The Yellow Leaf: Age and the Gothic in Dickens

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Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate, Vol. 33 (2024): 1-17.
DOI: 10.25623/conn033-quabeck-1

This article is a contribution to the debate on "Dickens and Colour" http://www.connotations.de/dickens-and-colour/. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de.

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Abstract
Dickens was a fashionable writer, and from what we know he was also a very fashionable person, but the use of the colour yellow in his works differs surprisingly from the fashion of his times. He hardly uses canary yellow for his materials, and he abstains from the use of yellow as an indication of brightness and symbol of optimism and hope, too. Yellow in Dickens is not a gay or illuminating colour, and it seems that Dickens creates his own logic of colours, in which he uses yellow predominantly not as a primary colour but as a tinge, a *dis*colouring of that which was formerly white, or conceived of as white. This does not mean, however, that the use of the colour in his works is not heavily invested with symbolism—quite the opposite. Dickens uses his own colour code, and yellow signifies both the literal and metaphorical imprisonment in and of old age.

1. Introduction

Early in 2023, *The Guardian* published a feature on the colour yellow as a distinctive fashion emblem of Gen Z. Introduced, apparently, as a "post-pandemic" flash of brightness and analysed as a representative of hopefulness and optimism for this particular generation, yellow has begun to colour the fashion choices of people in their early twenties (see Demopoulos

2023). In fashion, in particular, the phrase "history repeats itself" is, of course, very true. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the colour yellow may be "it" once again today, although it was already "it" in the nineteenth century. The Victorian invention of synthetic dyes gave yellow a prominent place in nineteenth-century fashion, when it was apparently also used for its general brightness. In both these centuries, yellow plays a role as an illuminating, as a hopeful colour, and it seems that the reasons that make it fashionable now also made it fashionable then. While there is no doubt that yellow played a role in Victorian fashion, it is remarkable that Dickens does not, in any way, participate in its fashionable use in his works—although he was not averse to the colour in his own wardrobe. In fact, in Dickens's novels, yellow is not a positive colour, but quite the opposite, and thus contrary to contemporary fashion. As a colour of nineteenth-century clothes, yellow signifies two different, though not unrelated, ideas. For one, the colour yellow tends to evoke a certain association with frivolity. The number of yellow fashion items in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) alone is an obvious indicator of the morally ambiguous preference of the upper classes for the colour. Lady Fuddleston's yellow hat is an object of Becky Sharp's desires and envy; yellow liveries and yellow shawls abound in this world that tends towards the insincere and immoral. Significantly, yellow also became Thackeray's chosen colour for the title pages of his publications, presumably, because it was both fashionable and attracted attention. In Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), M. Paul sneers at yellow and other ostentatious colours: "'Pink or scarlet, yellow or crimson, pea-green or sky-blue; it was all one: these were all flaunting, giddy colours […]" (419). In Victorian fashion advice, yellow is equally associated with "outward show" and discarded as "objectionable" (Matthews David 187). At the same time, yellow signifies a certain wealth, because it is a new industrial colour that substitutes the cheaper vegetable dyes (see Nunn). Thus, Mrs Boffin imagines a yellow chariot as a symbol of her and her husband's new wealth in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), and Miss La Creevy tends to implement yellow in her slightly eccentric wardrobe to mask her poverty in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39).

In theoretical contexts, yellow often evokes brightness. In his *Theory of Colours* from 1810, translated into English in 1840, Goethe elaborated on the

distinction between the primary colours yellow and blue as a distinction between brightness and darkness: "Next to the light, a colour appears which we call yellow; another appears next to the darkness, which we name blue" (Goethe xliii). Moreover, he postulated with unequivocal historical influence that "every colour produces a distinct impression on the mind, and thus addresses at once the eye and feelings. Hence it follows that colour may be employed for certain moral and aesthetic ends" (350). Generations of studies on the symbolism of colours and the basic distinction between light and dark in literature have shown that this is indeed true. According to Goethe's theory, yellow is a positive colour: "In its highest purity it always carries with it the nature of brightness and has a serene, gay, softly exciting character" (307). The positive association that Goethe ascribes to yellow as a colour changes quite drastically at the end of the century, but this is a symbolic shift in British culture that Dickens would have been more or less unaffected by. While there are several references in his works to Yellow Jack, the yellow fever most commonly associated with the West Indies, and Nemo, in *Bleak House* (1852-53), has turned yellow with opium use, also associated with the East, the racist association with the colour yellow that would dominate the nineties, is luckily not to be found in Dickens yet.[1]

