

A WRITER'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING CHARLES DICKENS'S "GEORGE SILVERMAN'S EXPLANATION"

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"There is nothing of interest to be said about George Silverman."
— Andrew Lang, Introduction to "George Silverman's Explanation"

"George Silverman's Explanation" is one of Charles Dickens's least analyzed works (Ullman 11). Yet, this short story is a prime example of Dickens's blueprint for writing. Published in 1868, two years before Dickens's death, this story is his last completed work. With the advantage of looking back over his career of writing, Dickens's readers can find in "George Silverman's Explanation" a summation of the most important subjects that concerned Dickens. The story features recurrent elements in his prior works that are now termed "Dickensian"—for example, this short story is narrated by an orphan, George Silverman, who bemoans the hypocritical clergymen, unmaternal mothers, and elusive love interests existing in a world corrupted by the industrial city and often lacking the restorative value provided by country life. "George Silverman's Explanation" can be read as a final literary effort to consolidate all these Dickensian themes, or as a reflection of Dickens's personal experience as a writer who constantly felt forced to defend his work to a judgmental audience (Wilson). However, I would like to propose that "George Silverman's Explanation" is a short story that should be read as Charles Dickens's final and most comprehensive treatise on the exercise of writing.

Instead of outlining an explicit approach to the writing process, as he inspired his American contemporary, Edgar Allan Poe, to do in "The Philosophy of Composition" in 1846, the inventive Dickens uses the narrative of George Silverman as an allegory to detail the formation of a story (Poe 643). I will demonstrate how "George Silverman's Explanation" serves as Dickens's explanation of the writing relationship between the author and the narrator, as seen through the parallels of Charles Dickens and George Silverman. This metadiegetic story can be used as a framework to portray the growth trajectory of the writer and his eternal struggle to create original work from the world of literature that precedes him. The details of the story shed light on the methods that a writer employs to add plot twists and develop characters as a way to hold a reader's interest. Dickens's renowned writing—including his assortment of eclectic characters, brilliant wordplay and clever threads connecting his own works to others—informed and continues to inform writers of the scope of the Dickensian tradition. Therefore, if readers approach Dickens's last story as his departing discourse on the construction of literature, "George Silverman's Explanation" becomes invaluable instruction for aspiring writers

committed to understanding the literary past before participating in the creation of the literary future.

It is important to consider that Dickens's popularity often meant that his work was plagiarized, a concern that troubled him immensely. Dickens went to great lengths to protect his work and "George Silverman's Explanation" is a beneficiary of that effort. In fact, because his work published in England could not prevent printers in the United States from redistributing his work for their own profit, Dickens published "George Silverman's Explanation" in the *Atlantic Monthly* in Boston prior to its release in England "for a rate unexampled in literature" (Forster xi). In this way, "George Silverman's Explanation" became Dickens's most protected piece of writing. This mark of ownership verified the story as distinctly Dickens's, with all credits of originality regarding the plot and the narrator attributed to the story's writer.

The sparse scholarship on "George Silverman's Explanation" suggests that Charles Dickens's autobiographical details can be compared with those of his narrator, George Silverman. After all, Charles Dickens and George Silverman both share a suspicious attitude towards their audience and an obsessive work ethic. Edmund Wilson points out that, as a writer, Dickens exhausted himself by neurotically tracking his readership rates and becoming despondent when he inevitably lost readers ("The Two Scrooges"). Deborah Allen Thomas elaborates on this observation, writing that George Silverman is also fundamentally insecure. His feelings vacillate with regard to his readership: he begs his readers to understand him while also mentioning that he would rather have no one read his work at all (Thomas 138; Dickens 22, 24, 28). Prior scholarship on "George Silverman's Explanation" draws parallels between the unsettled psyche of George Silverman and Charles Dickens. Dickensian scholar Harry Stone describes the story as a depiction of "frail humanity engulfed in a tragic universe" and Dudley Flamm adds that George's long-winded explanation is "Dickens... reveal[ing] his bleakest view regarding self-extrication from guilt" (Stone 86). Given Dickens's mental exhaustion towards the end of his life, the comparisons resonate.

