Plot

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There is only one way to start this lecture: with a warning!

spoiler alert, *n* (in a review or esp. online discussion of a film, television series, etc.) an intervention used to warn a reader that an important detail of the story is about to be divulged or alluded to; a forewarning of a plot spoiler … frequently *humorous* or *ironic*, esp. in wider use

1982 *ST-2 Question* in *net.movies* (Usenet newsgroup) 8 June [*Spoiler alert*] regarding Spock's parting gesture to McCoy, it wouldn't surprize me if that's how they bring him back.

The word *spoiler* is a little bit older than *spoiler alert* but has the same thing in mind.

Spoiler, n

> *colloquial (originally U.S.). A description of a significant plot point or other aspect of a movie, book, etc., which if previously known may spoil a person's first experience of the work. Esp. in written contexts, warning the reader of an impending revelation of this type.*

1971 D. C. Kenney in *National Lampoon* Apr. 33/1. On the following pages, the National Lampoon presents, as a public service, a selection of 'spoilers' guaranteed to reduce the risk of unsettling and possibly dangerous suspense... Psycho: The movie's multiple murders are committed by Anthony Perkins disguised as his long-dead mother [etc.].

Well, the film *is* pretty pointless after *that*.

Wilkie Collins, the pioneer of what we have since come to call 'the thriller', was so concerned at the prospect of 'spoilers' from clumsy reviewers that he attached a plea to the front of his bestseller *The Woman in White* when it was published in book form in 1860. He explicitly addressed 'the critics'.

> *In the event of this book being reviewed, I venture to ask whether it is possible to praise the writer, or to blame him, without opening the proceedings by telling his story at second-hand? … if he tells [the story] at all, in any way whatever, is he doing a service to the reader, by destroying, beforehand, two main elements in the attraction of all stories — the interest of curiosity, and the excitement of surprise?*

He said this even though the novel had already appeared, as a serial, in the weekly periodical *All the Year Round* (edited and partly owned by Collins's great friend and sometime collaborator, Charles Dickens).

Plot is still what cannot be talked about in reviews, which might be one of the reasons why it plays such a small part in literary analyses of novels.

<u>The lecture needs a general spoiler alert</u>: I'm afraid that, in order to talk about 'plot', I will be giving away quite a

few plots.

So – what *is* a plot? We know the signs of one when we see them. Or rather, when we are made to see them, by the novelist.

Here is an example, from a novel with a peculiarly beautiful and intricate plot. It is from John le Carré's 1974 novel, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. The protagonist, George Smiley, has gone to Somerset to question the former spy Jim Prideaux, now a master at a benighted country prep school. Jim recalls a disastrous mission in Czechoslovakia, where he was sent by Control, Head of the Circus. 'Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief': the old rhyme is used by Control as code to identify the senior members of British intelligence, one of whom is a Soviet 'mole'.

Prodeaux was captured and interrogated under torture. After he was eventually returned to England, he was visited by fellow spook Toby Esterhase, who gave him some cash and told him to forghet everything about his mission.

> *'I could forget Tinker, Tailor and the whole damn game: moles, everything. … I could forget it. Right? Forget it. Just behave as if it had never happened.' He was shouting. 'And that's what I've been doing: obeying orders and forgetting!'*
>
> *The night landscape seemed to Smiley suddenly innocent; it was like a great canvas on which nothing bad or cruel had ever been painted. Side by side, they stared down the valley over the clusters of lights to a tor raised against the horizon. A single tower stood at its top and for a moment it marked for Smiley the end of the journey.*
>
> *'Yes,' he said. 'I did a bit of forgetting, too. So Toby actually mentioned Tinker, Tailor to you. However did he get hold of that story, unless ...'*
>
> *John le Carré, Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy, 32*

Some of you might remember <u>some</u> of this being said by Alec Guinness, in the part of George Smiley, in the 1979 BBC dramatization of the novel.

That last line is a plot hook. However, <u>did</u> he know …

Prideaux will have given up this detail under torture. So, Karla, the Soviet spymaster, will have known. So 'Gerald', his mole, will have known. So, does that mean that Toby Esterhase is 'Gerald'?

Well, no. It is a misleading clue – though if you go online, you can find le Carré devotees explaining to each other how Toby Esterhase does know this detail.

