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## Contexts and Implications of Charles Dickens's Depictions of Suicide in Bleak House

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Advanced Writing in the English Major

Sr. Mary Hotz

Dec. 13, 2021

Contexts and implications of Charles Dickens's depictions of suicide in *Bleak House*

"I passed on to 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"

(Esther's Narrative, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, pg. 701).

The death of Esther Sommerson's mother, Lady Dedlock, is one of the more simplistic and cold renderings of suicide in Charles Dickens's oeuvre. The results of Esther and Mr. Bucket's tireless search are given in three short sentences with a count of five adjectives. And yet, Charles Dickens was writing in the tradition of literary sentimentalism, a genre that started in the Gothic period that manipulated the concept of sentiment into a literary device meant to induce compassion and sympathy in the reader. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a famous example of the sentimental novel. In contrast to Dickens's sentimental novel, Goethe's *Werther* sentimentalizes suicide through the protagonist's struggles with an ill-fated love, and some likely undiagnosed mental health conditions such as depression. In recent discussions of Victorian suicide in literature, a controversial issue has been whether Dickens's depictions of suicide reflect the ambient Victorian taboo around suicide or destabilize those societal prohibitions. While Dickens's depictions of suicide are not sentimental in nature,

his inclusion and framing of the suicides demonstrates an attempt to destabilize the rigidity of Victorian norms concerning suicide. Indeed, especially in comparison to Goethe's progressive depictions of suicide a century earlier in romantic German literature, Dickens's subtlety in challenging the Victorian stance on suicide reveals the relative stagnancy in British ideology on suicide and interiority, even within the genre of sentimentalism.

### Reception of Suicide in Victorian England

Before delving into Dickens's portrayals of suicide, it is important to explore and understand Victorian English ideology concerning suicide. In short, suicide was a taboo. Not only was it seen as virtually criminal in nature, a violation of God's wishes, but also it was an act that struck fear into any Victorian's heart. Certainly, the language used in the Victorian media framed suicide in terms indicative of disease and pandemic. For instance, a succinct article, entitled 'The Suicide Epidemic,' published 1893 in *The Citizen*, detailed four deaths, three of which were hangings and the other involving a railway and decapitation. The title underlines their fear that suicide is some sort of disease whose contagion is the dissemination of information. Thus, the details on the suicides mentioned in the article make for one of the smallest paragraphs in the newspaper. Similarly, Dickens's description of Lady Dedlock's death, as quoted at the beginning of this essay, makes for a very succinct paragraph — just three sentences. This simplicity of language and lack of attention to the suicides indicates a hesitancy to discuss or interpret suicide; these Victorian writers merely avoid any elaboration on the subject.

Certainly, the scarcity of true details in the newspaper article on suicides corroborates Olive Anderson's findings, examined in his research novel *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, that statistics on English suicide are either incomplete and unreliable or unusable and

difficult to find or to decipher. On closer examination of the article from *The Citizen*, one starts to wonder at the lack of due attention paid to such terrible news. In fact, the information is so concise that it is almost comical. According to Anderson, this sort of delicate treatment of suicide is a pattern, indicative of the skeletal database of suicide in England:

“one body of official statistics in conspicuously lacking from [the] expanding literature on suicide — those of England... Among English and continental writers alike there was thus a neglect of English official suicide statistics which was strange indeed at a time when statistical studies of suicide proliferated throughout Europe” (pg. 9-10).

In other words, true extensive statistics on suicide in Victorian England do not exist because they were intentionally ignored. Hence, it is no surprise that the article in *The Citizen* did not expand much on the information it was reporting as even the statistics were silenced. Without much precedent in the literature or the official databases, neither Charles Dickens nor the author of the newspaper article in *The Citizen* could have much of a guide when writing about suicide. Moreover, this neglect of the realities — the snubbing and shunning of suicide — in the statistics is the ultimate evidence of Victorian England’s deep-seated fear of suicide and of their taboo so long enforced.

