

Research Article

# DICKENS'S A TALE OF TWO CITIES: NARRATIVE DRIFT AND SERIAL TEMPORALITY AND RETROSPECTIVE AUTHORITY

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## Abstract

This paper argues that publication format severely alters narratorial authority by examining how the narrative voice in *A Tale of Two Cities* changes between its serialized and volume versions. Narratorial drift is a slow but cumulative shift in the narrator's epistemic position due to reading contexts and small textual changes, beyond the basic importance of suspense and plot. The serial version also takes place in a temporality of interruption, anticipation, and reader reorientation that is characterized by incursions, modal uncertainty, and dialogic address, based on narratological frameworks that Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal developed. The volume edition, on the other hand, suppresses these characteristics in favor of a retrospective, authoritative narrative voice that is distinguished by structural coherence, declarative certainty, and continuity. By paying particular attention to segmentation, duration, focalization, and micro-level stylistic modifications, the article demonstrates that reader temporality and the material constraints of publication co-produce narratorial identity, which is not fixed. The codex form resurrects this voice as one of coherence and omniscient, but serialization also implies a contingent and processual narrator who can be delayed and disrupted. This study reframes narrative voice as a dynamic feature and a feature of the text, which makes the connection between textual form and reading habit key. Finally, it argues for a more comprehensive narratological approach that incorporates media in the analysis of narrative discourse.

**Keywords:** Serialization; Narratorial drift; Narrative voice; Temporality; Dickens; Narratology

## Introduction

In this essay, I argue that the narratorial instability in *A Tale of Two Cities* stems from a clear drift between its serial form in *All the Year Round* (1859) and its volume form, in which it is packaged as a whole rather than merely the thematic duality. This drift appears in small edits and suppressions that alter the narrator's epistemic position, rather than a wholesale rewrite. These interventions, such as "But, we must return to Doctor Manette" and mnemonics like "As we have seen", help the reader return to the story when we have to pause to see another one. Dickens, *All the Year Round*, 30th April 1859; Sanders 393–401. These gestures speak to the fact that storytelling is not a one-off event; it is a continuous process. However, this phrase is either shortened or removed in the 1860 volume edition: "Doctor Manette—," According to Dickens (1860 ed.) and Sanders (401), "the wine was spilt" conceals any signs of temporal rupture and depicts events as if they are always accessible.

The modulation of epistemic markers is another way to see this change. The volume regularizes modal hesitation in the serial text, such as "It might have been supposed," into a declarative statement, such as "It was supposed" (Sanders 428), turning narrative from a speculative reconstruction into an authoritative report. In a similar vein, reader-oriented hints such as "the reader will remember" vanish in the volume form (417), signifying a shift away from dialogic interaction and toward an impersonal narrative. Dickens's proof-stage edits tend toward closure even at the levels of syntax and punctuation: the more suspenseful rhythms of serial prose, which are frequently organized through parataxis and dashes, are regularized into syntactically complete units, strengthening the sense of retrospective control (Sanders, Textual Introduction).

These minor but constant changes result in a reconfiguration of narrative ontology rather than just artistic improvement. While the volume narrator speaks from a position of complete knowledge ("we see") and retrospectively puts the narrative field in order, the serial narrator speaks from a time frame of anticipation, often predicting "we shall see" but also reestablishing continuity when interrupted. Dickens's changes take this distinction "between the lines" and extend it into narratorial authority, as instruction, hesitancy and reader attention are gradually negated. Narrative voice is, then, not a feature that remains constant throughout the publication, but rather a function which is recalibrated based on the material of the publication. Dickens's narrator is one that is created in time— responding to interruption, delay and reader uncertainty— and then reassembled as a single person with authority in the codex as it comes from serial to volume. A retrospectively cohesive and conceptually powerful narrative voice replaced a temporally dispersed and episodically stable pluralistic narration. This drift arises from minute but cumulative changes in segmentation, rhythm, focalization, and the temporality of reading itself; it cannot be reduced to significant textual changes. This study shows that Dickens's narrator is not a stable entity but rather a function co-produced by publishing format and readerly temporality, drawing on the narratological frameworks of Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal.

## Literature Review:

Narrative discourse is fundamentally shaped by the structural limits imposed by serialization. Dickens's book, which was published in *All the Year Round*, was divided into 31 weekly instalments, each of which had to keep readers interested while allowing for temporal disruption. Victorian serial storytelling relies on "rhythms of interruption and resumption that structure both narrative form and readerly expectation," as noted by Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund (Hughes and Lund 15). These rhythms recalibrate the narrator's function in maintaining coherence across temporal gaps, in addition to having an impact on story progression.

