

Prominent Backgrounds:
Visions of Class and Desire in Dickens's Illustrated Novels

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This dissertation examines Dickens's illustrated novels, focusing on the second half of his career--from *Dombey and Son* to *Our Mutual Friend*--to investigate how the illustrations remained central to Dickens's artistic vision, even though the nineteenth-century illustrated novel eventually lost the freshness and energy associated with *Pickwick Papers*. The Introduction discusses how the desire evidenced by many Dickens characters to raise themselves into a higher class is tinged with the anxiety that certain aspects of their social backgrounds will prevent such ascension. "Prominent Backgrounds" therefore describes less the social prominence a character hopes to achieve than the social blemishes which threaten to become prominent as that character aspires to higher stations. The illustrations are essential to this understanding of Dickens because they highlight class concerns which Victorians were often reluctant to address directly.

Chapter One shows how Dickens uses the illustrations in *Dombey and Son* to present Edith Dombey as the novel's unlikely heroine. Her status as fallen woman is reformulated in the illustrations as an indictment of the class-obsessed institution of marriage. Chapter Two examines *David Copperfield*, a novel that questions what it is to be a gentleman at a time when class boundaries were becoming less certain. The illustrations specifically challenge David's *moral* claim to gentlemanly status. Chapter Three moves from David's self-presentation to Dickens's prominence in nineteenth-century popular culture, studying the illustrations of *Bleak House* to demonstrate that Dickens found aesthetic value in his position as "lowly" writer for the masses. Chapter Four considers the criminality of Bradley Headstone in light of the illustrations for *Our Mutual Friend* to explore Dickens's continued dissatisfaction with a class system that offered only the illusion of social advancement.

The Conclusion discusses *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations*, novels serialized without illustrations. These works examine a class system in which everyone is on display. The horrors of such a world are made more distressing by ways of looking which had earlier been articulated in the illustrations. Dickens's visual imagination highlights the indiscretions about which Victorian writers were generally discreet, calling attention to aspects of his work overlooked by the reading eye.