould into the form that her wild resentment, spurned affection, and wounded pride found vengeance in, I knew full well. But that, in shutting out the light of day, she had shut out infinitely more; that, in seclusion, she had secluded herself from a thousand natural and healing influences; that, her mind, brooding solitary, had grown diseased, as all minds do and must and will that reverse the appointed order of their Maker, I knew equally well. And could I look upon her without compassion, seeing her punishment in the ruin she was, in her profound unfitness for this earth on which she was placed, in the vanity of sorrow which had become a master mania, (Great Expectations 312)

Miss Havisham, in locking herself in the premature crypt of Satis House, beyond the reaches of time, has created for herself a setting in which to stagnate herself within the mindset she experienced at the time of her rejection. By recreating in her sole companion a distorted version of the man who wronged her, she effectively lives with a version of the person who wronged her so heinously, and locks herself into a state of unilateral melancholic obsession from which she has a nearly nonexistent hope of breaking free. And, in being the one who must model the behavior for her heartbreaking protege, she herself becomes a version of the person whom she so despises. Pip recognizes her mania, and feels sympathy for it; after all, he is a de facto version of the same aberration, reared as he was to desire and sympathize with Estella and all she represents. Estella is an intractable part of Pip; she is eternally linked with the innermost of his life. Because he was exposed to this bleak cycle as a child, when he lacked experience and good sense (such as that which the estranged Pockets display toward Miss Havisham, and toward
Estella) he is unable to protect himself from the egotistic, manic figures of hubris and melancholy, and instead sympathizes with them. Pip recognizes aspects of himself in Miss Havisham and in Estella (aspects which likely grew from seeds planted in his child mind by the very people he identifies with), so he feels sympathy toward them.

Pip has a remarkable capacity for cognitive dissonance—he holds so many conflicting emotions, ideas, and expectations within his mind simultaneously that he has effectively developed the ability to lie to himself. He convinces himself that he will be happy with Estella, even though he has never once been truly happy in her company. There is a way in which this self-delusion lingers to the end of the novel. *Great Expectations* is one of the works where we are offered insight into the process of the writer through the inclusion of the different potential endings of the novel in modern editions of the text. The novel has several different endings; all feature reunions with Estella many years after the resolution of the plot of the novel, but in all endings, Pip views his interactions with Estella in a different way than she does. In the published versions, where Pip meets Estella at the site which formerly housed Satis House, he shares, in multiple stages of editing, different versions of the same sentiment:

- I saw no shadow of another parting from her.
- I saw the shadow of no parting from her.
- I saw the shadow of no parting from her, but one. (“Putting an End to *Great Expectations*”)

While he expresses these thoughts, which heavily imply a continued attachment to Estella, she expresses her wish that they “will continue friends apart.” Even on the final page of the novel, Pip still projects onto Estella the vision of her that he holds within his mind, and, in a way, he interacts with a person who does not even truly exist. Even in the Piccadilly Square ending,
where Pip posits that, “suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham’s teaching, and had
given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be,” he still writes onto Estella his own
projection of her; he has no way of knowing whether Estella was able to overcome the emptiness
fostered within her by her upbringing. In this version of the ending, Pip encounters Estella in a
busy urban setting, and he has a much more distant interaction with her than he does in the Satis
House endings (perhaps just because he is not alone with her, but I digress). Now, after all these
years, he feels that she has suffered at the hands of Drummle like he suffered at hers, and he
takes selfishly from the knowledge of that suffering the closure which he would need to finally
get over her. Dickens’s editor Edward Bulwer-Lytton advised against this ending, for it was less
ambiguous, and did not read with even the possibility of the “happy” romantic ending that sold
more editions, but this unpublished ending actually allows for even more resolution than the
published ones. The Piccadilly ending shows a Pip who has grown beyond Estella, who has
grown and moved beyond the immature person he used to be (more so, at least, than the Pip who
encounters Estella at Satis House), who constructed his entire sense of self based on the whims
of someone who did not recognize him as an equal. The variations of published ending hold
onto the lingering trace of gothic excess, to the inability to move beyond old habits of interaction
and idealization, and, perhaps worst of all, the lingering possibility that Estella and Pip might
actually begin a romantic relationship is present. For, though they are functional apart, the union
of two of Havisham’s monsters would ensure their mutual, unhappy destruction--she is incapable
of happiness, and he is utterly miserable at this incapacity.
VI. On Endings, and Excess

Regarding the ending of *Great Expectations*, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s urging of Dickens to choose the more ambiguous ending for consumer reasons ultimately had a deeper impact on the story itself--ambiguity is a feeding ground for the gothic imagination, and the ending which is ambiguous allows the reader to project his or her own values and expectations onto the characters of the novel, to relate to and to engage the story as other, and there is something within each of us that craves this sort of unconscious interaction between the self and the other. This is something which Dickens’s narrators achieve in all three of his first-person novels. Pip remains tethered, to an ambiguous degree, to the object of his own undoing. David remains haunted by the memory of a face he cannot name, which he describes in a prevaricating manner that harkens back to his retelling of the death of his gothic object of desire. Esther remains haunted by the ghosts of her past, of her unknown mother, and of herself; and, in the most deliberately ambiguating move of the novels under consideration, she emptily “supposes” a caveat to her conventionally saccharine Victorian married life which she chooses, in an incredibly assertive way which is at odds with the manner in which she almost tidily wraps up her narrative, not to share with her audience. In this way, Dickens is able to capture the true nature of man--he leaves the crests and troughs of the story open for exploration even beyond the course of the narrative, fostering discussion and speculation which continues to be relevant even centuries after his lifetime. A degree of necessary closure is provided, but Dickens always manages to leave a trace of excess that serves to give his novels life outside of the pages. If every single aspect of narrative were laid unambiguously bare for all to see, it would not be possible for each reader to bring something of themselves to the experience of the text--and it is
this engagement which allows literature to have such resonance in the minds of consumers of literature the world over, even well beyond the time of its creation. In this way, the novel is a form of contagion; it infects the mind of its audience with the itch to know more about the workings of the characters in its pages, and withholds enough information to force further speculation, even if this speculation occurs on the level of the unconscious. As the Gothic mode delves beyond conscious thinking, the Gothic text is capable of extension into the unconscious of the audience who consumes it.
Work Cited