But more importantly, Michael Ullman makes an astute observation that is pertinent to understanding the exercise of writing: the narrator, George Silverman, as a writer, has "a drive to be understood" (14). The story begins with a series of false starts as the narrator's obvious attempts to express himself. Understanding how a writer writes is difficult, and some critics try to argue that Dickens was a genius teetering on the edge of insanity, and, therefore, his fits of creativity can never be fully understood (Bodenheimer 3). However, in a simpler sense, Dickens, like any writer, spent his time chasing that elusive "writerly flow" that every aspiring author dreams to have. In a letter to his wife, Catherine, Dickens writes: "My composition is peculiar; I can never write with effect—especially in the serious way—until I have got my steam up, or in other words until I have become so excited with my subject that I

cannot leave off” (Fairhurst 73). Dickens explicitly states that his primary focus when he begins to write is to invest himself in his characters and story. From there, Dickens’s imagination can become inspired. Similarly, the narrator of his last short story, George Silverman, who works as a tutor, has an obsession with bringing his pupils, or his “characters,” Adelina and Granville, together in marriage—which reflects the all-consuming emotional and intellectual involvement the author requires to write. However, the relationship between the real writer and the fictional writer exceeds mere biographical similarities that Thomas, Stone, and Flamm assert. It would be reductive to read “George Silverman’s Explanation” for the sole purpose of comparing Silverman to Dickens and claiming to understand Dickens’s personal life, even if there are some similarities.

Instead, a structuralist framing of the story “George Silverman’s Explanation,” including close analysis of the narratological elements that comprise the story, plot, narrator, and characters will assist readers in understanding how Charles Dickens uses this story to both describe a roadmap for “writing” and to construct his idea of “the writer” through his narrator, George Silverman. To understand George Silverman as a writer, we should not read “George Silverman’s Explanation” as a clue-hunting venture to discover aspects of Charles Dickens’s personal life. Rather, as structuralist Roland Barthes would say, let Dickens rest in peace in the Poet’s Corner (“The Death of the Author” 1268). While “George Silverman’s Explanation” operates as Dickens’s manifesto for writing, the guide cloaks itself within the framework of a narrative structure, with a plot and characters for readers to interpret. Dickens’s narrator, George Silverman, ultimately fails to adequately explain himself—a failure so utterly complete that, in the past, readers have found little meaning in the story. However, by detailing the process of George Silverman’s failure, the story serves as a guide for how writers can learn from his mistakes. Instead of looking for meaning *in* the story, here, the meaning *is* the story; the crux of “George Silverman’s Explanation” is Dickens’s instructive portrayal of George’s struggle to write it.

There is an unmatched linguistic richness to be found in the clever character names that Charles Dickens is famous for creating; therefore, an investigation into the names of the characters in “George Silverman’s Explanation” will help to uncover a deeper understanding of the characters and their motives embedded in this story (Luu). An analysis of the etymology of George Silverman’s name provides the reader with the essential qualities that characterizes Dickens’s narrator: George is educated, but not overbearing in his presentation of the story; descriptive, but not overly absorbed in the minutia of materialism; and reserved, but actively working hard to represent the story as adequately as possible. In other words, the narrator is a hard worker. Considering Dickens’s first-person narrators over the years—Pip from *Great Expectations*, David from *David Copperfield*, Esther from *Bleak House*—there is a

pattern of self-deprecation in their narration, despite their different personalities. George Silverman is no exception.

The name George stems from the original Greek *georgos* meaning “farmer,” which is a combination of *ge* meaning “earth” and *ergon* meaning “work,” harking back to Vergil’s descriptions of agriculture in *Georgics*. Just as a farmer must till the earth to sustain himself, the reader can understand that, as a narrator, George must return to his roots, to the soil from which man was created and use the tradition of past literature to mold his own story. Simultaneously, the name George evokes the image of the English Hanoverian monarchs and its prevalence as a name among the English commoners—a phenomenon which may indicate the laymen’s hopes for grandeur for their sons. King George IV died in 1830 and King George V was born in 1865, and in the late 1800s, George was the third most popular name given to English sons, so the name “George” was extremely familiar to Dickens and the English public (“Name of the Week: George”). As such, with a name like George Silverman, the narrator must differentiate himself as a unique entity, like a king, or resign himself to the ordinariness of the masses. George’s name reflects his struggle to make himself visible.

The surname Silverman suggests that the narrator writes from a life of lived experience. The *silver* refers to grayed hair of the aged and wise, who has accumulated knowledge over time and is entering into the twilight portion of his life. Dickens expressed his belief that writers must write from a wealth of life experience, as he insisted in a letter written in 1867 that a writer must have “sufficient knowledge of life or character to venture on so comprehensive an attempt [as writing]” (*Life, Letters and Speeches of Charles Dickens* 248). George writes precisely when the prime of his life is behind him, after years of education and many lived experiences. Additionally, the *silver* in Silverman ironically alludes to George Silverman’s unfortunate financial realities: George never inherits a silver shilling from his grandfather’s property. He subsists on very little, and although he may not leave behind many material possessions, his written “explanation” stands as his legacy.