In like manner, nineteenth-century psychiatry also suffered from the same intentional ignorance of suicidal thought and understanding that resulted from the prohibitions against suicide in Victorian England. One would think that the mental asylums would have the most accurate data on actual and potential suicide cases and thus psychiatric history would have a solid, if hidden, baseline for research on suicide in nineteenth-century England, but this was not the case. According to Sarah York, in her article “Suicide, Lunacy and the Asylum in Nineteenth-Century England,” there were large numbers of inmates in Victorian lunatic asylums

that were suicide patients, but “despite being relatively large in number, the suicidal population of public asylums has received only nominal attention in the history of nineteenth-century psychiatry” (pg. 3). Even the patients were victims of Victorian society’s silencing of suicide information. This is especially disturbing as modern science now recognizes that opening more discussions on suicide actually helps to prevent it and that the reverse — when those suffering voices are silenced — tends to worsen or expedite symptoms. Hence, we have seen the creation of Suicide Prevention Awareness month (September) and World Suicide Prevention Day (September tenth). The question then remains whether Dickens’s discussion of suicide, though far from sentimental, is a more progressive stance on suicide by not only including suicides but also developing the characters of suicide victims.

#### Real Suicides in Victorian England and Their Effect on Dickens

As a rule, suicide was shunned in England, but that did not prevent suicides from happening. Indeed, Dickens worked with someone that committed suicide. In researching Dickens’s connections with suicide, I came upon an engraved cover design for Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers* which was designed around 1836 by a certain Robert Seymour who was a successful illustrator who shot himself soon after drawing the cover design (British Library). The engraving of Seymour’s drawing shows, at the bottom, a tranquil Pickwick out fishing and, at the top, a man with a shotgun aiming past a billowing tree. While the image of the man with a shotgun must relate to an element of plot in *The Pickwick Papers*, one cannot help but wonder if the gun imagery was not indicative of Seymour’s suicidal thoughts. While we cannot be sure of what effect this had on Dickens, it is important to note that this suicide occurred early in Dickens’s career as a writer and just around fourteen or fifteen years before he

writes *Bleak House*. Thus, this suicide must have had a profound effect on Dickens, especially when one considers the ideology and ontology of suicide at the time.

Additionally, there were some sensationalized suicides that reached unprecedented amounts of publicity, indicating that Victorians were starting to slowly show more interest, if not acceptance, of suicide. For example, just two years after Seymour's death, a suicide in London of a woman by the name of Margaret Moye was sensationalized to the point of notoriety close to that of Victorian murder cases: "the press enthusiastically took the job of interpreting the event for those not present. Customers for every London newspaper craved knowledge of the particulars of such an audacious act" (Gates, pg. 39). In other words, this suicide caught the fascination of the Victorian public, and thus the press, with its gore and obvious desperation. It was a public act in the middle of a busy district and from the top of a prominent monument — the act seemed to crave attention. The press merely responded to the demand of the public.

Additionally, Barbara Gates's point that this sensationalism was only rivaled by murder cases further underlines not only that Victorians continued to think that suicide was diabolical but also that Victorians were mortally afraid of suicide. According to Gates, "for the most part, Victorians feared suicide far more than they did murder... suicide was more easily internalized than murder" (38). Suicide would have constituted a greater unknown than murder; suicide was an act of extreme desperation and/or self-hatred that stemmed from a disease that Victorians had yet to truly understand. Recall the aggrandizement of suicide to contagion in 'The Suicide Epidemic,' an article sandwiched conspicuously between two murder case articles. It was thought that one suicide could lead to another just by the mere mention. If one mention of suicide could incite another, so too could literature be considered culpable for influencing

suicide — though suicide by the same token influenced literature. Dickens would have had to grapple with these realities. How he introduced, mentioned, framed, and described any suicide would be scrutinized.

### Goethe's *Werther* and Its Reception

Indeed, when Goethe wrote *The Sorrows of Young Werther* a century earlier in Germany, the public response was split between the old beliefs and the younger enthusiasm and acceptance. Part of this split was a result of shifting modes of literary criticism. Certainly, Germany saw the emergence of 'enlightened critics' who "shared an assumption that the location of a work's value, the source of its legitimacy, had migrated from a set of timeless rules to the emotional effect that it exercised on contemporary recipients" (Duncan, pg. 7). Such enlightened critics shifted the appraisal of literature from its relation to the baseline of the classics to the quality of its emotional appeals. Thus, Goethe's sentimental novel was published at an ideal time in the evolution of literary criticism. Of course, the character of Werther undergoes quite a lot of emotionally charged situations. Indeed, the denouement of the novel is Werther's suicide and the reactions of his loved ones. There would have been no better novel to test the literary criticism waters.

