

Inverting Dickens: Biofiction, Illegibility, and the Author as Suspect in Dan Simmons's *Drood*

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Abstract: Dan Simmons's *Drood* (2009) rewrites Charles Dickens not as a stable moral authority but as an object that can be known only through suspicion and compromised testimony. By handing narration to Wilkie Collins – addicted, jealous, and belated – the novel turns “Dickens” into a contested construction produced by biography, scandal, and the reader's own appetite for access. This essay argues that Simmons stages three linked inversions. First, the Staplehurst railway accident breaks Dickensian intelligibility: trauma is narrated as an experience that resists plot, and celebrity recognition functions as a survival credential rather than proof of ethical clarity. Second, the novel shifts from the readable surface of London to Undertown, an infrastructural counter-city governed by permissions, debts, and embodied forms of knowledge, thereby reversing the familiar “paperscape” model of Dickensian urban mastery. Third, Simmons converts the unfinishedness of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* into an afterlife engine, showing how detection plots and completion fantasies compete to seize authorial sanction once the author is absent. Across these sites, *Drood* exposes how modern regimes of surveillance, commodified intimacy, and interpretive hunger manufacture literary authority. Rather than simply debunking Dickens, the novel demonstrates that Dickens's cultural afterlife persists through managed illegibility: the more closely the text promises to reveal the man, the more it multiplies uncertainty and makes authority itself the mystery. Reading the novel as neo-Victorian biofiction, the essay tracks how Collins's hostile witness turns private memory into evidence and how the rhetoric of detection collapses into coercion. These dynamics reposition Dickens from explanatory center to unstable celebrity body – policed, managed, and circulated – so that the desire to “solve” Dickens becomes indistinguishable from the desire to possess him.

Keywords: neo-Victorian biofiction; Dickens afterlives; Wilkie Collins; urban infrastructure; unfinishedness

In contemporary Anglophone culture, “Dickensian” functions as a convenient moral shorthand: it can name poverty, institutional cruelty, and the belief that narration makes suffering socially legible. Boyce and Rousselot note that the term condemns “repressive institutions” and “social injustices” by drawing on Dickens’s unusual fusion of literary authority and public visibility (Boyce and Rousselot 2012, 3). Yet that authority is continually maintained through heritage culture – adaptations, commemorations, and marketable versions of “the Victorian” – rather than simply inherited from nineteenth-century texts (Boyce and Rousselot 2012, 4).

Dan Simmons’s *Drood* intervenes by attacking precisely that aura. Its innovation is less a darker “portrait” than a reorganization of the terms by which Dickens is made available as a public object. From its first pages, the novel frames Dickens through the logic of indictment and spectacle, posing the question, “Did ... Charles Dickens plot to murder an innocent person and dissolve away his flesh in a pit of caustic lime?” (Simmons 2009, 7). The accusation does not arrive as a late twist; it is the narrative’s opening contract. A familiar Dickens, famous, benevolent, and culturally secure, is placed under a form of hostile biography that treats moral authority as a mask requiring explanation.

The inversion is formal. *Drood* relocates the production of “Dickens” to Wilkie Collins, who narrates from physical deterioration, chemical dependence, and professional rivalry, so that Dickens appears not as the origin of narrative order but as an object reconstructed by a damaged witness. Collins insists on insider status, yet his access is repeatedly undercut: he is absent from decisive events, forced to rely on second-hand reports, and often unable to separate hallucination from observation. That structure is recognizably neo-Victorian in the sense Louisa Yates describes when she defines the mode as “self-reflexive literary engagement with the Victorians, the Victorian, and Victorianism”, marked by “revisionist history, intertextuality, and, often, fragmentation” (Yates 2009, 187). Simmons turns fragmentation into method: the reader receives Dickens only as a contested construction, assembled within a witnessing apparatus whose failures are part of the novel’s argument about how celebrity authors are known.

