The Mystery of Edwin Drood

by Allan Ronald

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*The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* Dickens's final novel, left uncompleted upon his death, was to have been brought out in twelve monthly parts, beginning in April 1870. This was a departure from his usual practice which was to bring out work in twenty monthly numbers. When he died in September of 1870 the novel was at the half-way point and was published as one volume in that same month. While Dickens was planning and writing the novel he was involved in his farewell tour of readings from his earlier novels, prominently featuring Sykes's murder of Nancy; in his letters at this time he wrote about acting the part of a murderer and one of the features of *Drood* was to be its exploration of the criminal mind in someone, unlike Bill Sykes, who was not a member of the so-called 'criminal classes.' Dickens was also extremely busy with the production of his weekly magazine, *All The Year Round,* and was at this period close to complete physical collapse.

The novel seems to be close in form and style to the so-called 'sensation novel', a genre begun in 1860 by Wilkie Collins with *The Woman in White.* Several other popular novels of this type were written during the 1860s including Ellen Price Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and other works by Collins, notably *Armadale* (1866) and *The Moonstone* (1868). These works were marked by a certain formulaic approach, often including criminal feelings and behaviour among the 'respectable' classes, a tendency to melodramatic dialogue and storyline, mistaken or concealed identities and the appearance of a *femme fatale.* The genre continued to have some success up to George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894). Dickens was surely alert to the existence and success of these works as he collaborated with Wilkie Collins, who contributed to his magazines, especially on *No Thoroughfare* in 1867. This work looks forward to the character of John Jasper in *Drood,* having a protagonist whose villainous character had appeared in the stage version to attract 'pity and sympathy.' There are links between *Armadale* and *Drood,* too: the chapter in the former entitled 'The Mystery of Ozias Midwinter', for example, points to the eventual title of the Dickens novel, and the *femme fatale* Lydia Gwilt, with her laudanum addiction, looks forward to John Jasper's opium habit.

Dickens, however, did not suddenly turn to a winning formula purely for commercial success and there is little that is formulaic about *Drood.* Earlier novels of his had contained elements of mystery and sensation: *Bleak House* (1852-3) carries the dreadful secret of Lady Dedlock and the murder of the blackmailing lawyer, Tulkinghorn, as well as several concealed identities, and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), the novel written before *Drood,* has a number of lost and concealed identities as well as some similarities with the plotting of the final novel of Dickens. For example, the 'arranged' marriage of Rosa Bud and Edwin Drood is a more benevolent mirror-image of that between Bella Wilfer and John Harmon and both novels feature a pair of young women of contrasting character, Bella Wilfer and Lizzie Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend* and Rosa Bud and Helena Landless in *Drood.* While there are traces of the various hallmarks of the 'sensation' novel in *Drood,* it is much more psychologically satisfying than most of its supposed prototypes. Dickens achieves success in this novel, putting him far above the run-of-the-mill practitioners of the genre, by means of his plotting, his characterisation, his creation of atmosphere and use of settings, and his skill in bringing in elements of comedy to lend relief to what might become lurid melodrama.

Although the story-line, and Dickens's notes for each part of the work, only reached the half-way point in the novel, we do have some idea of the plot that he intended to use. In his excellent biography of Dickens, Michael Slater quotes John Forster, Dickens's friend and first biographer, to whom the author had outlined the plot:
an uncle was to murder his nephew only to discover almost at once that the situation motivating his crime had ceased to exist before he had committed it.