2. Faded and Yellow

Dickens was a fashionable writer, and from what we know he was also a very fashionable person, but canary yellow, the colour so popular at his time, is curiously absent from his works.[2] He does not use yellow for frivolous fashion, but neither does he use yellow as an indication of brightness and as a symbol of optimism or hopefulness in general. Yellow in Dickens is not a gay or illuminating colour, and it seems that Dickens creates his own logic of colours, in which he uses yellow predominantly not as a primary colour, but as a tinge, a *dis*colouring of that which was formerly white, or conceived of as white. This does not mean, however, that the use of the colour in his works is not heavily invested with symbolism—quite

the opposite. Dickens uses his own colour code, and yellow signifies both the literal and metaphorical imprisonment in and of old age.

In *Great Expectations* (1860-61), Pip observes that Satis House is deeply tinged with colour as a discolouration of white: "I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow" (*GE* 50). Annette R. Federico has pointed out that, at Satis, "the predominant color is yellow, the atmosphere hazy, the hour twilight, the season winter, the courtyard abandoned, the gates always locked" ("Satis House" 66). At Satis House, one of Dickens's most famous prisons both in the literal and metaphorical sense, the colour yellow is inextricably linked to time and age. The house appears like a timeless space to young Pip, yet all that he sees is a remnant of the past, and while time seems to have stopped there, it has worn away both the house and its inhabitant:

> So unchanging was the dull old house, the yellow light in the darkened room, the faded spectre in the chair by the dressing-table glass, that I felt as if the stopping of the clocks had stopped Time in that mysterious place, and, while I and everything outside it grew older, it stood still. (*GE* 100)

The fact that everything associated with Satis House is yellow symbolises that, tragically, time does not stand still, because time grinds away unmercifully at a wasted life. The colour is significantly linked to a deathliness Pip perceives in and around Miss Havisham that is the result of her incarceration. Looking at Dickens's works in general, it becomes apparent that he uses the colour yellow for prisons of different kinds. Thus, it occurs in the actual prisons, such as the Fleet, the Marshalsea and the Bastille as well as the "prison-like homes" which Monika Fludernik has identified in his works (225).

Mr Pickwick peers into the individual rooms along the corridors of the Fleet, where "some solitary tenant might be seen, poring, by the light of a feeble tallow candle, over a bundle of soiled and tattered papers, yellow with dust and dropping to pieces from age […]" (*PP* 536).[3] One of those solitary tenants is, of course, an old acquaintance, for Pickwick encounters here a shadow of the formerly so spirited Mr Jingle. His imprisonment has deprived him of the comic spirit that is crucial in the early chapters of the

novel. Now, a prisoner for debt at the Fleet, Jingle is destitute, seemingly only biologically alive and that but barely:

> [I]n tattered garments, and without a coat; his common calico shirt, yellow and in rags; his hair hanging over his face; his features changed with suffering, and pinched with famine; there sat Mr Alfred Jingle: his head resting on his hand, his eyes fixed upon the fire, and his whole appearance denoting misery and dejection! (*PP* 555)

His incarceration has drained Jingle of his former colour in both the physical and the psychological sense, for he is no longer able to brighten up the novel.