The reader of a le Carré novel is expected to be clue attentive. In an earlier lecture in this series, I talked about novelists, from Daniel Defoe to Karl Ove Knausgaard, who provide the reader with details in order to make an invented world credible. In a plot-heavy novel, observed detail is likely to excite curiosity rather than belief.

Here is a passage from the first chapter of a novel by Agatha Christie. We are outside a Harley Street dentists'.

> *A taxi had just drawn up before the house and a foot was protruding from it. Poirot surveyed the foot with gallant interest.*
>
> *A neat ankle, quite a good quality stocking. Not a bad foot. But he didn't like the shoe. A brand new patent leather shoe with a large gleaming buckle. He shook his head.*
> *Not chic—very provincial!*
> *The lady got out of the taxi, but in doing so she caught her other foot in the door and the buckle was wrenched off. It fell tinkling on to the pavement. Gallantly, Poirot sprang forward and picked it up, restoring it with a bow.*
>
> *Agatha Christie, One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*

Each of the ten unnumbered sections of this novel is headed, in sequence, by one of the lines of that counting nursery rhyme: On, Two, Buckle My Shoe / Three, Four, Shut the Door / Five, Six, Picking Up Sticks / Seven, Eight, Lay Them Straight … and so on.

And there is the buckle on that shoe. At this stage in the novel, no murder has yet been committed. However, an experienced reader of Christie's novels will infer that, plot-wise, this is a significant detail and that it should be remembered when trying to explain the mysterious death (in the next chapter) of the dentist in question.

Novels shaped by their plots have to let you detect those plots. Here is the moment in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* when the reader might hear a plot taking shape. Sir Percival Glyde has married Laura Fairlie to try to get her money, but she will not relinquish it. Here Laura's half-sister, Marian, is overhearing a conversation between Sir Percival and his accomplice, the villainous and brilliant Count Fosco.

> *'…I must know how to recognise our invisible Anne. What is she like?'*
>
> *'Like? Come! I'll tell you in two words. She's a sickly likeness of my wife.'*
>
> *The chair creaked, and the pillar shook once more. The Count was on his feet again—this time in astonishment.*
>
> *'What!!!' he exclaimed, eagerly.*
>
> *'Fancy my wife, after a bad illness, with a touch of something wrong in her head—and there is Anne Catherick for you,' answered Sir Percival.*
>
> *Are they related to each other?'*
>
> *'Not a bit of it.'*
>
> *'And yet, so like?'*
>
> *'Yes, so like. What are you laughing about?'*
>
> *There was no answer, and no sound of any kind. The Count was laughing in his smooth silent internal way.*
>
> *Wilkie Collins, The Woman in White (1860)*

Those three exclamation marks in a row should do it! Fosco has had an idea. He will engineer a swap between Lauran and Anne, and when the latter dies, Sir Percival will inherit all Laura's money. (In fact, we will find that Sir Percival is wrong: the two women are alike for a good reason – Anne is Laura's illegitimate half-sister).

If you were studying for a BA in my department, I would be obliged to take you on a path through the ruminations of what is called narratology. You are lucky to be spared that, as narratology, though full of useful technical terms, is a notoriously dry literary specialism. (Narratology abstracts the patterns of narratives, leaving behind all their literary qualities.)

However, let's see what a narratologist has to say about 'plot'.

> *If one conceives of plot as a structuration, then it traces the thoughts of readers as they ponder the reasons for events and the motivations of characters and consider the consequences of actions in their quest to make sense of the narrative as a whole ... In this conceptualisation, plot spans the time through which the narrative unfolds.*
>
> *Karin Kukkonen, 'Plot', in Handbook of Narratology, ed. P. Hühn, J.-C. Meister, J. Pier and W. Schmid (2014)*

There is something important here: the idea that plot involves the engagement of the reader's curiosity – and (implicit here, I think) the reader's perplexity. Why am I being told this?

Novels that rely on plot have always had a rather low reputation. Critics have often looked down on plot. When Wilkie Collins led the fashion for thrillers in the 1860s and 1870s, disapproving critics coined a disapproving name for this new type of fiction: 'sensation novels'. Collins's contemporary and rival, Anthony Trollope commented as follows.

