

Dark Side of the Moon: Dickens and the Supernatural

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Abstract

Quite overshadowed by Dickens the social reformer and Victorian England's most popular and prolific author, lay Dickens a man fascinated with the occult and the supernatural, a practitioner of mesmerism, a believer in the pseudo-science of phrenology, a man so obsessed with the Gothic that time and again he registered a covert, symbolic re-emergence of it throughout his works. Dickens harboured a lifelong attraction towards the supernatural, evidenced in his childhood fondness for the weekly magazine *The Terrific Register*, dealing with themes of ghosts, murder, incest and cannibalism, and in the several ghost-stories interspersed throughout the corpus of his work. Deeply involved in the 19th Century debates over the existence of spirits and the veracity of ghost sightings, Dickens oscillated between faith in the existence of the other-worldly and scepticism. Always concerned with the psychological aspect of the supernatural, Dickens' work shows a constant engagement with the eerie, the uncanny and the grotesque. This paper attempts to explore not only the evolution of the theme of the supernatural in Dickens' works but also his changing attitudes towards it.

[**Keywords:** Dickens, ghosts, supernatural, 19th Century, psychological, attitude]

Dickens's biographer John Forster wrote 'Among his good things should not be omitted his telling of a ghost story' (Forster 1890:286). The interspersed but unmistakable presence of ghosts and goblins, the grotesque, the eerie and the uncanny throughout the works of Dickens bears ample testimony to Forster's claim. The development of Spiritualist movements on both sides of the Atlantic in the 19th Century and the Victorian tussle between faith and doubt as well as the new experiments and research regarding the science of seeing interacted with Dickens's lively imagination and story-telling genius to spawn a distinct body of supernatural fiction starting right from Dickens's early literary days of the Pickwick Papers right upto the fag end of his literary career.

Dickens's initiation into the genre of supernatural fiction may be attributed to his nanny Mary Weller about whom Dickens says 'Her name was Mary though she had none on me' (Dickens). Dickens further says in *The Uncommercial Traveller*:

The first diabolical character who intruded himself on my peaceful youth...was a certain Captain Murderer. (Dickens)

In Chapter 15 of *The Uncommercial Traveller* Dickens recounts some of the scary bedtime tales told to him by his nurse. Captain Murderer is the first tale he relates. He refers to him as 'a wretch' who 'must have been an offshoot of the Bluebeard family' (Dickens). As Dickens puts it:

Captain Murderer's mission was matrimony and the gratification of a cannibal appetite with tender brides (Dickens)

A month after his marriage the Captain would produce 'a golden rolling pin and a silver pie-board' (Dickens) and would ask his young bride to make a pie-crust. The Captain would bring in all the ingredients of the pie whereupon the bride would ask as to what kind of pie it was to be. And the Captain would answer that it was to be a meat-pie. The bride would say that she saw no meat and the Captain would humorously reply 'look in the glass' (Dickens). Still she would see no meat and the Captain would laugh and then suddenly frown and bid her roll out the pie-crust. Having done that she would hear the Captain say 'I see the meat in the glass' (Dickens) and then she would look up in the glass just in time to see her head cut off by the Captain. The Captain would then chop her in pieces, pepper her, salt her and eat her, picking the bones. The Captain finally meets his match in one of two twin sisters. The dark one of the two sisters discovers the Captain's fiendish ways and poisons herself with the result that although the Captain kills her, makes a pie of her and eats her, he starts bloating up monstrously and finally explodes, a result of the poison in his 'meat'.

Dickens recollects:

The young woman who brought me acquainted with Captain Murderer had a fiendish enjoyment of my terrors...I sometimes used to plead I thought I was hardly old enough to hear the story again just yet. (Dickens)

He farther observes:

If we all knew our own minds...I suspect we should find our nurses responsible for most of the dark corners we are forced to go back, against our wills. (Dickens)

This would be later reflected in Dickens's work dealing with the supernatural, in his attempt to trace ghost sightings to some hidden fear of the mind. Such a scientific outlook, common in Dickens's time, was expressed by Dr. Benjamin Rush on the other side of the Atlantic in his *Medical Inquiries and Observations, Upon the Diseases of the Mind*:

The fear of ghosts should be prevented or subdued in early life, by teaching children the absurdity and falsehood of all the stories that are fabricated by nurses upon that subject. (Rush 1805:331)

However, the variety and prolific output of Dickens's literary production runs contrary to such an assertion. The fact that Dickens was able to use the supernatural so creatively in his work, fusing it appropriately with other elements, culminating in the timeless classic *A Christmas Carol* rather indicates that his nanny's bedtime tales and his early familiarity with sensational magazines such as *The Terrific Register*, a weekly magazine featuring tales of cannibalism, incest and murder, stimulated Dickens's creative instincts and fired his imagination.