As it turns out, characters who experience incarceration in Dickens's novels are all symbolically marked by the colour yellow in some form or another. Dr Manette has turned yellow all over in the Bastille to the extent that he becomes indistinguishable from the materials covering his body. In effect, there seems to be almost no perceptible difference between the animate and inanimate:

> His yellow rags of shirt lay open at the throat, and showed his body to be withered and worn. He, and his old canvas frock, and his loose stockings, and all his poor tatters of clothes, had, in a long seclusion from direct light and air, faded down to such a dull uniformity of parchment-yellow, that it would have been hard to say which was which. (*TTC* 46)[4]

Yellow marks the prison's devouring of life's spirit, and the colour code is therefore not exclusive to the real prisons in Dickens. Yellow marks not just institutional incarceration but, more importantly, those oppressive conditions that imprison the mind. Florence Dombey grows up in such conditions, in which the material "prison" is turned yellow from the wasteful passing of time that marks an unlived life:

> Florence lived alone in the deserted house, and day succeeded day, and still she lived alone, and cold walls looked down upon her with a vacant stare, as if they had a Gorgon-like mind to stare her youth and beauty into stone. […] Through the whole building, white had turned yellow, yellow nearly black; and, since the time when the poor lady died, it had slowly become a dark gap in the long monotonous street. (*DS* 297)[5]

It is no coincidence, therefore, that in the lawyers' offices from Snubbins in *The Pickwick Papers* to Mr Vholes in *Bleak House*, the blinds at the windows are "yellow with age and dirt" (*PP* 403), for they keep out the air that would be needed desperately not only to reform the law but also to turn those representative of it into decent moral beings.

The use of the colour yellow in these examples not only indicates confinement and closeness, resulting from the general lack of light and air, but it also symbolizes the incarceration of a human spirit. Yellow is anathema to light, air, and freedom. Thus, imprisoned in the Marshalsea, Arthur Clennam in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) cannot see the sun but only an uncanny replica in yellow, which signifies that the dawn he has been waiting for does not in fact bring a new day. It is a weary repeat of the one before. He can no longer see the break of day as a new beginning but only as an uneventful passing of time that repeats the day before and signifies, again, an unlived life:

> With an aching head and a weary heart, Clennam had watched the miserable night out, listening to the fall of rain on the yard pavement, thinking of its fall upon the country earth. A blurred circle of yellow haze has risen up in the sky in lieu of sun, and he had watched the patch it put upon his wall, like a bit of the prison's raggedness. (*LD* 904)[6]

What transpires through Dickens's use of yellow, hence, is a general opposition between this particular colour and natural light; the brightness typically associated with the colour code is substituted for oppressive conditions, and the result is a contrast between a negative inside and a more positive outside. London's streets outside the Marshalsea may not brim with happiness, but the leaving of the yellow space mostly indicates a sense of liberation. The physical confrontation between the eponymous protagonist and Sir Mulberry in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), for example, is also tinged in yellow, like the rooms associated with the latter's debauchery:

> What a contrast, when they reached the street, to the scene they had just left! It was already daybreak. For the flaring yellow light within, was substituted the clear, bright, glorious morning; for a hot, close atmosphere, tainted with the smell of expiring lamps, and reeking with the steams of riot and dissipation, the free, fresh, wholesome air. (*NN* 620)[7]

Things, rooms, materials, and human minds turn yellow where there is a lack of human freedom, where there is the tinge of immorality, whether only perceived, as in Arthur's case, or real, as in the case of Sir Mulberry. Far from a bright or gay colour, yellow in Dickens colours spaces in the widest sense that are oppressive. Thus, yellow is an uncanny colour.

3. Yellow and the Gothic

Dickens uses the colour yellow to enhance the Gothic atmosphere in several of his novels through the uncanny. As pointed out above, the use of different colours creates a variety of associations, and a particular colour, as Goethe reminds us, "may be employed for certain moral and aesthetic ends" (Goethe 350). This end in Dickens is contrary to the fashion of his time and contrary to many uses of the colour yellow as indicating brightness, hope, or optimism. This becomes even more significant in reference to the generic cues he employs that belong to the tradition of the Gothic novel. Dickens may not be a paradigmatic Gothic author, but his contributions to the genre mid-century are undisputed: "[I]n terms of innovation and influence (not to mention the mere volume of content that can be characterized as 'Gothic'), no writer has a greater claim to importance in the history of the Gothic during its supposed sabbatical than Dickens" (Mighall, "Dickens and the Gothic" 82). Such "content" often transpires in Dickens in the shape of his Gothic mansions.

