

### **How important is setting in the novels of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins?**

In the two novels 'The Woman in White' by Wilkie Collins and 'Bleak House' by Charles Dickens setting is important to create effect and atmosphere. When reading these two novels there are clear contrasts between the story line, atmosphere, setting and characters that are seen instantly. This is not a coincidence; a link was formed between the two authors after meeting and becoming close friends since March 1851. "We saw each other every day, and were as fond of each other as men could be. Nobody (my own dear mother excepted, of course) felt so positively sure of the future before me in literature, as Dickens did."<sup>1</sup> This is a quote from one of Wilkie Collins' letters describing how close they were. Another piece of evidence proving Dickens and Collins were exceptionally close is the fact that Collins' younger brother Charles Allston married Dickens' younger daughter Kate. This shows how close the two writers were and how they inspired each other. This is partly the reason the two novels 'The Woman in White' and 'Bleak House' have distinct similarities.

The setting in both novels is similar due to this link between Collins and Dickens, and a tradition of sensational fiction writing in the Victorian period. The setting influences many aspects of the story, including events, actions, as well as the characters mood, personality and actions. However all of these influences are dictated by how the writer wants the reader to feel and express their feelings. Dickens and Collins create a wide variety of feelings on their readers through out the novels from upbeat, down to morbid as well as awkward. Dickens creates this awkwardness by adding humor into the novel which almost seems forced upon the characters and the reader. This is seen in the scene in which Skimpole looks at other people paying his debts with the air of a kindly outsider, hoping that the people may 'sign something'. John Jarndyce also refers to the 'East Wind' during awkward moments. This makes the reader also feel awkward; however it always catches the moral of the characters within the novel.

Firstly Dickens uses the setting to describe how the Jarndyce and Jarndyce law case is no longer clear to anyone involved, 'Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows, fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city'<sup>2</sup>. Dickens carries on to describe the fog further in even greater detail using pathetic fallacy, this is of great significance due to how chaotic and unclear the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case really is. By doing this Dickens shows how law suits and cases were so messed up in the 1800s (Bleak house was written between March 1852 and September 1853 in twenty monthly installments). This could also reflect the law system and how people were corrupt and untrustworthy within the law system for example the police. Inspector Bucket was always critical of Jo, and Jo is being falsely accused such as when he was caught with a large amount of money that he was given 'we haven't got much good out of you'<sup>3</sup>. This is also due to the injustice of the social hierarchy in which Inspector Bucket abused the authority

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<sup>1</sup> Bowen, John. "Champagne Moments". Times Literary Supplement. (February 3, 2006): 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Dickens, Charles, Bleak House, (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2001), P. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Dickens, Charles, Bleak House, (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2001), P. 272.

he was given over Jo, due to Jo being a 'lower class citizen' and further down the social hierarchy.

Collins doesn't use the technique of pathetic fallacy to describe setting and events in the novel frequently. When Collins does use it, however, he doesn't go into as much detail as Dickens with the descriptions. 'I was on the dark side of the road, in some thick shadows of some garden trees'; this is when Hartright realizes that he has helped a woman escape from an asylum. The Darkness represents the events that now lay ahead at Cumberland, due to helping this woman. The thick darkness also represents how Hartright does not know much about the woman he has met (In the dark), and the mystery links between the Woman in White, also known as Anne Catherick as an illegitimate daughter of Laura's father. This is an important aspect in the two novels, it portrays how Collins and Dickens novels will keep going, it's more interesting for the reader to read about how setting is being created using atmosphere rather than just being told straight up. This is due to the reader actively having to think how the writers what these two novels to be portrayed. We also see what the writers Dickens and Collins want their readers to draw out of the pathetic fallacy. 'mysteries in most sensational novels do not clearly connect with anything higher than a particular case of arson or bigamy or murder. The mysteries in Bleak House point to the large mysteries of community and isolation, love and selfishness in the society that Dickens anatomizes.'<sup>4</sup>. This critical quote from Lyn Pykett, shows how she believes that the reader should portray Dickens pathetic fallacy. I agree with this quote due to it being significant in Dickens life as well as with in the novel of Bleak House.

I can also get a sense of what the Wilkie Collins wants the reader to take from her characters, from the critical essay by Lyn Pykett.

'And unlike the Deadlocks and their followers in Bleak House, who represent everything that Dickens thinks is wrong with the decaying aristocracy of the 1850s, Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco in The Woman in White are not bearers of social or even weighty moral messages. Sir Percival is a stereotypical melodrama villain from whose career of deceit and crime Collins asks us to draw only the most obvious morals. Count Fosco is much more interesting as a character, but the shadowy Italian politics that destroyed him at the end of the novel are only a deus ex machina to bring on his just deserts.'<sup>5</sup>.

Like other novels written by Collins, such as No Name and Man And Wife; Collins show the marriage laws and injustice within the system and social reform in the in the forefront. We also see that Collins is not interested with the conditions of the private asylum and secret societies. This shows how both writers have carefully described the points within the novel that they feel need highlighting. They achieved this through the use of pathetic fallacy throughout the novel, being careful not to describe anything they

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<sup>4</sup> Pykett, Lyn, The sensational novel from The Woman in White to The Moonstone, (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1994) P. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Pykett, Lyn, The sensational novel from The Woman in White to The Moonstone, (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1994) P. 47.

don't feel is necessarily of interest to the point they are trying to put incorporate; whether these are political views or social views.