The method of this paper is textual and intertextual rather than biographical in a documentary sense. It combines close reading with neo-Victorian biofiction studies, reading *Drood* in relation to the unresolved legacy of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, biographical traditions surrounding Dickens, and scholarship on Dickens’s afterlives. After establishing the biofictional frame, the paper traces

how questions of authority and legibility recur across Collins's narration, Staplehurst, Undertown, detection, performance, and unfinishedness.

This paper argues that Dan Simmons's *Drood* inverts Dickens by shifting narrative authority to Collins's compromised testimony, staging Staplehurst as the collapse of Dickensian intelligibility, relocating London's legibility into Undertown's controlled infrastructure, and corrupting detection into coercive compulsion that collapses the boundary between suspect and investigator.

To say that *Drood* "inverts" Dickens is to reverse the usual direction of explanation. Dickens's novels often translate opaque institutions into readable motives; Simmons borrows that apparatus only to turn it against its inventor. The novel foregrounds "unintelligible" experience – first in Dickens's own post-Staplehurst account and then in Collins's drugged testimony – so that illegibility becomes the condition of authorship rather than an accident (Simmons 2009, 15). In Louisa Yates's terms, this is neo-Victorian re-vision: recognizable Victorian forms installed in order to unsettle their claims to coherence (Yates 2009, 187).

I. The Other Dickens and the Biofictional Economy of Authority

Neo-Victorian biofiction often promises to restore historical figures to complexity, yet it can also render the famous person less human and more artifact, a surface rewritten to stage contemporary anxieties about authority and ethics. Kathyne Ford offers a useful working definition when she writes that "Neo Victorian biofiction may be defined as the mainly literary, dramatic, or filmic reimaginings of the lives of actual individuals who lived during the long nineteenth century" (Ford 2014, 7). *Drood* pushes that "reimagining" toward inversion: Dickens is not granted interiority so much as he is placed under hostile interpretation, as if the author's life were a text whose meaning must be extracted by force. The novel's opening allegation about lime functions as a sales pitch to cultural curiosity, but it also exposes what that curiosity wants – secret access to Dickens – and what it costs: a Dickens made readable only through suspicion.

The stakes are biographical and institutional. John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens* established one of the most influential stabilizing portraits of Dickens, energetic, morally awake, devoted to work, and legible as a genius, yet even Forster records how precarious that authority could be at the level of the body. Dickens, Forster reports, warned that "Work and worry, without exercise, would soon make an end of me" (Forster 1872, 9). *Drood* does

not simply contradict Forster; it turns biography into a battleground, staging Dickens's authority as something maintained by omission, reputational management, and the strategic control of what the public may see. Collins becomes a rival biographer who insists that Forster's monument rests on silence and that Dickens's respectability is a structure sustained by household labor, legal pressure, medical certification, and intimidation.

Collins's narration supplies humiliations that puncture the public icon. He recalls seeing Dickens "stuck in a rural, doorless privy with his trousers down around his ankles" (Simmons 2009, 8). The image is crude, but its function is theoretical. It turns Dickens from authorial presence into bodily vulnerability and insists that celebrity relies on selective visibility. The humiliation also sets the tone for what Boyce and Rousselot call the "Other Dickens", a Dickens produced when neo-Victorian appropriation refuses reverence and treats Dickens's image as available for inversion (Boyce and Rousselot 2012, 1).

The same logic governs Dickens's domestic scandal. Collins frames Dickens's separation and relationship with Ellen Ternan not as background but as an emblem of how Dickens's public life is propped up by concealment. The scandal is triggered by a banal logistics error: "Dickens had bought the actress Ellen Ternan an expensive bracelet [...] and the idiot jeweller had delivered the thing to the Dickenses' home" (Simmons 2009, 8). A private gift becomes public evidence; the household becomes an archive of betrayal. The inversion here is not moralism but infrastructure: Dickens's authority requires the capacity to move objects and people without leaving readable traces.