After recounting the story of Captain Murderer Dickens relates another tale, that of a shipwright named Chips whose ancestors had sold themselves to the Devil for 'an iron pot and bushel of tenpenny nails and half a tonne of copper and a rat that could speak'(Dickens) and who, reluctantly, strikes the same deal. A ghostly refrain occurs throughout the tale

A lemon has pips, And a Yard has ships, And I'll have Chips! (Dickens)

More than the Devil himself it is the talking rat which is the more menacing character in the story. The rat is not only indestructible despite the shipwright's several efforts to kill it, but multiplies itself, manifesting as a curse of a plague of rats in the manner of a plague of locusts in the Old Testament. The tale has elements of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. So strong was the influence of Mary Weller's description of the numerous rats on Dickens's imagination that he observes:

By this time a special cascade of rats was rolling down my back, and the whole of my small listening person was overrun with them (Dickens)

He further says:

At intervals since, I have been morbidly afraid of my own pocket, lest my exploring hand should find a specimen or two of those vermin in it. (Dickens)

Dickens first used the ghostly element in a tale belonging to *The Pickwick Papers* called *The Lawyer and the Ghost*. Dickens seems to take up a certain position here, that of a disbeliever in ghosts, a rationalist. The narrator in the story overcomes his spectral opponent with simply one thrust of commonsensical logic. He says to the ghost:

It does appear to me somewhat inconsistent, that when you have an opportunity of visiting the fairest spots of earth...you should always return exactly to the very places where you have been most miserable. (Dickens)

The ghost admits the truth of such a logic and says

Egad, that's very true; I never thought of that before...it never struck me till now; I'll try change of air directly. (Dickens)

And the ghost, defeated by the strength of the narrator's logic, disappears, never to return. This short tale marks Dickens's use of humour even in stories dealing with supernatural elements.

Another story from the *Pickwick Papers* called "The Queer Chair" reads more like a fairytale than a ghost story. The ghost in the story is a chair with human characteristics. In another tale called *The Ghosts of the Mail* the phantom coaches of the retired mail service take the hero back in time whereupon he kills two rogues and rescues a beautiful lady. The ghostly element simply helps in asserting the main character's heroics.

The true beginning of the dark and the macabre in Dickens's stories occurs with *A Madman's Manuscript* which is very Poe-esque and different from the other ghostly tales in *The Pickwick Papers*. Rather than the supernatural, this story dwells on themes of madness and guilt and is reminiscent of Poe's stories along similar line such as *The Tell-tale Heart* and *The Black Cat*. The story is written from the point of view of a lunatic, a rich young lord who is chronically insane. While the protagonist in Poe's *The Tell-tale Heart* insists on his absolute sanity, the mad narrator in Dickens's story gloats in his insanity. The madman raves:

Shew me the monarch whose angry frown was ever feared like the glare of a madman's eye- whose cord and axe were ever half so sure as a madman's grip. Ho! Ho! It's a grand thing to be mad! (Dickens)

The insane protagonist marries a beautiful young woman. She is forced into the marriage by family's poor circumstances. On one occasion the madman tries to slit her throat with a razor and she is shocked and traumatized. She undergoes a complete nervous breakdown and eventually dies. When her brother comes to comfort the madman he reveals his lunacy and tries to kill the man. However, he fails and is chased through the streets and is eventually locked up in a madhouse where he pens the manuscript.

Written in 1837 and drawn from such genres as the Gothic, the diary and the short story, *A Madman's Manuscript* showcases for the first time Dickens's fascination with the Gothic and his skill in creating an atmosphere of claustrophobia and fear. The Gothic setting would typically include a castle, crypt or a gloomy mansion with a long history of violence, murder, suicide or haunting, replete with images of ruin. As the narrator in the story describes:

The floor of the old house in which my father's father died, was stained with his own blood, shed by his own hand in raging madness (Dickens)

And then again:

Here in this grey cell where the sunlight seldom comes, and the moon steals in, in rays which only serve to show the dark shadows about me (Dickens)

In his madness the guilty narrator sees the pale figure of his wife whom he drove to sickness and death and is condemned to a life of solitude, madness and guilt.