There are sensational novels and anti-sensational, sensational novelists and anti-sensational, sensational readers and anti-sensational. The novelists who are considered to be anti-sensational are generally called realistic. I am realistic. My friend Wilkie Collins is generally supposed to be sensational. The readers who prefer the one are supposed to take delight in the elucidation of character. Those who hold by the other are charmed by the continuation and gradual development of a plot.

Anthony Trollope, Autobiography (1883), Ch. XII

Plot is inherently 'sensational'. And you can see what he means. It was not just the subject matter (murder, attempted murder, embezzlement, adultery, bigamy), it was also the use of narrative form. Collins specialised in the exploitation of serialisation to excite his readers. His art was the leave the reader, at the end of each week's episode, hungry to know more – and therefore to buy the next number of *All the Year Round*.

Here is how the very first instalment of *The Woman in White* ended. The story is being narrated by a young drawing master, Walter Hartright, who is about to leave London for his first proper employment, teaching two young ladies at a remote house at a place called Limmeridge, in Cumberland. The evening before his departure, he has been to visit his mother and sister in Hampstead and, late at night, is walking back into the city. Somewhere near what is now the Swiss Cottage gyratory system, he is accosted by a young woman, dressed entirely in white. She asks for his help and, in the course of their conversation, mentions that she comes from Cumberland and knows Limmeridge. He finds her a cab and, a little later, while he is hidden behind trees at the side of the road, he observes two agitated men in an open carriage, stop to question a policeman about a 'woman in white'.

> *The policeman looked at the card that was handed down to him.*
>
> *'Why are we to stop her, sir? What has she done?'*
>
> *'Done! She has escaped from my Asylum. Don't forget; a woman in white. Drive on.'*

Wilkie Collins, The Woman in White, in All the Year Round, 26 November 1859

And there the reader was left, itching to but the next issue of *All the Year Round*, a week later. As Jed Mercurio fashions *Line of Duty*, he has a mind to just the narrative structure that Collins pioneered.

Some of Collin's weekly, curiosity- and perplexity-generating closures were more sensational than others. Here is the ending of a later instalment. Walter falls in love with Laura, one of the young women he is teaching. However, she feels obliged to marry Sir Percival Glyde, according to her late father's wishes. Walter has learnt that, soon after her marriage, she has died. He returns to Limmeridge and visits the churchyard, where, by Laura's grave, he encounters two women, one of them veiled.

> *But the veiled woman had possession of me, body and soul. She stopped on one side of the grave. We stood face to face with the tombstone between us. She was close to the inscription on the side of the pedestal. Her gown touched the black letters.*
>
> *The voice came nearer, and rose and rose more passionately still. 'Hide your face! Don't look at her! Oh, for God's sake, spare him——'*
>
> *The woman lifted her veil.*
>
> *'Sacred to the Memory of Laura, Lady Glyde——'*
> *Laura, Lady Glyde, was standing by the inscription, and was looking at me over the grave.*

The Woman in White, in All the Year Round, 19 May 1860

How can this be? The thunderstruck Victorian reader had to wait to find out. But the thunderstruck Victorian reader also had to be confident that Collins had it all planned out – that he or she was working through what was already intricately designed.

This weekly working through of an elaborate plot placed great demands on a novelist. Less than eight months after *The Woman in White* concluded in *All the Year Round*, a new serial began in the same periodical: *Great Expectations*. In the following Spring, as Dickens neared the end of it, Dickens wrote to his friend John Forster about the difficulties of combining an elaborate plot with weekly divisions.

> *It is a pity that the third portion cannot be read all at once, because its purpose would be much more apparent; and the pity is the greater, because the general turn and tone of the working out and winding up, will be away from all such things as they conventionally go. But what must be, must be. As to the planning out from week to week, nobody can imagine what the difficulty is, without trying. But, as in all such cases, when it is overcome the pleasure is proportionate. Two months more will see me through it, I trust. All the iron is in the fire, and I have 'only' to beat it out.*
>
> *Charles Dickens, letter to John Forster, mid-April 1861*

Dickens preferred the monthly form of serialisation, with much longer parts, allowing a more spacious elaboration of plot. 'Nobody can imagine …'. Hard to combine weekly jolts and cliff-hangers with that larger 'working out and winding up'.