Another attribute of George Silverman’s character is that he is plagued by accusations of “worldliness” as a result of his life education and a motley assortment of experiences; even his own mother calls him a “worldly little devil” (Dickens 2). To be “worldly” in the Victorian era meant to have an awareness of the ways of the world which was considered somewhat sinful; as Ellen Marie Snyder discusses in “Innocents in a Worldly World,” Victorian culture viewed young children as pure and unblemished by the vices of the physical world that adults inhabited (11). In reading “George Silverman’s Explanation” today, readers can follow both definitions that the Oxford English dictionary provides: to be “worldly” means to both to be educated, sophisticated, having had diverse experiences, but also, (as in the Victorian era,) to be solely focused on the physical and leaving spiritual inquiries by the wayside. These definitions seem somewhat paradoxical, but it is the delicate balance

of these qualities that creates a compelling narrator, especially in our reading of the story today.

On one hand, George's "worldliness" manifests itself in the education he receives under Mr. Hawkyard and at college. His education provides him with the tools to appear as an "educated, sophisticated" individual. Nevertheless the "worldly" description of his physical desires—from his longing for food, light, and warmth at the beginning of the story to his qualms over lusting after his pupil, Adelina, at its center—provide the story with material descriptions that creates Barthes's understanding of the "reality effect": a believable backdrop of physical richness that enhances the reading experience (Barthes 1272). The irony is that George Silverman is not the materialistic, "worldly" figure that the people in his life are accusing him to be; he consistently makes choices to abstain from being perceived that way. As Ullman points out: "No other Dickens story told in the first person derives so much of its effect from the difference between what the reader is aware of and what the character-narrator is aware of" (21). George Silverman's self-deluded naïveté allows readers to clearly see his flaws and learn from his mistakes.

George Silverman's timid approach to narrating—his struggle to put pen to paper and express himself—is also noticeable, which presents him as an endearing and compelling narrator for readers. The title "George Silverman's Explanation" immediately informs the readers that the following story will be a defense against some accusation, and the *qui s'excuse, s'accuse* presentation of the narrator's guilty conscience delivers a potent urgency to the story (Pettit 110). George Silverman's perpetual need to explain himself throughout the story delineates the moments where he begins to fail, and by drawing in readers to his flaws, readers can learn from his mistakes with sustained interest.

An analysis of the story's plot will serve as Dickens's instruction for a writer's *curriculum vitae*. The construction of "George Silverman's Explanation" can be understood in part as a metaphor for the journey of a writer. The beginning of the story demonstrates that a writer needs to choose a place to start and situate his work within the world of literature preceding it. The opening of George's story is the act of writing—a writer wrestling with the toil of testing out words:

FIRST CHAPTER

IT happened in this wise—

But, sitting with my pen in my hand looking at those words again, without desecrating any hint in them of the words that should follow, it comes into my mind that they have an abrupt appearance. They may serve, however, if I let them remain, to suggest how very difficult I find it to begin to explain my explanation...

SECOND CHAPTER

IT happened in *this* wise—

But, looking at those words, and comparing them with my former opening, I find they are the self-same words repeated. This is the more surprising to

me, because I employ them in quite a new connection...I will make a third trial, without erasing this second failure, protesting that it is not my design to conceal any of my infirmities, whether they be of head or heart.

THIRD CHAPTER

NOT as yet directly aiming at how it came to pass, I will come upon it by degrees. The natural manner, after all, for God knows that is how it came upon me. (Dickens 1)