The theme of guilt driving the culprit to madness recurs again in "The Mother's Eyes in Master Humphrey's Clock" (1840). A man befriends a tall deaf man and the latter relates a terrible story penned in a prison in the time of Charles the Second. The story is a murderer's confession. The man's sister-in-law once terrified him with her condemning stare. When she and her husband die the man adopts their son. The boy possesses the same eyes and the same condemning stare which his mother had. The man kills the boy with a sword and buries the body under a lawn. However, his guilt and fear of discovery give him nightmares and make him stare suspiciously at the spot. Finally, blood-hounds sniff out the buried body and all is over for the murderer.

The similarities with Poe's the Tell-tale Heart, which would come out three years later, are striking. The condemning stare of the murderer's sister-in-law mirrors the 'vulture eye' of the old man in Poe. There is the same basic structure of eyes-stare-hatred-murder-guilt-guilty action-discovery of crime and it is probable that Dickens's story did influence Poe in some way. Sidney P. Moss claims:

It is well-known that Poe had an interview with Dickens sometime between 5 and 9 March 1842 when the novelist put up at the United States hotel in Philadelphia (Moss 1978:10)

As Moss states, little is known of what took place between the two writers. Moss says

Poe probably hoped to impress the writer with his work and versatility as a critic, poet and writer of tales with the aim of establishing through Dickens's influence an English reputation(Moss 1978:12)

Poe is said to have sent Dickens two volumes of his Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque. Poe was quite familiar with Dickens's work and had reviewed the first four chapters of the serialized Barnaby Rudge.

The Christmas tales of Dickens amply use folklore and the supernatural. An early example would be The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton. In this story Gabriel Grubb is a mean gravedigger, a precursor of Ebenezer Scrooge who drinks and works on Christmas. Grubb is captured by a group of goblins who take him to their underground cave where he is shown scenes of misery and suffering. He witnesses the misery of a poor family whose small son dies(a precursor of tiny Tim). Grub is beaten mercilessly. He becomes a changed man and goes off to live in another village as he is unable to face his fellow villagers for shame over his past actions. Eventually, he puts stories about his disappearance to rest by returning home.

"The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton" enabled Dickens to hone his skills for his Christmas masterpiece A Christmas Carol. This was the novella with which

Dickens was to redefine Christmas, restoring it to a pre-Cromwell tradition, transforming Christmas from a Church-based festival full of sobriety and gloom to a family-and-friends based festival of merriment, giving and generosity. Dickens drew on his own humiliating experiences of childhood as well as the condition of the poor during his times. Another possible source could be Washington Irving's essays on Christmas published in his *Sketch-book* (1820) where Irving described the traditional English Christmas. Dickens's book received instant success and critical acclaim. William Makepeace Thackeray pronounced it 'a national benefit and to every man or woman who reads it, a personal kindness'(Littell 1853:390).

The supernatural element plays a pivotal role in the story. Ebenezer Scrooge is portrayed as a miserly old wretch, the surviving partner in the firm of Scrooge and Marley. Scrooge has no kindness or generosity in his nature, underpays his clerk Bob Cratchit and regards the festivities of Christmas as 'humbug'. As he retires to bed on a Christmas eve he is visited by the ghost of Marley, in grave-clothes and dragging a chain, forged of his own misdeeds. Marley repents having wasted his life in the inhuman pursuit of money and warns Scrooge that the same fate lies ahead of him and that he will be given three chances to escape it and will be haunted by three spirits. The First Spirit arrives, a curious ageless figure. It is the ghost of Christmas Past and it conducts Scrooge through scenes of his childhood and youth, bringing him remorse for opportunities wasted and the substitution of ambition for love in his life. The ghost of Christmas Present is a jolly giant who takes Scrooge to the poor home of the Cratchit family, poverty stricken but happy, even though the youngest child, Tiny Tim, is a hopeless cripple who may not live long. The ghost shows Scrooge how people everywhere are rejoicing in Christmas and how his own family laugh good-naturedly at his attitude to it. The third spirit is a mysterious shrouded apparition, the ghost of Christmas Yet to come. It shows Scrooge his own death and burial, unmourned and takes him to the sad Cratchit home where tiny Tim is only a beloved memory. The horrified Scrooge declares that he is not the man he was and begs for another chance, promising to honour Christmas in his heart. The spirit vanishes and Scrooge finds himself alone in his bedroom. Finally, Scrooge realizes that 'the Time before him was his own, to make amends in!' (Dickens). Scrooge exclaims:

I will live in the Past, the Present and the Future...the Spirits of all three shall strive within me (Dickens)

Scrooge becomes a thoroughly changed man, the very embodiment of Christmas, of giving, kindness and generosity. He visits his relations, sends a big Christmas turkey raises Bob's salary to the Cratchits, and truly honours Christmas in his heart.