Lime would be used, as Orlick had intended to use it in *Great Expectations*, to get rid of the body but a gold ring worn by the nephew would resist its corrosive effects and ultimately lead to the detection and conviction of the murderer. The final chapters were to echo another Dickens novel, *Oliver Twist*, with the murderer shown in the condemned cell, as Fagin had been presented, ‘to which his wickedness, all elaborately elicited from him as if told of another, had brought him.’ The artist who illustrated the monthly parts, Luke Fildes, recalled Dickens telling him to show John Jasper wearing a long scarf ‘for [he] strangles Edwin Drood with it.’ In the course of working out the first part of this plot Dickens showed himself in control of the various plotting techniques of the mystery novel. For example, while the Cloisterham Cathedral choirmaster, John Jasper, is introduced to us in a degraded opium den and thus is presented as an object of suspicion, Dickens skilfully introduces what are known as ‘blinds’. These are ‘red-herrings’ brought into the plot in order to lead the reader’s suspicion away from the real criminal. Neville and Helena Landless perform this function (along with much more subtle roles in the novel). They are presented very much as ‘other’, alien, possibly half-Asian, figures from Ceylon:

- both very dark and very rich in colour....something untamed about them both;
- a certain air upon them of hunter and huntress; yet withal a certain air of being the objects of the chase.

Speaking of his cruel stepfather, Neville Landless tells his tutor, Minor Canon Crisparkle, that ‘it was well he died when he did or I might have killed him.’ Later he quarrels violently with Drood and goes to throw a glass at him and speaks of challenging him to a duel. Although there is a subtle suggestion here that he is acting not only from animosity to the smug Drood but also from the effects of a drink drugged by Jasper, he goes on to increase the reader’s suspicions of his character by describing his own nature as ‘secret and revengeful.’

Jasper stokes this impression by describing the scene of the quarrel to Crisparkle as ‘murderous’ and claiming ‘he [Landless] might have laid my dear boy dead at my feet.’ Later Jasper further implicates Neville as a possible murderer by reading his diary entry for the night of the quarrel to Crisparkle, telling how

- the demoniacal passion of this Neville Landless, his strength in his fury, and his savage rage for the destruction of its object, appall me.

All in all, Jasper claims the incident has left him with ‘dark and intangible presentiments of evil.’ While all of this activity on the choirmaster’s part might be felt to be in danger of over-egg the pudding and thus casting suspicion on himself, Landless’s actions on the night of the Christmas Eve dinner of reconciliation with Drood and Jasper are used by Dickens to cast him still further in a suspicious light: he burns all his papers, packs his clothes in a knapsack, tries a suspiciously heavy iron-shod stick for the walking expedition he has planned, with Crisparkle’s permission, to set out on in the morning of the next day.

Dickens, however, is much more concerned in this novel with the exploration of character than with muddying the waters of a ‘mystery’ plot. His daughter, Katey, claimed he was ‘deeply fascinated and absorbed in the study of the criminal, Jasper.’ The doubleness of the choirmaster’s character is strikingly revealed in the opening chapter. At its start he is coming out of an opium trance in a room shared with a ‘Lascar and a Chinaman’ and the old woman who owns the opium den and who mixes the drug. All three are presented in a debased light: ‘the Lascar laughs and dribbles out of the mouth’, ‘the Chinaman.... snarls horribly’ and the old woman has smoked herself into ‘a strange likeness of the Chinaman.’ Dickens’s readers would have seen in this a picture of degradation that was racial as well as moral and physical.

The chapter ends with as different a setting as one could imagine: the cathedral at Cloisterham where the opium addict is leading the choir in their suitably ‘sullied robes’ as they sing an anthem taken from Ezekiel 18: 27:

