

Plot

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GRESHAM
COLLEGE

spoiler alert, *n* (in a review or esp. online discussion of a film, television series, etc.) an intervention used to warn a reader that an important detail of the story is about to be divulged or alluded to; a forewarning of a plot spoiler ... frequently *humorous* or *ironic*, esp. in wider use

1982 *ST-2 Question* in *net.movies* (Usenet newsgroup) 8 June [*Spoiler alert*]
regarding Spock's parting gesture to McCoy, it wouldn't surprise me if that's how they bring him back.

spoiler, n

colloquial (originally *U.S.*). A description of a significant plot point or other aspect of a movie, book, etc., which if previously known may spoil a person's first experience of the work. Esp. in written contexts, warning the reader of an impending revelation of this type.

1971 D. C. Kenney in *National Lampoon* Apr. 33/1 On the following pages, the *National Lampoon* presents, as a public service, a selection of 'spoilers' guaranteed to reduce the risk of unsettling and possibly dangerous suspense... *Psycho*: The movie's multiple murders are committed by Anthony Perkins disguised as his long-dead mother [etc.].

‘I could forget Tinker, Tailor and the whole damn game: moles, everything. ... I could forget it. Right? Forget it. Just behave as if it had never happened.’ He was shouting. ‘And that’s what I’ve been doing: obeying orders and forgetting!’

The night landscape seemed to Smiley suddenly innocent; it was like a great canvas on which nothing bad or cruel had ever been painted. Side by side, they stared down the valley over the clusters of lights to a tor raised against the horizon. A single tower stood at its top and for a moment it marked for Smiley the end of the journey.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I did a bit of forgetting, too. So Toby actually mentioned Tinker, Tailor to you. However did he get hold of *that* story, unless ...’

John le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974), 32

A taxi had just drawn up before the house and a foot was protruding from it. Poirot surveyed the foot with gallant interest.

A neat ankle, quite a good quality stocking. Not a bad foot. But he didn't like the shoe. A brand new patent leather shoe with a large gleaming buckle. He shook his head.

Not chic—very provincial!

The lady got out of the taxi, but in doing so she caught her other foot in the door and the buckle was wrenched off. It fell tinkling on to the pavement. Gallantly, Poirot sprang forward and picked it up, restoring it with a bow.

Agatha Christie, *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940)

‘... I must know how to recognise our invisible Anne. What is she like?’

‘Like? Come! I’ll tell you in two words. She’s a sickly likeness of my wife.’

The chair creaked, and the pillar shook once more. The Count was on his feet again—this time in astonishment.

‘What!!!’ he exclaimed, eagerly.

‘Fancy my wife, after a bad illness, with a touch of something wrong in her head—and there is Anne Catherick for you,’ answered Sir Percival.

‘Are they related to each other?’

‘Not a bit of it.’

‘And yet, so like?’

‘Yes, so like. What are you laughing about?’

There was no answer, and no sound of any kind. The Count was laughing in his smooth silent internal way.

Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860)

If one conceives of plot as a structuration, then it traces the thoughts of readers as they ponder the reasons for events and the motivations of characters and consider the consequences of actions in their quest to make sense of the narrative as a whole ... In this conceptualisation, plot spans the time through which the narrative unfolds.

Karin Kukkonen, 'Plot', in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. P. Hühn, J.-C. Meister, J. Pier and W. Schmid (2014)

There are sensational novels and anti-sensational, sensational novelists and anti-sensational, sensational readers and anti-sensational. The novelists who are considered to be anti-sensational are generally called realistic. I am realistic. My friend Wilkie Collins is generally supposed to be sensational. The readers who prefer the one are supposed to take delight in the elucidation of character. Those who hold by the other are charmed by the continuation and gradual development of a plot.

Anthony Trollope, *Autobiography* (1883), Ch. XII

The policeman looked at the card that was handed down to him.

‘Why are we to stop her, sir? What has she done?’

‘Done! She has escaped from my Asylum. Don’t forget; a woman in white. Drive on.’

Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, in *All the Year Round*, 26 November 1859

But the veiled woman had possession of me, body and soul. She stopped on one side of the grave. We stood face to face with the tombstone between us. She was close to the inscription on the side of the pedestal. Her gown touched the black letters.