Simmons sharpens that portrait by stressing Dickens's household not as a refuge but as a disciplinary theatre. Collins recalls Dickens "shouting and roaring at" Catherine Dickens and "actually screaming in his wife's face" (Simmons 2009, 10). The language is blunt, but its narrative purpose is precise: Dickens's celebrated tenderness toward "the poor" is inverted into a private practice of intimidation. Even Dickens's paternal charm is shown as conditional. Collins remarks that Dickens "enjoyed his children, seemed almost to dote on them, until they began to think for themselves" (Simmons 2009, 10). Read against Laird's claim that later commemorations recast Dickens from "benevolent patriarch" into "restless, tormented, and sometimes vindictive genius" (Laird 2012, 13), the domestic scenes in *Drood* do not merely scandalize; they show how authority in the novel operates as conditional affection, granted only so long as it does not generate independent judgment.

When rumor threatens that infrastructure, Dickens turns to institutional verification. Collins reports that a doctor was “ordered to publish a statement [...] declaring [...] Miss Georgina Hogarth was *virgo intacta*” (Simmons 2009, 11). The Latin phrase marks a culture in which bodily examination can be conscripted to defend reputations. Dickens’s moral authority is thus shown to depend on an ability to mobilize coercive forms of legibility against others. The novel even adds a judgment from within Dickens’s family: “My father was like a madman” (Simmons 2009, 11). Dickens is inverted not into a simple villain but into a manager of exposure who uses the same social machinery his fiction often condemns.

II. Hostile Witness: Collins, Addiction, and the Problem of Testimony

Drood’s most consequential decision is to make Wilkie Collins the medium through which Dickens is known. Collins narrates from the ruins of his own credibility. His dependence on opiates and later morphine distorts time, interrupts memory, and renders perception vulnerable to suggestion. The novel does not treat this merely as psychological texture. It turns addiction into an epistemological condition: Dickens becomes readable only through a narrator who cannot guarantee what he sees.

This structure has two effects. First, it reverses the direction of authority. Dickens, famous for producing narratives that organize social complexity into intelligible form, becomes the object about whom intelligibility is disputed. Second, it turns biography into compulsion. Collins repeatedly frames himself as dragged along by Dickens’s private obsessions and by Inspector Field’s pressure. The reader is asked to evaluate Dickens’s actions through an account that is itself a battleground of envy, dependence, and fear.

The novel externalizes the costs of Collins’s compromised witness through a recurrent figure of apparition and repetition. In the aftermath of Dickens’s separation scandal, Collins sees his former household employee Mary Hogarth as “the Woman in Green”, her skin “green”, her face “a moderately decomposed corpse”, a vision that returns in corridors and half-lit thresholds (Simmons 2009, 56). Rather than offering a tidy supernatural explanation, *Drood* uses the Woman in Green as an image of what cannot be domesticated into biography: private damage made perceptible as haunting. The apparition also folds the domestic interior into the novel’s broader infrastructural logic. Mary’s reappearances often hinge on passages, stairs, and servants’ routes, spaces designed for circulation

without notice. That design rhymes with *Undertown* itself: an architecture of movement whose success depends on staying off the map. Collins's testimony, then, is not only unreliable because of opiates; it is structurally routed through spaces that train perception to miss what is right beside it.

The hostility in Collins's witness is not accidental; it is thematized as part of Dickens's celebrity economy, where intimacy becomes a form of public property and narrative access becomes an entitlement. David Vincent, describing nineteenth-century reception, notes that Dickens's works became the object of mass conversation: "the whole reading public were talking about them, discussing their real meaning, their real truth, their human characters" (Vincent 2009, 8). *Drood* turns that shared interpretive habit into a trap. Collins cannot separate his personal rivalry from Dickens's crowd power because Dickens's power is always interpersonal as well as textual; what once looked like communal meaning-making becomes, under Simmons's pressure, a condition of anxious over-reading in which private rumor and public discussion converge to produce Dickens as unstable.