"The Baron of Grogzwig" from *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) presents a truly Dickensian ghost, not a ghost per se, but an idea embodied as a ghost. The narrative is about a

young baron, given to much feasting, revelry and hunting who marries and soon finds married life frustrating and restrictive. Having suffered financial ruin he contemplates suicide and rinks heavily, preparing to cut his own throat. Soon, he sees a 'wrinkled hideous figure, with deeply sunk and bloodshot eyes, and an immensely long, cadaverous face' (Dickens)It is the Genius of Despair and Suicide. He tempts the baron onto death but the finally regains his sense of humour and drives out the spirit and goes on to sort out his life.

The Genius of Despair and Suicide could be seen as a precursor to the Ghosts of Cristmas Past, Present and Yet To Come in A Christmas Carol and the haunting spirit in The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain. He could be both a spirit and the effect of hallucination experienced by the inebriated baron. This particular 'spirit' may be taken to be a pointer towards Dickens's position regarding ghost sightings. Though an early member of the Ghost Club which was founded in 1862 Dickens was more interested in the psychological aspect of ghost sightings and at times, presented ghosts as subjective constructs of a troubled or guilty mind. It may be mentioned in this regard that the decline in the influence of religion over people's minds and advancements in science in 19th Century England had led to the generation of a strong current of thought which saw ghost sightings as an optical phenomenon, much like a mirage. Dickens took up varying, often antithetical stances in his supernatural or ghostly fiction, making it hard to bracket him as just a sceptic or a believer.

It would be worthwhile to have a brief overview of the various currents of thought in 19th Century England on the issue of ghost sightings. Zealous defenders of the traditional Christian doctrine such as Thomas Carlyle or John Ruskin argued in favour of the supremacy of spiritual vision. They pointed out the limitations of the external eye as contrasted to the more abiding insight offered by the spiritual visions of the inner eye. At the other end of the spectrum were individuals like John Ferriar, Samuel Hibbert and David Brewster, not to leave out Sir Walter Scott himself, who saw ghost sightings as optical illusions. Ferriar asserted:

It is well-known that in certain diseases of the brain such as delirium and insanity, spectral delusions take place...The best supported stories of apparitions may be completely accounted for (Ferriar 1813:14)

Ferriar saw ghosts simply as vivid visual memories that keep coming back. Hibbert affirmed:

The impressions produced on some of the external senses, especially on the eye, are more durable than the application of the impressing cause. The effect of looking at the sun in producing the impression of a luminous globe, for some time after the eye has been withdrawn from the object, is familiar to everyone. (Hibbert 1823:116)

Scott saw ghost sightings as a:

Disorder...a disease of the visual organs which present to the patient a set of spectres or appearances (Scott 1830:22)

Dickens's corpus of supernatural fiction oscillates between any fixed stance. While pieces like *The Lawyer and the Ghost*, *The Baron of Grogzwig*, *Well-authenticated Rappings*, *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* and *A Christmas Carol* present the spectre as a hallucination brought on by guilt, a troubled conscience or a state of intoxication or painful memories, stories like *The Signalman*, *To Be Read At Dusk*, stories in *The Haunted House* and *The Trial for Murder* elude any rational explanation and are testimony to the deep rootedness of Dickens's fascination with the supernatural, with ghosts simply as ghosts.

Apart from *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens's only other novel-length ghost story is *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* (1848). The story is about a certain Redlaw, a teacher of chemistry who broods over painful memories from his past life. He is haunted by his phantom-twin who is

An awful likeness of himself...with his features, and his bright eyes, and his grizzled hair, and dressed in the gloomy shadows of his dress. (Dickens)

The apparition offers to rid him of his painful memories and a deal is made. Redlaw is without memories but experiences an anger and bitterness which he passes on to others. It destroys everything good in the life of those around him. Through Milly Swidger, an angelically charitable woman, he regains his memory. Milly presents the moral of the tale:

It is important to remember past sorrows and wrongs so that you can then forgive those responsible, and, in doing so, unburden your soul and mature as a human being (Dickens)

From the fictional point of view *The Haunted Man and The Ghost's Bargain* is darker than *A Christmas Carol*. Redlaw the protagonist is not, when the story takes off, a morally vitiated or cruel man, only one who broods too much on his past. Milly Swidger is the one remarkable character, the very embodiment of kindness and is most likely an idealized version of Dickens's sister Fanny who had died of consumption the previous summer.