Let us try this definition of 'plot': a plot is a concealed design. Though that won't quite do, for it is a concealed design whose shape we might (if we are clever) just detect. We must be able to see the signs of concealment.

Which is why *Emma* is the only Jane Austen novel that relies on a plot.

Here is the garrulous, foolish, good-hearted Miss Bates, explaining why her niece, Jane Fairfax, has unexpectedly announced that she is coming to stay with them in the Surrey village of Highbury.

> *"Jane caught a bad cold, poor thing! so long ago as the 7th of November, (as I am going to read to you,) and has never been well since. A long time, is not it, for a cold to hang upon her? She never mentioned it before, because she would not alarm us. Just like her! so considerate!—But however, she is so far from well, that her kind friends the Campbells think she had better come home, and try an air that always agrees with her; and they have no doubt that three or four months at Highbury will entirely cure her—and it is certainly a great deal better that she should come here, than go to Ireland, if she is unwell. Nobody could nurse her, as we should do."*
>
> *Emma (1815) II i*

It is now the first week in January – a long time to have a cold, indeed. But a good enough reason, apparently, for the young lady not to travel to Ireland with the Campbells, her adoptive family, but to come to Highbury.

Miss Bates unknowingly supplies us with clues as to what is really going on – though an unknowing reader will only be able to pick up on the plot on a second reading.

Soon Jane does arrive, and Emma, who has always been irked by her perfection and her reticence, invites her round. But she cannot get anything interesting out of her.

> *The like reserve prevailed on other topics. She and Mr. Frank Churchill had been at Weymouth at the same time. It was known that they were a little acquainted; but not a syllable of real information could Emma procure as to what he truly was. "Was he handsome?"—"She believed he was reckoned a very fine young man." "Was he agreeable?"—"He was generally thought so." "Did he appear a sensible young man; a young man of information?"—"At a watering-place, or in a common London acquaintance, it was difficult to decide on such points. Manners were all that could be safely judged of, under a much longer knowledge than they had yet had of Mr. Churchill. She believed every body found his manners pleasing." Emma could not forgive her.*
>
> *Emma II ii*

We see things through Emma's eyes, here as through almost all of the novel. Emma is exasperated but would have done better to be suspicious.

Soon the highly eligible Frank Churchill, who has always been promising to visit his father, Mr Weston, in Highbury, actually turns up. Naturally, the first person he visits, in the company of his father, is the Queen of Highbury, Emma herself.

> *A reasonable visit paid, Mr. Weston began to move.—"He must be going. He had business at the Crown about his hay, and a great many errands for Mrs. Weston at Ford's, but he need not hurry any body else." His son, too well bred to hear the hint, rose immediately also, saying,*
>
> *"As you are going farther on business, sir, I will take the opportunity of paying a visit, which must be paid some day or other, and therefore may as well be paid now. I have the honour of being acquainted with a neighbour of yours, (turning to Emma,) a lady residing in or near Highbury; a family of the name of Fairfax. I shall have no difficulty, I suppose, in finding the house; though Fairfax, I believe, is not the proper name—I should rather say Barnes, or Bates. Do you know any family of that name?"*
>
> *"To be sure we do," cried his father; "Mrs. Bates—we passed her house—I saw Miss Bates at the window. True, true, you are acquainted with Miss Fairfax; I remember you knew her at Weymouth, and a fine girl she is. Call upon her, by all means."*
>
> *Emma II v*

There is a brilliant little twist of what is called 'free indirect style' in that phrase 'too well bred to hear the hint'. We might think that this is Jane Austen's comment, but in fact it is Emma's thought. Her consciousness is the magnet to which everything in the narrative bends. But her thought is entirely wrong.

In fact, here are the signs of a buried design – a plot. The buried is design is Austen's – but it is also Frank's and Jane's. They have plotted to co-ordinate their visits to Highbury so that they can pursue their secret romance – begun in Weymouth. Everything they do or say is calculated to this end.

A plot often involves the placing of clues that a first-time reader is likely to miss – but might have noticed. Here are some examples from a literary novelist who likes a plot: Ian McEwan. They are taken from a novel that, like Agatha Christie's *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, sets a puzzle with its title, whose solution turns out to be a key to its plot.