The voice came nearer, and rose and rose more passionately still. ‘Hide your face! Don’t look at her! Oh, for God’s sake, spare him——’

The woman lifted her veil.

‘Sacred to the Memory of Laura, Lady Glyde——’

Laura, Lady Glyde, was standing by the inscription, and was looking at me over the grave.

The Woman in White, in All the Year Round, 19 May, 1860

It is a pity that the third portion cannot be read all at once, because its purpose would be much more apparent; and the pity is the greater, because the general turn and tone of the working out and winding up, will be away from all such things as they conventionally go. But what must be, must be. As to the planning out from week to week, nobody can imagine what the difficulty is, without trying. But, as in all such cases, when it is overcome the pleasure is proportionate. Two months more will see me through it, I trust. All the iron is in the fire, and I have 'only' to beat it out.

Charles Dickens, letter to John Forster, mid-April 1861

“Jane caught a bad cold, poor thing! so long ago as the 7th of November, (as I am going to read to you,) and has never been well since. A long time, is not it, for a cold to hang upon her? She never mentioned it before, because she would not alarm us. Just like her! so considerate!—But however, she is so far from well, that her kind friends the Campbells think she had better come home, and try an air that always agrees with her; and they have no doubt that three or four months at Highbury will entirely cure her—and it is certainly a great deal better that she should come here, than go to Ireland, if she is unwell. Nobody could nurse her, as we should do.”

Emma (1815) II i

The like reserve prevailed on other topics. She and Mr. Frank Churchill had been at Weymouth at the same time. It was known that they were a little acquainted; but not a syllable of real information could Emma procure as to what he truly was. “Was he handsome?”—“She believed he was reckoned a very fine young man.” “Was he agreeable?”—“He was generally thought so.” “Did he appear a sensible young man; a young man of information?”—“At a watering-place, or in a common London acquaintance, it was difficult to decide on such points. Manners were all that could be safely judged of, under a much longer knowledge than they had yet had of Mr. Churchill. She believed every body found his manners pleasing.” Emma could not forgive her.

A reasonable visit paid, Mr. Weston began to move.—“He must be going. He had business at the Crown about his hay, and a great many errands for Mrs. Weston at Ford’s, but he need not hurry any body else.” His son, too well bred to hear the hint, rose immediately also, saying,

“As you are going farther on business, sir, I will take the opportunity of paying a visit, which must be paid some day or other, and therefore may as well be paid now. I have the honour of being acquainted with a neighbour of yours, (turning to Emma,) a lady residing in or near Highbury; a family of the name of Fairfax. I shall have no difficulty, I suppose, in finding the house; though Fairfax, I believe, is not the proper name—I should rather say Barnes, or Bates. Do you know any family of that name?”

“To be sure we do,” cried his father; “Mrs. Bates—we passed her house—I saw Miss Bates at the window. True, true, you are acquainted with Miss Fairfax; I remember you knew her at Weymouth, and a fine girl she is. Call upon her, by all means.”

Lettice ... began to describe an investigative piece she had commissioned on a medical scandal in Holland.

‘Apparently, there are doctors exploiting the euthanasia laws to ...’

Vernon interrupted her.

‘I want to run the Siamese twins story in Friday’s paper.’

There were groans. But who was going to object first?

Lettice. ‘We don’t even have a picture.’

Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam* (1998) II i

The literary editor, who had never before been in early enough to attend a morning conference, gave a somnolent account of a novel about food which sounded so pretentious that Vernon had to cut him off. From arts there was a funding crisis, and Lettice O'Hara in features was at last ready to run her piece on the Dutch medical scandal, and also, to honour the occasion, was offering a feature on how industrial pollution was turning male fish into females.

Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*, IV iii

The world was its usual mess: fish were changing sex, British table tennis had lost its way, and in Holland some unsavoury types with medical degrees were offering a legal service to eliminate your inconvenient elderly parent. How interesting. All one needed was the aged parent's signature in duplicate and several thousand dollars.

Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*, V i

These exclamations continued till they were interrupted by the lady, who now proceeded to execute the commission given her by her brother, and gave orders for providing all necessaries for the child, appointing a very good room in the house for his nursery. Her orders were indeed so liberal, that, had it been a child of her own, she could not have exceeded them; but, lest the virtuous reader may condemn her for showing too great regard to a base-born infant, to which all charity is condemned by law as irreligious, we think proper to observe that she concluded the whole with saying, “Since it was her brother’s whim to adopt the little brat, she supposed little master must be treated with great tenderness. For her part, she could not help thinking it was an encouragement to vice; but that she knew too much of the obstinacy of mankind to oppose any of their ridiculous humours.”

Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (1749) I v

The view from my Lady Dedlock's own windows is alternately a lead-coloured view and a view in Indian ink. The vases on the stone terrace in the foreground catch the rain all day; and the heavy drops fall—drip, drip, drip—upon the broad flagged pavement, called from old time the Ghost's Walk, all night. On Sundays the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves. My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from her boudoir at a keeper's lodge and seeing the light of a fire upon the latticed panes, and smoke rising from the chimney, and a child, chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped-up man coming through the gate, has been put quite out of temper. My Lady Dedlock says she has been “bored to death.”

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Ch. II (March 1852)

My Lady, changing her position, sees the papers on the table—looks at them nearer—looks at them nearer still—asks impulsively, “Who copied that?”

Mr. Tulkinghorn stops short, surprised by my Lady's animation and her unusual tone.

“Is it what you people call law-hand?” she asks, looking full at him in her careless way again and toying with her screen.

“Not quite. Probably”—Mr. Tulkinghorn examines it as he speaks—“the legal character which it has was acquired after the original hand was formed. Why do you ask?”

“Anything to vary this detestable monotony. Oh, go on, do!”

Mr. Tulkinghorn reads again. The heat is greater; my Lady screens her face. Sir Leicester dozes, starts up suddenly, and cries, “Eh? What do you say?”

“I say I am afraid,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, who had risen hastily, “that Lady Dedlock is ill.”

“Faint,” my Lady murmurs with white lips, “only that; but it is like the faintness of death. Don't speak to me. Ring, and take me to my room!”

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Ch. II

What connexion can there be between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world who from opposite sides of great gulfs have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!

Jo sweeps his crossing all day long, unconscious of the link, if any link there be. He sums up his mental condition when asked a question by replying that he “don't know nothink.” He knows that it's hard to keep the mud off the crossing in dirty weather, and harder still to live by doing it. Nobody taught him even that much; he found it out.

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Ch. XVI (July 1852)

Mr Tulkinghorn to be shot (Pointing Roman)

George to be taken by Bucket. Yes.

Jo? Yes. Kill him.

Allan? — And Richard? Not Richard

Mr Guppy? No.

Smallweeds? No.

Lead up to murder through Chesney Wold? No. Through house in town.

Mrs Bucket? No.

Snagsbys? Mr. Slightly

Chadbands? Not yet.

Waiting Room? No
 Office? No
 French Town? Yes
 Man from China? Yes
 Prison? Yes
 Quarantine? Yes
 Family and two daughters? No
 Working jeweller and his daughters? No

People to meet and part as travellers do, and the future connexion between them in the story, not to be now shewn to the reader but to be worked out as in life. Try this uncertainty and this not-putting of them together, as a new means of interest. Indicate and carry through this intention.

New sort of practical People }
 Father — Mother — Baby } Meagles

Tattycoram

Reserved Woman. Introduce Miss—Wade?

(〈Nobody's Fault〉 Little Dorrit—N° I)

Chapter I
Sun and Shadow

Marseilles—Hot dusty picture Cold, shaded prison—Two men

Little Genoese—or Neopolitan?—Picture of an Italian—Monsieur Rigaud, with his nose going up & his moustache coming down Signor John Baptist Cavalletto Cavalletti

Jailer's child

Qui est-ce-qui passe ici si tard compagnon de la Majolaine

Chapter II

〈Baby〉. 〈Practical People〉. Quarantine

Bring in Father—Mother—Baby Meagles.

Arthur Clennam. From China. Indicates his story.

“Practical people”—New and better aspect thereof than usual: shewing how to be practical, not politico-economically.

Miss Wade Tattycoram

Travellers disperse—thus all travellers through life

Long afterwards he had cause to remember how Jasper sprang from the couch in a delirious state between sleeping and waking, and crying out: “What is the matter? Who did it?”

Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Ch. X (June 1870)

“Ware that there mound by the yard-gate, Mister Jarsper.”

