Edwin Drood

Edwin Druid? *Household Words* Article Suggests Clue

Tim McKinney

No credible scholar speaks anymore about *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in terms of ‘solving’ it, not that patterns haven’t been noticed. A theme of repression pervades the text and, as Lauriat Lane writes: ...allusion and echo call to mind patterns of ancient myth and ritual, sacrifice and redemption, good and evil. Such patterns are coded symbolically, culturally, and even semically in Dickens’s *Edwin Drood* in ways that have not yet been fully apprehended, though some readers have sensed them. (122)

Is a ‘fuller apprehending’ possible? A *Household Words* article might hold the key.

“The good old times”

An article that had come across Dickens’s plate as *Household Words* editor bears resemblance to the character Mayor Sapsea in *Drood*. The short piece tells of an alderman Blenkinsop who stubbornly resists change preferring the ‘good old times.’ Blenkinsop gets drunk and an animated statue teaches the implications of holding such misplaced reverence for history, talking Blenkinsop backward in time, all the way to Druidism and human sacrifices, the logical conclusion of adhering to ‘the good old times.’

Was it in the good old times that Harold fell at Hastings, and William the Conqueror enslaved England? Were those blissful years the ages of monkery... Of Danish ravage and slaughter? Or were they those of the Saxon Heptarchy, and the worship of Thor and Odin? Of the advent of Hengist and Horsa? Of British subjugation by the Romans? Or, lastly, must we go back to the Ancient Britons, Druidism, and human sacrifices; and say that those were the real, unadulterated, genuine, good old times when the true-blue natives of this island went naked, painted with woad? (Leigh 106)

Dickens wrote to the author, friend Percival Leigh, “your moral that the real old times are the oldest times is charming.” (Dickens’s *Letters*)

Thomas Sapsea

Blenkinsop and Sapsea share parallels, enough at least, to wonder aloud that Dickens might have had him in mind as *Drood* was gestating. Both characters resist change. Blenkinsop “had successfully opposed all the Beetlebury improvements...” while Sapsea maintains a “strongly felt conviction that there never should be, never would be a railroad” connecting his town with the city. Both wield their peculiar nostalgia with a ludicrous self-regard. “This title [“a man of worship”] would probably have pleased [Blenkinsop] very much.” (Leigh 103) Sapsea “dresses at the dean… is mistaken for the dean and is spoken to in the street as ‘my lord and bishop.’ Blenkinsop contemplates a highly revered public work of art as Sapsea considers his own monument to Mrs. Sapsea.

In Sapsea, Dickens might be exaggerating to extreme Leigh’s ‘charming’ idea of sticking to ‘the good old times’. The alderman is promoted to mayor, and his anachronistic ideals extend to his constituents. The townsfolk “seem to suppose all changes lie behind it, and that there are no more to come.” And again, Cloisterham is “a city of another and a bygone time.”

In short, Blenkinsop/Sapsea holds sufficient correlation to explore this premise: Led by Mayor Sapsea, Cloisterham secretly maintains the good old (Druideic) times.

The Sapsea Fragment

Among Dickens’s papers at his death were five half-sized pages treating Mr. Sapsea, Since it was likely written early in the *Drood* process, in other words, at a time Dickens was still crystallizing his plan, the ‘Sapsea Fragment’ is a good starting place to try the premise.

Arthur Cox writes,“The first thing we notice is that [the fragment] has no apparent connection with the subject matter of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*...looks like a by-blow, a piece of writing tangential to the much more demanding work he had in mind.” (34).

In the fragment, Sapsea’s group, The Eight Club, castigates him for his being mistaken on the street as “high in the Church.”

“I was alluding, Mr. Sapsea,” said Kimber, ‘to a stranger who entered into conversation with me in the street as I came to the Club. He had been speaking to you just before, it seemed, by the churchyard; and though you had told him who you were, I could hardly persuade him that you were not high in the Church.’

‘‘Idiot!’ said Peartree.

‘‘Ass!’ said Kimber.

‘‘Idiot and Ass!’ said the other five members.

Has this nothing to do with the novel as readers have received it? It would seem not. Yet the question to be asked is, “why should the Eight Club be especially concerned that a stranger believes Sapsea is a religious figure? Sapsea reasons to the stranger, “Your name is Poker, and there is no harm in being named Poker.” The Eight Club senses otherwise, and their anxiety explains why this particular boasting
generates their ‘scornful’ reaction.

That Poker is indeed ‘poking around’ is made clearer in that he reappears ‘within a few yards of the door of the inn where the Club was held.”

Hardly ‘tangential’ then, is this ‘by-blows’ as two central points correspond to the premise: A group concerned that Sapsea is identified as a religious leader. And a ‘Poker’ who makes inroads into uncovering a possibly ‘religious’ group by exploiting Sapsea’s vanity.

