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# Reflecting Identity through Glass Windows in Charles Dickens's Tom Tiddler's Ground

## **Keywords**

Tom Tiddler's Ground, identity, Charles Dickens

Reflecting Identity through Glass Windows in Charles Dickens's *Tom Tiddler's Ground*

Ryder Seamons

In Charles Dickens's Christmas portmanteau story *Tom Tiddler's Ground*, Mr. Broadhead, a travelling artist, claims that “the windows of a house give one a great idea of the dispositions, the habits, and the tempers of the occupants” (Collins 25). Windows appear in many different shapes and varieties throughout *Tom Tiddler's Ground*, disclosing a concept of identity that is not definitive, but fragile and malleable. The framework for this portmanteau story—a nameless Traveller visits a nameless county to seek out a hermit named Mr. Mopes—was created by Dickens and based partly on an autobiographical experience. Mr. Traveller attempts to convince Mr. Mopes to abandon his dreaded, solitary existence, and does so by inviting fellow passersby to share their stories of life from the outside world.

Several regular contributors to Dickens's periodicals wrote chapters for *Tom Tiddler's Ground*: Charles Alston Collins writes Mr. Broadhead's story of how he once observed a married couple's unfortunate circumstance through a glass window in his London apartment; Amelia B. Edwards tells the tale of Francois Thierry, a passionate Frenchman who escapes prison after committing political offenses; Dickens's close ally Wilkie Collins writes the story of two unrelated baby boys born on a ship at sea who are accidentally mixed up and remain indistinguishable due to a coincidental close resemblance; and the relatively unknown John Harwood provides

the unique narrative of a business man's trek across continental America to retrieve his employer's pocketbook.

From the first page of the first story, characters interact with glass windows in noteworthy ways: they glance outward through windows, fixated on distant landscapes from an interior dwelling; they glance through windows, observing the lifestyles of a home's inhabitants from the outside; they climb in and out of windows, cover their windows with blinders, and smash the glass out of their window frames to replace them with bars. What does Dickens's, and his fellow authors', literary fixation on glass windows reveal to us about *Tom Tiddler's Ground*?

Windows function in *Tom Tiddler's Ground* both to reveal and to distort identity, suggesting that our sense of identity is not definitive nor visibly perceptible, but is malleable and easily mistaken. Utilizing windows as a literary motif, the authors draw a distinct dichotomy between individual identity, or one's personality and unique attributes, and social identity, or one's socioeconomic place in society, simultaneously implying that individuality is of little worth and that, despite its superficiality, it is only one's social identity that is necessary to flourish in modern society.

Glass windows appear frequently in Dickens's works, from the beginning of his career with *Pickwick Papers*, to Dickens's final, unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Katherine Williams, perhaps the leading expert on Dickens's literary use of windows, argues that "Dickens was viscerally attracted to windows, and viscerally repulsed by their absence" (58). Dickens seemed to have a personal connection with windows that transcended his fiction. In the biography written by close confidante John

Forster, Dickens relates that during his darkest time working in a blacking house as a child, he was stationed by a window where “people,” including his father, “used to stop and look in” (67). Kristin Leonard argues that this sense of “display case captivity” produced by a glass window clearly penetrates his novels, particularly in the case of Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (208). Concerning this incident, Michael Hollington writes that, “when one recalls that Dickens as a child was taken away from Warren’s Blacking Warehouse because his father was embarrassed by the fact that his son was visible as an ‘exhibit’ at work through the window . . . it is not difficult to understand why so many meanings gathered for Dickens around glass thresholds between inside and outside” (11). Dickens’s writings in his own periodicals also reveal his fixation with windows. He “attacked” the infamous Window Tax in an article in *Household Words*, and later, after visiting a factory that made windows, published “Plate Glass,” an article detailing the techniques of glassmaking (Williams 56, Armstrong 20). Dickens often lamented the difficulty of organizing and editing his annual Christmas portmanteau stories into cohesive works with unifying themes and morals. It is clear, however, that the literary motif of glass windows appears so frequently in *Tom Tiddler’s Ground* and holds such significance to the development of plots and characters in the stories that it can hardly be considered coincidence.