In its use of the motif of a gift which is actually a terrible curse, the story anticipates "The Monkey's Paw" (1902) by W. W. Jacobs. Yet another prevalent motif in the story is that of the phantom-twin, the 'ghost' in the title:

As the gloom and shadow thickened behind him, in that place where it had been gathering so darkly, it took, by slow degrees...an awful likeness of himself (Dickens)

Described by Dickens as “an animated image of himself (Redlaw) dead” (Dickens), the ghost is a ‘doppelganger’, an evil body-double representing misfortune, found in mythology, folklore and literature across cultures. In Norse mythology, there is a similar concept of a ‘vardoger’ while in Finnish mythology the same entity is called ‘etiainen’. Dickens’s story is along the same lines as William Wilson (1839) by Poe and The Double: A Petersburg Poem (1836) by Dostoevsky. In both stories the narrator is plagued by a double that drives him to insanity.

“To Be Read at Dusk” (1852) is the story of a man who overhears some couriers in the Swiss mountains. The couriers recount certain unusual happenings. In the first of two episodes a newly-wed bride dreams of a man with a dark face and a grey moustache. The husband and wife search the ancient castle where they have put up for a painting with a likeness of the face seen by the wife in her dreams, but can find none. Subsequently they meet a gentleman called Signor Dellombra who has the same countenance as seen by her. The husband befriends the gentleman so as to help his wife fight her fears. But at the end of the tale Signor Dellombra kidnaps the lady and they are never seen again.

The story uses the motif of premonition or foreboding, as does The Signalman (1866). In this story the narrator visits a railway tunnel where he meets a lonely signalman. He cries out “Halloa! Below there!” (Dickens) but the signalman is reluctant to reply. However, the signalman soon motions the man to come down to his cabin. The setting is as Gothic as it can be. There is “on either side, a dripping wet wall of jagged stone” (Dickens). There is a black tunnel “in whose massive architecture there was a barbarous, depressing and forbidding air” (Dickens). The narrator says:

So little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthly dead smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world (Dickens)

The signalman confesses to the narrator that he is haunted by a spectre whose every appearance is invariably followed by an accident. The narrator visits the signalman a second time whereupon the latter tells him about the last visit of the spectre who appeared with one arm across its eyes and crying out “Halloa! Below there! (Dickens), the same words uttered by the narrator when he first saw the signalman. The narrator tries to rationalize it all, attempting to resist “the slow touch of a frozen finger tracing out my spine” (Dickens). He even tells the signalman that:

Figures, originating in the diseases of the delicate nerves that minister to the functions of the eye, were known to have often troubled patients (Dickens)

At this stage the narrator echoes the many scientific studies and experiments that were carried out in 19th Century England regarding ghost sightings and the science of seeing. The narrator further reflects:

It was unquestionable that remarkable coincidences did continually occur, and they must be taken into account in dealing with such a subject (Dickens)

However, on his third visit to the cabin of the signalman, the narrator's rational hypothesis regarding the signalman's reports collapses. The signalman's tunnel is now the scene of an accident, the man himself having been knocked down dead by an oncoming train, whose driver, in the last moments before the accident found the signalman standing in the tracks, oblivious of the charging train and intently looking at something. The driver of the train had shouted out "Halloa! Below there!" (Dickens) and had put his arm across his face so as to avoid seeing the signalman getting knocked down, mirroring the exact gestures of the spectre as seen by the signalman and echoing the exact words uttered by the spectre as well as by the narrator on his first visit to the tunnel. The story ends with the narrator affirming the inexplicable nature of such a 'coincidence'.

In his essay "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition" (1827) Sir Walter Scott remarks:

The marvellous, more than any other attribute of fictitious narrative, loses its effect by being brought much into view. The imagination of the reader is to be excited if possible, without being gratified (Barnes & Noble 1968:314)

The Signalman, as a story utilizing the supernatural, is one in which Dickens excites the imagination of the readers in two important ways. Firstly, he avoids detailed descriptions, allowing the reader to paint a picture of the eerie environment for himself. Important information, such as details about the spectre's appearance, is purposely withheld from the reader. Secondly, Dickens keeps the reader suspended between belief and disbelief. While the narrator continually attempts to rationalize the events, the coincidences prove simply too bizarre to be explained.