The false starts of this story are strange. The speaker is hardly the confident narrator that readers might imagine Dickens would use to represent “a writer.” The vagueness of these fumbled openings is also peculiar. “It” and “this” are deictics; there is no way to tell the infinite paths down which a story can proceed, unless specified by the writer. These words have an “abrupt appearance,” the way that every story does since narrators inevitably begin at an arbitrary point in time. This hesitant start also shows the difficulties of beginning to write in a world saturated with words and an established tradition of literature. Alternatively, the hesitancy can be attributed to the narrator, accustomed to being misunderstood, knowing that his words will have the opposite effect on his audience than he intends. In the second chapter, the narrator tries again, with the “self-same words.” This time, though, he imbues them with a different meaning. The emphasis on “*this*” fails to explain a specific event to the reader, but the word emphasizes the internal machinations of the writer’s mind that readers can never truly know. To be sure, we are reading the words of the writer on the page, but the representation of his consciousness is only accessible through the words that he provides. The declaration “it is not my design to conceal,” offers instruction to writers. Writing is necessarily vulnerable, and with narration, Dickens is suggesting that writers should follow the bare-all approach. Additionally, this opening provides a prime example of foreshadowing in the plot: the ambiguous introduction alludes to the upcoming events that will be clarified later in the narrative. By saying “[i]t happened,” readers are clued into the fact that *something happened* and, as narratologist Seymour Chatman writes, the suspense created functions as part of the suspense-surprise mechanism built into the style of the story (*Story and Discourse* 60-62). George Silverman decides to tell the story in “degrees”—or in a gradual, processional manner—the way, he insists, it “naturally” happened to him.

After stumbling through this introduction, writer George Silverman begins by describing his life in a Preston cellar prior to learning about the world, including the world of literature. In the dark cellar where George becomes an orphan, his ability to think is based purely on the physical dimensions of his living environment. For example, when his poverty-worn mother descends into the cellar, he cannot discern her emotions until he sees her face since “the cellar-steps were steep, and that the doorway was very low” (Dickens 2). George knows nothing of the outside world, except the little bit that his parents tell him, such as his mother hoping for the

death of her father in order to inherit his property. Stuck in this barren womb underground, George can only mull over the morsels of information he possesses. He writes that: “I would stand about, musingly fitting my cold bare feet into cracked bricks and crevices of the damp cellar-floor ... walking over my grandfather’s body, so to speak, into the courtful of houses, and selling them for meat and drink, and clothes to wear” (Dickens 3). While the educated Henry James might write from his “house of fiction,” George—or the nascent writer—can only work with the very little he knows (*The Art of the Novel* 46). It would be incorrect, though, to say that George Silverman originates from nothing; rather, his beginning results from an absence. He writes: “I cried for that I was in the dark, or for that it was cold, or for that I was hungry” (Dickens 2). George Silverman’s childhood is lacking: he lacks light, warmth, food, and as a future writer, he is currently lacking words and knowledge.

It is the recognition of ignorance that necessitates George’s change. The external stimulant of his parents’ illness raises George’s awareness of his own ignorance: “The universal change came down even as low as that, - so will it mount to any height on which a human creature can perch, - and brought other changes with it” (Dickens 3). Life events are universally distributed among both the uneducated and the educated, but for George—or the ignorant writer—these happenings are an impetus for change. These changes grant his life “tellability” (Ryan 589). Suddenly, he does not know—“what foul litter in the darkest corner” was called “the bed” and why his mother and father begin to “laugh” and “sing” before their deaths (Dickens 3). Even his definition of death is greatly lacking; when he is finally pulled out of his informationally barren prison by Preston inhabitants, he tells them he “doesn’t know what it is to be dead” (Dickens 3). George must first learn the definition of basic words, especially since these words have the power to fundamentally define his life, such as the one-word label: orphan. An orphan symbolizes an object wrenched from its origin and abandoned as an outcast. In this way, Dickens suggests that every aspiring writer is like an orphan: an individual in an unsupported position as he struggles to find his place in a world already so full.

The extraction of George Silverman from his Preston cellar and subsequent education under the auspices of Brother Hawkyard is akin to the process by which a writer must be trained to respect the literary canon before daring to step outside of its institution. George is “lifted out of the cellar,” a passive description that accurately portrays what the early years of education are like for an aspiring writer: education is done *to* the writer, not *with* or *by* the writer (Dickens 3). When George emerges from the cellar, he hears that his maternal grandfather is dead and asks: “Where’s his houses?” to which Hawkyard responds: “Hah! Horrible worldliness’...The bystanders seemed to form an opinion of this gentleman much more favourable than their opinion of me” (Dickens 4). On one hand, it is easy to understand why the gathered crowd finds the denouncement of their preacher more

credible than the utterances of a bedraggled orphan pulled from a cellar. But the bystanders also represent the audience to George's first story, in which case the readership would still be more inclined to heed the stories of the established institution than the ramblings of a fledgling writer. Mr. Hawkyard represents the age-old literary canon, and the dogma that runs deep in the literary institution. As "a servant of the Lord" for an unchanging "five-and-thirty years" throughout all the time that George Silverman knows him, the static Mr. Hawkyard is the *hawk* that keeps a keen supervision on the young boy and has him reigned into a *yard* where is corralled and controlled (Dickens 5). Even though George is pulled from a cellar, he only enters a slightly larger, but equally imprisoning system: his education.

