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Drood Renominated

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Abstract

Several names in Dickens' novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* have been the source of disagreement among scholars. Among these are *Drood* itself, which may relate to *rood* 'cross'; *Neville Landless*, both parts suggesting disenfranchisement; and the pet names for Rosa Bud, *Rosebud* and *Pussy*, both of which probably should not carry the sexual connotations some have ascribed to them.

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A few years ago, in *Dickens Quarterly*, the Journal of the Dickens Society, Everett F. Bleiler published a provocative two-part literary onomastic study on the nomenclature in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* Although his work has a few intriguing etymological points suggestive of at least coincidental rhyme, on several key issues his inferences can be sharply brought into question; in fact, some appear to be flagrantly incorrect. However arresting a few of his verbal associations may be, certain additional facts need now to be enlisted. Hence the present rejoinder, a bit belated though I confess it to be.

First, though, it may be helpful to remind readers of the plot of this novel, Dickens' last, in process when he died in 1870. Only six of the proposed twelve numbers were written and published serially, and much speculation has been made about what was to happen in the rest of the novel. The setting is Cloisterham, a cathedral city. John Jasper, outwardly respectable as the cathedral choir leader, is a slave to opium and passionately in love with Rosa Bud, who, at the beginning of the story is engaged to Jasper's nephew, Edwin Drood. From Ceylon come twins Neville and Helena Landless, of uncertain parentage. Fairly early in the novel Edwin Drood disappears, apparently murdered (although this is not certain), and suspicion falls on both his uncle and on Neville Landless, but the mystery remains far from being resolved at the end of the sixth number.

Bleiler acknowledges my own study of the name *Drood* ("*Drood* the Obscure"), but he explicitly dismisses my symbolic analysis, namely its Christological overtones. Thus, it is perhaps a little ironic that the first part of his study appears in the issue of a journal which also happens to list in its comprehensive Dickens Checklist some of my research on Dickens' creative rewriting of the Gospels.[1] The same issue also provides, as its leading book

review, an analysis of Andrew Sanders' useful work with the resonant title (as derived from the novelist himself) *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist.* Indeed, Sanders, though finding Dickens "insistently undogmatic," still calls him "devout" (37). But, all irony aside, the key question is this: Can Drood's name be cogently thought of in the extended terms of "Christian mysticism and the death of Edwin Drood" (Bleiler 88)? In brief, to accommodate a whimsical but apt Dickensian twist, do I over-Drood?

In answer, first my research on *The Life of Our Lord* has raised the pertinent question of whether Dickens did actually invent that designation. Clearly the expression "Our Lord" is one especially liked by (though hardly limited to) Roman Catholics; yet Dickens was admittedly critical enough of aspects of the Roman Church, as is well recognized. The point is that a good many Protestants do not so automatically interrelate the Saviour with the Father as being, let us say, One (except of course in Spirit). Although, true, the "Lord" is petitioned often enough in Protestant hymnology, there the referent is mainly or tonally the Father alone. It appears rather more likely, as I pointed out a few years ago, that the novelist's son, Henry Fielding Dickens, bestowed the "Lordly" title upon his father's retelling of the Christ story than that Dickens himself went in for that, if only because the son had had a Catholic marriage, even though he himself (and *his* sons), were not especially Roman, at least in the ordinary, practicing, church-going sense ("The Title" 39–40). But, in any event, if Dickens would scarcely have accepted a title for a work of his suggestive of Catholic dogmatics, he was clearly no less of a bona fide Christian in spirit. Why else, for instance, would he have become so commonly and warmly venerated during the Yuletide season?

Now, secondly, with all due respect, Bleiler in his essays critiques me a bit out of context. My express purpose was not to foster righteously anagogic interpretations of the Drood story—rather exactly the opposite, for I specified that the hero's name phonologically calls forth the conception of a *rood* (that is, *cross*), but only again ironically. It is scarcely requisite to be reminded of the title of the Old English dream vision "The Dream of the Rood" to cope with this obvious clear-cut word link-up.