Collins's recollections therefore oscillate between admiration and contempt. The privy memory is one pole; the other is Dickens's ability to bend people into service. Collins insists that Dickens expects forgiveness from readers regardless of private conduct, and that this expectation shapes Dickens's behavior as entitlement. The narrative's moral pressure comes from uncertainty: because Collins is compromised, the reader cannot accept his indictment as transparent truth, but because he is intimate, the reader cannot dismiss his testimony as mere fantasy. Dickens's inversion happens in that unresolved space.

III. Staplehurst: Trauma, Paranoia, and the Failure of Dickensian Intelligibility

The Staplehurst railway crash functions in *Drood* as both a historical event and an epistemic rupture. Simmons uses the crash to dramatize what happens when Dickensian intelligibility fails, when the author associated with narrative legibility encounters a scene that refuses to become coherent. Collins describes Dickens's post-crash account as saturated with the language of interpretive breakdown. Dickens, whose "stories were [...] always eminently intelligible", confronts a moment where "Perhaps the unimaginable began" (Simmons 2009, 15). The phrase does not merely describe shock. It marks a shift from narration as mastery to narration as inadequacy.

Simmons's rendering of Staplehurst also refuses the consolations of heroism by staging Dickens's survival as a performance of recognisability. Dickens stops a guard and demands, "Look at me! [...] tell me whether you don't know me", and takes comfort in being instantly identified as "Mr Dickens" (Simmons 2009, 14). That insistence on recognition is not vanity for its own sake: it is a survival tactic that turns celebrity into a credential. Yet the same sequence undercuts that credential by tracking the objects Dickens chooses to save. Once planks are laid, Dickens "clambered back into the tilted coach" to retrieve "his top hat and his flask of brandy" (Simmons 2009, 14). The hat and the flask read as props, tokens of the public Dickens who must re-emerge intact, so that even trauma becomes a scene of self-preservation as self-display. In *Drood*, Dickens's famous energy is no longer proof of moral clarity; it is the engine of a branded persona that must keep moving even when the narrative cannot make sense of what has happened.

The crash sequence also introduces Drood as a perceptual compulsion. Dickens repeatedly misrecognizes ordinary phenomena as the return of the cloaked figure. At one point, "A shadow passed over them. Dickens whirled, sure [...] that it would be Drood [...] But it was only a cloud passing between the sun and the river valley" (Simmons 2009, 17). The moment matters because it shows paranoia taking the place of explanation. Dickens needs an enemy because randomness and helplessness are otherwise unbearable. Drood becomes a narrative device Dickens uses to convert trauma into a mission.

Simmons reinforces this shift with the word that opens Dickens's unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. In Dickens's first chapter, Jasper listens to opium den mutterings and pronounces them "Unintelligible!" (Dickens 1870, 2). Ford notes that "the word 'Unintelligible' links the Victorian and neo-Victorian", since it is both "the final word in *Drood*" and a word from Dickens's unfinished novel (Ford 2021). Simmons's Staplehurst scene moves that intertextual hinge onto Dickens himself. During the crash, Dickens cannot make out Drood's speech over the noise: "Unintelligible, murmured Dickens. Unintelligible" (Simmons 2009, 22). The inversion, then, is exact: Dickens becomes the one confronted by unintelligibility, no longer the author who resolves it.

From this point, Dickens's interpretive habits are recorded as obsession. He begins to propose explanations that look less like evidence than like compulsive horror. When he tells Collins that "some sort of cannibalism went on" at Staplehurst, Collins responds with disbelief, briefly wondering whether the crash has "mentally unhinged" his friend (Simmons 2009, 30). Bell places this pattern

within a wider biofictional economy of “cannibalising Dickens”: later representations make Dickens “into a villain, a cannibal himself”, suggest that he “cannibalises his friends and his life in his fiction”, and then cannibalize “Dickens’s works and his life in their own fiction” (Bell 2020, 204). At Staplehurst, Simmons localizes that economy in trauma. Cannibalism becomes the grotesque story Dickens reaches for when random disaster resists explanation. It also connects to a longer cultural controversy. Collins notes that “it was actual cannibalism, or at least the rumour of it, that had changed the course of Charles Dickens’s life” when Dr. John Rae reported on the fate of Franklin’s expedition (Simmons 2009, 35). Simmons thus frames Dickens as someone whose public authority has been shaped by disputes over what horrors England will acknowledge as real.