"A Trial for Murder" (1865) is a story about a spirit's retribution for murder. One fine morning the narrator looks out of his window to see two men, one following another. While the first man looks to be in a rush, the narrator observes that "the face of the man who followed him was of the colour of impure wax" (Dickens). Subsequently, on a certain night the second man appears through a sealed door in the narrator's house. The narrator realizes he has seen a ghost and upon touching his servant, makes the servant see the ghost as well:

The change in him (the servant) was so startling, when I touched him, that I fully believe he derived his impression in some occult manner from me at that instant.
(Dickens)

Later, the narrator is chosen to be 'Foreman of the Jury' at the trial, the murderer being the defendant. The murdered victim's ghost appears as the thirteenth Juror. The Jury comes to an agreement and declares its verdict: guilty, whereupon the spectre disappears.

Dickens uses verbal allusions throughout to create a tense, eerie, suggestive atmosphere. For example, the sentence:

John Derrick, my trusty and attached servant for more than twenty years.
(Dickens)

A 'derrick' was the frame supporting a hangman's noose, deriving its name from Thomas Derrick who is said to have executed three thousand convicted criminals during the Elizabethan period. Then again, as a Juror counts the Jurymen:

We are Thirt-; but no, it's not possible. No. We are twelve. (Dickens)

The ghost makes the thirteenth Juryman, thirteen being a traditionally unlucky number. Sure enough the murder trial proves disastrous for the defendant. Then again, the narrator observes:

We retired to consider, at seven minutes before ten at night...and finally the Jury returned into the Court at ten minutes past twelve. (Dickens)

The specific details regarding time, highly suggestive here, point to the fact that the Jury took exactly 137 minutes to come to a verdict. A look at Psalm 137 in the Bible would reveal the coded allusion:

Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

Dickens carefully chose the allusion, one that echoes the theme of retribution.

The variety of ways in which the supernatural is used in Dickens reflects his varying stances on the subject. "Household Words" having been inaugurated in 1850, Dickens had the opportunity to express his interest in ghostly fiction as editor as well as author. A distinct feature of "Household Words" as well its successor "All The Year Round" was the special Christmas number, including stories by Mrs. Gaskell, Willkie Collins, Charles Collins, Amelia Edwards and J.S.Le Fanu. Dickens stimulated a popular taste for ghostly literature, himself writing stories of the supernatural and encouraging other writers to do the same.

The eternal lure of the supernatural, the Christmastime tradition of telling ghost stories, Dickens's own fascination with ghosts and the 19th Century Spiritualist

movement all interacted together to create the diverse ghost stories from Dickens's pen. The Spiritualist movement raged on both sides of the Atlantic but its beginnings can be said to have taken place in Hydesville, New York in 1848, with the Fox sisters claiming to be able to communicate with the ghost of a murdered peddler. The peddler's spirit would typically express itself through certain rapping sounds, even in the presence of the public. The Fox sisters performed all over America to paying audiences and, in the midst of accusations and controversies over the authenticity of the ghostly rappings, later admitted to fraud. The craze for Spiritualism had, however, already caught on with the public. The writings of the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg and the newly invented technique 'mesmerism', propounded by Franz Anton Mesmer further invigorated the bases of Spiritualism. Dickens was one of the early members of the Ghost Club, founded in 1862 and was attracted to such pseudo-scientific systems as mesmerism and phrenology.

Dickens was close to Dr. John Elliotson who championed magnetism, mesmerism and acupuncture. Dr. Elliotson was, in fact, a godfather to Dickens's son Walter. In a letter to Robert Collier on the 27th of January 1842 Dickens wrote:

With regard to my opinion on the subject of mesmerism, I have no hesitation in saying that I have closely watched Dr. Elliotson's experiments from the first...after what I have seen with my own senses, I should be untrue to both him and myself, if I should shrink for a moment from saying that I am a believer, and that I became so against all my preconceived notions. (Routledge 2003:189-90)

Dickens watched several demonstrations of magnetism and mesmerism performed by Elliotson and even took to practicing mesmerism himself. He personally practiced it on one Madame de la Rue. The two started spending long hours with each other and this put a great strain on Dickens's marriage with Catherine.

While a firm believer in mesmerism, Dickens waged a battle with séance holders and debunked the idea of ghosts appearing at séances. In his story "Well-Authenticated Rappings", written in 1858 for *Household Words*, the voice in the narrator's head turns out to be the effect of a hangover. Ironically, five days after his death in 1870, Dickens's spirit is said to have appeared at a séance in America and such appearances continued in subsequent years to propose an ending for his unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

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