The ways in which characters interact with glass windows suggest that identity can be changed in an instant. In Edwards’ chapter “Picking Up Terrible Company,” a Frenchman named Francois Thierry shares his story of escaping from a French prison with Mr. Traveller and the hermit, Mr. Mopes. Thierry recounts that, upon arrival, he is given his prison uni-

form, and on the trousers and blouse “were printed the fatal letters ‘T.F.’” (Edwards 66). Thierry is then given a green cap, on the front of which is the number “207.” In an instant, Thierry’s name, the symbolic embodiment of his personal identity, is stripped and replaced by a prison number. “I was no longer Francois Thierry,” claims the Frenchman, “I was Number Two Hundred and Seven,” implying that identity is not dictated by any inherited or definite means, but that one’s entire identity can be shifted and determined by anyone at any time (66). After a short and miserable stay in the cruel prison and an escape attempt, Francois finds himself stuck inside a confined room, with a locked door and “a tiny window close against the ceiling” (76). Hollington argues that “to be stationed at the window in Dickens” stands for “a longing for change and progress and the signs thereof” (3). The “tiny”-ness of the window symbolizes the relatively “tiny” chance for the Frenchman’s desires for freedom to come to fruition. He spends his time not looking out the window, but instead crawling through it. The Frenchman describes in great detail the grueling process of climbing up to the elevated glass window, and how he “drew [himself] through the little casement, dropped as gently as [he] could upon the moist earth,” and made a safe escape, bringing about not only the “change” and “progress” he had hoped for, but also a change in identity (77).

The simple act of crawling out of a window results in Francois’s escape from prison, but also the termination of his identity as a prisoner, as quickly as it was given to him. He does not serve his time, nor does he show remorse or recompense for his political crimes. The transition through a window provides the Frenchman the means to escape confinement and

transforms his identity from a prisoner identified by a number to a free man identified by a name. It is important to note that Edwards draws a distinction between two different types of identity, as this theme continues throughout the other authors' contributions to *Tom Tiddler's Ground* as well. In addition to his individual identity, crawling through the window also alters the Frenchman's social identity, due to the change from captive criminal to free man. When he later introduces himself to Mr. Traveller and Mr. Mopes, he proudly declares, "I am a Frenchman by birth, and my name is Francois Thierry" (Edwards 65). Francois's physical interaction with a glass window transforms his identity, suggesting that both individual and social identities are not definitive but fragile, subject to change at any moment.

The second chapter in *Tom Tiddler's Ground*, by Charles Alston Collins, also uses windows to reinforce the idea that characters are defined by both an individual and a social identity, and suggests that identity is easily mistaken. The entire plot of this story, called "Picking Up Evening Shadows," revolves around windows. The character sharing the story with Mr. Traveller and the hermit Mr. Mopes is Mr. Broadhead, who begins by stating that "the windows of a house give one a great idea of the dispositions, the habits, and tempers of the occupants" (Collins 25). Mr. Broadhead, an artist, tells of a time when he lived alone in a studio in London and how he observed a married couple who lived directly across the way. During the day, Mr. Broadhead could examine the empty interior of the couple's residence through his window and theirs, but during the evening, when the window blinds were shut, Mr. Broadhead could analyze the actions and routines of the couple from the window of his own home by examining their

silhouettes. From observing the couple's window, Mr. Broadhead accurately perceived much about their identity. His "tendency to attach much importance to the external aspects of things as indicative of what goes on within" led him to surmise that the couple lived in poverty, but "little contrivances and adornments there were about this poor casement, which, though of the cheapest and most twopenny order of decorative art, showed yet some love of the gentler side of things, and a wish to put a good face on poverty" (Collins 25, 26). Again, like the Frenchman, this glass window reveals to the narrator and the reader both the individual and social identity of the couple. Their low social class is manifest, but fashionable decorative taste speaks to Mr. Broadhead of the individual identities of the couple that seemingly differ from their class status.

The "mistaken pair" is a literary trope that appears often in Dickens's fiction, and it is through the glass window that Mr. Broadhead confuses one married couple for another, again suggesting that identity is not always visibly perceptible, but can be easily mistaken. After observing through shadows that the husband was ill and could no longer provide financial support, Mr. Broadhead began anonymously donating money to aid the couple in their struggle, only to find later that he had mistaken the silhouetted couple in the window for another married couple living next door who were suffering from an identical misfortune and benefited from the anonymous donations. If two individuals or groups of individuals can appear to be so similar by appearance or circumstance as to have their identities completely mistaken by those who are familiar with them, the authors of *Tom Tiddler's Ground* here suggest that individual identity fails to perform



its sole duty of distinguishing individuals from one another. In the case of the couple, the window functions paradoxically by revealing accurately to Mr. Broadhead information about the couple's individual identity and social class, while simultaneously causing him to mistake the couple for their next-door neighbors. The window both reveals and distorts identity, implying that identity is fickle and easily mistaken.

