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The Dangers of a Literate Working Class; Or, *Office Space*, but the Printer Is a Human

There are seemingly few things one can do to break the monotony of daily work life. This is especially true in the 19th century, before the advent of *The Office* and Youtube videos of cats. With this in mind, it is not surprising that Jasper, the main "villain" of Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, seeks to break his monotony in part by creating a story about the murder of his nephew, himself being the murderer. Well, this is somewhat alarming, but what's more astonishing is that Jasper's decision to look for murder to entertain himself does not depart far from the behavior of many working class people in Victorian England. This period, which saw the rise of the sensation novel in tandem with mass literacy, was inundated with novels oriented around relatively gruesome and intricate murder. Jasper, who documents his life in his diary, also documents the life and eventual death of Edwin, fabricating the story piece by piece, and even creating a narrative which paints Neville Landless as Ned's murder. What's more is that Jasper's dangerous and evil way of entertaining himself highlights upper class concerns for a mass readership of sensation fiction and penny dreadfuls: if the lower class keeps reading and pondering gruesome though fictional murders, how long will it be until frequent homicide becomes a nonfictional phenomenon? Jasper's writing of a diary about Ned's murder, in parallel with the popularity of sensation fiction among a bored working class, brings attention to the imagined dangers of a boring work life, and the fantasies it might engender.

By the end of the first quarter of the 19th century, England typically saw a literacy rate of at least 70% among males, and an even smaller portion of illiterate females, though males more often knew how to read *and* write (Nicholas and Nicholas, Table 2). This rise of literacy helped shape the foundation for the explosion of cheap literature in the 19th century, particularly literature which was much easier to consume; while literacy offered a method of self improvement to the working class in England, readers might prefer something which would allow "for shared engagement with sensational episodes and melodramatic incidents" (Yan 320). Ostensibly the 19th century analog to *Game of Thrones* or *Friends*, "cheap literature was thus intended more for pleasure and entertainment than for mental stimulation" (320). This drive for pleasure was an important and understandable facet of Victorian culture. Manuals and guides might not change the certainty of the bricklayer's social immobility, but a penny dreadful could mitigate one guarantee of a blue collar life: monotony. With this capacity for entertainment, it is only natural that "cheap literature emerged as the period's most popular form of escape from the drudgeries of everyday life" (321). But this begs the question: what about cheap literature caught the attention of these readers?

The short answer is, quite frankly, murder. Nothing seemed quite as stimulating to the mind as reading about a gruesome murder, especially when reading a "broadside" depicting and illustrating the crime committed by an individual about to be hanged. These news pieces were sold at marginal prices, and the accounts often focused on the most brutal parts of the crime for sensational effect. One broadside, for instance, describes a man beating his coworker's head with a gun until the "barrel was bent double," covering the victim's head with a "gore of blood" (Stephenson). This interest in tales of murder concerned many individuals who saw this as a sign

of moral degradation. One illustration from Punch Magazine, titled “Useful Sunday Literature for the Masses; Or, Murder Made Familiar,” depicts a man reading a newspaper accounting a gruesome murder, with his family showing facial expressions of disgust and horror (Figure 1). The image clearly depicts a Bible cast on the floor, indicating how the family’s focus on religion is cast aside by the entertainment offered by accounts of murder.

USEFUL SUNDAY LITERATURE FOR THE MASSES;
OR, MURDER MADE FAMILIAR.

Figure 1. “Useful Sunday Literature for the Masses; Or, Murder Made Familiar” Punch Magazine (1849)

This interest in real accounts of murder, as well as concerns for the implications of its readership, translated to sensation fiction. The lower class seemed to devour this literature, while the upper class worried themselves over how this affected England; "indiscriminate reading was thought vulgar as it contaminated both mind and body of men and women, thereby producing degenerative effects on the whole nation" (Yan 328). Thus, in Victorian England, a culture emerged which placed value on seemingly "low" and vulgar literature, where tales of murder acted as the best form of escape from a tedious work life. This trend did not go unnoticed, and raised concerns among typically upper class people, who saw this as a sort of gateway into real violence.