The narrative voice of *A Tale of Two Cities* is pluralistic, which means that although they are not a part of the story universe, their authority is irregular. In the serial form, the narrator constantly performs acts of reorientation to make up for the discontinuities associated with weekly printing. This leads to a phenomenon called episodic narratorial modulation, when the narrative voice occasionally becomes more prominent in order to maintain continuity. The famous opening lines demonstrate this instability:

"It was the age of wisdom, the age of foolishness, the best of times, the worst of times"(Dickens 1).

From a Genettian standpoint, this chapter uses a communal, somewhat impersonal voice and proceeds through iterative narrative, depicting a generic state rather than a particular event. However, in the serial setting, this start serves as an introductory gesture whose interpretive weight develops over the course of the following weeks rather than a cohesive prologue. The scope of this introduction is retroactively redefined in each instalment, keeping it from solidifying into a single narrative position. In contrast, the identical passage gains the authority of a retrospective frame when it appears in the volume edition. When taken out of the weekly reading's temporal context, it becomes a totalizing statement that establishes a cogent narrative perspective right away. This change is temporal rather than textual; the reader perceives the story as continuous rather than interrupted, which makes the narrator seem more omniscient.

The link between segmentation (chapter/instalment division) and narrative duration is an important site of narratorial drift. Genette emphasizes how narrative pace affects reader perception by distinguishing between story time and discourse time. Instalment gaps in the serial adaptation of Dickens's book often occur during tense moments, creating what Peter Brooks calls "narrative desire"—a forward-moving drive organized by delay (Brooks 37).

Take the instance of Doctor Manette's relapse in Book II, for instance. This sequence is divided into instalments in the serial pattern, with each segment ending at a moment of psychological or emotional ambiguity. In these situations, the narrator frequently steps in to stabilize interpretation by bridging the gap between instalments with summary or anticipatory clues. An example passage is as follows:

"There was something curiously rough and sudden in the tone of the words... that jarred upon him" (Dickens 188).

Such moments are followed by a pause in the serial setting, which compels the narrator to reassert coherence in the next instalment. Scenes are lengthened through suspense and then

shortened through narrative summary, creating a rhythm of expansion and compression. However, these same paragraphs are read consecutively in the volume edition. The observed duration of events is changed when there are no forced pauses; what was previously temporally dilated by expectation is now retrospectively compressed. Continuity is established by continuous reading; the narrator no longer needs to engage in overt acts of reorientation. Narratorial power is significantly impacted by this change. Authority in the serial is contingent and is frequently reinstated in reaction to disturbance. Authority seems to be innate in the volume, as the story develops without apparent stress.

Narratorial drift is mostly caused by large-scale structure, but it is also influenced by micro-level textual elements, including punctuation, phrase length, and paragraphing. According to bibliographical research, Dickens made a few small edits to the volume edition, frequently changing sentence divisions, commas, and semicolons. These seemingly insignificant adjustments have an impact on what Genette refers to as narrative rhythm. Think about the first sentence once more. The parallel clauses' cadence is changed by minor punctuation changes in some early printings. The tempo of enumeration is altered when a comma is swapped out for a semicolon, or vice versa, which affects how the narrator's voice is heard. Such rhythmic elements add to a sense of urgency and immediacy in the serial format, where each instalment must swiftly grab readers' attention. The same statement appears as a calm, almost ceremonial proclamation in the volume.

These little modifications serve as an example of what could be referred to as the "micro-physics of narratology"—minor formal components that collectively influence narrative voice. Dickens frequently uses "minute modulations of tone that produce large-scale effects of authority" in his narrative, as noted by D. A. Miller (Miller 102). The change from serial to volume reading in *A Tale of Two Cities* amplifies these modulations. Focalization, or the viewpoint that is used to interpret events, is another aspect of narratorial drift. Mieke Bal makes a distinction between variable focalization (changing perspectives) and zero focalization (omniscient perspective). Dickens's book regularly switches the focus between persons and places, especially between London and Paris.