The glass window functions in a similarly paradoxical manner as it reveals to the reader the identity of Mr. Broadhead himself, the narrator of the story. In his case, the function of glass windows seems to comply with Leonard's theory that windows create "physical and societal confinement"; however, the windows simultaneously provide Mr. Broadhead with an opportunity for sociality as he comes to know his neighbors by means of observation through a window (209). Mr. Broadhead repeatedly confesses that it was the loneliness and isolation he felt living by himself in London that fueled his obsession with the married couple in the window across the way. To the hermit, Mr. Broadhead warns, "I never knew any good to come yet. . . of a man shutting himself up the way you're doing" (Collins 22). The glass window confines Mr. Broadhead to a solitary lifestyle, and perhaps even temporarily intensifies his loneliness by giving him a glimpse of social domestic life but denying him the experience of being able to engage in such a life. Williams suggests that two of the literary functions of windows are "to frame an outside world that is seen and analyzed from an interior" and "to frame an interior space that is seen and analyzed from the outside," both of which occur in this story (59). This two-window separation creates the illusion that sociality is present, but only through the passive act of

observation that the windows provide. This is the “display case captivity” that Leonard refers to in her argument on *The Old Curiosity Shop*. As Mr. Broadhead himself admits, “it would be difficult to express how anxiously I longed for the evening, and the shadows which should tell me more” (Collins 28).

The window that confines and restricts reveals Mr. Broadhead’s identity as one who is completely alone in terms of friends or family, but later shows Mr. Broadhead’s transformed identity as one no longer defined by isolation. Mr. Broadhead eventually introduces himself to the shadow-couple and admits that he intended to donate financially to assist them after learning of their circumstances through his window, then returns home. Mr. Broadhead sat for an hour, “reflecting on the loneliness of my own position,” when he heard his name shouted from a window across the way, discovering that the couple of his obsession was inviting him to join them for the evening (Collins 61). Ultimately, Mr. Broadhead’s observations from his confined window space provides for a different identity, defined not by isolation but instead by sociality. Eventually, his interactions with glass windows did not perpetuate his identity as a man “leading a solitary life,” but instead the glass windows, which originally provided only confinement and restriction, allowed for a social life and a new identity as a man no longer living in complete isolation (22). Again, windows function paradoxically both to reveal and to distort identity, implying the malleability of one’s identity.

While identity proves to be fragile, malleable, and easily mistaken in *Tom Tiddler’s Ground*, the authors also suggest that different parts of

identity prove to be more significant than others. Dickens's own framework chapter distinguishes between individual identity and social identity by describing the village and its windows, proposing that individual identity is of little worth and that social status is the preferred method of identification in Victorian society. Dickens describes in detail the idyllic farmland "among the pleasant dales and trout-streams of a green English county," but then adds, "no matter what county" (3). Dickens neglects to provide a proper name that might separate the village from any other and give it a distinct sense of individual identity. According to one critic, the setting of *Tom Tiddler's Ground* is "framed by an image of a village that is less truly particular than nationally representative" (Piesse 49). Dickens almost lazily remarks that "the village street was like most other village streets: wide for its height, silent for its size, and drowsy in the dullest degree," further implying the idea that individuality is of little importance (3).

Dickens does, however, provide the village with a developed social identity, and he does so by describing the glass windows of certain buildings. The "largest of window-shutters" of the "Doctor's house. . . stood as conspicuous and different as the Doctor himself in his broadcloth, among the smockfrocks of his patients" (Dickens 4). Though the Doctor apparently merits some form of introduction, he never makes an appearance in the story—only his window does. Dickens isn't using the window to describe a person; he is using the window to describe an occupation of a character who isn't even present. Further down the street, "some of the small tradesmen's houses. . . had a Cyclops window in the middle of the gable . . . suggesting that some forlorn rural Prentice must wriggle himself into that apartment

horizontally” (5). Again, Dickens’s description of the tradespeople provides no individual detail of the humans occupying these professions—the reader only knows that their rank in the business is “Prentice.” Dickens’s description of a “Cyclops window” further intimates the anonymity of the village. The social identity of the village is the main focus, as opposed to any unique detail about the actual people living there that might provide the village with a distinct flavor. Dickens describes what appears to be a ghost town, where glass windows reveal information about occupations filled by mysteriously absent villagers. All of these details suggest that in the modernized Victorian society of *Tom Tiddler’s Ground*, one’s identity is shaped by titles, occupations, and class, not by any originality or individualism.

