Natalie Beecher

Dr. Crank

Prose and Editing

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Analysis of the Back-Cover Text

In this paper, I will be analyzing the back-cover text of five different novels from the nineteenth century, as well as a sixth from an alternate edition of one novel. The books I am using relate differently to the back-cover text than many other books. I will use examples of back-cover texts from six novels: *The Count of Monte Cristo, Great Expectations, The Brothers Karamazov, Crime and Punishment, The Picture of Dorian Gray,* and another edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

The production of novels involves the interaction of many different genres. These genres extend beyond the obvious examples of genre—distinctions between the nature of the novels’ contents, which may include horror, romance, etc.—and even into the minute genres, the dedication page or the copyright page. Back-cover copies, another genre, include everything on the back of a book (or on the inside cover of the dust jacket, in the case of hardcovers), and generally, serve as a hook to capture the interest of potential buyers and readers. The back-cover copy includes a short author biography, (and, in many cases) critical praise written about the book, and, most importantly, the plot summary called the back-cover text.

For most novels, the back-cover text is the primary advertisement for the book. The novel’s beautiful cover art and catchy title may attract the attention of potential readers, but the back-cover text is what sells the book. It is arguably the most important text in the novel—when the goal of generating profit is what’s most important, that is. Not only does the back-cover text appear on the book itself, but it is also likely that it will be used in online descriptions as well. These texts provide the first glimpse into the novel and are meant to give a brief preview of the story without spoiling too much of the plot. The back-cover texts found on physical are necessarily short, designed to fit in a small area on the book. The texts could be longer online, and, consequently, vary greatly from those designed to be on physical books, so I’ll be using examples from physical copies of novels only.

Besides the differences between online and physical examples, another way in which back-cover texts may vary is when it is taken into consideration who, exactly, writes the texts. In recent decades, most back-cover copies are first written by the author or someone on behalf of the author, who is able to influence the outcome. But what about novels written before back-cover copies were necessary?

According to Andrea Koczela, marketer and author of *Books Tell You Why* (where the following information is extracted from)*,* when novels became commercially distributed in the early nineteenth century, they were sold in the form of unbound paper stacks, and covers could be individually commissioned (often to match existing libraries). Books were bound in ornate covers and it became commonplace to protect them with book jackets by the 1870s. The book jackets were initially meant to be temporary and were used to protect the books until their sale, after which the jackets were usually disposed of. These were often left blank, but included, at most, the author’s name and the title, depending on individual publishers. Koczela noted that a fundamental change happened in the 1920s when publishers began employing artists to create attractive book jackets, as well as printing author biographies and short summaries. This made common much of what would be expected on a back-cover copy on books even today (both book jackets and paperbacks), with the addition of a few more components.

By the time these back-cover texts were first printed, countless novels already existed, including all the novels I will be using in my examples of back-cover texts. Each of the novels whose summaries I will be analyzing were originally published in the nineteenth century (mostly the late decades), long before plot summaries were printed on book jackets. The examples are recent editions of the novels, relative to the original publication date, and the back-cover copies were written around the time of their re-publication. These novels each have been long recognized as “classics,” and are well-known in literary circles. For example, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is lauded (by its own back-cover text, in one example) as a celebrated example of the aesthetics movement; Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment,* has been acclaimed as one of the greatest authors in Russian history; Charles Dickens is regarded by many as the greatest English novelist of the Victorian era, several of his works, including *Great Expectations*, having reached great popularity during his lifetime.

Knowing that these novels are by no means obscure or newly published, does the purpose of the back-cover text, which is used as a marketing tool, change? Does the fact that these novels might have already been familiar to potential buyers change the general purpose of the back-cover text?

Because of the historical context and significance of these novels, I initially found it surprising that the back-cover texts were not all written in a way that makes their history the most important aspect. For example, newly written novels today, which do not have the same kind of historical significance, include a back-cover copy that uses a brief plot description, probably a catchy one, to capture the attention of readers. I would have expected a novel such as *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which is part of a long literary context (especially in France), to have a description that focused on this historical significance rather than a catchy hook to attract new readers. However, the description of *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Penguin Classics edition) begins, “Thrown in prison for a crime he has not committed, Edmond Dantes is confined to the bitter fortress of If,” and overviews, in a few short sentences, major plot points. This overview covers two-and-a-half out of the description’s three sentences, clearly acting as the focus of the text.

This method of introducing the story and characters first was used in half of the descriptions, including *The Count of Monte Cristo,* the Arcturus edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* and *The Brothers Karamazov.* These back-cover texts, I noticed, are some of those that spend the most amount of space, relative to the overall length of the text, describing the plot of the story. The Arcturus edition of *Dorian Gray,* for example, uses four of its five sentences describing aspects of the story; *The Brothers Karamazov*’s description uses two of its three sentences to that purpose, and one lengthy sentence dedicated to introducing important characters makes up nearly half of the text.