> When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed and doth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive.
Sadly we will never know how, or how successfully, Dickens intended to examine this psychology of doubleness, so reminiscent of Wringhim in Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. There is, unfortunately, little psychological subtlety in the picture we are given of Jasper in his dealings with his music pupil, Rosa Bud. Although she is betrothed to his nephew, Edwin Drood, he is in love with her. Rosa is presented at first as a familiar Dickensian female type, childish and helpless with ‘a thumb in the corner of [her] mouth’ and consuming in the course of a walk with Drood a quantity of Lumps-of-Delight, ‘a Turkish sweetmeat.’ She is understandably in fear of Jasper who exerts a Svengali-like influence over her. She tells Helena Landless, who has swiftly become her close friend and possible protector, ‘he has made a slave of me with his looks’ and ‘he terrifies me. He haunts my thoughts.’ Indeed, at the evening party at Minor Canon’s Corner Rosa breaks off her singing in a faint as Jasper sits accompanying her and never takes his eyes off her face. When, taking advantage of Rosa being left alone in her school, Jasper makes his declaration of love and tries to blackmail Rosa into accepting him by threatening Landless, there is a strong echo of Bradley Headstone’s obsession with Lizzie Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend*, the same seething passion barely held under control. As with Headstone there is a real risk here of the scene slipping into the language and matter of melodrama, some contemporary critics even finding it near to parody.

It is that declaration and the fear that it inspires in Rosa which reveals her not to be so weak and helpless after all. She sets off alone at night to travel to London where she seeks safety and advice from her guardian, Mr Grewgious, in his chambers at Staples Inn. The incomplete nature of the novel does not allow us to see how Rosa’s character will change and develop from this promising point of strength and the beginnings of independence. An even stronger case for character development, not just within the novel but going beyond Dickens’s practice in previous novels, can be made for Rosa’s opposite, Helena Landless, she of the ‘lustrous gipsy-face’ and ‘slumbering gleam of fire in the intense dark eyes.’ This case is eloquently made by Michael Slater in his book, *Dickens and Women*:

> Helena is, it seems to me, the only female character in *Drood* the conception of whom appears to have exercised Dickens’s imagination in the way (though not to the extent) that the conception of Jasper did. It is remarkable that, although she is shown as very passionate by nature, prone to fierce resentments and distinctly ‘unfeminine’ (i.e., ungentle, independent) in many aspects of her demeanour and attitude to life, she is, unlike such predecessors as Rosa Dartle or Miss Wade, clearly intended to be a wholly sympathetic figure and perhaps even the ‘hero’ of the novel (in the sense of defeating and unmasking the villain). Mingled with the qualities that link her with Rosa Dartle or Miss Wade are two which, throughout all Dickens’s work, as we have seen, have been absolute hallmarks of the author-approved feminine; a quickness to sympathise lovingly with others of her sex, and sisterly devotion to her brother.

Slater goes on to point out that ‘Helena’s masculine qualities of physical boldness, initiative, leadership and so on forms part of an interesting pattern in Dickens’s last novel [suggesting] that the rigid sexual polarities that had tended up to this point to dominate Dickens’s characterization were beginning to give way to a freer and more complex rendering of gender in human beings.’ Here, perhaps, is the greatest artistic loss entailed by Dickens’s death before he could complete the novel.