A very brief look at the reactions to Werther reveals that the literary critics tended to divide along generational lines. The younger critics and readers — the 'enlightened critic' equivalents — supported Goethe's work for its ability to yield a tangible emotional response. In contrast, the older critics and readers rejected Goethe's style for being a departure from the norms. Concerning suicide specifically, those norms dictated how the older critics assessed a piece: "When the older critics speak of a work's 'truth,' they mean... its articulation of acknowledged verities — such as the unacceptability of suicide. For the younger critics, on the

other hand, ‘truth’ refers to individual readers’ encounter with something in the text that seems to mirror a part of themselves” (Duncan, pg. 7). In other words, Goethe’s *Werther* appealed to younger audiences and shocked and concerned older critics. Those older critics’ largest anxiety was that *Werther* might in some way encourage or justify suicide. Similarly, this disquiet of a pattern of suicide emulation is the core of the Victorian fear of suicide. Certainly, according to Erlend Frislid, not only was Goethe’s *Werther* banned in multiple countries for fear of mass suicides, but also “*Werther*, seen as an influence believed to coerce young men into taking their own lives, is thought to have possibly extended into the 1830’s — illustrating the impact of the novel” (pg. 16). This extension of *Werther*’s influence would potentially indicate that Wertherism — the term for the fanaticism that swept Europe after Goethe published *Werther*, including group suicides and other disturbing accounts — could have, at the very least, reached the ears of Dickens. Certainly, it cannot have lightened Victorian England’s fears of suicide influencing more suicides. All is to say that Dickens would have to have been extremely careful in his inclusion of suicidal plot lines in *Bleak House* as the Victorians’ fears of literature and any suicidal iconography or discussion influencing more suicides would have been very much active if not heightened.

Granted, this is a German sentimental novel written in the era before Dickens, but despite initial reservations, this link to the German sentimental author and his opinions of England as well as Victorian England’s lack of response to Wertherism provide valuable insights into how Dickens challenges Victorian inhibitions toward suicide. Goethe, himself, argued that England was a suicidal nation. From this perspective, one might have expected Dickens to sentimentalize the suicides in the novel. On the other hand, however, others, namely the British, argued that suicide is indicative of insanity and an act far too close to murder to be

worthy of sentimental empathy. England, in fact, was not a nation that was generally accepting of suicide. Therefore, from this view, it is not surprising that Dickens does not fully sentimentalize the suicides in *Bleak House* as Victorian society would not accept such a violation of norms. In the words of Barbara T. Gates, one of this view's main proponents, "at no time did the English embrace Wertherism or fashionable suicide as wholeheartedly as did the Continentals. Quite the contrary, people like the Reverend Solomon Piggott abhorred such dangerous fads" (pg. 24). Gates' point directly opposes the largely European idea that the British in the Victorian era were a suicidal society as clearly the English see suicide as taboo. According to this view, Dickens would not have sentimentalized suicide, even if he participated in sentimentalism, as Victorian society would have rejected such an overstep.

However, it should also be noted that Victorian opinions on suicide were not by any means homogenous. The views that went against the stream of anti-suicidal ideology tended to come from the environmentalist side of the moralist versus environmentalist debate. Generally, the moralist believed that an individual is morally accountable for their actions and their fate as opposed to the environmentalist who saw the individual as a victim and product of their surroundings. Incidentally, Dickens is generally believed to have started out as a moralist and evolved into an environmentalist. One such environmentalist view on suicide comes from an article from Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine in which the author quotes a man by the name of Bucket: "suicide is merely a product of the general condition of society,' and that 'in a given state of society a certain number of persons must put an end to their own life... it is society which prepares the crime: the guilty man is only an instrument of execution.'" In other words, one should not judge the person committing suicide but rather examine the society and the pressures that society has placed on the individual. Judging that, in *Bleak House*, Dickens

carefully develops either the victim of suicide themselves or the societal pressures placed on them — or both at once—, one might fairly guess that Dickens was leaning toward the environmentalist side of the debate by the time he was writing *Bleak House*. Thus, while Dickens did not sentimentalize those suicides in the same way as Goethe or the other sentimentalist authors, I hold that Dickens was challenging, if slowly, the Victorian taboo on suicide, especially in the context of literature and the Victorian fears of an emulation cultural pattern.

