

The hanged man's  
bride, the trial for  
murder, and  
confession found in a  
prison



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Based on my study of Charles Dickens, I have decided to focus upon three short stories to write about in detail. These are: The Hanged Man's Bride, written in 1860, The Trial For Murder, written in 1865 and Confession Found in a Prison, written in 1842. To enable me to understand the stories better and also Dicken's interests and motivations, I have carried out necessary research on historical, literacy contexts and other biographical details.

Charles Dickens stories could be said to be a reflection of his own childhood because of the intensity in which he writes about the subject - his early years were full of upheaval and uncertainty. He was born in 1812 into a middle-class family, however, his father was declared bankrupt in 1824. His family was sent to the Marshalsea Prison for debtors in London. Charles, however, at the age of 12 was sent to work in a blacking factory, labeling bottles. He lived in lodgings in semi-squalor in an attic room.

However, his father borrowed money and Dickens was then sent to a public school called Wellington House, but the masters were savage and academic standards were low. Dickens got a job at 15 as a clerk for a law firm and then later became a freelance reporter. Dickens taught himself shorthand and became a journalist. This put him in good stead and in 1836-7 he brought out in serial form The Pickwick Papers. This was very successful and enabled him to become a full-time writer of novels and stories by his mid-twenties, his first story was Oliver Twist.

He died in 1870 aged 56 through over-work - he had been on a number of very successful public readings tours around the country, which drained him, suffering from stress he died of a stroke. A reoccurring theme within Dickens

writing is that of the supernatural such as ghost stories. These are about good and evil, justice and injustice, meanness and generosity such as in Scrooge, and love and hate. Confession Found in a Prison and The Trial For Murder are told in the first person as if the storyteller has written their account. Whereas in The Hanged Man's Bride the story is told in the third person, this being a narrator who is talking about what happened to other people.

In Confession Found in a Prison Charles Dickens has organised the story as the narrator is in prison awaiting his execution and the story then goes on to tell the reader how he came to be in this position. In The Trial For Murder the narrator opens with a long introduction about the supernatural and how people feel about it, before he then goes on to progress with the story, which in itself relates to a psychic experience. In The Hanged Man's Bride the story is organised in a more straightforward fashion such as that it starts with two friends on holiday and what happens to them when they visit a country house. Within all his stories Charles Dickens presents the characters in an in-depth fashion. This helps the reader to develop in their mind a picture of what the characters may look and behave like.

This also helps the reader to form an opinion on the characters such as whether the character is good, bad, evil or kind. For example, in Confession Found in a Prison the main characters appearance is not only described but we have examples of his thoughts. From this the reader is able to gain an understanding of how the narrator feels about the other characters within the story. In The Trial For Murder the main characters are also described in some detail, not just the way they look but the way they feel and their

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thoughts, whereas some of the more minor characters such as the servant, his valet and his wife are given a brief characterisation. This helps the reader to distinguish and focus on the main characters within the story. Again in *The Hanged Man's Bride* a great deal of detail about the characters is given so the reader can form an opinion on the characters.

These could be opinions such as their thoughts, their past and present experiences and their feelings towards other characters in the story. In his stories, Dickens liked to have characters with interesting and unusual names such as the characters Mr Goodchild and Mr Idle in *The Hanged Man's Bride*. Other examples include the characters Fagin, Mr Bumble, the Artful Dodger from *Oliver Twist*, Miss Havesham and Estella from *Great Expectations* and Ebenecer Scrooge and Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol*. These interesting and unusual names could have been used by Dickens as a reflection of the character and their personality.

For example, the word scrooge is used to describe a mean or miserly person; these thoughts also instantly come to mind when you hear this name. Within *Confession Found in a Prison* the main ideas and issues are of greed and envy, as the narrator is jealous of his brother because of his wealth and because he was everything he wasn't such as open-hearted, generous, handsome, accomplished and generally loved by others. This later turns to fear of justice catching him and possible regret, when he is finally caught. In *The Trial For Murder* the main ideas and issues are those of the influence of the supernatural upon people and those of psychic experiences and the fact that the narrator believes that more people have such experiences than admit to having them. The other main ideas and issues are of the legal

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process and good and evil, with justice prevailing; a common theme within Dickens stories.