It is his departure from stifling Preston and into the natural world that sparks our young writer's imagination, much like life experience and education can enhance a writer's perception of the world. However, George is headed not only into nature, but also into the austere halls of education, and as Dickens warns, this enlightenment can possibly stunt the writer from creating due to the isolating engagement with the intimidating enormity of the literary canon. At the start of George's journey, however, he is too young to contemplate that daunting prospect. Leaving in a farmer's cart "for the first ride I ever had in my life," George the *georgos* stares out "at Preston streets as long as they lasted" (Dickens 5). He can only see the streets as long as they are in his line of vision; otherwise, George struggles to sustain scenes in his mind. When he arrives at Hoghton Towers, the venerable ruin that Dickens visited in 1854 and appreciated for its historical significance, George looks at the building "like a stupid savage...seeing no antiquity in it" (Dickens 6; Butterworth 94; "Hoghton Tower"). His lack of an education prevents him from understanding his surroundings with nuance. When he goes to sleep that first night at the start of his transformation, he is a "young vampire"—only able to survive on the lifeblood of others, but not able to create any of his own (Dickens 6).

Dickens stresses that the story's setting creates the context in which a character can develop, and the same truth applies for a writer's development. At Hoghton Tower, the castle that King James is depicted to have visited, George's imagination is cultivated (Cattermole). Continuing his reflection on his childhood, George shares that as a child he imagines the presence of imaginary creatures within the architecture of Hoghton Tower: "fearing to see I know not what dead-alive creatures come in and seat themselves, and look up with I know not what dreadful eyes, or lack of eyes" (Dickens 7). He begins to personify his surroundings and to subjectively describe his spatiotemporal circumstances, projecting his growing emotions onto the world. Observing the rats at the bottom of the staircase, he sees himself alongside them and thinks of the "old life (it had grown old already)" that he had experienced in the cellar (Dickens 8). This anthropomorphizing of the rats hints at his growing creativity and potential as a blossoming creator of fiction.

But even as George begins to plow some fertile land for himself on which to grow, he also begins to grow fearful of the looming forest that literate society presents, and its unconquerable vastness causes him to retreat. His first concern manifests in the figure of the young girl Sylvia, Latin for “forest,” and he keeps his distance since he thinks she might “take the fever from him”—that the ignorance from his time in the cellar might be contagious in any connections he forms (Dickens 9). Sylvia invites him to a party, but he refuses to go for fear of infecting her. As George watches the partygoers wistfully from his window, he thinks: “they will take no hurt from me” (Dickens 9). He thinks like an insecure writer, not yet confident in anything he might have to say. His saying that *they will take no hurt from me* may also mask the reverse, the projection of someone defensively thinking *I will take no hurt from them*. Thus, “[i]t was in these ways that I began to form a shy disposition; to be of a timidly silent character under misconstruction” (Dickens 10). While George writes that he was timid in the Preston cellar, it was a baseless timidity due to his confined state. Now, however, his “silent character” presents a more accurate portrayal of the person he is becoming, because he is quite literally “under construction” through his education in the world.

The education that George Silverman receives gives the young writer a refuge to fall back on in his moments of insecurity, but the academic instruction doesn’t allow him the freedom to truly cultivate his own interests. George is made to “prosper” under Hawkyard’s “schooling,” but as he grows “wiser,” he notes that “I liked it less and less” (Dickens 10). George notices how the establishment only allows for one dogma to exist at a time: Gimblet, another elder of the sect, must fall in line behind Hawkyard, which reduces Gimblet’s words to mere parentheticals (Dickens 11-12). George can’t shake the nagging suspicion that Hawkyard has appropriated his grandfather’s property, the inheritance George had dreamed of receiving while stuck in his childhood Preston cellar. In an effort to vindicate himself from this “worldly” misgiving, George writes “an ample tribute of thanks” to Hawkyard before leaving for college (Dickens 13). Realizing the ramifications his writing to Hawkyard can have, “[a]ccordingly, I wrote the document with much care” (Dickens 14). His attempt ultimately backfires; Hawkyard seizes upon the letter to humiliate him publicly in church. George leaves the service, realizing how “I was weak enough to feel as though it were my hard fortune to be misrepresented and misunderstood” (Dickens 17). George departs, unhappy that he cannot gratefully reconcile with his benefactor without feeling disadvantaged. This tension between George and Hawkyard is the tension that exists between an aspiring writer and the establishment: the tradition of academia, publishers, editors, and canonized writers. While the literary institution provides the necessary foundations to ground oneself in, a writer risks grinding endless ingratiating circles into firming cement from which he can never fully extricate himself.