All but one of the back-cover texts, including those that mention the author of the novel before introducing the characters (unlike the examples in the previous paragraph), do not spend more than a sentence talking about the author. Unlike modern novels, none of these examples of back-cover copies include author biographies; they don’t need to when the author’s name—by this time—can stand on its own reputation. People might not know, for instance, Natalie Shmeecher, brand new author (who might require an introduction), but it might be considered an unnecessary cost for publishers to include a biography for Charles Dickens, whose name is immediately recognizable by many. These texts that summarize the main plot of the story do not, consequently, need to introduce their authors much, and can use the names as another marketing tool. This reason is why the names of the authors, in most of the examples, show up in only one sentence: “Dostoyevsky’s dark masterwork evokes…” (*The Brothers Karamazov)*; “…one of Dickens’ most popular novels” (*Great Expectations)*; “Wilde’s cautionary tale…” (Arcturus’ *Dorian Gray*); “Dumas’ epic tale of suffering and retribution…” (*Monte Cristo*). When modern big-name authors write new books, their recognizable name is also used in a similar way. Covers often announce, “New York Times bestselling author…” or “Award-winning author…” and when the author’s name is the main attraction, like Nora Roberts or James Patterson, the author’s name sometimes appears larger than the actual title of the novel. The name drops in the descriptions for the nineteenth-century novels are just more modest ways of advertising a well-known author’s work.

To talk generally, I would like to discuss the basic content and structure of back-cover texts. The examples I’m analyzing are all between 94-234 words (100-200 seems typical from other research I’ve done). There is one outlier: the Barnes and Noble classics edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is a somewhat lengthy 233 words, more than 100 words longer than the next longest. As I’ve mentioned previously, this edition stood out in other ways as well, but I’ll get back to it a bit later on. The rest of the texts are 94 to 130 words. These five examples (excluding the outlier just mentioned) contain between three and five sentences, and each is written in two paragraphs. The first of these paragraphs is the longer of the two, with the second usually either naming the author for the first time, or mentioning the writer of the introduction, afterword, or notes. For those novels that were translated, *The Brothers Karamazov, Crime and Punishment, and The Count of Monte Cristo,* the translator was named in this second paragraph and/or a sentence below this paragraph, which I excluded from my word counts. It seems, from the length of the back-cover texts, that it is typical and important to keep the texts short. Novels not only have limited space on their backs, which lends a physical restriction to the length of the text but also have to consider where consumers will be reading the text. People usually read the back-cover text in stores, which means that they have to be short so as to be easily and quickly read. For the most part, the writers of these texts don’t seem to include many rhetorical devices, with the unavoidable exception of the Barnes and Noble classics edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* which I’ve left to analyze last.

I will now transition into talking about each of the examples individually. The back-cover text for *The Count of Monte Cristo* was 122 words, but if the part that mentioned the translator, introduction, and explanatory notes is excluded, it’s only 93 words. Several of my examples of back-cover texts are descriptions of very long novels, such as *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which exceeds 1000 pages in the Penguin Classics edition. This presents a bit of a challenge for the writers of the texts because they have to decide how much information to include in the description, which is usually not more than 200 words long. This example does this job of conciseness well, and manages to include the most important aspects of the plot in two sentences:

“Thrown into prison for a crime he has not committed, Edmond Dantes is confined to the grim fortress of If. There he learns of a great hoard of treasure hidden on the Isle of Monte Cristo and he became determined not only to escape, but also to unearth the treasure and use it to plot the destruction of the three men responsible for his incarceration.”

I have found, as I will discuss for other examples, that using dependent clauses can effectively add drama and/or emphasis to a part of a sentence without adding significantly to the overall length of the text. In this example, the writer uses a (participial?) phrase, which, despite not being a dependent clause (no subject?), has a similar effect. Beginning with the phrase, “Thrown into prison for a crime he has not committed,” the writer creates a hook and adds drama to the sentence, designed to draw the attention of the reader.