Staplehurst, then, becomes the novel’s model for inversion. Instead of Dickens organizing trauma into a story, trauma destabilizes Dickens into a man who chases a story in order to survive trauma. The reader is left with a Dickens whose power is no longer ethical clarity but the ability to infect others with his obsession. Collins’s narration renders this infection both persuasive and suspect.

IV. Undertown and the Anti-Paperscape: Infrastructure, Access, and the Desire to Map

If Staplehurst marks the collapse of narrative legibility, Undertown marks the collapse of urban legibility. Céline Prest argues that Dickens’s London is frequently structured as “paperscape”, a city whose inscriptions are “meant to make places immediately legible, like so many labels” (Prest 2016, par. 6). Prest also stresses the ambition of that model, observing that “the whole space of London seems to be encompassed by such a map” (Prest 2016, par. 7). *Drood* reverses the expectation that London can be mastered by surface reading by making the city’s depth, its tunnels, sewers, crypts, and bricked corridors, the privileged space of action. Undertown is not simply a gothic metaphor; it is an infrastructural system connected to civic works and governed by gatekeeping, secrecy, and negotiated access.

Prest’s language is especially helpful here because it points to a Dickensian habit of translating space into readable tokens, street names, postings, documents, and labels that invite the reader to orient and judge. Simmons borrows the desire for orientation but evacuates its security. Undertown functions as a counter-archive: instead of paper traces that stabilize memory, it offers sealed

passageways, bricked-up corridors, and acoustic tests that privatize knowledge. Where Prest's paperscape suggests a city "encompassed" by representation (Prest 2016, par. 7), Simmons constructs a city whose most consequential "texts" are infrastructural and can be read only by those with the right touch, the right keys, and the right permissions. Undertown therefore becomes the spatial analogue of Collins's narration: both promise access, and both make access contingent, coercive, and unreliable.

The novel introduces Undertown through rumor and commodity. A woman in an opium den tells Dickens and Collins that Drood is "in the deepest parts of Undertown ... where the Chinees named King Lazaree provides ... the purest pure opium in the world" (Simmons 2009, 74). Knowledge of the underground arrives as information for sale, purchased with coins, and framed as access to a supplier. Undertown is thus immediately economic: a space where bodies and secrets move along routes controlled by those who profit from them.

When Dickens and Collins finally reach Lazaree's domain, Simmons emphasizes the deferral of arrival. Lazaree denies that they are in Undertown at all: "One might say that this is the foyer to ... the antechamber of the porch of the vestibule of Undertown" (Simmons 2009, 94–95). The comic recursion does more than build atmosphere. It encodes power as spatial delay. Undertown is not a place one simply enters; it is a threshold economy in which each boundary is another opportunity for negotiation, surveillance, and debt.

Dickens responds by trying to impose procedure. During a descent through sewer works, he "quickly made three parallel marks on the crumbling brick where our crude staircase opened into the sewer" so they can "find our way back" (Simmons 2009, 101). The gesture resembles detective practice, a rational attempt to preserve orientation. Yet in context, it also signals desperation. Marking the wall is not mastery of the underground; it is a confession that the city's depths refuse stable mapping. The author, whose essays and novels often move through London by confident observation, is reduced to carving a memory aid into a brick.

This shift in spatial logic is also a shift in Dickens's role. Dickens becomes a would-be cartographer of a space whose cartography is guarded. Undertown's accessibility depends on intermediaries such as Dradles, whose craft allows walls to be opened and resealed without an obvious trace. The novel repeatedly frames such knowledge as not simply technical but political: whoever controls entrances controls movement, and whoever controls movement controls what

can be known. Prest's paperscape becomes an anti-paperscape here: the city's decisive texts are not printed but built, sealed, and cut into stone.