Clive Linley and Vernon Halliday are old friends, united, in part, by the fact that they were both once lovers of Molly Lane, at whose funeral they meet once again at the beginning of the novel. Clive is an esteemed composer of classical music; Vernon is the editor of a daily newspaper.

Vernon is at his morning editorial conference, hearing ideas about stories from his features editor.

> *Lettice … began to describe an investigative piece she had commissioned on a medical scandal in Holland.*
>
> *'Apparently, there are doctors exploiting the euthanasia laws to …'*
>
> *Vernon interrupted her.*
>
> *'I want to run the Siamese twins story in Friday's paper.'*
>
> *There were groans. But who was going to object first?*
>
> *Lettice. 'We don't even have a picture.'*
>
> *Ian McEwan, Amsterdam (1998) II i*

Incidental detail? If you are very attentive, you might think, 'Holland? Amsterdam??' But probably not.

Later in the novel, there is another editorial conference. This time it is a big event, because Vernon's newspaper has an exclusive story about a sexual scandal involving the Foreign Secretary.

> *The literary editor, who had never before been in early enough to attend a morning conference, gave a somnolent account of a novel about food which sounded so pretentious that Vernon had to cut him off. From arts there was a funding crisis, and Lettice O'Hara in features was at last ready to run her piece on the Dutch medical scandal, and also, to honour the occasion, was offering a feature on how industrial pollution was turning male fish into females.*
>
> *Ian McEwan, Amsterdam, IV iii*

We might be so distracted by the joke that McEwan has smuggled in (the juicy scandal about a leading politician is enough to get even the literary editor lout of bed) that we don't notice something Dutch again. That 'medical scandal'.

By the last section of the novel, Clive and Vernon have fallen out, with a vengeance. Now they despise each other. We are all set up for McEwan's plot to reveal itself.

Clive is reading Vernon's newspaper and notices the plot hook: 'unsavoury' goings on in Holland.

> *The world was its usual mess: fish were changing sex, British table tennis had lost its way, and in Holland some unsavoury types with medical degrees were offering a legal service to eliminate your inconvenient elderly parent. How interesting. All one needed was the aged parent's signature in duplicate and several thousand dollars.*
>
> *Ian McEwan, Amsterdam, V i*

Clive notices this report – and makes a plot out of it. And *then* we get to see the point of the novel's teasing title. Both men will arrange for each other's 'voluntary' euthanasia. They will both travel to Amsterdam, though neither will return.

Plot charges the incidental with significance and frequently, satisfyingly relies on suggestions that are hidden in plain sight. The most elaborately plotted novel of the eighteenth century was Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*. The hero is 'a foundling', deposited as a baby in the bedroom of the benevolent Squire Allworthy. Here the quire is met by his usually sour spinster sister, Bridget.

> *These exclamations continued till they were interrupted by the lady, who now proceeded to execute the commission given her by her brother, and gave orders for providing all necessaries for the child, appointing a very good room in the house for his nursery. Her orders were indeed so liberal, that, had it been a child of her own, she could not have exceeded them; but, lest the virtuous reader may condemn her for showing too great regard to a base-born infant, to which all charity is condemned by law as irreligious, we think proper to observe that she concluded the whole with saying, "Since it was her brother's whim to adopt the little brat, she supposed little master must be treated with great tenderness. For her part, she could not help thinking it was an encouragement to vice; but that she knew too much of the obstinacy of mankind to oppose any of their ridiculous humours."*
>
> *Henry Fielding, Tom Jones (1749) I v*

The intricate, delicately wrought plot of this roistering novel revolves around the mystery of Tom Jones's origins. Here, the reader might be so distracted by Fielding's ironical excuses for the Allworthys' kindness to the child, as not to notice the clue in plain sight: 'had it been a child of her own'. Some 700 pages later, we will discover that this is just what he is.

Here is a passage from the early part of another large novel featuring an orphan of unknown parentage, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*.

> *The view from my Lady Dedlock's own windows is alternately a lead-coloured view and a view in Indian ink. The vases on the stone terrace in the foreground catch the rain all day; and the heavy drops fall—drip, drip, drip—upon the broad flagged pavement, called from old time the Ghost's Walk, all night. On*

Sundays the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves. My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from her boudoir at a keeper's lodge and seeing the light of a fire upon the latticed panes, and smoke rising from the chimney, and a child, chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped-up man coming through the gate, has been put quite out of temper. My Lady Dedlock says she has been "bored to death."