At college, George Silverman dedicates himself entirely to his studies, hoping to find a space in which he can succeed. From his college room window, he watches his peers: “boats’ crews and...athletic young men on the glistening water,” although he never takes part in socializing with them (Dickens 19). Instead, he observes his colleagues from a distance, as though he can sufficiently learn the essence of their humanity from the books he reads.

After spending time hidden behind innumerable books at college, at last, George is “qualified” to create, and Dickens begins to shed light on the creative process of a well-rounded post-graduate attempting to compose original work. George Silverman creates characters by taking ownership of them, molding them in his own image, and, through them, demonstrating the process of writing a character. George’s first opportunity for “character creation” occurs when he becomes the tutor of a young baronet, Sir Gaston Fareway. While it was George’s job to teach Fareway, he ultimately considers it “my due to dissuade him from going up for an examination which he could never pass; and he left college without a degree” (Dickens 19). Giving this guidance, George takes virtual ownership of the young Fareway’s future, making the college dropout George’s very first “character.” George soon comes into greater opportunity; the young baronet introduces George to his mother, Lady Fareway, and George is given a house—a Jamesian “house of fiction,” with the promise of a pupil he can mold and create and through whose “pierced aperture” he can stare out at the world (*The Art of the Novel* 46).

Lady Fareway offers a vacant estate for George Silverman to live in, and an ellipsis in the narrative brings the reader immediately to George Silver’s description of Adelina Fareway. Adelina is the biological daughter of Lady Fareway, but she is also the brainchild of George’s imagination (Chatman 70-72). After all, as her tutor, George is able to shape her into his desired image. He works on her with the materials of the “classical acquirements” left at his disposal to mold a being of his own origination. A veritable Pygmalion who carves his ideal woman from an ivory slab, George builds Adelina from the foundation in Latin and Greek they already share (Dickens 21; Ovid 260). This character that George creates possesses “beauty,” “intelligence,” “quickness of perception,” “powers of memory,” and “sweet consideration,” while George is the loving, “slow-paced tutor who ministered to her wonderful gifts” (Dickens 21). Just as Dickens writes that the imaginative quality of his writing is dependent on his involvement with his characters, here, he provides the internal process of the writer in the midst of creating a character.

A slow, steady, and constant devotion to the creation of a character will ultimately result in the steadfast flow of inspiration that writers seek. George grows infatuated with Adelina; in the plot of the actual story, George senses that Adelina loves him back. His rationalization for Adelina’s love for him, however, is evocative of the thought process a writer undergoes while forming his character: “She may have enhanced my knowledge, and loved me for that...she may- she must- have

confused the borrowed light of what I had only learned, with its brightness in its pure, original rays; but she loved me at that time, and she made me know it” (Dickens 22). George feels that his new “character” is a product of his learning and this act of origination gives the writer a newfound, emboldened sense of knowledge. All the time spent reading the works of others is meaningful, since the writer can now use what he knows to originate.

However, having created such a sublime character, the writer becomes emotionally invested to the point that he is unsure how to proceed with the story. Dickens steps in, calming down the exhilarated character-creator and reminding George—and any writer—that he is not the first in the literary tradition to create a beautiful, kind, and desirable female character. In the plot of this story, Adelina, whose name originates from the French *adeline* which means “nobility,” is unattainable to George. In Proppian terminology, the *dramatis persona* of Adelina represents the sought-for person in this possible fairytale. The English literary memory can still recall the famous European story of Abelard and Eloisa: the star-crossed tutor and pupil who fall in love but are ultimately destined to be apart (Pope 55-64). Therefore, while Adelina may resemble this idealized female archetype, it would be too formulaic for the story to proceed exactly as readers might expect. Instead of creating predictable characters who follow a predictable pattern, some element of the story must present a surprise.