Before discussing the noticeable parallels between Jasper's life and England's interest in murder based fiction, it is important to establish the fact that Jasper is very likely the killer of Edwin Drood. There is a very real chance that Jasper might not have been the killer. However, circumstances such as Jasper fainting at the news of Edwin's cancelled engagement, and him declaring to Rosa that he "might have swept [Edwin] even from" her side had he loved his nephew less, are glaring implications of guilt that can only be dismissed in the face of much stronger contrary evidence (Dickens 176, 215). These implications are solidified by the fact that Dickens himself "explicitly told several people—his son, Charles Dickens, Jr; John Forster; Luke Fildes, his illustrator—that Jasper murdered Edwin Drood" (Tracy 33). With this established, Jasper's diary acts as a sort of "variorum version of the novel in which he appears, attempting to control its plot and define some of its characters" (Tracy 29). For instance, Jasper attempts to paint a negative picture of Neville in such a manner that, when the disappearance of Edwin occurs, Jasper's narrative suggests that Neville himself killed his nephew. In a diary entry which

he shows to Mr. Crisparkle, he depicts Neville as having a "demoniacal passion" and a "savage rage for the destruction of its object," namely Edwin Drood (Dickens 110). In this light, Jasper is attempting to control the story of his own orchestrated murder, which includes the biased characterization of potential suspects.

In fact, authorship of *Edwin Drood* itself is immediately challenged upon the opening of the novel. Its first paragraph, where Jasper imagines the Cloisterham cathedral tower and doubts its actual presence ("How can that be here!"), is full of free indirect discourse which places Jasper's thoughts directly in the narrative without any explicit separation (Dickens 7). From the beginning of the novel, Jasper acts as a challenger to the narrator, implicitly laying claim to the story as *his*, with the plot only revolving around Edwin because Jasper has decided to make it so. This obscuration of point of view treats *Edwin Drood* as a kind of meta-container for Jasper's diary, the latter effectively functioning as "a diary of Ned's death, and a fiction about the identity of his murderer" (Tracy 29). Thus, Jasper's diary is intricately connected with *Edwin Drood's* resemblance to sensation fiction, which was clearly popular in 19th century England.

This is not the only parallel between Jasper and the culture of the actual England which *Edwin Drood* imitates. He is also well worn by the tedium of his work life. Early in the novel, he admits to his nephew: "the cramped monotony of my existence grinds me away by the grain" (Dickens 19). This is not unreasonable considering the nature of his work: as choirmaster, he attends service multiple times a day, singing a relatively homogenous group of hymns. For someone who lacks a particular religious fervor, this can easily wear one's patience away, similar to how a repetitive set of tasks present in most working class jobs engender great boredom for anyone who doesn't love their work (that is to say, almost all of the working class).

It is also important to recognize the source Jasper's agony as multifaceted. Not only is he bored of his work life, but he also loves Rosa, who is engaged to Edwin until just before Edwin's disappearance. These two causes of pain work in similar ways, in that they make every moment of his existence miserable. Thus, the solution to one problem has added appeal for its benefit in solving another: killing Ned and documenting it might make life interesting for Jasper, and it also opens up Rosa for the possibility of romantic pursuit, at least from his perspective. Despite the complexity of Jasper's situation and his plan for solving it, these complexities are such that still allow for his behavior to parallel and resemble that of a bored Victorian working class. In other words, murder is still the ultimate and reliable stimulant and solution for Jasper's problem, which consists of boredom as well as a romantic rival.

These connections between the creepy uncle and the culture of his time make him an important character within the context of his historical moment. Jasper, who actually murdered in response to monotony, embodies Victorian upper class concerns that lower class workers enjoying the entertainment of murderous fiction and journalism will actualize their reading material. This begs the question of how Dickens uses Jasper to represent his views on these concerns. For one, it appears that "Jasper as novelist is a projection of Dickens himself, who has imagined so many crimes and murdered so many characters in so many novels" (Tracy 29). This draws a connection between Jasper and his real life counterpart, Dickens, who *probably* never murdered someone (though he is a monster in other ways [refer to the famous author's marriage life for more on that]). The connection in part suggests that concerns for the morality of working class readers, who frequently immerse themselves in violent material, are much like Jasper himself: imaginary.

Though Dickens passed away before he could finish his last novel, there is plenty to extrapolate from its first half. Its status as incomplete solidifies the novel as a mystery in more than one way, and leaves significant room for speculation, except for, ironically, the main mystery itself. Within the novel, Jasper is given the role of both murderer and author, and performs much of the novel's work in interacting with sensation fiction within the context of 19th century England. He represents upper class concerns and partly acts as a satirization of them, attempting to assuage fears that there will be a real life Jasper as a result of reading too much of the "wrong" material. If only Dickens could be here to witness the same arguments being made, though now including violent video games. However, I'd like to believe that he'd be too busy laughing at the great wealth of cat videos on Youtube.

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