Another aspect of Dickens’s craftsmanship in *Drood* that elevates it above the more run-of-the-mill ‘sensation’ novel is his masterly creation of setting and atmosphere. We have already noticed the finely crafted opening with its contrasting pictures of the degraded opium den and the elevated cathedral. It appears that in one of his forays with the Metropolitan Police into the slum districts of London Dickens had been shown an opium den with ‘a haggard old woman blowing at a pipe made out of a penny ink bottle’ who became the model for Jasper’s ‘dealer’, known in the novel as ‘Princess Puffer.’ However, the principal setting for the novel, Cloisterham, owes a great deal to Dickens’s boyhood memories of Rochester, another instance of the writer spinning material from his own life-experience. From that first scene in
the cathedral with its ‘muttered thunder’ and the locked iron-barred gates that ‘divide the
sanctuary from the chancel’ we enter a world that looks forward to the scholarly but sinister
purlieus of the ghost stories of M. R. James. One character in particular aids this creation of
an atmosphere at once mysterious and death-related, Durdles, the semi-intoxicated
stonemason who is used by Jasper to help him explore the hidden and threatening areas of
the ancient minster, a man who from long experience can find the hidden resting places of
long-deceased abbots and bishops. His discovery of these ‘old ‘uns’ comes by ‘his knowledge
through grubbing deep for it,’ a suggestion of the hidden and the arcane, the mysterious
‘other’ whose knowledge is only available to those in the know and which Jasper wishes to
make his own. This sinister ecclesiastical atmosphere imprints itself on Grewgious in his visit
to the cathedral where he is struck by its gloomy interior: ‘like looking down the throat of Old
Time.’ Jasper advances into this ‘throat’ by engaging Durdles, ‘always prowling among old
graves and ruins like a Ghoul,’ to take him round the hidden places of the building. At
Durdles’s yard he sees where the ‘two journeymen have left their two great saws sticking in
their blocks of stone; and two skeleton journeymen out of the Dance of Death might be
grinning in the shadow of their sheltering sentry-boxes, about to slash away at cutting out
the gravestones of the next two people destined to die in Cloisterham.’ The allusion here to
the Holbein engravings intensifies the antiquity and the macabre nature of the setting. It is
here, too, that Jasper is warned by Durdles of the quick-lime by the yard gate, ‘quick enough
to eat your bones.’ At the time of Edwin Drood’s disappearance there is a fierce wintry storm
that intensifies the mood: when Drood meets ‘Princess Puffer’ on his way to dine with Jasper
and Landless ‘the woman’s words are in the rising wind, in the angry sky, in the troubled
water, in the flickering lights.’

With the shift of the action to London we have a change of mood as well as of setting, the
settled bachelor chambers of Grewgious in Staple’s Inn (with the very funny account of the
two markedly different waiters bringing in dinner) and the remarkably neat and ordered set
of rooms inhabited and formed by Lieutenant Tartar. In stark contrast to the mediaeval
gloom of the cathedral and its precincts we find everything shipshape and Bristol fashion to a
degree that is almost on the verge of obsessive compulsive disorder: the chambers are ‘the
neatest, the cleanest and the best-ordered chambers ever seen under the sun,’ and Dickens
tells us that ‘the whole concern had a sea-going air…so delightfully complete’ that it ‘might
have bowled away gallantly with all on board if Mr Tartar had only clapped his lips to the
speaking-trumpet that was slung in a corner.’ As John Carey points out in his study of
Dickens’s imagination, The Violent Effigy, it follows on from the lodgings of Captain Cuttle in
Dombey and Son and is ‘the completion of a dream that began with Mrs Jarley’s caravan’ in
The Old Curiosity Shop.

There is little point in pursuing the speculations of those who fret over how the novel might
have ended had Dickens lived. It is striking that none of his friends and contemporaries
stepped in to complete the work. Wilkie Collins’s comment on Drood that it was ‘Dickens’s last
laboured effort, the melancholy work of a worn-out brain’ goes some way to explain why,
although he had collaborated with the novelist in the past, he did not play Sussumay to
Dickens’s Mozart and bring the novel to completion. A set of those fascinated by the possible
endings of the work, the so-called ‘Droodians’, have bothered themselves with endings that
are frequently fantastical: these have often centred on the mysterious character of Dick
Datchery, introduced shortly before the novel came to a premature halt. Some have seen
Datchery as Drood himself, having survived the murder attempt, in disguise. One ‘Droodian’
even conjectured that Datchery was Helena Landless, also in what must have been a pretty
heavy disguise, setting out to rescue the reputation of her brother. It has to be said that by
losing the end of the plot we have lost very little. By losing Dickens’s mature understanding of
the psychology of the criminal mind of John Jasper, of the positive virtues of a strong and
independent woman in Helena Landless, we have lost matter of greater value. Four years
before Dickens began this final novel, in 1866, Dostoevsky published, also in twelve monthly
parts, Crime and Punishment. It was not translated into English until fifteen years after
Dickens’s death. It would be interesting to see what a completed Drood, fully developing
Dickens's picture of the criminal mind, seen, as Forster made clear, from the criminal's own
point of view, would have produced.
Further Reading
Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens*
Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women*

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