Undertown's resistance to mapping is staged most vividly when Dickens attempts to learn a new literacy from Dradles, the cathedral mason. As the men enter the Rochester crypts, Dickens whispers, "Watch this, Wilkie! And listen! And learn", as Dradles begins tapping walls to distinguish "solid" from "hollow" (Simmons 2009, 259). Dradles's method is not visual but acoustic and tactile: knowledge is produced through vibration, echo, and trained attention. The scene matters because it inverts the cultural hierarchy that usually supports Dickens's urban mastery. Prest warns that even Dickens's surface paperscape contains an internal limit: "over this Dickensian paperscape looms the threat of illegibility", and "paper appears less the medium for words than the shroud of meaning" (Prest 2016, abstract). *Drood* literalizes that threatened illegibility by relocating decisive knowledge into a sonic underground where paper is useless, and where the author must apprentice himself to forms of expertise that cannot be translated into printed "labels" without losing their force.

Simmons links this infrastructural inversion to Dickens's own private infrastructures of secrecy. Dickens's ability to run a "Second Life" with Ellen Ternan depends on managing routes, lodgings, and knowledge distribution. Undertown becomes an exteriorization of that logic: a London where intimacy and access are always mediated by hidden channels. Rather than letting Dickens read the city, *Drood* makes the city read Dickens, mirroring his dependence on clandestine networks.

V. Coerced Detection: Field, Surveillance, and the Collapse of the Case

Detection offers a particularly sharp lens for inversion because it sits at the intersection of ethics and knowledge. In classic detective structures, evidence produces explanation, and explanation promises a restoration of order. *Drood* borrows detective machinery only to contaminate it, turning inquiry into leverage and closure into compulsion. Chloe Wadoux summarizes a recurring pattern in neo-Victorian Dickens rewritings with unusual clarity: "the Inimitable is either presented as a detective, or as a criminal figure, or both" (Wadoux 2019, 69). Ford moves inside the same collapse when she argues that "Drood's reality is secondary to Collins's obsession with detection", which becomes "a vehicle for authorial intervention – and invention" in his competition with Dickens (Ford 2021). The key for Simmons is the final clause, "or both." Dickens, often

remembered for exposing injustice, is recast as a figure who may be implicated in the hidden economy he claims to pursue, and the very act of investigation becomes part of what makes him suspect.

Inspector Charles Field embodies this contamination. Collins imagines Field “would attempt to blackmail me beyond a mere threat to expose” his relationship with Caroline (Simmons 2009, 183). The wording is significant: blackmail is not presented as an aberration but as an expected method in Field’s professional repertoire. Investigation becomes inseparable from coercion, and coercion becomes inseparable from private life. The detective does not simply find facts; he extracts compliance by holding reputations hostage.

Field’s own claims about *Drood* also destabilize the logic of evidence. When Collins doubts that a figure like *Drood* could move through Dickens’s public readings unnoticed, Field insists, “*Drood* is a man of infinite guises” (Simmons 2009, 211). The claim immunizes the theory against falsification. If *Drood* can be anyone, then any absence of proof becomes proof of disguise. Detection collapses into paranoia: the more elusive the object, the more powerful the hypothesis.

Field’s coercion is effective because it mimics the same conversion of intimacy into evidence that structures Dickens’s celebrity. Field treats information as currency, demonstrating, through his agents’ reports and his casual recitations of Collins’s movements, that privacy is already a compromised fiction (Simmons 2009, 239). This is why Collins’s description of Dickens’s “*Game of Drood*” is so revealing: Dickens “manufactures and plays the games he enjoys” and, through “fame and force of personality”, “bullies those around him to play the game as well” (Simmons 2009, 239). Wadoux’s formulation that Dickens rewritings repeatedly make him a detective, a criminal, “or both” (Wadoux 2019, 69) helps explain the procedural stakes: in *Drood*, the detective apparatus does not simply test Dickens; it folds him into a regime of surveillance whose authority is itself coercive, making ‘truth’ indistinguishable from the power to force compliance.