Therefore, Dickens writes that George Silverman voluntarily abandons his love for Adelina as a requisite part of his budding authorship. The plot, Dickens advises, must be subverted. This process begins when George finds another pupil whom he is tutoring—an orphaned “young gentleman” named Mr. Granville Wharton—and describes him as a “well-looking, clever, energetic, enthusiastic; bold; in the best sense of the term, a thorough young Anglo-Saxon” (Dickens 23). Granville represents the *grand ville*—or the perfect city—in which George will settle Adelina once and for all. Having created his two perfect characters, George can marry the two of them together and hope to feel satisfied. This idealized depiction is yet another example of the saintly light in which a writer views his characters; just as Adelina stems from nobility and Granville evokes the image of a person of high estate, it is easy for a writer to aggrandize his characters after having invested so much time and effort into creating them. George thus decides, in a subversion of the readers’ expectations, that he will hold back from pursuing Adelina for himself and instead: “I resolved to bring these two together” (Dickens 23). This assertion is made with confidence: George will become a matchmaker, constructing the plot as a writer would.

The work of a writer necessitates isolation, and through dealing as a matchmaker between his two “characters,” George is forced to “be more of a recluse and bookworm than I really had become” (Dickens 24). In this quiet writing process of creating a story, George slowly tries to strip away the distinctions between his

education and what he wants to express: “I separated myself from my poets and philosophers; was careful to present them in their own light, and me, their lowly servant, in my shade” (Dickens 24). George distances himself from the literary canon while still acknowledging the service it has afforded him. He retreats to hovering in the background, while he sets the stage so that his imaginary creations can have a happy ending in his story. Note that here, too, George has become a “servant” to the writing process, just like Mr. Hawkyard is a servant to the establishment (Dickens 5). George Silverman the writer recedes into the lonely background in his effort to unite his two characters.

In his effort to bring Granville and Adelina together, George “labour[s] to raise Granville... directing his attention to such subjects as I knew would interest her, and fashioning him (do not deride or misconstrue the expression, unknown reader of this writing; for I have suffered!) into a greater resemblance to myself in my solitary one strong aspect” (Dickens 24). Dickens is restating the obvious, but perhaps not much spoken, truth that writers take their knowledge, their lived experience, themselves—and channel that raw information into the development of their characters. The grand finale of George’s story is the marriage of Adelina and Granville and, at last, his work is done: “It was on a summer morning that I rose before the sun for the crowning of my work with this end... Methought that all I looked on said to me, and that all I heard in the sea and in the air said to me, ‘Be comforted, mortal, that thy life is so short. Our preparation for what is to follow has endured, and shall endure, for unimaginable ages’” (Dickens 25). The wedding of Adelina and Granville is a bittersweet ending for solitary George. Before he performs the wedding ceremony, he is comforted by nature’s immortality and the relatively short lives of human beings; the sea and air will inevitably persist, and George is consoled by the ephemerality of human suffering.

He chooses to step away from pursuing his own worldly desires, and instead, invests his time in creating happiness for his characters. As a writer, George writes for the lives of his characters, but never for his own. Even the explanatory nature of “George Silverman’s Explanation” is less about himself than it is his defense against the opinions that others hold of his characters’ marriage. Similarly, the writer has little life except in the creation of the lives of others. Coming close to finishing his story, the writer hopes that he will live on through the words he has written, even after death. George Silverman’s pronouncement: “I married them” is a dual declaration of the consummation of Adelina and Granville Wharton’s marriage and the consummation of the writer’s mission, in a bold tone reminiscent of the famous line: “Reader, I married him” from *Jane Eyre* (Dickens 25; Brontë 386). After the exertion of creating, George is “at peace” (Dickens 25).

Even though George successfully creates this couple and weds them, his characters in this story are still missing the vitality of realism. Throughout the story, the central consciousness focuses on the first-person narrator and protagonist

George Silverman. His character is the most classically developed, fulfilling Aristotle's four principles of characterization: *chreston* or the possession of moral elevation, *harmotton* or the endowment of traits that relate to the action he takes, *homois* or the possession of idiosyncrasies, and *homalon* or consistency (Prince 13). The characters that surround him, however, are markedly minor and flat. George Silverman's characters lack a dynamic quality: Adelina and Granville are cobbled together with bits and pieces of George's values, but he does not flesh them out with the roundness that would give them believable realism. M.K. Bradby describes George Silverman as having a "subtle pervading egotism in his attitude towards other people... he cannot put himself into other people's places and realize that their feelings are as poignant as his own" (17). As a result, the narrator George Silverman seeks to be understood and endeavors to express himself, but he falls short in empathizing with the people in his life and personifying them in a believable manner. As a writer, the flat perception of his "characters" speaks to his amateur writing level (more than just personal egotism)—this inadequacy reflects George's inability to flesh out characters properly. While George is proud of his work, he is still an inexpert writer. Perhaps his most blatant failure is his reclusive nature and affection for books instead of friends—a habit he developed at Hoghton Tower by avoiding Sylvia and continued throughout college. A writer would be short-sighted in thinking that his books can supply him with all the truths about humanity.