#### Phiz's Illustrations to Dickens's *Bleak House*

Few have taken full advantage of the illustrations that accompanied Dickens's 1853 text to inform their reading of *Bleak House*. However, particularly when examining the imagery associated with the novel's suicides, the original chapter art is a rather beautiful way to inform both the intentions of Dickens, considering he must have had some say in the illustrations' depictions, as well as the diversity of Victorian ideology as regards suicide and its reception. Two suicides in *Bleak House* that particularly hold the reader's attention are that of Nemo and Lady Dedlock. The two suicides are also connected in the tragedy of their characters' ill-fated affair.

#### 'Consecrated Ground' and Dickens's Depiction of Nemo's Burial Site

For the former, one illustration that is especially poignant is that of 'Consecrated Ground' which is highly effective in portraying the fear accompanying a suicide in Victorian England and the horror following a loved one's realization of the harsh realities of Victorian burial rites. This illustration accompanies the passage in Chapter XVI ("Tom-All-Alone's"). An etching by Phiz (Hablot K. Browne), 'Consecrated Ground' [see Figure 1] depicts a disguised Lady Dedlock and a confused and terrified Jo. Phiz's choice of lighting in the black and white

sketch creates a triangle whose pinnacle is Jo's pointed finger, indicating the deepest, darkest part of the graveyard in which, we assume, Nemo's remains are buried. The audience does not see Nemo's grave — only the huddled figure of Lady Dedlock and the stricken face and figure of Jo. All else is chaos, indicated by the darkness and perpendicular lines at odd angles (the graves, bricks, etc.). The use of light and dark in this image provides drama as well as thematic elements. First, the light marks out the living from the dead. Second, the light emphasizes the fear of the living looking into the dark — the unknowns of suicide and death, itself.

This theme of the fear of the unknown is especially rank in discussions of Victorian terror of suicide. Indeed, stemming from that fear of suicide and its guilty spirits are the realities of burial rites. According to Gates, burial rites were still harsh for suicide cases: “until the 1880's, proven suicides could not be buried in consecrated ground” (pg. 39). Of course, with this information in mind, we can safely assume that Nemo's burial site is, in fact, not ‘Consecrated Ground,’ revealing the irony in the illustration's title. Thus, the darkness in the image also indicates a lack of blessing. Furthermore, according to Frislid, conceptions of suicide as being diabolical, transforming the victims into malevolent spirits, continued with “alternative burial rituals which were used well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century [which] were seen as one way to [protect] a community from those malevolent, restless, wandering spirits of self-murders” (pg. 12). If the spirits of suicide victims were labeled as malevolent and diabolical, causing towns to create protective rituals around such burials, then it is no surprise that the darkness in Phiz's illustration covers the graves; the darkness and even implied darkness of the graves that are not in the frame (in ultimate darkness) reflect the beliefs that the souls of such people are evil.



[Figure 1]

As it happens, this idea of consecrated ground, or the lack thereof, is also embedded in the text. The image illustrates the scene in *Bleak House* when Jo shows the terrified Lady Dedlock Nemo's burial site. Lady Dedlock, of course, reacts with horror at the state of the graveyard and inquires of Jo, "Is this place of abomination, consecrated ground?" and not knowing what she means even after she explicates that her question concerns whether or not it is 'blessed' ground, Jo can but give the answer, "I'm blest if I know" (Dickens, pg. 243). Jo is 'amazed' at her question partially because he is not necessarily familiar with the rules of burial. But mostly, Jo's amazement would be similar to that of a Victorian reader as no proven suicide would be buried in blessed ground, so Lady Dedlock's question is to most readers almost superfluous. However, Dickens's inclusion of this consecrated ground discussion is meant to solidify to the reader that Nemo's death was a suicide, a detail that Dickens's predictably skirted. Further, I would argue that Jo's ignorance is meant both to mirror the Victorian ignorance of the experiences and background of those who commit suicide and to show how one can be loving and understanding toward a friend while alive and while dead by suicide in an unblessed grave. Dickens is teaching his Victorian readers awareness and compassion for suicide.

#### 'Shadow' — of Murder and Suicide

As concerns the latter, Lady Dedlock's suicide, another illustration that is applicable to the patterns of Victorian ideology is that of 'Shadow,' an etching by Phiz that attended Ch. LIII of *Bleak House*. This illustration depicts a troubled Lady Dedlock in the aftermath of Mr. Tulkinghorn's murder and prior to her own suicide [see Figure 2]. While this image does not explicitly concern the suicide of Lady Dedlock, the inclusion of the murder bill poster would for Victorian readers increase the tension and apprehension for the possibility of an even worse

crime in Victorian eyes — that of suicide. As explored earlier in this essay, murder and suicide were often placed in the same category of heinous crimes — suicide seen as the murder of oneself and therefor even more condemned.