These movements frequently correspond with instalment boundaries in the serial format, creating a sense of spatial discontinuity. After a week, the reader may go from a scene in London to one in Paris, perceiving the change as sudden. By offering thematic connections or contextual reminders, the narrator makes up for this. For example, narratorial commentary focusing on differences or similarities often marks the transitions between scenes of Lucie Manette and scenes of revolutionary Paris. Such commentary is a bridge in the serial, keeping the pauses consistent. But these changes look more symmetrical and deliberate in the volume edition. Rather than being a reaction to episodic fragmentation, the juxtaposition of London and Paris is part of a larger structural design. The narrator's voice is in a much more controlled manner as well and leads the reader through a well-balanced composition. The shift in narrative time from suspense-based to teleological is the most obvious difference between serial and volume. To keep the readership, serial pieces are cliffhangers, with the end at the point of tension. Prolepsis, or the expectation of future events, is highlighted by these endings, according to Genette. Several of the pieces in *A Tale of Two Cities* end in similar ways: a

character has an uncertain future, a revelation is delayed, danger is imminent. In these moments, the narrator emphasizes the uncertainty of what will happen by adopting a cool and controlled withholding of information. However, these same events are reframed as steps leading to a predetermined outcome in the volume edition. Sydney Carton's self-sacrifice in the last scene serves as an example of this change: "I do something that is far, far better than I have ever done." Dickens, 357.

This conclusion, which is perceived as a postponed resolution in the serial, is the climax of weeks of expectation. It appears in the book as the unavoidable conclusion of a storyline. As a result, the narrator's voice changes from one that controls tension to one that expresses meaning in retrospect. This shift from anticipation to closure is consistent with Brooks's theory of narrative desire. However, in Dickens's instance, how this movement is seen depends on the form of dissemination. The volume highlights the result, whereas the serial stresses the process.

### **Theoretical framework:**

This study is grounded in narratological theory, primarily drawing on the works of Gérard Genette (1980, 1988) and Mieke Bal (2009). Narratology provides a systematic framework for examining how narratives are structured and how meaning is produced through narrative voice, temporality, focalization, and discourse. Rather than focusing solely on the events of a story, narratology investigates the relationship between the story (what is told) and the discourse (how it is told), making it particularly appropriate for analysing Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* in both its serialized and volume editions.

Genette's theory of narrative discourse offers the principal analytical framework for this research. His concepts of narrative voice, duration, order, frequency, and focalization explain how narrative authority is constructed and how readers experience narrative time. These concepts are especially relevant for examining the shifts in narratorial authority that occur between the serialized publication of *A Tale of Two Cities* in *All the Year Round* and its later publication as a complete volume. Genette's distinction between story time and discourse time enables the study to investigate how serialization creates interruption, anticipation, and reader reorientation, whereas the volume edition produces a more continuous and retrospective reading experience.

The study also incorporates Mieke Bal's narratological framework, particularly her discussion of focalization and narrative perspective. Bal distinguishes between the narrator and the focalizer, emphasizing that narrative meaning depends not only on who tells the story but also on whose perspective shapes the presentation of events. This theoretical perspective assists in examining how Dickens's narrative voice changes according to publication format and how these changes influence readers' perception of authority, continuity, and narrative coherence.

By combining the theoretical perspectives of Genette and Bal, this study examines narratorial drift as a dynamic process shaped by textual organization, publication format, and reader temporality. The framework allows for a detailed analysis of serialization, narrative voice, focalization, temporality, and retrospective authority, demonstrating that narratorial

identity is not fixed but evolves according to the material conditions of publication and reception.

## Conclusion

What could be called the narrator's ontology is reconfigured as a result of these changes taken together. The narrator is often viewed as a stable construct in traditional narratology and linked to the narrative. But *A Tale of Two Cities* suggests that readerly temporality (the situation in which the novel is consumed) also determines narratorial identity. In the serial format, the narrator has to deal with weekly publishing changes and unpredictability, but manages to negotiate. Its temporary authority is preserved by frequent coherence-building. The narrator in the volume is presented as a retrospective authority with seemingly complete control of the story. The following is a summary of this distinction: Serial narrator: future-focused, episodic, and contingent. The narrator in the volume is cohesive, continuous, and retrospective. The shift between these modes is indicative of the relationship between the texts and the media, not of the author being inconsistent. Dickens was well aware of serialization, as Robert Patten points out, and he developed his stories to keep readers interested throughout time (Patten 213). But the narrative of these stories becomes altered when they are collected into volumes. In this essay, we have argued that a variety of segmentation, duration, focalization and narrative temporality make *A Tale of Two Cities* so susceptible to the narrator drifting from serial to volume. It is clear from narratological theory in the context of publishing that Dickens's narrator is a complex construct, not fixed over time, and that narratology is not only about the texts but also the material and time in which they were received and the way in which they were presented. In Dickens' case serialization is more than just a story; it is a kind of narration that is re-framed and not destroyed when the text is rearranged as a single book.

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