Florence Dombey lives, not unlike Miss Havisham and Mrs Clennam, in a decidedly carceral Gothic space. Like many conventional Gothic subjects, these women are mentally and physically imprisoned at the same time. In her seminal study of the Gothic convention, Eve Sedgwick emphasises the genre's "psychological model of the self": "one with an inside and an outside and with certain material ('the irrational') on the inside that could or should pass to the outside" (140). Dickens uses the Gothic mode to indicate that there is another story brewing underneath, making use of the uncanny, in the classic Freudian sense, to indicate "something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (Freud 833). The yellow tinge in

his Gothic mansions is such a manifestation of the uncanny. The deterioration of whiteness, the very fact that everything in sight has visibly aged, plays on the reader's repressed fear of death although the material is inanimate. Faded colours are a common staple of the Gothic novel, because they "emblemize[] the temporal" (Sedgwick 161), and the visible decay suggests to the reader's subconscious that something is wrong with the human condition at this point in the novel.

Pip's observation of the dressing-table at Satis House is a perfect example:

> I glanced at the dressing-table again, and saw that the shoe upon it, once white, now yellow, had never been worn. I glanced down at the foot from which the shoe was absent, and saw that the silk stocking on it, once white, now yellow, had been trodden ragged. Without this arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud. (*GE* 52)

The basic horror of decay that surrounds Pip is enhanced by the yellow colour of everything that was formerly white. The faded colour indicates not only the inevitable passing of time towards death but the eruption of horror into the everyday. After all, Pip visits a living person, yet death is uncomfortably visible. It has come to light in an extremely unwelcome reminder that everything is fleeting and that a life must be lived, not wasted. The yellowness at Satis House is, therefore, an almost conventional example of the Gothic horror that disrupts a story; a vestigial past, uncannily encroaching on the present. As C. C. Barfoot writes, the Gothic is "an invasion of the known present by the hidden past, an encroachment of the closed past onto the open present, a disturbance of the apparent daylight of today by the dark of yesterday" (161). Through the use of the colour yellow, Dickens shows his own variation of such Gothic tropes as the disturbance of the visible and mundane, for all objects that are discoloured in *Great Expectations* are perfectly ordinary items of everyday life, yet extraordinarily uncanny due to their discoloration. The combination defies language, for things are literally not what they seem. Dickens's colour code thus adds to the list of those techniques he employs that somehow answer to and yet circumvent the Gothic tradition (see Mighall, *A Geography* 104).

In this sense, Mr Jingle's and Dr Manette's shirts are also Gothic items, for they stand for the mind's decay at work in both characters as a result of their unfair structural oppression. The imprisonments of both those characters and others—such as Miss Havisham, Florence Dombey, and Arthur Clennam, who waste away in prisons although they have done nothing wrong—play on the readers' fears of death and remind them of the brevity of life. The yellow objects invoked in the scenic descriptions of these themes relating to death thus correspond directly with the physical decay that happens to the human beings in the picture underneath. This is taken very literally in the case of Dr Manette, because he "and his old canvas frock, and his loose stockings, and all his poor tatters of clothes, had, in a long seclusion from direct light and air, faded down to such a dull uniformity of parchment-yellow, that it would have been hard to say which was which" (*TTC* 46). As pointed out earlier, the impossibility to distinguish between the animate and inanimate here adds to the uncanny aspect of the incarcerated spirit, for if the animate, i.e. the body, can turn yellow like the rags it wears, the human being's mortal end is certainly not far behind. Accordingly, Dickens does not delimit his Gothic use of uncanny yellow to materials such as clothes and furniture but uses it with even more significance for his design of character. Catherine Waters reminds us that, in the novel and beyond, clothes are "symbolic expressions of identity" (29), and the yellow shirts of Mr Jingle and Dr Manette signify threateningly that life has almost left their bodies. They have undergone a significant change of identity that is the result of oppression and incarceration—they have literally been deprived of the air to breathe. Thus, it is not the fact alone that they have aged that makes them pitiable, but the fact that their age and their physical decay is a direct consequence of the experienced oppression. This is why Dickens uses the colour yellow not just in clothes, but also in faces.