At the center of that paranoia is Dickens himself. Collins’s suspicion crystallizes into a statement that collapses the suspect-detective distinction: “Dickens is *Drood*” (Simmons 2009, 236). The line is not merely sensational. It names the novel’s central inversion. Dickens, the supposed pursuer, becomes the pursued; Dickens, the guarantor of moral narrative, becomes the narrative threat. Even Field rejects the claim as “highly unlikely”, but the conversation matters because it shows how far the “case” has drifted from verifiable action. By this point, the investigation is not about identifying a criminal mastermind so much as deciding what Dickens is allowed to be.

The claim also functions as a critique of celebrity intimacy. Dickens's public authority depends on being treated as singular, recognizable, trusted, and morally intelligible. *Drood* reverses that by treating Dickens as a role that can be performed or inhabited, as if Dickens's own performative authorship makes him vulnerable to role confusion. If Dickens can mesmerize audiences through readings, if he can play moral crusader while managing scandal, then he can also be imagined as the master of a covert system. The novel's logic is brutal: performance erodes the boundary between authenticity and disguise.

VI. Performance, Animal Magnetism, and the Violence of Authorial Intimacy

Simmons intensifies Dickens's inversion by reframing the public readings as coercive intimacy. Ferguson notes that reading culture fostered a fantasy of closeness in which "the author is every reader's domestic companion and friend" (Ferguson 1997, 2). *Drood* turns that friendly presence inside out. Collins links Dickens's stagecraft to mesmerism – "animal magnetism" (Simmons 2009, 30) – so performance becomes a technology of influence that steers feeling, suspends judgment, and recruits spectators into repeated violence.

This logic peaks when Dickens adds "Murder of Nancy" to his programme. Collins calls it "another unprecedented departure for a man of letters", testing what audiences will endure for intimacy and sensation (Simmons 2009, 474). Forster appears as the adviser who encourages the inclusion, framing it as both artistic and calamitous (Simmons 2009, 474). Authority here is not ethical representation but the capacity to stage suffering as spectacle – and to survive its fallout.

Seen in this light, the public readings become less a celebration of Dickens's art than an institution that consumes his failing body for the sake of continued access. Friends and physicians warn him, yet he persists, delivering "Murder of Nancy" with a ferocity that transfixes the hall even as it threatens collapse backstage (Simmons 2009, 49). Ferguson's formulation of the author as "domestic companion and friend" (Ferguson 1997, 2) clarifies the ethical instability of this scene: the more intimately the audience believes it possesses Dickens, the more it demands ever more intense proximity, and the more Dickens must convert suffering into spectacle to keep that proximity alive. Inversion, here, is not simply that Dickens performs cruelty; it is that the very medium through which Dickens became beloved is recoded as a mechanism that extracts, disciplines, and harms.

VII. Unfinishedness and the Afterlife of *Edwin Drood*: Authority, Completion, and the Lime Pit

Drood's final inversion turns on unfinishedness. Dickens's last novel fuels completion industries because a missing ending invites interpretive possession. De Stasio notes that unfinished narratives provoke "curiosity and investigation" (De Stasio 2012, par. 1); with Dickens, that curiosity attaches to the absent authorial sanction that would fix meaning. Hoel argues that unfinishedness makes sense only "in the context of a creative authority" and that readers pursue the author as guarantor (Hoel 2012, 4). Simmons exploits that author-function crisis by letting Collins offer "secret" access as a substitute sanction. Tomaiuolo observes that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* can feel structurally "closed" while still making full disclosure impossible (Tomaiuolo 2023, 176). *Drood* converts that paradox into atmosphere: explanation becomes compulsion, and what Frenk calls "unending Dickens" persists because closure is endlessly deferred (Frenk 2011, 140).

