From Visual Tools to Body Parts: Functions of Eyeglasses in The Pickwick Papers

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Abstract
The Industrial Revolution and subsequent technological advancements enabled most members of the Victorian middle class to afford eyeglasses and facilitated the improvement and mass production of frames and lenses. This explains the popularity of eyeglasses among Dickens's fictional characters such as Samuel Pickwick and Snubbin. Eyeglasses are associated with aging, social standing, power, and authority in his works; apparently, these help the characters see more clearly. Dickens's first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37), explores a time when the Victorian middle class began using eyeglasses cautiously. In *The Pickwick Papers,* only characters who were financially well-off or legal professionals wear eyeglasses. Additionally, there is an invariable association between a character's temperament and the kind of eyeglasses they wear in his works. For instance, Pickwick's round eyeglasses represent a mild temperament. Initially, references to Pickwick's donning and removal of his eyeglasses are so frequent that his eyeglasses eventually appear to be a part of his body, forming his identity. Thus, this study discusses how Dickens's use of eyeglasses to represent his characters reflected his contemporaries' increasing affordability of eyeglasses.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, Victorian Middle Class, Industrial Revolution, Eyeglasses, Spectacles, Glasses, Eyewear

Introduction

Eyeglasses play an important role in many of Charles Dickens's novels. They serve as a symbol of social status and reflect a character's personality and physical traits. The popularity of eyeglasses among his fictional characters parallels the time when technological advancements owing to the Industrial Revolution facilitated the mass production of eyeglasses, thereby increasing the demand for eyeglasses among the middle class. Samuel Pickwick, the protagonist of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37), is the most popular eyeglass wearer among Dickens's characters. Dickens uses Pickwick's round eyeglasses to reflect his temperament and goodness, adding a comical tone to the story. Pickwick's eyeglasses eventually become a part of his being. Exploring this tendency in the characterization of Pickwick and those of other eyeglass wearers in *The Pickwick Papers*, this study discusses the socio-cultural connotations of eyeglasses, their increasing availability in Dickens's lifetime, and Dickens's use of them to represent the temperament, taste, and social standing of eyeglass wearers.

Eyeglasses in the Western culture

The history of eyeglasses dates back to ancient Rome. The Roman tragedian Seneca (4 BC–65 AD) is said to have used a glass filled with water to magnify written texts for clarity (Rue). Over time, glass was cut into lenses, which were used to treat vision impairment. Around 1000 AD, reading stones, which were placed on writings to magnify the letters, were developed ("History of Eyeglasses and Sunglasses"). Reading stones aided elderly monks with presbyopia (Zeiss). Sabin states that these were the first systematic visual aid (56/838).

The first wearable eyeglasses were invented in Italy at the end of the 13th century. These were called rivet glasses because the two convex lenses placed in wooden frames with stems were fixed by a rivet. Rivet glasses were not hands-free, and the wearers had to balance the glasses on their nose or hold them in front of their eyes (Zeiss). Although unstable and inconvenient, these enabled better vision. *The Portrait of Hugh of Saint-Cher* (1352) by Tommaso da Modena (1326-79) is considered the first painting to depict a man wearing glasses.

Starting with Seneca, glasses were used to help scholars and monks read. This explains why glasses came to be associated with learning and knowledge. Most people were excluded from the use of eyeglasses. Steven Johnson suggests that Gutenberg's invention of printing in the 1440s and the spread of literacy boosted the demand for eyeglasses among ordinary citizens (25–26/302). As eyeglasses spread among the public and their designs varied, they were associated with the following perceptions in addition to studying:

Sophistication and refinement: From the 18th century onward, eyeglasses became increasingly fashionable and were seen as a symbol of refinement and sophistication. Wealthy people preferred eyeglasses made of expensive materials, such as gold, to flaunt their social standing and taste. For instance, in Conan Doyle's short mystery, "The Golden Pince-Nez" (1904), on examining the titular object left at the murder site, Sherlock Holmes deduces the suspect to be "a woman of good address, attired like a lady" because the pince-nez is "handsomely mounted in solid gold" (1015). His deduction is correct because the murderer is a Russian anti-government activist with "a certain nobility" and "an over-mastering dignity" (1024), and she earns Holmes' respect because of her sense of justice and loyalty toward her fellow activists.