In *The Hanged Man's Bride* the main ideas and issues are those of greed, revenge and taking advantage of someone's innocence and naivety. Also, because of the husband's wrongdoing, the fear of being discovered is another theme within the story, such as that the husband now feels trapped by the house in case the body buried in the garden is discovered. In *The Hanged Man's Bride* the husband takes advantage of Ellen when he gives her a paper to write out and sign, which is in fact her will which he has drawn up for her. In fear of what he may do, she fails to realise what she is doing and so leaves everything she owns to him.

However, as the story progresses, justice prevails. Charles Dickens believed very passionately that it was not healthy to possess wealth that you had not earned. The theme of the novel *Great Expectations* is exactly that and so helps to give the reader an insight into Dickens' view and the way in which he develops it. Of all Dickens' novels there are only two that do not hold this as a central theme. Dickens himself had always lived his life spending or borrowing very close to the limit of his earnings. He did not possess enormous wealth and had to work hard for that which he did possess.

He believed that idleness was an unhealthy occupation and that men should work hard and then enjoy the fruits of that labour. This links very nicely with the fact that in *Great Expectations*, though simple and illiterate, Joe Gargery is a much nicer character than the adult Pip. Pip changes as he begins to have great expectations and changes even further as he realises them. The

fact that he has this sudden wealth gives him expectations that seem attainable but are, in fact, beyond his allotted station in life. He becomes a snob and there are various moments where the reader feels really quite uncomfortable with his actions. His relationship with Estella is never possible because she is a lady and he is not a gentleman.

In Confession Found in a Prison the key place is in the storytellers garden. This is where the main action takes place such as when he murders the young child after hiding behind the bushes. It is also the place where the storyteller tries to hide the body by burying it and is the place where justice catches up with the storyteller. The garden is described in some detail so to give the reader a better picture of the scene. For instance, within the text it describes the shrubs where the storyteller hid, the stream at the end of the garden, the dark thicket where he hid the body, and the newly dug up and turfed lawn where he buried the body of the child.

However, in The Trial For Murder the key places are where the main action takes place such as the courtroom itself where the trial takes place and the chamber where the jurors stay. Both of these places are again described in some detail, not just the actual buildings themselves but also the atmosphere within them. For example, within the courtroom the narrator talks about “ the cloud of fog and breath that was heavy in it” and “ a black vapour hanging like a murky curtain outside the great windows”. In both places the presence of the ghost appears to the storyteller and to others within the story.

In *The Hanged Man's Bride* the key places are the country house where most of the action takes place, the tree in the garden where the murderer hides the body, and the castle where murderers were hanged. Again these places are described in a great deal of detail. For example, the story opens by the narrator describing in detail the features of the country house such as "an excellent old staircase and oak paneling". The tree where the young boy's body was buried is also described in a great deal of detail as it changes through the various seasons. When the tree is struck by lightning, again the affects of this are described in some detail, giving the reader a clear picture in their mind of what has happened. For example, it says: "the stem lay in two blighted shafts: one resting against the house, and one against a portion of the old red garden-wall in which its fall made a gap".

The three stories have a basically similar plot in that they are all about murders. However, the murders are committed for different reasons and vary in the amount of detail given. For example, in *Confession Found in a Prison* the storyteller physically murders someone and this is described in some detail to gain sympathy for the murdered boy and dislike for the murderer from the reader. Likewise in *The Hanged Man's Bride* the murder that takes place is also described in detail such as that it describes the victim being killed with bill-hook that splits open the young man's head.

In both of these stories the murder victims are described in some detail helping the reader to feel sympathetic towards them. However, in *The Trial For Murder* a murder has taken place but it is not described in any detail nor is any reason given for the murder or the person murdered. In two of the

stories, these being *Confession Found in a Prison* and *The Hanged Man's*  
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Bride, the individuals murdered are described in such a way to make the reader feel that they are innocent young people (the young child and the young man). In both of these stories the murderers are also described in some detail but this time in a very non-flattering way so that the reader is in no doubt that they are evil characters. Within The Trial For Murder however, apart from the storyteller and the officer Mr Harker, the other characters are not really given great descriptions as to focus the attention on the supernatural aspects of the story.

As illustrated in Confession Found in a Prison and The Hanged Man's Bride, Dickens seems to have been interested in what happened to vulnerable children just like the two young people who were murdered in these stories. This theme appears in Great Expectations where Pip has to live with his horrible sister and her husband since both of his parents are dead. This theme also appears in Oliver Twist along with the recurring theme in Dickens' novels of social injustice, Oliver Twist is no exception. The protagonist, Oliver, is a poor child who is raised in a workhouse for the poor. Conditions inside the workhouses of the nineteenth Century were notoriously hard and Oliver is cruelly ill-treated there.

