

Color and Memory in *David Copperfield*: A Response to Georges Letissier

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Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate, Vol. 33 (2024): 181-189.
DOI: [10.5263/conn33-federico-1](https://doi.org/10.5263/conn33-federico-1)

This response is a contribution to the debate on “‘The prismatic hues of memory’: Visual Story-Telling and Chromatic Showmanship in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*.” (<https://www.connotations.de/debate/dickens-and-colour/>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome; contact editors@connotations.de.

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Abstract

In his essay on memory and color in *David Copperfield*, Georges Letissier pays special attention to the construction of spatial memories. I build on this insight by showing how temporality is also represented through associations with color. Throughout *David Copperfield*, color recurs as a symbol or motif for both change and continuity, reflecting David’s perception of the swiftness of time—a reddening sundial, a room in twilight, a hill covered with snow—while also suggesting an implicit hope that the world will continue to turn, the years spin on for future generations. Letissier’s essay also invites me to think about how we remember books we have loved over time, and how our memories of colors we only see in the mind’s eye may shift and change with every reading. But this is not something we need worry about: rereading a novel, especially a novel of memory such as *David Copperfield*, may offer a consoling glimpse of the “prismatic hues” we cast upon our personal histories, and our reading lives.

I know almost nothing about color theory, but I am drawn to phenomenology as a way to approach the reading experience, and Georges Letissier’s essay opened a little door. This study of memory and color in *David Copperfield* feels like an invitation to walk through a few moments

in this novel where color is linked to perceptual experience—to memory and space, as Letissier demonstrates persuasively, and also to spatial perspective and to the way temporality is represented through associations with color that are almost archetypal. In *David Copperfield*, colors recur as symbol of or motif for both change and continuity. A reddening sundial, a room in twilight, a hill covered with snow—these poignant images register for David (and for the reader) the cycles of his life from childhood to adulthood.

In general, Dickens's deployment of color often feels theatrical and emblematic—Annie Strong's cherry-colored ribbons and Steerforth's red sailing cap, the red caps of the Paris revolutionaries and the red wine that stains the cobblestones, Coketown's red brick buildings and its black smoke, Rogue Riderhood's conspicuous spotted red neckerchief.¹ The palette in Dickens's novels feels bold and documentary to my visual sense, an analog to the vivid hues in some Pre-Raphaelite art, where color can be(come) a sign in a moral drama. And many Victorian novelists used color this way, both to conjure a complete picture for the reader and as moral signification.

The Victorian realist novel is governed by an aesthetic of accuracy. Yet description in nineteenth-century fiction is often both factual and evocative, documentary and dreamlike: things, rooms, faces, clothing all work as realistic details, but they also have a psychological function, often pointing to aspects of a character's perceptive reality. Georges Letissier is absolutely right to note that color in *David Copperfield* functions as more than mimesis. His essay also made me appreciate the overall painterliness of David's memories, and to think about Dickens's use of color more generally, whether atmospherically or didactically. John Ruskin thought that color in painting could precisely suggest the entire spectrum of moral feeling: "Affection and discord, fretfulness and quietness, feebleness and firmness, luxury and purity, pride and modesty, and all other such habits, and every conceivable modification and mingling of them, may be illustrated, with mathematical exactness, by conditions of line and colour" (Ruskin). Could not something like this also be said of Dickens's use of color?²

Color signals an emotional temperature and a mood, as well as a value. In Dickens's first-person novels, the narratives of time and self-discovery—*David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* (1861), and also perhaps Esther Summerson's narrative in *Bleak House* (1853)—the narrator's subjective associations with certain colors may indeed be "triggers in the process of remembering" (Letissier 35). Color is an essential layer in David Copperfield's recovery of the past, and as Gaston Bachelard has noted, the time of childhood is always something *pictured*:

Childhood sees the World illustrated, the World with its original colors, its true colors. The great *once-upon-a-time* (*autrefois*) which we relive in dreaming of our memories of childhood is precisely the world of the *first time*. All the summers of our childhood bear witness to the "eternal summer." The seasons of memory are eternal because they are faithful to the memory of the *first time*. The cycle of exact seasons is a major cycle of the imagined universes. It marks the life of our *illustrated* universes. In our reveries we see our illustrated universe once more with its *childhood colors*. (117-18)

I will briefly come back to Bachelard later, for his ideas apply beautifully to *David Copperfield*. Indeed, Dickens was a born phenomenologist, able to convey his experiences of things and places with great vividness, in memorably broad brushstrokes, but also with startling and moving intimacy.