The back-cover text for *Great Expectations* was the shortest of the examples, only 94 words total (not having to mention a translator, unlike some of the others). It only spends one sentence that does not directly relate to the characters, the first sentence, that says just this: “*Great Expectations* (1861) is one of Dickens’ most popular novels.” The rest of the description describes the characters. By this content, we can see what the writer of this text prioritized. In the text about *The Count of Monte Cristo,* the writer mentions the importance of the novel by saying it was “inspired by a real-life case” and was a huge success when it was first serialized. But for this description of *Great Expectations,* a novel that was also a huge success when it was first serialized*,* the reader does not get this same sense of the novel’s prominence. The writer of this text clearly prioritized an engaging introduction of the plot over convincing the reader of the novel’s historical relevance. This text seems to be targeting new readers who don’t necessarily care or know much about the history of Dickens’ works

This back-cover text was only three sentences, and although the text was the shortest of the examples, it contained one of the longest sentences of the texts. This sentence, interrupted three times to add detail, introduced four of the characters. The writer used the syntax devices of appositive and parenthesis to add more insight into who these characters are:

“In addition to its endearing hero, Pip—a blacksmith’s boy, desperate to escape his humble background—the story is populated by a vivid cast of characters, from the convict Magwitch to Miss Havisham who, jilted long ago, still wears her wedding gown and, for revenge, schools the beautiful young Estella in the art of malice towards men.”

Using a parenthesis to add more detail about the characters not only adds a bit of drama—with words like “jilted long ago,” and “for revenge”—but is a good way to do so without adding too much to the word count, which is necessary to keep short, as mentioned previously. The appositive used to describe Pip—“a blacksmith’s boy, desperate to escape his humble background—is used in a similar way, but it breaks up the text more than the parentheses, which are set in commas because it is set between dashes. This gives the impression that Pip is a more important character—which he is, as the main character.

The back-cover text for *The Brothers Karamazov* is similar to the text from *Great Expectations* in the way that it focuses a lot on describing the characters from the novel. It uses a similar method of adding detail to the depictions of the characters in its use of appositive (the device) and adjective clauses. The text jumps right into a dramatic first line and into an intriguing snapshot of the brothers:

“The murder of brutal landowner Fyodor Karamazov changes the lives of his sons irrevocably: Mitya, the sensualist, whose bitter rivalry with his father immediately places him under suspicion for parricide; Ivan, the intellectual, whose mental tortures drive him to breakdown; the spiritual Alyosha, who tries to heal the family’s rifts; and the shadowy figure of their bastard half-brother, Smerdyakov.”

The writer uses the adjective clauses after the name of three of the brothers gives drama and detail into not only the characters, but to the plot itself, and is effective in getting the most effect from few words. This is very similar to the use of appositive in this example, which is used to define the Mitya and Ivan in a word: “Mitya, the sensualist…” and “Ivan, the intellectual….” If the dependent clauses and the words that make up the parentheses were removed, the sentence seems empty: “The murder of brutal landowner Fyodor Karamazov changes the lives of his sons irrevocably: Mitya; Ivan; the spiritual Alyosha; and the shadowy figure of their bastard half-brother, Smerdyakov.” This revised sentence gives much less insight into the story or the characters and removes nearly all of the intrigue and drama from the sentence, which is vital in the text’s role in capturing the interest of readers.

The back-cover text for *Crime and Punishment* focuses much less on describing specific characters or plot points of the novel than *Great Expectations* or *The Brothers Karamazov* did. Written in a mostly general, vague way, the text only spends two sentences talking about the story, only about 30 percent of the total text. The majority of the text is dedicated to a long quote from a “noted scholar and literary critic,” Sidney Monas, who explained why Dostoyevsky is an impressive writer, saying, “For Dostoyevsky, an idea always has skin around it, and a human personality.” This is an example of the writer of this back-cover text employing ethos (a quote from a literary critic) to give the novel—and especially Dostoyevsky himself—some weight of importance, the sense that the novel is a masterpiece. This quote (in its use of ethos) reinforces the claim first sentence of the text made, which begins, “One of the world’s greatest novels….” Unlike the previous two examples, *Crime and Punishment’s* back-cover text seems to emphasize the historical aspect of the novel. Not only does the text claim the novel as “one of the world’s greatest,” but it also mentions that the introduction that is included with this edition “defines the global literary significance of *Crime and Punishment.*”

The back-cover text for Arcturus edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* similarly to *Great Expectations*, fixates almost entirely on the contents of the story. The only part that tells the reader anything other than of the plot is in the second-to-last sentence when it says “Wilde’s cautionary tale, published in 1891, describes how every sin that Dorian commits is reflected in the portrait.” This text is another example of the use of a dependent clause is used to add additional detail and drama, particularly emphasizing a catalyst of the events of the novel: “…which prompts an admirer, Lord Henry Wotton, to declare that life is nothing without beauty and sensuous gratification.” The text ends in a similar way, with a dependent clause emphasizing a seemingly pivotal part of the story: “The painting is banished to his attic, where the image finally becomes so loathsome that Dorian tries to destroy it.”