Yet, at the end, my rationale turned out to be the same as Bleiler's: The hero Edwin, in spite of his presumed missionary zeal with regard to matters Egyptian, is too snobbish, even insufferable, in his outward behavior to be acting truly in a Christlike manner. Whereas Bleiler charged him merely with being "rude," an all-too evident onomastic pun, Edwin's reactionary attitude toward Neville Landless may more accurately be characterized as *racist.* Agreed, Neville, in turn, admits to having a temper, and the altercation between him and Edwin was, to be sure, occasioned by his Uncle Jasper's spiked drink, but purportedly these

"clues" are merely side-effects, misdirections inserted to keep us on the alert. For, after all, Dickens was also an amateur conjuror. But what I find perturbing is that Bleiler went so far as to substitute a colloquial and profane etymology for what might be a religious hint, finding the surname *Drood* to be a startlingly abrupt conflation of *damned* and *rude*. Mildly diverting though such a spanking new reading may appear, it (alas) is simply not good Dickens. As a Victorian gentleman, the staunch Inimitable was clearly above such low-brow antics.

For the record, an earnest Dickensian, or Droo-id (as may now be allowed), who observed the etymological "echo" of *rood* in *Drood* (along with the old standbys of *dread* and *Druid*) broached her views in print some time before I did: Jane Vogel so described the novel aptly enough in terms of the "Mystery of the (D)rood or Cross" (64). This constituted a reading that we happened to arrive at independently (no "mysticism" in that), yet her own implied inference that Edwin's supposed death, like Jesus's, points actually to "a death not a death," happens to invoke a so-called survivalist view of the last novel which is hard for many specialist readers to share. Charles Forsyte, for instance, in a recent article, "How did Drood Die?" gives an inspired anti-survivalist reading. In any event, that divergence hinges on disparate interpretations of the end point of a novel which Dickens was unable formally to complete; so, to restate our dilemma, the apparent dispute between Bleiler and me was virtually not one. We did not really, in essence, disagree – only went our somewhat different ways. For, in truth, how can one truly dissent over what simply does not exist to begin with? Although Forsyte has his circumstantial points, it still must be admitted that if the survivalist view can be demoted because of Dickens's stated intent, his initial meaning is still susceptible to alteration, hence pointing to *final* as well as *original* forms of intentionality. In any case, Vogel's entire book, not her views of *Drood* alone, provide more than ample evidence that a veritable plethora of Christian overt meanings and connotations permeate the Dickens novel. Regrettably, her study has been given short shrift by some terse reviewers, but it warrants more attention, as is already indicated in my article "*Drood* the Obscure" (with its titular nod to Hardy).

Allied to the Droodian mystery is that of Neville Landless. Bleiler here arrived at the anomalous verdict that "the racial composition of the Landlesses is unclear, since the number notes do not indicate whether they are half castes or simply dark English who have absorbed Indian ways" (92). Yet evidently Dickens wanted to have his readers believe that the Landlesses were ethnically rather more than Caucasian. Otherwise Edwin would scarcely have said so crisply to Neville: "You may know a black common fellow, or a black common boaster, when you see him (and no doubt you have a large acquain-

tance that way); but you are no judge of white men" (*"Edwin Drood"* 74). Such a passing slur was presumably directed at a member of another racial group, not merely at "dark English who have absorbed Indian ways." If the author had not meant it as such, would he not have been violating a basic principle of verisimilitude and incidentally thereby the reader's clear expectations? He was indeed ahead of his time in the extent to which he recognized the evils of racism, as his criticisms of attitudes toward blacks in his travels to America confirm (see my "Dickens on Slavery").

Bleiler, moreover, sets forth the view that if the Landless name indicates a loss of land or a sense of being dispatriated, no further evidence for such dispossession is extant in the novel. Yet now Vogel has so cogently shown how the very first name of *Neville* also conveys this signification, which is obviously further proof: *Ne-ville* (no city or home town). She affirmed that brother and sister here symbolize in their surname the "land-less" as those being outside the Judeo-Christian pale: the dispossessed whom Christ will include among the Elect (or, as Dickens expressed it so nostalgically elsewhere, "God Bless Us, *Every One*!" [italics added]). In this respect the *Ne-* prefix may convey double connotations, an ironic enough twist (*new* or *neo* as well as *no*). Thus, the final meaning of *Ne-ville* still may connote hope of a *new city*, the biblical City of God, a New Heaven and Earth (eventually, let us posit, through the intercession of the Reverend Crisparkle).