Color and the use of light and shade, prismatically and metaphorically, as well as Dickens's acute awareness of perspective, all contribute to the effectiveness of the memory snapshots in *David Copperfield*. In his discussion of Chapter 2 ("I Observe"), Letissier mentions the narrator's "empirical stance" (29) as well as the "artistic competition" (22) that is played out between lines and colors in David's memory: the outline of Clara's youthful shape against Peggotty's black eyes and red arms. Dickens pays careful attention to the view of the child's eye here, which needs to sort and organize not only pigments and shapes but also sizes. David thinks he can remember his mother and Peggotty "at a little distance apart, dwarfed to my sight by stooping down or kneeling on the

floor" (18; emphasis added). He writes, "The first objects I can remember as *standing out by themselves from a confusion of things*, are my mother and Peggotty" (19; emphasis added). In the child's wondering observation of the material world sometimes he sees only patches of color. Thus David observes Peggotty as one associated mass: her red cheeks and arms and the red footstool in the parlor appear to be "one and the same thing" to him (22). In stark contrast, Mr. Murdstone is not seen "out of a cloud" of infancy (19) or as a soft shape slowly coming into focus but in tight and scary close-up. David gets a good look at Murdstone when he is sitting in front of this rather hairy adult man on the saddle of his horse. "I could not make up my mind to sit in front of him without turning my head sometimes, and looking up in his face. His hair and whiskers were blacker and thicker, *looked at so near*, than even I had given them credit for being" (27). David hunts for the right color to capture Murdstone's eyes: "He had that kind of shallow black eye—I want a better word to express an eye that has no depth in it to be looked into—which, when it is abstracted, seems from some peculiarity of light to be disfigured, for a moment at a time, by a cast" (27). He notes the "squareness about the lower part of his face, and the dotted indication of the strong black beard he shaved close every day"—the dotted stubble is exactly what a child would notice, but also splendid portraiture—and the "regular eyebrows, and the rich white, and black, and brown, of his complexion" (27; emphasis added). David will never forget this face.³ He takes particular notice when Murdstone's complexion is drained of this rich coloration—for example, when Aunt Betsey tells him off in Chapter 14 ("My Aunt Makes Up Her Mind About Me"): "He had stood by the door, all this while, observant of her with a smile upon his face, though his black eyebrows were heavily contracted. I remarked now, that, though the smile was on his face still, his colour had gone in a moment, and he seemed to breathe as if he had been running" (187).

What most matters in the novel (and perhaps in life) is the color that is *remembered*, the first impression, whether of faces or of things. The dome of St. Paul's Cathedral on Peggotty's work-box will always be

pink for David—and maybe even for Peggotty, for when she actually visits St. Paul's she is rather disappointed: "from her long attachment to her work-box, [it] became a rival of the picture on the lid, and was, in some particulars, vanquished, she considered, by that work of art" (402). But time is the real vanquisher in *David Copperfield*. In Chapter 64 ("A Last Retrospect"), David notes, "The cheeks and arms of Peggotty, so hard and red in my childish days, when I wondered why the birds didn't peck her in preference to apples, are shrivelled now; and her eyes, that used to darken their whole neighbourhood in her face, are fainter (though they glitter still)" (735).

Letissier notes that primary colors seem to be in competition in Chapter 2. In one brief but quite important passage, though, green and red complement each other, as if harmoniously arranged:

There is nothing half so green that I know anywhere, as the grass of that churchyard; nothing half so shady as its trees; nothing half so quiet as its tombstones. The sheep are feeding there, when I kneel up, early in the morning, in my little bed in a closet within my mother's room, to look out at it; and I see the red light shining on the sun-dial, and think within myself, 'Is the sun-dial glad, I wonder, that it can tell the time again?' (21)

David's father is buried in this churchyard, and in Chapter 1 ("I Am Born"), David thinks about the "white grave-stone in the churchyard, and of the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night" (10). In Chapter 22 ("Some Old Scenes, And Some New People"), when David takes a sentimental journey to Blunderstone, he cannot help but think back to "the rosy mornings when I peeped out of that same little window in my night-clothes, and saw the sheep quietly feeding in the light of the rising sun" (273). The green grass, the reddening sun-dial, the white tombstone glowing in the night—these are the colors that cycle most through David's memory. He mentions visiting or thinking about his parents' graves in the churchyard, the tree that shelters them, the reddening sky (sometimes dawn and sometimes dusk) more than twelve different times in his story. At one point David writes, "it pained me to think of the dear old place as altogether abandoned; of the weeds growing tall in the garden,

and the fallen leaves lying thick and wet upon the paths. I imagined how the winds of winter would howl round it, how the cold rain would beat upon the window-glass, how the moon would make ghosts on the walls of the empty rooms, watching their solitude all night. I thought afresh of the grave in the churchyard, underneath the tree [...]" (215). This is really a temporal image *tinged* with color, metonymically, as are so many images in this novel.