Therefore, even though George Silverman finishes writing his story, he does not consider the social reception that follows the wedding ceremony, and Dickens continues with the denouement of disillusionment that a writer who is not appreciated by his audience might face. After all, while George may envision his characters with halos, their perfection only resides in the refuge of his mind, represented meagerly by the words he has managed to put down on paper. George Silverman must now return to Lady Fareway, the woman who provides George with his *fare*—the material means to enact his goals. But Lady Fareway's *way* of obtaining her *fare* is shrewd and not necessarily *fair* (like the pronunciation of her name might suggest). Lady Fareway is truly "worldly"; as a businesswoman, she takes an active path to secure a means for living. When George enters Lady Fareway's office, she "filled my hands with papers before I could originate a word" (Dickens 26). Removed from the pedestal of production, the writer is rudely returned to the real world—a place where his thoughts are not appreciated, where the words of his predecessors preempt him in importance, and where the pursuit of capital is worth more than his creativity.

When George informs her of what he has done, Lady Fareway "tore [the papers] out of my hands and tossed them on her table" (Dickens 26). In an instant, George realizes he has lost his job. But as a writer, this action holds more meaning: he is no longer privy to the internal workings of the establishment; he loses his hard-earned access to the material means he depends on for his work. Then Lady Fareway

hurls out the fateful words: “You worldly wretch!” (Dickens 26) Lady Fareway views George Silverman as a threat. Considering his strong liberal education and the means for living that she provides him with, she sees his creative aspirations as an act of betrayal. She accuses him of being “a disinterested scholar, with not a design beyond his books” (Dickens 26). Once again, George’s naiveness does himself a disservice. Overly immersed in the realm of abstract ideas and character creation, George the writer lacks the foresight to realize the implication of his work in the real world.

The result of George Silverman marrying his two “characters” is that “[f]or years a cloud hung over me, and my name was tarnished” (Dickens 26). While the outside world shuns George, he finds refuge in the stronghold of characters that he created and relishes in the quiet solitude of existing with them in his own mind: “They stood by me, Adelina and her husband, through it all” (Dickens 28). After a lifetime of reading the events of others and having a hand in creating his own tribute, George sits by the window of his room; “I pen it for the relief of my own mind, not foreseeing whether or not it will ever have a reader” (Dickens 28). George writes his explanation alone, staring at a churchyard outside his window. Conscious of the fact that he began his life in a cellar and will one day return underground in a casket, these words are George’s only chance to explain himself on this earth. His final words also counterintuitively represent the writer’s last attempt to make an impression upon his readers. As Henry James remarks: “The author makes his readers just as he makes his characters” (Lewis 1). The narrator George Silverman writes without an explicit reader in mind; therefore, the implied reader for George Silverman is also the real reader. This writer’s tactic of conversing with an invisible audience that he is unsure exists means that he has already forged a connection with any reader who picks up his story.

“George Silverman’s Explanation” is Charles Dickens’s cautionary tale. At each fork in the road in the progress of the writer, Dickens could have chosen to portray the successful integration of the writer into society or warn his readership of the possible hurdles and pitfalls that a writer will inevitably encounter. He chooses the latter, and the result is a story replete with instructive lessons. Dickens was, first and foremost, a people’s writer; his satirical edge meant that “the thrust of [his work] is towards upsetting hierarchies of knowledge (Mee 7). A happy ending to this story would not have been useful. George Silverman encounters many divergent roads: he can either believe in the integrity of his early creativity or he can suppress his imagination; he can either use the literary canon as a solid foundation on which to build or he can stay resentfully shackled by the institution’s enormity; he can either join society or he can remain apart. Each time George stumbles down the wrong road in this Dickensian forest, potential writers are warned. Dickens wrote to his editor about “George Silverman’s Explanation” that “I feel as if I had read something (by somebody else) which I should never get out of my head” (Ullman 11). The lessons latent in the allegory of the story also struck Dickens as useful

advice—not necessarily stemming from himself, but from the world of writers. The unfortunate ending should not necessarily serve to dissuade writers from writing. Rather, the readers of Dickens’s final short story should understand the hard work of tilling the literary soil and pioneering their own paths, forewarned about the struggles that lie ahead.

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