Allowing for the moment the Eight Club idea as genesis for a closet, pre-Christian group, still, is there any evidence in The Mystery of Edwin Drood that supports a Druidic connection? The answer may be surprising.

Solar-astronomical Preoccupation

Terry Coverley’s work on his Dickens Themes website does a nice job demonstrating a clear pattern of solar-astronomical references in the novel.

Splitting Drood into two parts—before and after midnight December 24 (just before the end of Chapter 15) —produces some interesting search results.

A search for ‘sun’ in Part One (ignoring all general, non-seasonal references) finds:

- ‘Not only is the day waning, but the year. The low sun is fiery and yet cold’, ‘by the declining sun’, ‘reddened by the sunset’, ‘faced the wind at sunset’, ‘when the sun is down’, ‘the westering sun bestowed bright glances on it... ‘the sun dipped in the river.’
- ‘So the sun is in constant decline, and even in the final citation, in ‘danger’ of being extinguished.

In Part Two, however, after the Winter Solstice, the sun no longer sinks. There’s not even one more sunset. Instead, the sun rises. Crisparkle ‘was back again at sunrise’.

A close link is made between the sun and life and health: ”

- ‘But no trace of Edwin Drood revisited the light of the sun.’
- ‘For still no trace of Edwin Drood revisited the light of the sun.’
- Crisparkle to Neville: “I want more light to shine upon you.”
- And again: “She has to draw you into the sunlight.”
- “They preferred air and light to Fever and the Plague.”

There are just 76 occurrences of ‘moonli’ in the almost 4,000,000 words of Dickens’s other 14 novels. In Part One of Drood (less than 60,000 words) there are 22. And in Part Two, none at all! Moonlight vanishes entirely—replaced by stars and starlight (which, themselves, like ‘daylight’, don’t occur in Part One). The word ‘moon’ occurs 28 times in Part One and 29 times in total.” (Coverley)

Jasper’s shadow on the sundial

Continuing with the premise that a group of sun-worshippers secretly hides in the pages of Drood, who is Poker’s counterpart threatening to cut off solar communion, vital to the earliest Englishmen? Of course, posterity reads Jasper as a villain. Under the proposed premise, Jasper’s ‘shadowy’ character is re-conceived.

- He casts a solitary shadow.
- He lives in shadow.
- He casts a shadow on the sundial.
- Jasper’s rooms are “mostly in shadow even when the sun is shining brilliantly.”

Sapsea patrols the book looking for ‘un-English or ‘dark’ people, designations for outside threats, and once he makes his pronouncement the ‘finger of scorn’ is upon the accused. Sapsea declares Jasper both ‘un-English’ and ‘dark.’

In fact Jasper is writing a book about the town. In a key line that sums up Jasper’s threat the Dean charges, “You are evidently going to write a book about us, Mr. Jasper,” To write a book about us, well! We are very ancient...perhaps you will call attention to our wrongs.”

Something like this

We might imagine Dickens recalls the Leigh article and, in the Fragment, explores the curious idea of ‘modern English Druids. What we receive in the novel is this idea, refined and masterfully woven largely through symbolism and doublespeak into the original storyline of Edwin and Rosa’s engagement.

Is it possible?

Dickens hints that Cloisterham was “once possibly known to the Druids by another name and a name, more or less in the course of many centuries can be of little moment to its dusty chronicles.” “We are an ancient city and an ecclesiastical city,” Mayor Sapsea boasts. “The town’s architecture is a mix of ancient and contemporary much as kindred jumbled notions have become incorporated into many of its citizens’ minds.”

Michael Hollington in Dickens and the Grotesque looks at Dickens’s A Child’s History of England, and notes, “Dickens sense of history is frequently shot through with a sense of irony.” Hollington notes instances of this in Bleak House:

But of course Bleak House... shows how many Druids are operating now, in the legal and political spheres, for instance, and how many magic circles they describe, so that the streets of London offer ‘a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilization and barbarism walked
this boastful island together.’ (98)

Ultimately, to rise above conjecture, the premise of an embedded story of closet Druids must be testable against other passages of the book.

As a quick example, consider Drood’s opening of Jasper’s dream:

An ancient English Cathedral Tower? How can the ancient English Cathedral tower be here!... There is no spike of rusty iron in the air, between the eye and it, from any point of the real prospect. What is the spike that intervenes, and who has set it up? Maybe it is set up by the Sultan’s orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one.

Anachronism is immediately in play. How can a cathedral co-exist with this ‘Arabian’ milieu? And Jasper’s fear here is of ‘execution’ by a ‘Sultan’; it is a ‘reach’ to interpret the dream as Jasper contemplating Edwin’s murder. The imagery doesn’t fit. But it does the premise.

