



Digital Dickens Notes Project

exploring the temporalities of victorian serial form

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What are the Working Notes?

Although we tend to encounter them in single volumes today, Dickens originally wrote and published his novels in serial parts—usually in twenty monthly instalments of 32 pages each. For each instalment, Dickens kept a 'Working Note', a 7x9" page of notepaper, divided in half. On the left side, he experimented with combinations of potential story elements—character names, events, lines of dialogue—and wrote himself explicit instructions; on the right, he documented the salient details of each chapter.

What is the Digital Dickens Notes Project?

The Project is creating and exploring digital transcriptions of Dickens's Notes. The transcriptions will be placed alongside the novel texts on an interactive online platform, accompanied by annotations and essays tracing connections between Notes, manuscript and the final text. Crucially, the Project aims to show that the Notes are more than just blueprints: they are experimental, dynamic spaces Dickens used to negotiate the demands of writing in serial form.

The Copperfield Notes

Over the summer I transcribed and annotated the Notes for *David Copperfield* (1849-50) for publication on the Project's website. The annotations place the Notes in their historical-biographical context, describe their textual intricacies, and explain their relationship to the novel itself.

The *Copperfield* Notes are complexly layered: much of their content was written not before but after the corresponding serial instalment, signifying a dynamic movement between Notes, manuscript and proofs across the writing process. They also demonstrate a transition from a looser, more instinctive compositional approach (signified by more retroactive Notes) to a more disciplined practice (signified by more proactive Notes) as the novel's serial run drew to a close. In this, they illustrate how the temporal logics and pressures of serial form impacted the shape and style of the final text.

Working Note for *David Copperfield*, No. XVII



Original note (above) Transcription (below)

David Copperfield and Epitaphs of David Copperfield - No. XVII

chapter LI.

The beginning of a longer journey

Mr Peggotty's narrative
Fever - forgot recently acquired language - "Fisherman's daughter here's a shell!"
Saved by Martha
David & Peggotty go down to Yarmouth
clear the way for Emigration
farewell of old boat
Mrs Gummidge

Chapter LII.

I assist at an Explosion.

Uriah Heep's office
Mr Micawber's letter - Revelation - Traddles, my Aunt's property.
Mrs Heep - "Beumble Ury, and tell all!"
Emigration proposed by my Aunt.
Restoration of mutual confidence between Mr & Mrs Micawber

Chapter LIII.

Another Retrospect.

Three times - White line to be on each -
Speaks of herself as past. Jip grown old. The Chinese House before the fire. David looking at him
Present little Dora's death, through Jip's Death David sees him lie down on the rug, and die - Agnes comes down - all over

Annotation excerpts (right)

Why is this work important?

The Notes provide invaluable insight into Dickens's compositional practices—into both the constraints and the generative freedoms he found working within serial form. Documenting the vast imaginative reservoir he drew upon, they suggest potential intentions and alternate trajectories that challenge and inform our readings of his novels. Beyond Dickens, this work also extends our understanding of the dynamics of Victorian seriality, and the specific, intensive, and temporally-distributed forms of labour that went into writing and publishing in parts. Working with new methodologies in the digital humanities, the Project is making Dickens's Notes readable and accessible to students and scholars in ways they have not been previously—a task that, in a time of closed borders, feels all-the-more important.

Black and blue inks both appear on the Working Note for No. XVII, reflecting the switch from the former to the latter halfway through the manuscript, early in chapter 52. The notes for chapters 51 and 52, then, were apparently added retroactively and, contrary to his practice in previous months, chapter titles [...]

David's visit to Yarmouth in chapter 51 allowed for the reappearance of Mr Omer, deferred in the previous month. Here, Omer explicitly traces David's progress in the novel, from the "small party" he met in No. III to the celebrated author of a successful novel, "compact in three separate and individual wolumes" (739). Their exchange, too, provides some closure to the matter of Emily's recovery, and suggests the possibility of her [...]