Seriousness or authority: Sabin states that "the significance of glasses as a symbol of authority is an implicit bias, as social psychologists call the unconscious attribution of particular qualities to a member of a certain group. Writers exploit this bias when they have their characters wear glasses" (650/838). This suggestion is true because in certain professions, such as law or medicine, eyeglasses are often perceived as a symbol of seriousness and authority. Glasscock mentions a joke prevalent among 18th-century opticians that stated men of letters could have added 5 dollars to their hourly wage if they had purchased eyeglasses (102/373). Even today, eyeglasses perpetuate the illusion of professional competence and dignity. Another good example is the *Harry Potter* series wherein both Dumbledore and McGonagall, the headmaster and deputy headmistress of Hogwarts, wear eyeglasses. Along with their age, experience, and skills, their eyeglasses symbolize their dignity, which overwhelms their students.

Character-defining icons: In recent popular culture, eyewear is often used to define characters. Harry Potter is undoubtedly the most famous eyeglass wearer in 21st-century popular culture. In addition to the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, untidy black hair, and green eyes, the character's round eyeglasses distinctly characterize him. Other examples include the sunglasses in *Top Gun* (1986) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). In both movies, the protagonist Maverick (played by Tom Cruise) wears the green Ray-Ban Aviator RB3025, which enhances Maverick's manliness, along with his motorbike and leather jacket. The other characters also wear different types of Ray-Ban sunglasses (Sunshine Optometry). Potter's eyeglasses are a simple fit for teenage students. However, sunglasses in the *Top Gun* series were designed to be both practical and stylish, befitting elite pilots. These examples show that eyeglasses are not merely devices for correcting vision impairment; they inform the wearer's character, personality, tastes, and emotions.

The age of eyeglass mass production

Today, various types of eyeglasses are sold, and people can promptly afford them depending on their preferences and budget. Usually, individuals pick their eyeglasses based on their attire, where they are headed, and who they intend to meet. The technological developments in eyeglass manufacturing and their subsequent mass production in the 18th century have enabled consumers to select and purchase from among a plethora of options.

Lens grinding is a complicated and lengthy process that requires skill and scientific knowledge. Thus, the increasing demand for eyeglasses could not be addressed by manual lens grinding. Around the 1750s, lens grinding machines were invented in France (Sabin 410/838; MAFO). Owing to these, better-quality lenses could be produced in shorter timeframes. In 1728, temple glasses (spectacles with side arms) were invented by the London-based optician Edward Scarlett (Zeiss, Elborough 79/323). These allowed wearers to remain hands-free and formed the basis for modern eyeglasses. Another breakthrough invention was Benjamin Franklin's bifocal glass (Sabin 499–500/838, Elborough 88/323). Before the invention of bifocals, people suffering from both near- and far-sightedness had to carry two pairs of glasses and constantly change them. With Franklin's bifocals, only one pair of glasses could correct both kinds of impairment (Glasscock 44/373). Franklin's bifocals were elegant and became popular in the fashionable society of Paris (Sabin 517/838). Franklin's contribution was enormous because he made eyeglasses not just tools for better vision but also a fashion statement.

After the 18th century, the Victorian era saw significant developments in eyeglass manufacturing technology. This was marked by the appearance of steel-wired frames. At the beginning of the 16th century, horns, tortoiseshells, and whalebones were used as material for frames; however, they were expensive (Zeiss). From the beginning of the 19th century, steel began to be used as a cheaper alternative material for eyeglass frames (Elborough 101/323). Gemma Almond highlights that from as early as the 1820s, the eyeglass market grew, and retailers sold steel eyeglasses at 20 shillings (273). The advantages of steel lie in its lightness and ease of pressing (Elborough 101, 106/323). Another benefit unseen in the previous century was steam power. Travis Elborough notes that at the beginning of the 19th century, steam-powered looms were used to assist water-powered wire-drawing machines (101/323). The introduction of machines and new frame materials enabled eyeglass manufacturing to be faster and more efficient, promising better fit.

What types of eyeglasses would Dickens's characters wear?

Dickens's lifetime paralleled the period when the demand for eyeglasses increased because the middle class became more literate and had greater access to printed materials. Eyeglasses were also seen as status symbols, and many people wore them even when they did not have any vision problems. To better understand this argument, it is useful to examine the types of eyeglasses Dickens's characters wear. The following types of eyeglasses were popular during Dickens's lifetime:

Spectacles: These were the most common type of eyeglasses at the beginning of the 19th century. The round lenses were held in place using wire frames with side arms. When not in use, these were often worn with a chain around the neck. The majority of male characters and a few female characters (Betsey Trotwood, Mrs. Rouncewell, and Mrs. Pardiggle) in Dickens's novels wear spectacles.

Folding eyeglasses: These were an improved version of the spectacles that became popular in the latter half of the 19th century. These could be folded when not in use.