His escape from the workhouse leads to further suffering when he is abused by the family he lives with. As in the workhouse, his life with the Sowerberry family is harsh and physically brutal. Oliver's innate goodness shines through his hardships but does not prevent him from being mistreated. Through Monks' scheming, Oliver becomes enmeshed in the criminal underworld, represented by Fagin – yet another adult figure who uses children for his own ends.

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Oliver is further used and abused (by Sikes, for example) before he eventually finds salvation with the Maylie household and the story thus ends happily. Dickens is making a serious social comment on the plight of the poor and particularly of vulnerable poor children who often endured cruelty such as Oliver did in *Oliver Twist* and have little chance to overcome their poverty and also become “respectable” in the eyes of society. The main, similar idea within the three stories is that justice will prevail over evil. The idea in *Confession Found in a Prison* and in *The Hanged Man's Bride* is that justice always catches with you – good triumphs over evil no matter how long it takes and that guilty characters have a conscience in that they can't rest through thinking about what they have done or through fear of being found out.

In *The Trial For Murder* however, the main idea is that of supernatural forces beyond their control and their effect upon the way people behave and think. In this story the storyteller writes about the occurrences as if the supernatural definitely does exist. The setting for the three stories is very different. In *Confession Found in a Prison* the main setting is within the storytellers house and garden where all the action takes place. However, in *The Hanged Man's Bride* the setting is in a beautiful country house and to some extent the garden.

Whereas, in *The Trial For Murder* the main setting is within the storytellers house, the courtroom and the chambers where the jury were housed at the London Tavern. Many of Dickens's novels and stories were set in London where he lived. In *Great Expectations*, Pip, the main character arrives in

London and says it was “a shameful place”. Comment on Victorian society is <https://assignbuster.com/the-hanged-mans-bride-the-trial-for-murder-and-confession-found-in-a-prison/>

best highlighted by the chapter in *Great Expectations* where Pip gets a tour of Newgate prison, in which he describes it as “grim”. The conditions in the prison and the way in which criminals are dealt with are a huge concern to society at this time. As reflected in *Great Expectations*, Dickens shared the concerns of the highly influential politician Sir Robert Peel who wrote the Peel report, which would ultimately lead to the reform of the prison system itself.

In the three stories the main characters are all haunted but for different reasons. In *Confession Found in a Prison* the character is haunted by guilt of what he has done and the fear of being found out. This is a continuous theme throughout the story until the end where the bloodhounds sniff out the truth. On the other hand, in *The Trial For Murder* the main character is haunted by a supernatural force, however, even at the end of the story it is not clear whether this is for good or evil, for justice or injustice. However, in *The Hanged Man's Bride* although the murderer becomes a ghost and haunts people himself, he becomes cursed and haunted himself by the guilt of his past and what he has done.

This theme of characters being haunted was also a main aspect of one of Dickens most successful stories, *a Christmas Carol*. Suspense is used throughout the three stories to keep the reader interested and make them want to read more. Dickens achieves this in different ways. In *Confession Found in a Prison* the storyteller explains in the introduction that he is going to be executed for killing the boy.

However, the suspense is brought about by the storytellers growing fear of being caught as the story progresses. In *The Trial For Murder* the suspense is created by the appearance of the ghost which haunts the main character throughout the story and the fact that it is not clear whether this ghost represents good or evil, whether it has good intentions or bad intentions. In *The Hanged Man's Bride* suspense is created through different incidents in the story such as the appearance of the old men at the beginning, the fate of the young girl once she moves into the house, with the appearance of the young man who may tell the World what has happened, the appearance of the scientists who want to analyse the tree and so may discover the young man's body, and finally as the old man tries to lift the curse by telling his story to the guests.

Conclusion

From the three stories I have studied; *Confession Found in a Prison*, *The Trial For Murder* and *The Hanged Man's Bride*, my favourite story is *The Trial For Murder*. I liked this story the best for numerous reasons such as that it was interesting to read Dickens writing about the supernatural in the long introduction that opens the story and throughout the rest of the story; the supernatural is something Dickens was fascinated with and so it was interesting to read one of his stories which is based on both prevalent and his own ideas and issues of the supernatural. I also liked this story because of the dramatic courtroom setting and the interesting theme of the story such as the supernatural proceedings in the courtroom and in the room at the London Tavern where the jury was housed, this also gave an insight into how the legal process operated and how jurors involved in the murder court case were not allowed to mix with other people until the sentence was passed.