Another illustration in which Phiz utilizes lighting and shading to their fullest capacity, the image keeps everything in ‘Shadow,’ including the foreground with the elegant staircase and the archways, while spotlighting the white wall, on which is posted the reward bill for the apprehension of Tulkinghorn’s murderer, and Lady Dedlock’s exposed shoulders and the folds in her dress. Her face is turned away from us as in the last illustration, ‘Consecrated Ground.’ The darkness seems almost to be reaching across the Murder bill toward Lady Dedlock; the streaks of shadow in her dress are perpendicular to the shadows moving toward her, adding a sort of fleeing movement to her stationary, hesitating figure. At first glance, a viewer might interpret this image as an implication that Lady Dedlock is the murderess. She does exude an aura of guilt which is conveyed through her averted face and the fear and tension that the shadows creeping toward her might seem to imply. However, when the reader looks back at this image after finding out the true killer as well as Lady Dedlock’s fate, the reader suddenly sees Lady Dedlock as the victim of a rising darkness about her — even perhaps within her, indicating a more nuanced sense of interiority. The irony that she is, indeed, not the murderess but rather a victim herself acts as another instrument that Dickens uses to manipulate pity and understanding, however primitive, from the audience.



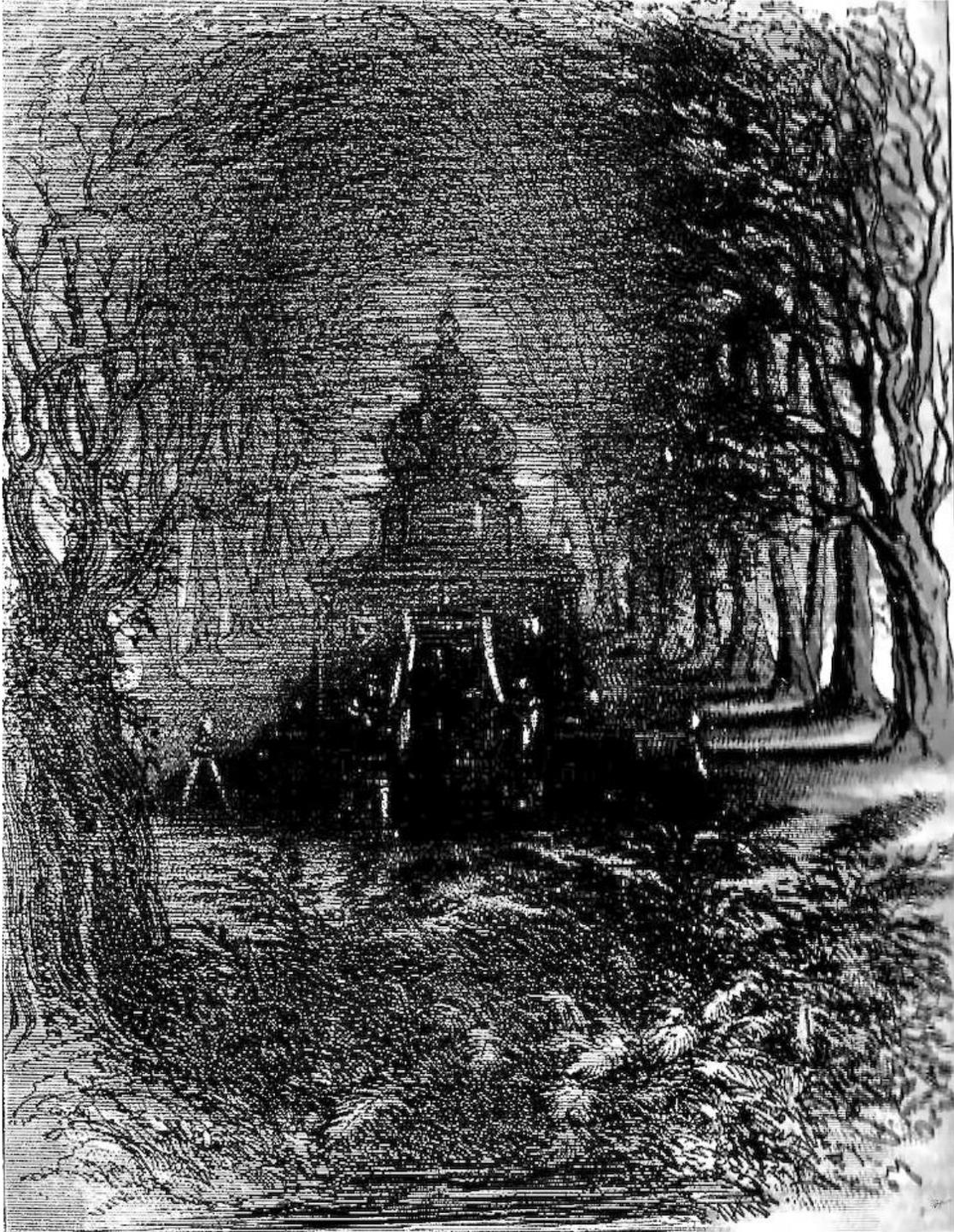
[Figure 2]