Nose spectacles: These were improved versions of rivet glasses that became popular in the mid-19th century. The lenses were held in place using a curved bridge that rested on the nose without side arms. Nose spectacles were made of gold or silver and considered more fashionable than spectacles. Sir Leicester Dedlock is supposed to wear nose spectacles.

Lorgnettes: These were a type of nose spectacles popular among upper-class women in the 19th century. They had handles that allowed the wearer to hold them up to their eyes. Lorgnettes were ornamentally decorated and made of expensive materials, such as gold, silver, and tortoises. A lorgnette is good for Mrs. Merdle.

Monocles: This was a single lens held in place by the eye socket. This glass developed from a quizzing glass "Beau" Brummel (1778–1840) loved (Elborough 94/323) and became popular among fashionable men. Even after eyeglasses became popular and common, monocles remained as status symbols and were preferred by British and German officers (Sabin 585/838). Bantam and Clarence Barnacle are described as wearing a monocle.

The popularity of eyeglasses among Dickens's characters reflects the increasing availability of eyeglasses throughout his lifetime. In his works, eyeglasses are associated with aging, social status, power, and authority.

Eyeglass wearers in *The Pickwick Papers*

The Pickwick Papers depicts the period when the Victorian middle class began wearing eyeglasses cautiously. There are not many eyeglass wearers, but starting with the protagonist Samuel Pickwick, Dickens superbly uses different types of eyeglasses to differentiate the wearers' age, social standing, and temperament.

Pickwick is the most famous eyeglass wearer in Dickens's novels. In Chapter 1, he is introduced as follows:

> A casual observer, adds the secretary, to whose notes we are indebted for the following account---a casual observer might possibly have remarked nothing extraordinary in the bald head, and circular spectacles, which were intently turned towards his (the secretary's) face, during the reading of the above resolutions: to those who knew that the gigantic brain of Pickwick was working beneath that forehead, and that the beaming eyes of Pickwick were twinkling behind those glasses, the sight was indeed an interesting one (4).

Reading this passage, the reader understands that Pickwick is apparently an ordinary middle-aged man with no remarkable features, but his sparkling spectacles enhance his indiscriminately kind and sweet temperament with the roundness of his appearance. In Chapter 45, Sam Weller describes Pickwick as an angel wearing spectacles (625).

Until Pickwick is imprisoned in a debtors' prison in Chapter 40, he is repeatedly seen putting on, adjusting, and removing his spectacles. His obsession with spectacles is evident from the beginning of the novel. In Chapters 2 and 4, he is delighted to see the local landscape, people, and army ceremony in Rochester using his spectacles and telescope. In Chapter 8, Pickwick is so intoxicated and excited that he throws off his spectacles and bursts into laughter. He seems to play with his spectacles very often.

As Sabin suggests (537/838), Pickwick's eyeglasses add a comic element. When Pickwick is in trouble, his eyeglasses are about to break, but they always miraculously return to him. For instance, in Chapter 9, while trying to catch Jingle, Pickwick's carriage is overturned, and he is knocked to the ground. The narrator states, "as soon as he had gained his feet, extricated his head from the skirts of his great coat, which materially impeded the usefulness of his spectacles, the full disaster of the case met his view" (121). In Chapter 30, Pickwick is piled on ice and buried in water while skating. His party is relieved to see his "face, head, and shoulders, emerged from beneath the water, and disclosed the features and spectacles" (407). These descriptions show that spectacles are firmly attached to Pickwick's face as they become part of his body.

Strangely enough, eyeglasses conveyed both negative connotations of evil and physical and mental weakness as well as positive connotations (Sabin 388/838, Almond 275-79, Elborough 92/323). Dickens was aware of the negative associations with eyeglasses, and he used them to satirize incompetent people. Pickwick's lawyer, Snubbin, is one such example. When Pickwick visits him for the first time, the narrator says:

> […] a lantern-faced, sallow-complexioned man, of about five-and-forty, or---as the novels say--- he might be fifty. He had that dull-looking boiled eye which is often seen in the heads of people who have applied themselves during many years to a

> weary and laborious course of study; and which would have been sufficient, without the additional eye-glass which dangled from a broad black riband about his neck, to warn a stranger that he was very near-sighted. His hair was thin and weak, which was partly attributable to his having never devoted much time to its arrangement, and partly to his having worn for five-and-twenty years the forensic wig which hung on a block beside him. The marks of hair-powder on his coat-collar, and the ill-washed and worse tied white neckerchief round his throat, showed that he had not found leisure since he left the court to make any alteration in his dress: while the slovenly style of the remainder of his costume warranted the inference that his personal appearance would not have been much improved if he had. (420)

