

The Roman

Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* was originally published in 20 monthly installments; each installment contained 32 pages of text and 2 illustrations by 'Phiz,' the pen name of British artist George Cruickshank, that commented on and provided the literary text with a second visual language. All of the illustrations include a physical presence of life that acts as a summary to the actions taking place within the story—usually the characters of the novel, but in a few cases, the characters are rendered as objects that come to life. These seemingly insignificant objects are brought to life and become crucial to the narrative and push the story forward.

In chapter 48, titled 'Closing In,' Lady Dedlock and Mr. Tulkinghorn are locked into a disagreement over a secret in which Mr Tulkinghorn, the family lawyer, has the knowledge of Lady Dedlock's past that could compromise her marriage and social position if discovered. Mr. Tulkinghorn is preserving Lady Dedlock's reputation, but at the cost of always being able to hold this over her through blackmail. After their argument, Tulkinghorn returns home while Lady Dedlock is seen going on a walk alone and a shot is eventually heard. Accompanying the textual story is an illustration by Phiz, titled "A new meaning in Roman," where no human is seen. Although the illustration is shrouded in darkness, it still allows the reader to see the Roman on the ceiling whose finger points directly to where the light ends. At the end of the chapter, Dickens writes, "For, Mr Tulkinghorn's time is over for evermore; and the Roman pointed at the murderous hand uplifted against his life and pointed helplessly at him, from night to morning, lying face downward on the floor shot through the heart" (752). The illustration of Tulkinghorn's office is shown to the reader before they learn that they are actually looking at the place where Tulkinghorn's dead body lay. After having studied the illustration, the reader learns that the

Roman on the ceiling is pointing at Tulkinghorn, and so, the Roman is the first witness to the crime scene.

Even though the Roman is the first on this crime scene and the only witness to the murder, he is unable to alert anyone nor be able to explain what he saw. The information has to stay with him, making him helpless. If we consider the word “helpless,” “help-” was used as a euphemism for a servant in American English, beginning in the 1640s. It also meant “assistant, supporter” in Middle English, around the 13th century. Meanwhile, the suffix, “-less,” comes from the Old English “leas,” meaning “free from or devoid of”; and so using the word “helpless” implies that the Roman painted on the ceiling is a servant of Tulkinghorn; in other words, the Roman has been endowed with human qualities; in other words, something that would usually be considered decoration has been given a purpose, a purpose that is clear in the illustration. As he gestures to Tulkinghorn’s dead body, we are reminded that while there is no human life displayed in an illustration, someone is always present, like the Roman. He is doing what he can to warn those who come into the room, as he is the only witness to Tulkinghorn’s murder, but he is helpless.

In an article written by Fred Bloggs for The Charles Dickens Page titled “Learn about the original illustrations for Dickens’ works,” Bloggs argues, “In the background of many of the Phiz illustrations of Dickens’ novels the illustrator introduces details that help to interpret what is happening in the story. Some of these emblematic details are rather obvious and some are more subtle.” These illustrations were created to provide a second form of language for the reader to analyze and to point to the reader something they would otherwise not think twice of. This specific illustration, “A new meaning in Roman” is the only illustration without any human life making it easy to quickly gloss over; however, the Roman plays just as important of a role. He is

the messenger which is crucial to detective fiction. There has to be someone moving the story along and getting the information of a crime to others. Even though the Roman does his best to tell others of what he found, he will forever only be “...pointed helplessly at [Tulkinghorn]...” (752).

The helpless painted Roman forever stuck on the ceiling is doing his best to communicate even though he may just be seen as a painting at first glance. Mercury is the Roman god of communication and messengers, which directly ties to the message that the Roman on the ceiling is attempting to make others aware of. Mercury already exists as a character: as the footman of Sir Leicester Dedlock who appears countless times in “Closing In” and plays the role of an in-between character between Dedlock and his guests, like Tulkinghorn. In a piece written by Julia H. Caverno for *The Classical Journal* titled, “The Messenger in Greek Tragedy,” Caverno writes, “One of the peculiarities of Greek tragedy, a peculiarity not universal but so widespread as to be fairly typical, is the presentation of scenes, and those, too, crucial scenes, not to the eye on the stage, but to the ear by the report of a messenger” (263). A common trope within tragedies is to not actually see the tragedy, but to be told about it through the messenger. This is the exact role that Mercury on the ceiling plays within the novel. The readers never see the scene in which Tulkinghorn is murdered, but instead the Roman painting is able to tell us what has happened. Dickens is using classical tragic tropes within his detective novel and the messenger plays the same role in both. With many mentions of Mercury peppered throughout the chapter, it is no coincidence that he appears at the end of the chapter alerting the readers of the dead Mr. Tulkinghorn.

Mercury will forever be pointing at the spot where Mr. Tulkinghorn was murdered as Dickens' narrator writes, “...the Roman, pointing from the ceiling, shall point, so long as dust and

damp and spiders spare him, with far greater significance than he ever had in Mr Tulkinghorn's time, and with a deadly meaning" (752). Having been brought to life through Mr Tulkinghorn's murder, he will always be pointing at the place where Tulkinghorn's dead body laid and a constant reminder of what was done in that spot.

Works Cited

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