4. The Yellow Leaf

In Dickens, jaundice seems to be not a medical but a mental condition. It must have been a common enough picture in the streets of Victorian London, for it was not a rare disease. As a sign of liver disease or pancreatic

cancer, it coloured a population as of yet not quite in control of medical insight or curative measures. As a realist marker of Dickens's demographic, the colour yellow therefore also spreads to faces, but it is only rarely referred to as a visible signifier of an invisible medical condition. In fact, yellow faces in Dickens primarily indicate old age, but, more importantly, the old yellow faces signify the social and psychological conditions in which aging takes place. Sometimes the depiction is sympathetic, as is obvious in the case of Dr Manette. Oppressive conditions that cause yellow aging are not limited to punitive institutional incarceration, however. Dickens makes it implicitly clear, for instance, that the workhouses do not stand at a great contrast, as is obvious in the little yellow old man in *Little Dorrit*, aka Old Nandy, at the beginning of the chapter that is tellingly titled "Spirit":

> Anybody may pass, any day, in the thronged thoroughfares of the metropolis, some meagre, wrinkled, yellow old man (who might be supposed to have dropped from the stars, if there were any star in the Heavens dull enough to be suspected of casting off so feeble a spark), creeping along with a scared air, as though bewildered and a little frightened by the noise and bustle. (*LD* 433)

This yellow old man is on his way to or from the workhouse, the cynical Victorian solution to old age in poverty. Dickens deliberately makes the yellow man a mundane picture in the streets of London, a normal occurrence in its appropriate space. The street is merely an extension of the workhouse, a shared social space for the poor and aged, but predominantly, the aged. By 1851, "one of three people living in the workhouses was elderly" (Chase 5). Thus, one can perceive a general association of old age with poverty and a widespread marginalisation of elderly people, who were "imaginatively and literally" relocated to workhouses and hospitals (Mangum 100).

However, the association of old age with poverty is also inextricably linked to the aspect of visibility. Only poor old age is visible to the spectator, who observes the streets of Victorian London and spots Old Nandy; wealthy old age, or at least old age above the working classes, remains duly hidden behind closed doors. Simultaneously, not all old people in Dickens are yellow like Nandy: Dickens's symbolic tinging of faces in yellow has a moral signification—old age is therefore not uncanny per se, but enforced

aging through an incarceration of body and mind is. The difference between turning old and turning yellow is fairly obvious with regard to characters who are notably aging or aged but just as importantly untainted. Martin Chuzzlewit Senior, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Mr Peggotty upon his return from the colony, and Wemmick's father—they are all portrayed as significantly advanced in years, and yet none of them is described as of an unnatural or sickly hue. The important difference is, of course, that these characters age in relative freedom and self-determination, capable agents of their own lives, or at least competently aided by others such as Trooper George and Wemmick himself, to live their lives in dignity. It is also important to note that this is not an exclusively male prerogative: while old women may be fewer, they still exist, and the difference again shows in the measure of control they have over their own lives. Miss Betsey Trotwood is obviously located at the top end of self-determination and, accordingly, she is neither imprisoned nor yellow. Even Betty Hidgen, who is notably low on the scale of personal fortune, both financially and socially, is not marked by the yellow hue—presumably because she is determined to live out her life on her own terms and stay away from the workhouse. Old age is yellow whenever it is the result of an imprisoned mind, which is most clearly pointed out in Dickens's *Dombey and Son*.