Letissier references Bakhtin's use of the term *chronotope* to describe the relationship between time and space in narrative. He suggests a new word, *chromatope*, to help us think about the ways color is used to represent or complement space—for example, Dickens's description of a fishing village as "pitch, and oakum, and tar" (78) evokes dull colors such as black and brown (see Letissier 28). But Dickens also uses color to convey how David perceives the passing of time, frequently linked through seasonal memories. Later in "I Observe," David sweeps away time in an almost cinematic prolepsis: "A great wind rises, and the summer is gone in a moment. We are playing in the winter twilight, dancing about the parlour" (22). In a similar way, Chapter 43 ("Another Retrospect") begins:

Weeks, months, seasons, pass along. They seem little more than a summer day and winter evening. Now, the Common where I walk with Dora is all in bloom, a field of bright gold; and now the unseen heather lies in mounds and bunches underneath a covering of snow. In a breath, the river that flows through our Sunday walks is sparkling in the summer sun, is ruffled by the winter wind, or thickened with drifting heaps of ice. Faster than ever river ran towards the sea, it flashes, darkens, and rolls away. (527)

The gold of summer days and the snows of a winter evening—this is how David measures time and how he remembers his life. Bachelard writes, "The pure memory has no date. It has a *season*" (116). And does not every season, and even every hour, have its special color?

Georges Letissier's original reading of *David Copperfield* invites many questions, some of which he succinctly addresses—how textile manufacturing created new colors, for instance, and what cognitive science

and psychology teach about color perception. His references to phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, and his attention to narrative technique stimulated me to think about the dynamics of the reading process more generally, and how reading fiction may assist us in our own acts of reverie and recovery. Elaine Scarry has written keenly and elegantly about how writers charge our visual imaginations by simulating movement, distance, texture. Literary works also assist in our perception of color. She notes, to take one example, that it is easier for a reader to picture a description that contains color if the visual field is small—thus it is much easier for a reader to see the face of a flower (or David's blue mug with the "nosegay of seaweed"; 33) than to see a whole landscape (see Scarry 53). I cannot prove it in this short response, but I strongly suspect that Dickens had an intuition about this, and took care to present certain colors in proportion to their objects.

Letissier concludes, "And in a novel underscoring the vulnerability of memories, always on the brink of the infinite indistinctness of oblivion, colours vindicate a form of resilience" (35). This is a hopeful claim. Reading and remembering—including remembering the books we have read—are mysterious and seductive processes. Scarry writes that we are continually surprised when we reread a book because we cannot help but follow different authorial instructions about what to visualize: "one recomposes all the pictures one made *the first time*, but now also finds new pictures turning up in the mind not noticed in the earlier encounter" (199; emphasis added).

The next time I read *David Copperfield*, thanks to Letissier, I will see more blue things than I had in any earlier reading (the staginess of Steerforth's red cap acting, perhaps, as a kind of blot on the retina). We can be haunted and saddened by our vulnerability as readers, humbled by how much we simply did not notice in our earlier reading. But we should also feel grateful to experience that visual world all over again at a later age and season—to see anew its lines and colors, like a familiar dream. "How can you be objective in the face of a book you love, which you have loved, which you have read at several different times of your life?" asks Bachelard. "Such a book has a *reading past*. In rereading it,

you have not always suffered in the same way—and above all you no longer hope with the same intensity in all the seasons of a life of reading” (75). Rereading a novel, and especially a novel of memory such as *David Copperfield*, may offer us a consoling glimpse of the “prismatic hues” we cast upon our personal histories, our reading lives, our hoped for futures.

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NOTES

¹The Charles Dickens Museum in London claims Dickens’s favourite color was “scarlet red.” <https://dickensmuseum.com/blogs/charles-dickens-museum/the-reading-desk-more-than-first-meets-the-eye>.

²In *Bleak House*, for example, the color yellow—oily, sour, decaying—has clear moral associations: Nemo’s face has “a yellow look” (165), greasy Mr. Chadband is “a large yellow man with a fat smile” (304), Krook’s body dissolves into “a thick, yellow liquor” (516), the vampirish Mr. Vholes picks at the “red pimples on his yellow face with his black glove” (696). Indeed, in a recent essay on Dickens’s color logic, Franziska Quabeck shows that Dickens consistently associates yellow with aging, deterioration, and manifestations of the uncanny—as a discoloring of what was once white.

³David cannot help interjecting, “confound his complexion, and his memory!” (27).

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