Further, Bleiler's daring attempt to press for strong sexual innuendoes in the names of Edwin's girl friend – *Rosebud* (i.e., Rosa Bud), but especially *Pussy* – must be stalwartly resisted as simply not British. ("No Sex, Please," as the title of a recent drama reminds us, "We're British.") For him to insinuate that Dickens of all people wanted such a definitely commonplace and pet name to become automatically "a slang term for the female genitals" is debatable, regardless of what in general the notorious Eric Partridge has very loosely catalogued in his book *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. Hence *Rosebud* (Herrick's "Gather Ye Rosebuds" notwithstanding) would suggest instead here an undeveloped rose of the world (thereby *-bud*), as also with the name *Rosamond*, meaning "rose of the world." The name of *Rosebud* should also not be bandied about with that of *Helena*, who, as Bleiler and others have (perhaps improperly) inferred, may be based on Dickens' sometimes presumed mistress, Ellen Ternan. Incidentally, his bald implication that Helena disguises herself as the male detective Datchery (89–90) is clearly now passé.[2] Among other things, it is implausible that a lady already known so well in Cloisterham could walk about in broad daylight disguised as a retired buffer and not be apprehended. Dickens, moreover, wrote W. H. Wills (30 June 1867) to the effect that he heartily disapproved of the hackneyed device of "disguised women or the like" (Lehmann 360). The

device goes back at least as far as Shakespeare (one easily remembers Rosalind in *As You Like It*), but that may be all the more reason why the novelist wanted to steer away; it was an overdone effect. Further, Helena would scarcely be expected to possess Datchery's familiarity with the "old tavern way of keeping scores"[3] with which the novel abruptly ends. In short, is it not to confuse Drood with James Bond, of all people, to overdo *Pussy* (as, say, *Galore*)? We *do* over-Drood that way.

Yet we need not insinuate that Dickens was essentially prudish, nor even that Drood was. The commonplace that Rosebud's feline nickname was respectable enough can be gleaned from such a recent collection as *My Darling Pussy*, Lloyd George's letters to Frances Stevenson, edited by A. J. P. Taylor. This collection appeared much later than *Drood*, which is scarcely a deterrent because at that time the questionable nickname *could* have seemed even more that way. For would the eminent Lloyd George have appropriated such a pet name for his beloved if he had seriously entertained the notion that it conveyed the gross, and not merely sexual, innuendo nowadays all too often associated with it? Scarcely so. For that matter, William Randolph Hearst likewise dubbed his childhood darling "Pussy" without having anything uncouth in mind (Fleissner, "Germination" 283). Comparable, for that matter, is Harriet Beecher Stowe's allusion in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "'What do you think, Pussy?' said her father to Eva"—as duly cited even in the *OED* ("Pussy," sb. 3). In brief, the pet-like name derived from *pussycat* has been accepted often enough down through the years for a young female—at least if the nickname "Puss" commonly enough given a youngster by her mother is any indication—although it is also one that she is naturally expected to outgrow and want to. In point of fact, Edwin and Rosa are fully aware of this exigency when he promises that he will henceforth refrain from calling her by that pet name any more. After all, as an earlier young lady once had mused, "A rose by any other name. ...[4]

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Notes

1. See especially "Dickens' *Little Testament*"; but also see "The Title."

2. Among noted Dickensians who have recently stressed these points is Arthur J. Cox, editor of the Penguin edition of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, but see also Robson 1246, 1259.

3. In his second installment, Bleiler argues *against* Helena's being Datchery, but gives no explanation for why he earlier thought she would be disguised (142, 89). He also oddly finds the name *Neville* to convey sinister meaning (141), but any connotation of *devil* would presumably be negated by the *Ne-* prefix.

4. As derived from *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.43–44 ("a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet"). For more on the implications of this image not only in early Shakespeare

but in Dickens, Conan Doyle, and modern times, see my collection *A Rose by Another Name*. The study of *Drood* as used in *Citizen Kane* ("Germination") is there slightly revised; also chapter 12 deals with the influence of Dickens upon Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (the import of the figure of Rose therein, etc.). See also my "Sherlock Holmes Confronts *Edwin Drood*."

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