In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens places two yellow-faced personifications of Death at opposite ends of his social hierarchy: Good Mrs Brown at the very bottom and Mrs Skewton at the very top. One might assume that their contrary position on the social scale of the novel makes only one of them yellow, for Mrs Brown lives in squalor and misery. Her yellow colour is therefore visible to the world, who can see her "munching with her jaws, as if the Death's head beneath her yellow skin were impatient to get out" (*DS* 354). It is not her poverty alone that makes Mrs Brown yellow, however; it is her single-minded obsession with turning her real or any substitute daughter into money. This is the ostentatious parallel that Dickens creates between her and Mrs Skewton at the top end of the hierarchy. It is unnecessary to point out that the portrayal of Mrs Skewton, at least, is far from sympathetic, but she is just as imprisoned by her own desires as is Miss Havisham.[8] Mrs Skewton's lifelong attempt to use her daughter in order to secure her financial fortune and standing in society has made her an

equally devouring vampire, whose greed has turned her yellow like Good Mrs Brown. The difference in social standing merely means that Mrs Skewton has the material means, in the most basic sense of that term, to hide her yellow features as becoming her class:

> The pained object shrivelled underneath her hand; the form collapsed, the hair dropped off, the arched dark eyebrows changed to scanty tufts of grey; the pale lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose; an old, worn, yellow, nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained in Cleopatra's place, huddled up, like a slovenly bundle, in a greasy flannel gown. (*DS* 365)

Shut up in her rooms, Mrs Skewton's yellow colour is only visible to the reader, for her financial means keep her from the streets. And yet, she has the same jaundice as her counterpart Mrs Brown, who has to make herself visible in the public space. The similarity between the two characters thus indicates that yellow old age is not always a marker of sympathy, as it is in Old Nandy, and that the yellow face signifies an oppressed mind. These women are truly Gothic subjects, in the sense that the uncanniness of their roles in the novel as witches that threaten to eat young women shows on the surface. The desires that ought to be hidden have broken out on the surface. As Gothic subjects, their irrational insides have passed to the outside.[9]

Aging characters could be read as manifestations of the Gothic uncanny per se, considering the reader's more or less conscious fear of death. As Federico argues, "images of the body's deterioration, decay, or, worse perhaps, sudden disposal force readers to contemplate their corporeal existence" ("Dickens and Disgust" 150). As I have pointed out, however, it is not old age per se that is uncanny in Dickens, and his use of the colour yellow underlines the difference. Aging in dignity and hidden from view is obviously a completely different story than aging in public and as a result of oppressive conditions. This view once again leads back to *Great Expectations*, for it unites all of these aspects of Gothic yellow. Satis House is yellow through and through, because it harbours an incarcerated spirit: "I am yellow skin and bone," says Miss Havisham to an already horrified Pip (*GE* 70). Miss Havisham's incarceration in Satis House, which is both voluntary and involuntary, because she is also the agent of her imprisonment but has

obviously no control over the trauma that has destroyed her psychological balance in the first place, is not only of the body, but in her case, most obviously of the mind. Her uncanny desires are no longer hidden at all, and she stages herself as a Gothic spectre; Robert Mighall hence argues: "Miss Havisham is both subject and object of the Gothic spectacle she enacts, acutely aware of its effect on her audience" ("Dickens and the Gothic" 92). She makes herself ostentatiously visible, which seems to be the most unforgiveable aspect of her torture for young Pip.

The yellow tinge at Satis House creates a house of horrors, because the decay of both, the material and the human body inside it, is all too graphic for Pip. The most offensive element of it all seems to be that Miss Havisham makes her old age visible for him. He marks with barely concealed disgust that the image of her age is accessible to him although, according to her social station, it should not be. The yellowness of old age belongs in the urban streets, not the country house, he implies. He tells us with specific emphasis that this is an image he should not have access to:

> It was not in the first moments that I saw all these things, though I saw more of them in the first moments than might be supposed. But, I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young women, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone. (*GE* 50)

The almost obsessive reiteration of the verb "to see" brings home the terror Pip feels at being exposed to something he does not want to see, but which he can now never unsee. As is conventional for the Gothic mode, the novel juxtaposes at this crucial moment what is visible and what is not, but it is very like Dickens to bend the rules by not making this moment of horror about what Pip *cannot* see, but what he can see. Typically, the Gothic subject is "massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally have access" (Sedgwick 12), which causes a great deal of the terror it experiences. Pip is terrified, because he has access to something he expects to be shielded from ordinarily. He has encountered a woman yellow with age

that he would never see in normal circumstances, as Mrs Skewton's masquerade with wigs and lashes and make-up indicates. This lack of "fashionable" disguise in Miss Havisham thus makes him see her as barely human:

> Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly wax-work at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state. Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, wax-work and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could. (*GE* 50)

As is so often the case in the Gothic novel, the terror Pip experiences defies all language. As is less often the case in the Gothic novel, it is the colour yellow that induces the terror. It is the yellow wax-work, the yellow skeleton, that is the most frightful for Pip. By describing Miss Havisham as having no brightness left, Dickens could not make it any clearer that his use of yellow differs significantly from all the associations and uses the Victorians had of this particular primary colour.

In *Bleak House*, Mr Turveydrop claims, "I am falling into the sear and yellow leaf, and it is impossible to say how long the last feeble traces of gentlemanly Deportment may linger in this weaving and spinning age" (294). The loose quotation from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (5.2.22) underlines his vanity and enhances the comedy, but the reference has more significance to it. Macbeth announces his end in act 5, scene 3:

> I have lived long enough; my way of life
> Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf,
> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have; (*Macbeth* 5.3.21-26)

The tragic hero stresses that he is fallen "into the sere, the yellow leaf" of age rather than enjoying what old age *should* have. In Shakespeare's image, as in Dickens's, the "sere and yellow leaf" stands in contrast to honour and the rest, and it turns out that, in Dickens, the lack of dignity is the be-all

and end-all of yellow characters. Dickens clearly conjures up dignified images of old age, only to indicate that aging in oppressive conditions brings about a very undignified aging in yellow. Mr Jingle, Dr Manette, Miss Havisham, and even Mrs Skewton age in oppression. The lack of air in both a literal and a metaphorical sense turns them yellow, which is a visual marker of the fact that they are not free to age with dignity. Their yellow faces are windows into imprisoned souls, and the tragedy of their lives is that they are helplessly exposed to the grinding away of time. The opposition between yellow and light is a distinction between the negative inside and the positive outside in Dickens, but this does not just pertain to physical spaces and real prisons. It also pertains to the prisons of the mind, to those souls trapped in dire conditions who are fundamentally unable to free themselves.

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NOTES

[1]Towards the end of the century, the negative connotations with the colour yellow begin to infiltrate the racist discourse around Asian people. Yellow now signifies the "alien" and "frightful" as colour coding fully infiltrates racist stereotyping. As David Scott Kastan points out, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* first stipulated at the beginning of the twentieth century that Chinese people had a decidedly yellow skin tone: "The Chinese and other East Asians had slowly but unmistakably become yellow in the Western imagination, so much so that the most authoritative encyclopedia in the English language could make its carefully calibrated claim as a seemingly neutral assertion of fact" (Kastan 64-65). The use of yellow for fin-de-siècle racism seems to have developed too late in the century for Dickens to be aware of it.

[2]In fact, Dickens hardly uses that "canary" yellow, except for the real canary on Boythorn's head. A notable exception is the "boy in boots" Pip employs in Barnard's Inn, a "monster," "in bondage and slavery to whom" Pip passes his days. This creature is dressed in a "canary waistcoat" (169). All references to *Great Expectations* are to the following edition and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *GE*: Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Edgar Rosenberg, in the Norton Critical Editions.

[3]All references to *The Pickwick Papers* are to the edition by David Ellis and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *PP*.

[4]All references to *A Tale of Two Cities* are to the Penguin edition of 2012 and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *TTC*.

[5]All references to *Dombey and Son* are to the edition by Karl Smith and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *DS*.

[6]All references to *Little Dorrit* are to the Penguin edition of 2021 and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *LD*.

[7]All references to *Nicholas Nickleby* are to the edition with an introduction by Tim Cook and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *NN*.

[8]As a character, Miss Havisham displays many similar characteristics as the much earlier Mrs Skewton; see Slater.

[9]See also Sedgwick 140.

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