In the adjacent text, too, there is a hint at interior suffering as well as a foreshadowing of Lady Dedlock's suicide. The scene in Phiz's illustration's is a scene directly from the text in which Lady Dedlock passes Mr. Bucket in returning from her dinner and barely acknowledges him before asking whether there are any new discoveries in the case as she swiftly takes herself up the staircase whose wall hangs the bill. As she glides up the stairs, Mr. Bucket "watches her as... the old man came down to his grave; past murderous groups of statuary... past the printed bill, which she looks at going by; out of view... 'She's a lovely woman, too... Don't look quite healthy though.' Is not quite healthy, Mercury informs him. Suffers much from headaches" (Dickens, pg. 631). Dickens compares her movements to the moving of Tulkinghorn to his grave. This foreshadows Lady Dedlock's future movement to her own grave. The use of motion verbs gives greater contrast to the living and the dead. Additionally, the inclusion of her headaches as well as her not looking well indicate that her inner turmoil affects both her internal and external well-being. This indication of the relationship between mental health and physical health and its escalation is a quite advanced conception that Dickens attempts to coach his Victorian audience into grasping. Thus, Dickens sets up his readers to empathize with the victim of suicide.

#### 'The Mausoleum at Chesney Wold' and Acceptance

In the wake of Lady Dedlock's death, the issues of burial return to haunt Dickens's next narrative steps. Dickens chooses to directly defy the precincts of burial tradition. In Phiz's penultimate illustration for *Bleak House*, death, alongside burial, threatens as an equalizing force rather than an instrument of moralist and classist oppression. 'The Mausoleum at Chesney Wold' [see Figure 3] uses minimal amounts of light to frame and illuminate the shadows that entomb the Dedlocks. The boughs of the trees create a canopy of shadows to frame and

enthroned, or rather further entomb, the Dedlock Mausoleum, an embellished triangular shadow with only white glints to define its edges.



[Figure 3]

This grim illustration accompanies an equally provocative passage in *Bleak House* which, upon further examination, illuminates Dickens's intentions to encourage acceptance and forgiveness in the hearts of his Victorian audience. Though her dead was a proven suicide, Lady Dedlock is buried in this Dedlock Mausoleum and not alongside Nemo in the deepest darkest corner of the cemetery. This would have shocked Victorians, especially had it been a true story, and yet Dickens turns this detail into a message on the ridiculousness of Victorian burial norms and condemnation of suicide. 'Mausoleum at Chesney Wold' precedes Chapter LXVI in which the first paragraph addresses this message of Victorian redress:

“Some of her old friends... as they toyed in a ghastly manner with large fans — like charmers reduced to flirting with grim Death, after losing all their other beaux — did once occasionally say... that they wondered the ashes of the Dedlocks, entombed in the mausoleum, never rose against the profanation of her company. But the dead-and-gone Dedlocks take it very calmly, and have never been known to object” (pg. 747).

Indeed, the more culpable, predatory, and menacing of the figures Dickens describes are the false, former 'friends' of Lady Dedlock. They conjecture as to the judgements that the dead hold when the judgements are very clearly their own and that of their society. Dickens mocks these instruments of traditionally classist and moralist views in Victorian society. Any reader that agrees with the judgmental onlookers is subject to the same mockery. His joke that the dead Dedlocks have never objected is grim, but it is Dickens way of revealing the realities of death as an equalizer — only the society of the living continue to project thoughts onto the dead. In between the lines, the reader discovers Dickens's implied point that there is no harm in burying this pitiable victim of society and her own mental illness in her rightful place alongside the other members of the Dedlock family. Dickens is careful not to make this any sort of

justification or encouragement for suicide but rather a plea to the Victorian public to have some mercy, acceptance, and empathy.