The intentional lack of proper names continues with several of the characters in the framework story, implying that one’s individual identity is less notable than status or title. The names given to characters in Dickens’s fiction are a curious phenomenon that have received much attention from scholars and critics. Some names are full of deeper implications for a character’s identity, while other names seem to play a purely comic function. The first three characters introduced in the first chapter of *Tom Tiddler’s Ground* are referred to only as the Landlord, the Tinker, and the Traveller, or Mr. Traveller, the protagonist. Dickens, who is known to put much effort into concocting clever names for even the most insignificant characters, surely has a purpose in neglecting to give his main character a proper name. The hermit, whose lowly and pitiful existence becomes the central feature around which the plot of the entire portmanteau story revolves, *is* given a name, and is referred to as Mr. Mopes. One could argue that having a given

name makes Mr. Mopes, despite his position as the piece's antagonist, superior to Mr. Traveller in terms of a developed individual identity. Without a proper name, Mr. Traveller lacks the depth of individuality that belongs to Mr. Mopes. Further, Mr. Mopes is described as having many other traits that accentuate his individuality, perhaps even more so than Mr. Traveller. The hermit Mr. Mopes speaks "with an air of authority" as one "who has been to school," has a distinctively fierce and rugged personality type, and he is referred to as a "genius," "an Emperor," and "a Conqueror" (Dickens 12, 8, 7, 7). Such personal distinction is given only to Mr. Mopes, and the author neglects to develop even slightly the individuality of Mr. Traveller. However, Dickens seems to be less interested in the difference in depth of individuality, as he puts a greater emphasis on the social identities of these two characters.

There is a clear disparity drawn between the socioeconomic circumstances of Mr. Traveller and Mr. Mopes, in which individuality plays no part. Though no occupation or social ranking is given to Mr. Traveller, it is apparent that he has a comfortable place in society, whereas Mr. Mopes is alienated and marginalized. Although Mr. Mopes has a more distinct individual identity, without a developed social identity he is nothing more than a "Nuisance" (Dickens 16). Mr. Traveller, politely but sternly, says to Mr. Mopes, "you are a Nuisance, and this kennel is a Nuisance . . . and the Nuisance is not merely a local Nuisance, because it is a general Nuisance to know that there *can be* such a Nuisance left in civilization so very long after its time" (16). Mr. Traveller admits that, in previous eras, hermits were romanticized for their eccentricity, cultivated by a life in isolation. However,

it is implied here that the age of “individual identity” has passed, and modern civilization values only those with a developed social identity. Unlike in the past, high status overshadows individual uniqueness.

Lastly, a critical examination of the windows belonging to both Landlord and Mr. Mopes further establishes the different social and individual identities of Landlord, who is identified purely by his socio-economic status, and Mr. Mopes, who is purely identified by his eccentric individuality, ultimately implying that a stable position in society far outweighs any sense of personal identity. Of all the features of Mr. Mopes’s residence, his windows are the first things described. As stated before, a visitor to Mr. Mopes’s residence said that windows “give one a great idea of the dispositions, the habits, and the tempers of the occupants,” both in preface to his own story but also perhaps as a subtle observation of Mr. Mopes himself, or what could be supposed of his nature from simply beholding his windows (Collins 25). In describing the windows, Dickens remarks that “all the window-glass. . . had been abolished by the surprising genius of Mopes” (Dickens 7, 8). Glass equips the window with much of its poetic capacity; without glass, a window is nothing but an empty frame. The glass is what both reveals and distorts, providing readers with insight into the complex identities of the characters that interact with the window but also adding nuance to that which may seem ordinary. Armstrong believes that “the [Victorian] novel is founded on glass culture,” and that, “for the [Victorian] novel, the glass panel of a window is the single most important architectural form” (183).