Unless further evidence emerges, it cannot be proven Dickens used Leigh’s article; what is a fact is that Dickens had considered the idea that the good old times extends back to Druidism. The work to follow is whether this curious idea is detectable in The Mystery of Edwin Drood, and, if so, how Druidism relates to the central mystery of Edwin’s disappearance.

WORKS CITED


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In Part I, I raised the premise that Cloisterham harbors a closet group of sun-worshiping Druids. Mayor Sapsea leads the community and Jasper attempts to uncover it. This paper aims to demonstrate the mechanics of symbolism and doublespeak concealing the Druid story in the superficial story.

Edwin Drood, Druid Apprentice

Lauriat Lane raises a pertinent question:

Why should...Edwin Drood have as his first name that of an early Northumbrian king converted to Christianity but later overthrown and killed by the still pagan Mercians and as his last name one that combines Druid, a pre-Christian priesthood, with Rood, the Anglo-Saxon Cross? (124)

Lane’s speculation is worth adding because its phrasing exactly describes Edwin Drood’s predicament-- a pagan martyred for Christian conversion. The vespers reading in “The Dawn” announces the theme of repentance lying at the heart of the mystery. “When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful
and right, he shall save his soul alive.“ (Ez 18:27)

Dickens provides first hand documentation of what he knew of Druidism:

The Britons had a strange and terrible religion, called the Religion of the Druids. [It seems] to have mixed up the worship of the Serpent, and of the Sun and Moon, with the worship of some of the Heathen Gods and Goddesses. Most of its ceremonies were kept secret by the priests, the Druids... ceremonies included the sacrifice of human victims, the torture of some suspected criminals.... They met together in dark woods...and there they instructed, in their mysterious arts, young men who came to them as pupils, and who sometimes stayed with them as long as twenty years. (Child’s Ch 1)

Dickens repeats the last line in the next paragraph, “...and their pupils who stayed with them twenty years...” (Ch 1)

Edwin Drood is twenty years old.

Requisite foreknowledge

The impenetrability of The Mystery of Edwin Drood is due largely to the symbolic clues that are not conveniently compacted as they are in this paper. The ‘trail’ grows ‘hotter’ and ‘colder’ through Dickens’s unfinished experiment, and the solution builds layer upon layer only after the reader has sufficient familiarity with the manner and applies this awareness orchestrally.

Take the following scene wherein Mr. Grewgious attempts a poetic description of a lover seeking his beloved, likening it as to “a bird seeking its nest.” The reader must have requisite foreknowledge a) Edwin is a Druid at the end of his apprenticeship b) like ‘shadow’ and ‘sun’, ‘dark’ and ‘un-English’, ‘birds’, ‘rooks’, ‘nests’ are symbolic doublespeak.

Mr. Grewgious’s Rite of the True Lover

Edwin visits Rosa’s guardian, Grewgious, and undergoes an initiation.

“Lord bless me cried Mr. Grewgious, breaking the blank silence which, of course ensued: though why these pauses should come upon us when we have performed any small social rite, not directly inductive of self-examination...”

“I could draw a picture of a true lover’s state of mind tonight.” (true lover=initiate)

“Mr. Edwin will correct me where it’s wrong (will object if he cannot consent)

“The true lover’s mind is completely permeated by the beloved object of his affections. (The group demands exclusive loyalty.)

Her dear name is precious to him, cannot be heard or repeated without emotion, and is preserved sacred. (This is why Sapsea is in trouble; his bragging risks exposure.)

If he has any distinguishing appellation of fondness for her, it is reserved for her, and is not for common ears (again, nothing whatsoever about the cult is to be uttered on the High Street.)

A name that would be a privilege to call her, being alone with her own bright self, it would be a liberty, a coldness, an insensibility almost a breach of good faith to flaunt elsewhere.”

Dickens completes the picture

It was wonderful to see Mr. Grewgious sitting bolt upright, with his hands on his knees, continually chopping his discourse out of himself; much as a charity boy with a very good memory might get his catechism said. (it is a catechism)

Mr. Grewgious continues:

Having no existence separable from that of the beloved object of his affections, as living at once a doubled life and a half life.” (this explains the pervasive duality of the town and people.)

Edwin sat looking at the fire and bit his lip. “There can be no doubt, no half fire and half smoke state of mind in a real lover.
What will the cult expect from him? Just what is this ‘engagement’ with Rosa adding up to? Grewgious tells Edwin, “You are going down yonder where I can tell you you are expected and to execute any little commission from me…”

“Grewgious charges Edwin with his eyes on the fire. Edwin nods assent with his eyes on the fire.”