Charles Dickens, Bleak House, Ch. II (March 1852)

That parenthesis is superbly misleading: of course, Lady Dedlock does have a child, who is the supposedly orphaned heroine of the novel, Esther Summerson – though the reader of this first instalment in March 1852 would surely have to have been a Poirot-like literary critic to discern the significance of Lady Dedlock being 'put quite out of temper'.

Bleak House was published in monthly instalments, and the first number includes quite a few clues as to what is to unfold. Later in the same chapter, Sir Leicester Dedlock is being shown some papers by his lawyer, Mr Tulkinghorn.

My Lady, changing her position, sees the papers on the table—looks at them nearer—looks at them nearer still—asks impulsively, "Who copied that?"

Mr. Tulkinghorn stops short, surprised by my Lady's animation and her unusual tone.

"Is it what you people call law-hand?" she asks, looking full at him in her careless way again and toying with her screen.

"Not quite. Probably"—Mr. Tulkinghorn examines it as he speaks—"the legal character which it has was acquired after the original hand was formed. Why do you ask?"

"Anything to vary this detestable monotony. Oh, go on, do!"

Mr. Tulkinghorn reads again. The heat is greater; my Lady screens her face. Sir Leicester dozes, starts up suddenly, and cries, "Eh? What do you say?"

"I say I am afraid," says Mr. Tulkinghorn, who had risen hastily, "that Lady Dedlock is ill."

"Faint," my Lady murmurs with white lips, "only that; but it is like the faintness of death. Don't speak to me. Ring, and take me to my room!"

Charles Dickens, Bleak House, Ch. II

Sir Leicester does not notice – but Mr Tulkinghorn does and so do we. She surely recognizes that handwriting. Of course.

Bleak House is a novel that asserts the primacy of plot. It is there to intrigue and excite the reader, but also to show the interconnections of a whole society.

What connexion can there be between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabout of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world who from opposite sides of great gulfs have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!

Jo sweeps his crossing all day long, unconscious of the link, if any link there be. He sums up his mental condition when asked a question by replying that he "don't know nothink." He knows that it's hard to keep the mud off the crossing in dirty weather, and harder still to live by doing it. Nobody taught him even that much; he found it out.

Charles Dickens, Bleak House, Ch. XVI (July 1852)

Dickens's plot will connect them all.

After the largely improvised novels of the first part of his career, Dickens began to play his plots with minute care. He left behind his number plans, his so-called 'mems', to show posterity that it was all plotted and planned. Here is a characteristic extract from a 'mem' for *Bleak House*.

- *Mr Tulkinghorn to be shot (Pointing Roman)*
- *George to be taken by Bucket. Yes.*
- *Jo? Yes. Kill him.*
- *Allan? — And Richard? Not Richard*
- *Mr Guppy? No.*
- *Smallweeds? No.*
- *Lead up to murder through Chesney Wold? No. Through house in town.*
- *Mrs Bucket? No.*
- *Snagsbys? Mr. Slightly*
- *Chadbands? Not yet.*

The characters jostle to be allowed back on stage, of course.

But here we also see their pre-ordained fates: Jo, the child who must be killed; Mr Tulkinghor, who inhabits chambers with a a neo-classical figure on the ceiling, who has been pointing to his doom throughout the novel.

Dickens began thinking of plotting as the connecting of characters – including characters who might want to avoid or shun each other. Here is his 'mem' for the opening of *Little Dorrit*.

People to meet and part as travellers do, and the future connexion between them in the story, not to be now shewn to the reader but to be worked out as in real life. Try this uncertainty and this *not-putting of them* together, as a new means of interest. Indicate and carry through this intention.

It is like an Agatha Christie *dénouement* in reverse. He gathers many of his main characters in Marseilles in the opening chapter – most detained in quarantine, a couple detained in prison. How can all of them be connected?

The answer turns out to be complex. In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens created a mystery whose unfolding, in the final monthly instalment, is so complicated that the Penguin Classics edition feels it necessary to provide a two-page Appendix, explaining '*The Dénouement of Little Dorrit*'.