The back-cover text that I could not group together with the others, the Barnes and Noble classics edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* uses language that makes it clear that the writer had a specific audience in mind, one which makes the text sound distinct from the other examples. Almost all of the other examples used dramatic statements or lofty statements about the prominence about the author to create interest in the novel, but this example uses words that seem targeted at a more specific audience: people who are interested in literary study. This edition does describe some aspects of the story, but the description of them are vaguer than any of the other examples.

“Oscar Wilde brings his enormous gifts for astute social observation and sparkling prose to The Picture of Dorian Gray, his dreamlike story of a young man who sells his soul for eternal youth and beauty. This dandy, who remains forever unchanged—petulant, hedonistic, vain, and amoral—while a painting of him ages and grows increasingly hideous with the years, has been horrifying, enchanting, obsessing, even corrupting readers for more than a hundred years”

The writer begins this passage by introducing a reason why the book, and its author, are famous, writing, “…astute social observation and sparkling prose…,” a description unlike what the other examples contained. The other examples focused on describing the story, not the quality of the writer’s writing, or even the underlying motivation of writing the texts. Charles Dickens is also well-known for writing vivid stories of social observation, but the text for *Great Expectations* didn’t mention anything to that purpose.

This back-cover text uses three sets of lists, two of which are in the first paragraph, one of which—“petulant, hedonistic, vain, and amoral”—is set in a parenthesis device. Unlike what I’ve said about the other example’s use of parenthesis, this back-cover text is not seeming concerned with staying concise, describing Dorian with more words than absolutely necessary. In fact, I would go as far to say that the impact of this paragraph would not be affected much if that list were not there, especially because the second list—“horrifying, enchanting, obsessing, even corrupting”—gives the reader enough of an impression of the darkness of the story.

From this first paragraph, even without the other two in mind, we can start to see that the writer assumed something very different about the reader of this back-cover text than the other writers had. The second paragraph gives an idea of who the targeted audience is.

“Taking the reader in and out of London drawing rooms, to the heights of aestheticism, and to the depths of decadence, The Picture of Dorian Gray is not only a melodrama about moral corruption. Laced with *bon mots* and vivid depictions of upper-class refinement, it is also a fascinating look at the milieu of Wilde’s *fin-de-siècle* world and manifesto of the creed ‘Art for Art’s Sake’.”

There couldn’t be a better sign that this writer was writing for a more academic audience than the others than their use of the phrases “*bon mots”* and *“fin-de-siècle”* and “Art for Art’s Sake.” The audience that the writer of the back-cover text of the Arcturus edition of *Dorian Gray*, even though they were writing about the same story, did not use this kind of language and their product sounded approachable by a wider audience as a result. This writer (of the B&N edition) wrote for people interested in or familiar with the aestheticism movement, who would read this novel as a study of that literary movement or of society at the end of the century (*“fin-de-siècle”*).

This back-cover text seems to emphasize the novel’s societal, academic, and historical importance, particularly in the last paragraph:

“The ever-quotable Wilde, who once delighted London with his scintillating plays, scandalized readers with this, his only novel. Upon publication, Dorian was condemned as dangerous, poisonous, stupid, vulgar, and immoral, and Wilde as a “driveling pedant.” The novel, in fact, was used against Wilde at his much-publicized trials for “gross indecency,” which led to his imprisonment and exile on the European continent. Even so, The Picture of Dorian Gray firmly established Wilde as one of the great voices of the Aesthetic movement, and endures as a classic that is as timeless as its hero”

This is the longest of the three paragraphs in the back-cover text and makes this example the one which spends the most time talking about the novel’s author.

It’s worth mentioning that it is in this example that I’ve found rhetorical devices other than parenthesis or appositive. The writer uses antithesis in the second paragraph: “…to the heights of aestheticism, and to the depths of decadence…” emphasizing the range of thought and contradiction illustrated in this novel, in which a life obsessed with beauty and pleasure leaves your soul disfigured. This writer also uses a couple of transferred epithets when they write, “sparkling prose,” and “his dreamlike story….” These devices further reinforce the idea that this description of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not simply meant to hook readers from a wide audience with dramatic language, but to hook ones from a specific, more academic-minded audience, who would have the patience to read through a back-cover text that is over 100 words longer than other examples of the genre.

The novels that these back-cover texts were pulled from each have a long history and continuing relevance in their timeless themes, commentary, and application to modern education. The way that these descriptions were written, however, sometimes did not emphasize this fact, suggestive of the writer’s view of their targeted audience. Whether targeted at brand-new readers of these famous novels, or readers searching for novels that gives insight into their societies, there were many similarities found between the texts. Even the most distinct of the examples, the Barnes and Noble Classics edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, still followed the basic rule that every text followed: do not give away too much of the story, no matter how well-known that story may be.