Edwin does break the engagement. He decides he will not ‘execute the obligation’ so now Jasper and he know that the ‘finger of scorn’ is upon them. As Grewgious underscores, ‘the largest fidelity to a trust is the lifeblood of the man.’ And the Droods and Jaspers have betrayed that trust.

Rosa as Sacrifice

When Grewgious leads Edwin through the rite it was noted that ‘no half smoke, no half fire would do.’ Grewgious looked upon the fire and Edwin took his meaning. Return to Jasper’s rooms, ‘mostly in shadow’:

Even when the sun shines brilliantly, it seldom touches the grand piano in the recess, or the folio music-books on the stand, or the bookshelves on the wall, or the unfinished picture of a blooming schoolgirl hanging over the chimney-piece.

Jasper’s ‘shadow’ shields ‘Rosa’ from the ‘sun’ as ‘Rosa’ hangs precariously over the fire.

Rosa’s sacrifice is prefigured.

“Miss Twinkleton turns to the sacrifice and says, ‘you may go down. Miss Budd goes down, followed by all eyes.”

Elsewhere she is the ‘doomed little victim’ and ‘apparition.’

Edwin points to her portrait and says, “I’ll burn your comic likeness.” Is he talking about the picture or is he talking to the picture and referring to its likeness?

“What is this imagined threatening, pretty one? What is threatened? I don’t know. I have never even dared to think or wonder what it is.” Always vague, always half imagined, like the fear that wells up in any drowsy nightmare. “Don’t Eddy!” “Don’t what, Rosa?”

All regarding the nature of sacrifice is summed up in one of the central lines of the novel:

Rosa “represented the spirit of rosy youth abiding in the place to keep it bright and warm in its desertion.”

Tartar

Mr. Tartar is a dashing sailor who mysteriously shows up in the middle of events, and Rosa immediately comes under his protection.

Tartar’s “chambers were the best ordered under the sun moon and stars.” This is the only time ‘moon’ is mentioned in the second part of the book, compared with twenty eight in the first. It is another biblical clue. “And lest when you see the sun and the moon and the stars you are drawn away and worship them and serve them.” Tartar’s allegiance is made known. (Deu 4:19)

Tartar is connected with sun-worship through symbolism. He is deeply sunburned though Dickens is careful to show us he is not a dark person by his white neck line.

His boatman, Lobely was “the dead image of the sun in old woodcuts, his whiskers answering for rays.”

Tartar settles Rosa in her London rooms, in what she and the readers feel safety: ‘Rosa imagined living her whole life atop the fireproof stairs.”

Again, “….what is to be done with you? …living fireproof, up a good many stairs for the rest of her life was the only thing in the nature of a plan that occurred to her.”

Tartar is not Rosa’s savior after all. In fact, Dickens arranges it so that the greater the relief the reader feels in Tartar’s care, the closer Rosa is to unspeakable horror.

The whole time, “Mr. Tartar talked as if he were doing nothing to Rosa.”
The curious case of Mr. Tope

In two chapters of the manuscript, Tope’s name is ‘Peptune.’ Dickens opts against another ‘astronomical’ name purposefully.

Tope’s job as verger explains the name change. ‘Historically vergers were responsible for the order and upkeep of the house of worship, including the care of the church buildings, its furnishings, and sacred relics.” (Verger)

“From the mound or cairn came the tope and pyramid, and very strong evidence could be added to show that the dome and spire are only another growth.” (Simpson 177)

Recall Grewgious’s admonishment that the lover seeks the beloved as a bird seeks its nest.” The Druids with their “poor strips of walled off gardens” are increasingly crowded into hiding. Is their meeting place an actual subterranean location in the book?

Tope’s house is termed, ‘the verger’s hole in the wall.” Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini in, The D Case: The Truth About the Mystery of Edwin Drood, trace the phrase to Ezekiel 8:8:

Then He brought me to the entrance to the court and I looked, and I saw a hole in the wall...So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there...So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the House of Israel.

Then he brought me to the entrance to the north gate of the House of the Lord, and I saw a woman sitting there, mourning for Tammuz.

“He then brought me into the inner court of the house of the Lord, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty five men with their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east.” (Ez 8:8-16).

Conclusion

Drood, abetted by Jasper, decides to flee; he spends his last day walking Cloisterham.

“He strolls about and about, to pass the time until the dinner-hour. It somehow happens that Cloisterham seems reproachful to him to-day; has fault to find with him, as if he had not used it well; but is far more pensive with him than angry.”

And on the winter solstice, Edwin Drood disappears.

[Grewgious’s] gaze wandered to the stars, as if he would have read in them something that was hidden from him. Many of us would, if we could; but none of us so much as know our letters in the stars yet--or seem likely to do it, in this state of existence--and few languages can be read until their alphabets are mastered.

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