It generated perhaps the longest single paragraph in any Victorian novel, as the resentful servant Flintwinch explains triumphantly to the hero, Arthur Clennam's, puritanical mother how elaborately he has outwitted her.

Dickens would have appreciated the convention that Agatha Christie established in her first published novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1921), where all the characters still alive are gathered together to have the detective explain the plot to them.

Dickens ended his career with another mystery, and a deep-laid plot. He died exactly halfway through writing *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, with six of its planned twelve-monthly instalments completed. The half-novel is a fascinating test of our capacity to discern the traces of plot. Dickens undoubtedly knew exactly how it would unfold and had planted his clues from the beginning. Yet academics still disagree about where the plot will lead.

We know that John Jasper, the choirmaster at Cloisterham Cathedral, is a secret opium addict. We know that he is sexually obsessed with Roasa Budd, who is engaged to his own nephew, Edwin Drood. We know that he has dark schemes. Here the kindly and intelligent Reverend Septimus Crisparkle comes upon Jasper, asleep on his sofa.

> *Long afterwards he had cause to remember how Jasper sprang from the couch in a delirious state between sleeping and waking, and crying out: "What is the matter? Who did it?"*
>
> *Charles Dickens, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Ch. X (June 1870)*

'Long afterwards'. The phrase points forward to a narrative future that we would have reached, if Dickens had

lived. ‘Who did it?’ Who did what?

Why might we think that ‘it’ is a murder?

Here, Jasper has persuaded the drunken stonemason Durdles, who knows the cathedral and its secret places better than anyone, to take him on a night tour.

> *“’Ware that there mound by the yard-gate, Mister Jarsper.”*
>
> *“I see it. What is it?”*
>
> *“Lime.”*
>
> *Mr. Jasper stops, and waits for him to come up, for he lags behind. “What you call quick-lime?”*
>
> *“Ay!” says Durdles; “quick enough to eat your boots. With a little handy stirring, quick enough to eat your bones.”*
>
> *The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Ch. XII (June 1870)*

Here’s how to dispose of a body! But is this perhaps nudging us too forcefully?

Dickens had written in his ‘mem’ for this episode.

> *Lay the ground for the murder, to come out at last*
>
> *Number plan for The Mystery of Edwin Drood, N^{o} III, Ch. XII*

Which seems to say it clearly enough. But does it?

What about visual clues?

[the wrapper for the monthly parts]

Are we sure that there *is* a murder?

If we presume that in such a carefully plotted novel, no detail is innocent, can’t we find hints taking the plot – the hidden design – in another direction?

Here is Dickens, in the novel’s first instalment, introducing us to Miss Twinkleton, head of the small private school for young ladies in Cloisterham, where Rosa Budd is still a pupil.

As, in some cases of drunkenness, and in others of animal magnetism, there are two states of consciousness which never clash, but each of which pursues its separate course as though it were continuous instead of broken (thus, if I hide my watch when I am drunk, I must be drunk again before I can remember where), so Miss Twinkleton has two distinct and separate phases of being.

The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Ch. III (April 1870)

Miss Twinkleton is a solemn old maid by day, but a scandal-loving gossip once all the young ladies have been sent to bed and she can chat with her crony, Mrs Tisher.

Why does Dickens reach for this analogy, requiring a length endnote in all good modern editions? (‘Animal magnetism’ was the coinage of Franz Anton Mesmer, the pioneer of ‘mesmerism’ – what we might call ‘hypnotism’).

Plots sometimes remember other plots. Many of the early readers of Dickens’s mystery would have been familiar

with Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, also published in *All the Year Round*, with its final part appearing less than two years earlier. In this story of the theft of a fabulous diamond, the culprit – final spoiler alert!! – turns out to be the novel's hero, Franklin Blake, in a hypnotic state induced by the inadvertent consumption of opium.

Was Dickens offering a plot hook to his first readers? If so, it does not seem to have been accepted by the many over the years who have finished his novel for him.

The Mystery of Edwin Drood **is perfect evidence for the power of plot. Its plot existed, fully formed, in its author's head. The clues or hooks must all be there. Remember Dickens's command to himself: 'Lay the ground'. Yet even the cleverest commentators cannot be sure where that plot leads. No wonder plot has such power.**