Another way, in which Dickens creates an important setting, is the way he names his settings. For example in *Bleak House* he calls the house which Esther lives in along with John Jarndyce, Ada Clare and Richard Carstone, 'Bleak House'. This automatically creates the impression on the reader that the house is grim, gloomy, dismal and oppressive place to be. Dickens does this frequently to show what the setting is like, before he even begins with his excellent description's of the setting, describing it in inevitable detail to the reader to create a clear picture in their heads. This is also shown in chapters such as 'The Ghost's Walk' and 'Chesney wold'. He also uses this technique with characters in *Bleak House*. 'Lady Dedlock'<sup>6</sup> has her fate already destined due to her name sounding like the word 'dead'. This is shown when Lady Dedlock dies in Pauper's Graveyard and is found by Esther. Another prime example of this is 'Krook' which sounds like crook. This is shown to match his name when crook steal's Nemo's letters and hides them.

Collins does not use this technique much in his writing. Instead he uses his first person narrator to describe his surroundings in detail. 'Placed amid the other rare and beautiful objects on a large round table near him, was a dwarf cabinet in ebony and silver, containing coins of all shapes and sizes, set out in little drawers lined with dark purple velvet'<sup>7</sup>. This is a very detailed description for an object so small and insignificant. However it helps the reader to create a clearer picture of what the room as a whole looks like. For example, it is unlikely to be rundown with an expensive dwarf cabinet in it, so the reader see's the room as luxury just as the cabinet is. Although the two writers use different techniques they are both effective on creating the picture of what the writer wants. This picture is important to be created otherwise messages the writer's are trying to portray such as political views, atmosphere or characters action (or characters personalities) may not be portrayed in the right way.

However we do see a limited example of this technique used by Collins such as 'Blackwater Park'. This name reflects a lot of the negativity of the house due to the name 'black' being associated with a negative atmosphere such as evil, suffering, mystery and death.

Dickens and Collins settings importance are however very similar. This is due to the link between the two writers being friends and influencing each other. In Collins novel 'The Woman in White', Limmeridge house is a contrast to 'Bleak House' in the way both are dreary, as well as the three main characters living there. Both houses are also large and of resemble wealth; Blackwater Park is also a contrast to Chesney Wold due to the negativity of the house as well as the characters that are created in the house. We also see a link into the characters actions due to the setting and links between Collins and Dickens. Marian get's ill with typhus in Blackwater house 'Ill, at such a time as this!'<sup>8</sup>. In *Bleak House* Laura is unable to see her due to her illness. In *Bleak house* Esther get's

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<sup>6</sup> Dickens, Charles, *Bleak House*, (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Collins, Wilkie, *The Woman In White*, (London: Penguin Classics, 1985, ISBN: 0-14-043096-2). P. 66.

<sup>8</sup> Collins, Wilkie, *The Woman In White*, (London: Penguin Classics, 1985). P. 358.

ill with small pox, and has a disfigurement due to them. 'when she knows I am ill', 'Charley; I am blind.'<sup>10</sup> This shows how the links between the setting and characters are influenced by the correlation between Dickens and Collins. These events of Esther falling ill then lead onto other issues, such as 'psychologically by her inability to believe that Woodcourt is in love with her and her consequent acceptance of Jarndyce's proposal of marriage'<sup>11</sup>. This again shows how the setting of 'Bleak House' is reflected in its name, as well as the atmosphere leading up to bad events and situations within the novel.

Dickens also express strong political views in Bleak House, this is due to Dickens becoming a political journalist in 1834 for the morning chronicle. These Political views of the forgotten poor and disadvantaged in London are shown Bleak House in mainly five different chapters: Covering a Multitude of sins, Tom-all-Alone's, Mr Bucket, Nurse and Patient and Jo's will. Covering a multitude of sins describes a barrier between the well educated rich and the poor. 'We both felt painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier, which could not be removed by our new friend.'<sup>12</sup>. This shows how dickens thought there was a barrier that could not be breached between the rich and poor. Collins Political views of the poor are not shared with Dickens, as strongly in The Woman in White. Although there are infrequent references to the poor and rich. For example Laura marrying Sir Percival Glyde, rather than marrying the person she loves, Walter Hartright. This could also be argued to be part of the idealist woman both Dickens and Collins create. However, I believe it has links with political views. We also see Dickens political views expressed through Chancery when 'Miss Flite' is being driven mad by the 'Jarndyce and Jarndyce'. She also says her birds will be released on 'the day of judgment' this shows how she is also tied down into the Jarndyce case. We also see this in Krook's house when he has a lot of paper going mould and decaying. This reflects how the Jarndyce case has papers in chancery with decaying papers on them due to the case going on for such an excessive amount of time. This makes the setting important in the novel, due to the papers subtly emphasis the point of the long and extended court case which is currently happening.

I believe in both novels 'The Woman in White' by Collins and 'Bleak House' by Dickens setting is extremely important to build up the novel, keep the reader interested, as well as to put across Collins and Dickens beliefs. I think both writers have used similar settings as well as plots in the story due to their connection. However they use different and original techniques to build up their settings which will help to create a picture in the reader mind. Their descriptions, pathetic fallacy and setting names used together; to create maximum impact onto the reader. This will the keep the reader interested, and wanting to read on. The contrast of extreme poor and rich settings allow Collins and Dickens to easily express their political views, which influenced many journalists and political figures. This demonstrates how well the setting was used by the two close friends. Dickens and Collins also concentrates on how children were treated wrongly by using setting. These techniques and ideas Dickens and Collins use show how very

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<sup>9</sup> Dickens, Charles, Bleak House, (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2001). P. 378.

<sup>10</sup> Dickens, Charles, Bleak House, (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2001). P. 378.

<sup>11</sup> Allan, Janice (ed), Charles Dickens's Bleak House: A Sourcebook, (London Routledge, 2004) P. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Dickens, Charles, Bleak House, (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2001). P. 94.

important setting is in 'Bleak House' and 'The Woman in White'. By using setting it allowed Dickens and Collins to express their political views clearly.