This suggests that Snubbin is exhausted by a task beyond his ability. His physical weakness, represented by poor eyesight and shabby appearance, tells the reader that he is incompetent. Unlike Pickwick, Snubbin's eyeglasses make him look frail and aged and intensify his clumsiness. Dickens's dislike for incompetent legal professionals later developed into Jarndyce and Jarndyce in *Bleak House* (1852–53). However, a clerk who appears in Chapter 40 of *The Pickwick Papers* is capable because he is quietly and promptly carrying out his duty in front of a crowd of clients: "All this time, the man in the spectacles was hard at work" (555). He is unnamed and appears briefly, but Dickens seems to esteem him, possibly because Dickens used to work as an apprentice in a lawyer's office. The clerk's spectacles represent their professional skills and pride.

In contrast to the unnamed clerk, Bob Sawyer is a deceitful and insincere fortune hunter. He is clever; however, he is more concerned with fashioning himself as a skilled surgeon than he is with acquiring any real medical training. He uses black clothing, green eyeglasses, and a large book to make himself "look as solemn I [he] could" (520). Glasscock states that colored protective lenses appeared in Europe in the 17th century and were promoted by opticians in the mid-18th century (85/373). Bob believes that colored lenses are far better than transparent ones at projecting him as a successful surgeon and gaining respect and trust. Therefore, he takes off his eyeglasses while enjoying practical jokes. For him, eyeglasses are a means of asserting himself and switching between duty and off-duty.

The eyeglasses of Pickwick, Snubbin, Bob, and the legal clerk are for practical use; therefore, they do not have to be ornamental. In contrast, Bath's MC Bantam's monocle is flashy, along with his clothes and other accessories as shown in the following passage:

> The friend was a charming young man of not much more than fifty, dressed in a very bright blue coat with resplendent buttons, black trousers, and the thinnest possible pair of highly-polished boots. A gold eye-glass was suspended from his neck by a short broad black ribbon; a gold snuff-box was lightly clasped in his left hand; gold rings innumerable, glittered on his fingers; and a large diamond pin set in gold glistened in his shirt frill. He had a gold watch, and a gold curb chain with large gold seals; and he carried a pliant ebony cane with a heavy gold top. His linen was of the very whitest, finest, and stiffest; his wig of the glossiest, blackest, and curliest. His snuff was princes' mixture; his scent *bouquet du roi.* His features were contracted into a perpetual smile; and his teeth were in such perfect order that it was difficult at a small distance to tell the real from the false. (484)

Bantam's heavy dress and obsession with gold items reveal his vanity and extravagance. He dresses up as a sophisticated gentleman and looks down on those engaged in commerce and

industry. However, in reality, he is snobbish and empty-headed; the narrator says, “who ever knew a man who never read or write either, who hadn’t got some small back parlour which he *would* call a study!” (487). He is the target of Dickens’s dislike of the pompous upper class because his love for anything glittering is designed to show off his social standing and conceal his superficiality.

Dickens’s satirical descriptions of a monocle wearer appear again in Chapter 17 of *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), when Clarence Barnacle repeatedly drops his monocle into dishes to the displeasure of the party. Elborough notes that young men’s love for monocles was fashion-driven, and as early as the 1820s, medical professionals issued warnings about the adverse effects of monocles on eyesight (96–97/323). Uninterested in the optical characteristics of monocles, Dickens rather pokes fun at young gentlemen’s craze for being fashionable by wearing monocles because such eyeglasses are impractical and therefore, a luxury afforded to the leisure class, emphasizing the wearer’s vanity and snobbery.

Conclusion

Overall, eyeglasses serve several functions in *The Pickwick Papers*, such as being tools to correct vision and indicators of age, status, and temperament. The spectacle wearers are limited to the wealthy characters, such as Pickwick and Bantam as well as middle-class experts, such as Snubbin and Bob. Although age and social standing may vary, Dickens carefully chose the eyeglasses to fit the wearer’s temperament. Pickwick’s spectacles are round, the most prevalent type among the Victorian middle class. The ones worn by the law clerk and Bob were of the kind that poorly-paid young men could afford. Bantam’s monocle is one of the most expensive eyeglasses referenced by Dickens.

When the characters in *The Pickwick Papers* begin wearing eyeglasses, they regard them as something special. Over time, they get used to wearing eyeglasses, which become a part of their bodies. Moreover, eyeglasses come to function as a means of creating a character that is different from what an individual really is.

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