### Conclusion

When reading *Bleak House* as a sentimental novel, the reader might very well hesitate or even balk at Dickens's lack of emotional, sentimental grace in his depictions of the suicides. However, when one considers the ambient Victorian attitudes and outside European movements and challenges and then examines closer the relevant passages and accompanying illustrations, Dickens's careful succinctness in those suicide depictions is not only explained but also informed. From such close readings, the reader emerges with a sense of Dickens's complex and subtle indictments of Victorian society. Thus, the reader also discovers that Victorian opinions of suicide were, in fact, far from homogenous. Dickens is a poster child for the nuances in Victorian perspectives on suicide.

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## Reflective Essay

Around November 2021, I started brainstorming what I would like to research in relation to Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* in order to write my final paper for Sr. Mary Hotz's class, Advanced Writing in the English Major. I decided that it would be interesting to look at suicide in Victorian England and compare *Bleak House* to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* which I had studied for Dr. Ivan Ortiz's class, *Frankenstein: Contexts and Legacies*.

When I broached my ideas, Sr. Hotz immediately thought of an e-book available through USD's Copley Library and the digital library, JSTOR: Barbara Gates's *Victorian Suicide*. Sr. Hotz recommended that I start with a few chapters in Gates's book, then use her bibliography to further hone my research and my specificity of topic. Sr. Hotz also urged me to look past the top few results in any search as these are only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

After reading some of Gates's book on suicide, I noticed Gates used quite a few newspaper articles from the Victorian era as primary sources that would give insight into the reception of suicide in England. I decided to use this hint to branch out and look at the archives of the British Library's Public Domain for primary sources directly related to my topic.

I developed a few basic keywords such as "suicide," "Victorian suicide," "Charles Dickens," and even "Murder." I would also broaden my search using creative synonyms that might have been more common during the Victorian era, such as "Self-murder." This method for key words is also mentioned in the English Literature research guides through the Copley Library website.

Through these searches, I found articles on suicide in England that placed suicide in the same category as murder and used sensationalized terms and events meant to appeal to fears of

suicide as an epidemic. Additionally, in this search for primary sources, I found a personal connection to Charles Dickens: one of his main illustrators for his installments, Robert Seymour, ended up committing suicide about 15 years before Dickens wrote *Bleak House*.

When looking for secondary sources, I used similar search tools, starting with my advanced search for Gates's book. The first thing to come up had been Gates's book, *Victorian Suicide*, and just under it was a book by Olive Anderson, entitled *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*. I noticed that Olive Anderson's name was also cited in Barbara Gates's notes from her book, so I knew this would also be a trustworthy source. I found this print book on the Copley Library's shelves. I also found peer-reviewed articles on JSTOR that were crucial for my research on Goethe's *Werther* and its associations and comparisons to suicide in England. Finally, I used Google Scholar to find the rest of my secondary sources in order to widen my pool of information. When looking for secondary sources, I made sure that the sources I used were peer-reviewed and supported by acclaimed institutions and databases.

While I found many fascinating articles on suicide in Victorian England, I had to be critical of what would be relevant to my arguments and directions in the paper. Otherwise, my essay would struggle with clarity and flow. Thus, I was disciplined in bypassing any sources that had at first drawn my attention but did not have strong connections to the subject. For example, under Anderson's book in the advanced search for "Victorian Suicide," I saw an interesting source by Ekbert Faas, entitled *Retreat into the mind: Victorian poetry and the rise of psychiatry*. However, I had to ignore this source as it was only tangentially related to suicide or Dickens.

This discernment required that I also narrow my own topic and focus. The more angles I saw through my research, the more I realized that I would need to make very specific choices

such as limiting the connection to Goethe's *Werther* in order to allow enough space to analyze Victorian England's taboos on suicide and the issues raised in *Bleak House*.

I decided I wanted to focus on whether or not Charles Dickens was challenging or perpetuating the societal norms in Victorian England toward the idea of suicide. The other connections, such as that made to Goethe, were included but taken out of center focus. Through my research and my analysis of the text, I concluded that Dickens was subtly breaking the silence and apathetic taboo around suicide in Victorian England.