That is why Simmons can deploy the apparatus of mystery without granting its satisfactions. In a conventional detective economy, a missing ending would be solved; here it becomes the condition that keeps interpretation circulating. The pressure to complete, to name *Drood*, or to certify Dickens's moral status is figured as addiction: a compulsive return to a scene that will not yield closure. Unfinishedness trains explanation into desire.

Simmons uses that engine to make Dickens himself unfinished. The novel repeatedly converts the desire for a solution into an atmosphere of compulsion. Instead of stabilizing Dickens as the author who would have resolved *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Drood* places Dickens in a world where resolution is structurally undermined by unreliable narration and by the underground's refusal of stable evidence. Unfinishedness thus migrates from text to author. Dickens becomes a figure who cannot be completed into moral certainty.

A few pages later, Collins registers his own eagerness to reach "the quick-lime pit" and finish the night's business (Simmons 2009, 572). The phrasing aligns the narrative's drive for closure with bodily urgency and bathos. Completion becomes less a moral act than a logistical one: get to the pit, finish the work, go home. The language exposes the grim mechanics behind completion fantasies. Endings are made by bodies, at night, under pressure, with tools and substances.

The late chapters sharpen the link between text, body, and disposal. After Dickens's death, Collins burns his inscribed copy of *Bleak House* and insists, "The

book was the style and the style was the man" (Simmons 2009, 610), collapsing authorship into a fetish that can be possessed or purged. Domestic objects likewise become instruments: Collins carries "a small embroidered sofa pillow" that later serves as silencer and shield (Simmons 2009, 611), and he recounts smothering Martha with it before shooting through it (Simmons 2009, 516). Comfort is retooled as concealment.

Most damningly, the novel makes Collins complicit in the very violence with which he framed Dickens. Collins describes carrying "the body of Joseph Clow ... to the quick-lime pit" (Simmons 2009, 613). The moment collapses the distance between narrator and accusation. The man who began by inviting the reader to imagine Dickens dissolving a victim in lime ends by participating in a lime-pit disposal. This is inversion at its sharpest. Dickens is not exonerated, but Collins's authority to indict is structurally sabotaged by his own implication in the narrative's murder economy.

Ford's definition of neo-Victorian biofiction clarifies why *Drood* refuses the comfort of a solved mystery. If biofiction is the "reimagining" of historical lives (Ford 2014, 7), then Dickens's afterlife becomes a field of narrative choices whose stakes are ethical and political: which Dickens will be made legible, which will be suppressed, and who benefits from the version that circulates. *Drood* therefore does not simply ask whether Dickens was guilty or innocent of some secret crime. It asks what it means for a culture to demand a Dickens who can always be "known" through ever deeper access, and it shows how that demand can turn interpretive hunger into the very violence it claims to investigate.

Drood thus inverts Dickens through a network of reversals. Authority shifts from the canonical author to a hostile witness. Moral legibility yields to interpretive breakdown. London's readable surfaces yield to an underground governed by access and debt. Detection yields not to closure but to paranoia. And unfinishedness becomes a cultural machine that keeps Dickens present by keeping him unsettled. In Simmons's novel, Dickens is not the stable moral emblem heritage culture promises; he is the contested residue produced when celebrity, biography, and narrative desire refuse to let the dead author rest.

Conclusion

Taken together, these inversions show that *Drood* is less interested in debunking Dickens than in modelling how Dickens's authority is manufactured and

contested. By filtering Dickens through Collins – punctured by morphine, jealousy, and hallucination – the novel makes knowing Dickens inseparable from wanting to know him. Undertown supplies the spatial analogue for that desire: a counter-city entered only through permission and debt, whereas the unfinishedness of *Edwin Drood* supplies the temporal analogue, sustaining what Frenk calls an “unending Dickens” whose afterlife persists because closure is withheld (Frenk 2011, 140). Dickens is kept alive by being kept suspect.

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Received: 2026-04-15; reviewed 2026-05-21; accepted 2026-06-03

DOI: doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.26.121.0401