Not only is the glass removed from the hermit’s window-frames,

but “all the windows . . . were barred across with rough split logs of trees nailed over them” (Dickens 8). Mr. Mopes’s intentional removal of glass from his window and the barring of the window-frames suggests an unwillingness to provide outsiders with a transparent insight into his own life. Further, he refuses to exist in the “display case captivity” that windows so often create for their characters, keeping his individual identity concealed (Leonard 208). His individual identity, far from the transparent and bland ones of Traveller and Landlord, is complex and difficult to navigate, for both the characters within the novel and readers. Though it is evident from his distinct personality traits and his proper name that Mr. Mopes has a fully-developed individual identity, it provides him with no substantial advantages and is considered purely a “Nuisance,” just as a window-frame without glass could be considered a nuisance (Dickens 16).

A barred-up window intimates an equally barred-up individual—Mr. Mopes does not share his developed individual identity with outsiders. The barred window also reveals information about the hermit’s close-to-nonexistent social identity. Hollington theorizes that glass windows indicate a “longing for change and progress and the signs thereof that might be detected on the horizon” (3). By barring his windows with rough logs, however, Mopes symbolically removes any hopes of a promising future. His disregard for possible future prospects perpetuates his lowly lifestyle and prevents any change from actually occurring. His peculiar reputation (one that tends to attract bad company) is the only thing that maintains his place in the town’s socioeconomic order, and at the lowest possible rung. Dickens, along with his equally disapproving literary persona Mr. Traveller, suggests

that in a modernized society with an increasing distinction growing between classes, individuality plays no valuable role. It is solely social identity that allows one to flourish, or even exist, in society with dignity. Mopes's true sin is not his improper lifestyle or individual identity, but his refusal to take even the smallest steps towards developing a sense of sociality or enterprise.

The Landlord's window poses as the obvious antithesis to Mopes's window, revealing his promising social prospects, but also the overall superficiality of his identity. The first scene of Dickens's framework story, "Picking Up Soot and Cinders," shows a simple conversation between the Traveller, eating his breakfast, and the Landlord, stationed at the table near the window. Armstrong writes that the "isolated figure at the window" is the "endemic image of nineteenth century iconography" (33). For the course of the entire conversation, the Landlord engages in his "favorite action" of looking out the window (Dickens 2). Unlike Mopes's window, the Landlord's is clean and transparent, with the window-blind drawn down half-way. If Mopes's barred window indicates an individual with no social standing or prospects, the Landlord's glass window clearly indicates a comfortable status. However, the Landlord looks out the window not on an expansive landscape of charming domestic-life or greenery, but "at vacancy" (1). To consider the nature of glass windows is to realize that they "set up a dialogue between translucency and reflection" (Armstrong 140). In other words, windows not only show what lies beyond restrictive walls, but also the faint reflection of one's own likeness staring back. Landlord's gaze "at vacancy" was not one directed toward a vacant setting or countryside, but a "vacant" reflection staring back at him. This is apparent when Dickens writes that the



blinds were “half drawn down,” and yet Landlord “stooped a little.” Surely a pleasant landscape could have been seen even if the blinds were drawn down slightly, but Dickens later reiterates that the Landlord “stooped again, to get a more comprehensive view of vacancy under the window-blind” (Dickens 2).

The apparent “vacancy” of the Landlord’s reflective image applies both to his individual and social identity. It is evident that, without a proper name, history, or any distinguishable traits or unique features, the “vacancy” of the Landlord’s individual identity suggests that it is simply nonexistent. Social identity *is* present, however—it is clear even from his title-name that the Landlord exists comfortably and has a well-developed social identity. The “vacancy” in this sense, then, refers to the superficiality of the Landlord’s personal identity. Like the reflection one sees while looking at a window, the Landlord’s identity exists, but it is faint and translucent; the silhouette is present but there are no distinctive features that provide flavor or substance. While it is evident that Dickens disapproves of the hermit Mr. Mopes’s lifestyle, he does imply that an identity established solely on social and economic status, though necessary to flourish in society, is indeed superficial.

By depicting character interactions with glass windows, the authors of *Tom Tiddler’s Ground* add nuance to the concept of identity, implying that it is not definitive or inherited, but fragile, malleable, and easily mistaken. Utilizing windows as a literary motif, as well as employing other literary techniques such as the omission of proper names, the authors also divide individual identity and social identity, suggesting that individual-

ity serves little purpose in a modernized society focused on economy, class, and status, and that social identity is essential for socio-economic success. However, despite its importance in society, Dickens and his cohorts subtly reveal the ultimate superficiality of an identity founded solely on class and economic prospects.

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