“I see it. What is it?”

“Lime.”

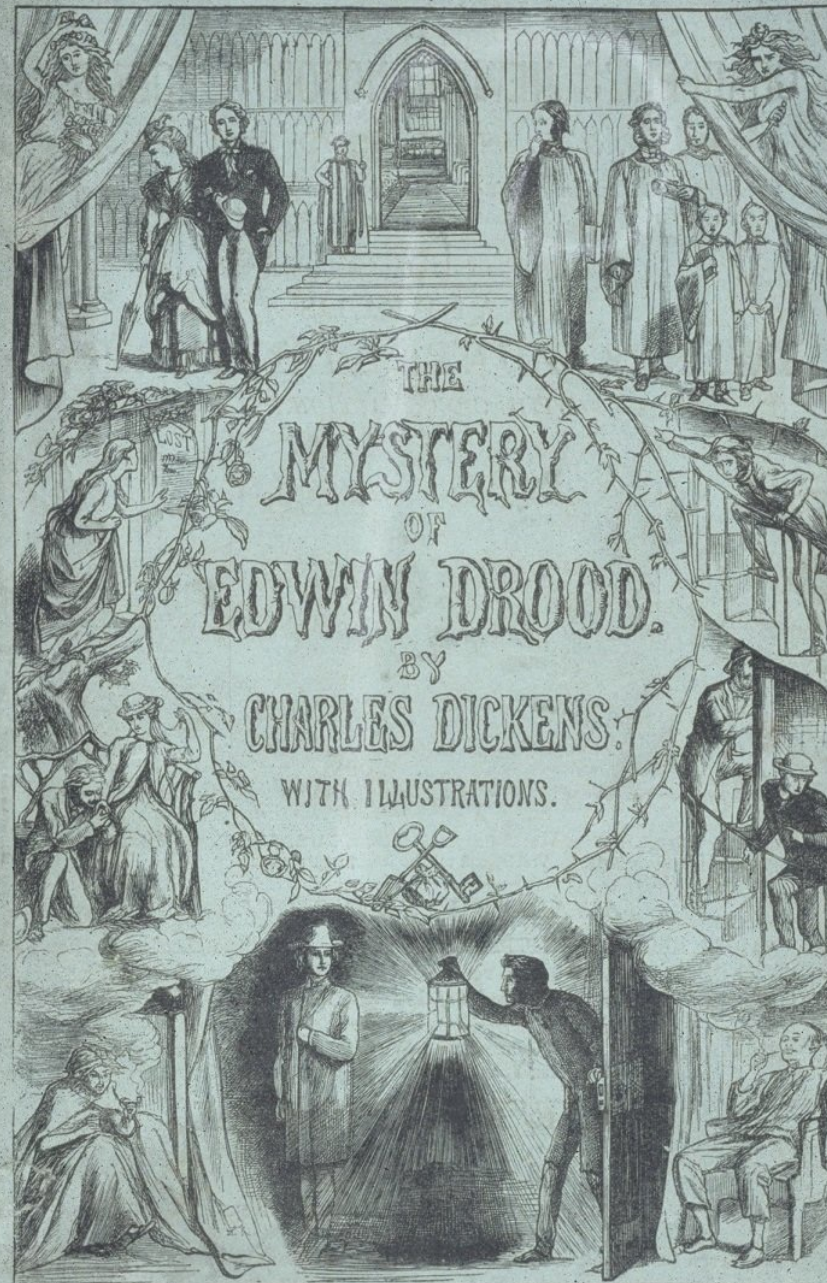
Mr. Jasper stops, and waits for him to come up, for he lags behind. “What you call quick-lime?”

“Ay!” says Durdles; “quick enough to eat your boots. With a little handy stirring, quick enough to eat your bones.”

The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Ch. XII (June 1870)

Lay the ground for the murder, to
come out at last

Number plan for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, N° III, Ch. XII



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As, in some cases of drunkenness, and in others of animal magnetism, there are two states of consciousness which never clash, but each of which pursues its separate course as though it were continuous instead of broken (thus, if I hide my watch when I am drunk, I must be drunk again before I can remember where), so Miss Twinkleton has two distinct and separate phases of being.

The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Ch. III (April 1870)