

A Response to Franziska Quabeck: “The Yellow Leaf: Age and the Gothic in Dickens”

ROBERT L. PATTEN

Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate, Vol. 33 (2024): 328-332.
DOI: [10.25623/conn033-patten-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-patten-1)

This response is a contribution to the debate on “Dickens and Colour” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/dickens-and-colour>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome; contact editors@connotations.de.

Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

Abstract

The response to Franziska Quabeck’s contribution to the debate on “Dickens and Colour” takes up a few points for further discussion and suggests that “yellow” does not always signify imprisonment in and of old age.

The email invitation from Burkhard Niederhoff read: Since you are an authority on Dickens, I thought you might be interested in it and consider writing a response. Well, I have been thinking about Dickens for sixty-five years, but I have not been acquainted with the debate on “Dickens and Colour” that has been running in *Connotations: A Journal for Debate*. Curious, I accessed the abstract, and it prompted me to promise a response.

I learned a lot from this article. It seems to be informed by conversations about color, from the abstractions of Goethe two centuries ago to current inquiries about the Gothic, authorial uses of images of color, the uncanny, and representations of Victorian England’s culture.

I take it that the essay has a primary thesis: “Dickens creates his own logic of colours, in which he uses yellow predominantly not as a primary colour, but as a tinge, a *discolouring* of that which was formerly white, or conceived of as white” (3). This is then refined to define Victorian connotations of “yellow” as light, air, and freedom, a kind of beneficent white illumination, whereas Dickens uses “yellow” to signify “both the literal and metaphorical imprisonment in and of old age” (4). Imprisonment becomes both actual prisons and enforcement in home or elsewhere. And metaphorical enforcement is elaborated into “oppressive conditions that imprison the mind” (5) “and human spirit” (6). The latter half of the discussion centers on the genre and psychologies of the Gothic, bringing in Dickens, said by Robert Mighall to be a major contributor of Gothic scenes in Victorian literature.¹

That is a lot to posit. Quabeck situates her postulations within current discourse, and applies its propositions to a number of instances in Dickens’s writing where the fit seems appropriate for containing all these elements: the color, its standing as discoloration, and its opposition to light, air, and freedom physically, mentally, and spiritually: “By describing Miss Havisham as having no brightness left, Dickens could not make it any clearer that his use of yellow differs significantly from all the associations and uses the Victorians had of this particular primary colour” (14). She also hits home by associating yellow with aging. She is particularly adept at nuancing Annette Federico’s “Dickens and Disgust” to distinguish those who are becoming decrepit from those who are, or seem to be, unaging. The comparison of Mrs. Skewton dressed and undressed to “Good” Mrs. Brown is telling.

Her generalizations range across, and encompass, nearly the entire oeuvre, from *Pickwick* to *Great Expectations*. And that is where I would demur, on several grounds, from such sweeping assertions as “from all the associations and uses of the Victorians.” The paper is convincing about “yellow” being used in the ways she analyzes, in these passages. But stretching across the whole corpus of Dickens’s writing, and a very large portion of the literature—or at least the fiction—of Victorian England, seems an unearned inference. From the start, I wanted to know

“more”—that obnoxious Oliver word—about every category of user. All novelists, all poets,² all Dickens, all Victorian architects and decorators and landscape designers, used “yellow” in this other way? Even Dickens—the only one I briefly tested—used “yellow” as an element in a lady’s dressing table, and perhaps thereby as an enhancement of her beauty; *Pickwick Papers*, ch. 22, serial edition: “Mr. Pickwick journeys to Ipswich, and meets with a romantic adventure with a middle-aged lady in yellow curl papers.” What about the fruiterers “radiant in their glory [...] pears and apples clustered high in blooming pyramids, [...] Norfolk Biffins, squab and swarthy, setting off the yellow of oranges and lemons [...] The very gold and silver fish [...] went gasping round and round their little world in slow and passionless excitement” (*A Christmas Carol*, Third Stave, Morgan Library transcription of MSS). Just two examples, but they serve to illustrate Dickens’s use of color to raise a variety of feelings and associations. It would be possible, using the Gutenberg electronic editions, to word search “yellow” across the Dickens corpus, to see how it is used. And the editors of *Connotations* tell me that the best way to discover “yellow” in all of Dickens’s novels is to use the CLiC concordance at <https://click.bham.ac.uk>.³

What this essay does is make one [me, at least] want to do that. It is clear that Quabeck has identified a significant way Dickens used “yellow.” But does it always signify “both the literal and metaphorical imprisonment in and of old age”?

Three other issues floated across my scattered mind. In the era of using natural dyes, up to the mid-nineteenth-century, yellow was derivable from many plants—Queen Anne’s lace, onion skins, turmeric, and marigold, for instance—and used in a lot in fabrics. When the coal-tar aniline dyes proliferated, and chemists found other means of enhancing color (e.g., arsenic for green) some authorities hated the vulgar brightness that resulted: Turner relished chrome yellow, but M. Paul in *Villette*, William Morris, Whistler, and William Holman Hunt thought the new hues vulgar. So perhaps “yellow” because too luminous?

Secondly, one needs to credit Dickens with being observant. His descriptions of prisoners did, if anything, moderate the awful smells and

filth of their bodies and environments. Contact with sweat and coal tar dust and other pollutants yellowed white shirt collars—still does. And when blood-vessels break apart in jaundice, bilirubin turns cheeks yellow. This happens sometimes in infants at birth as well as in persons with high blood pressure at any stage of life. And, as this essay mentions, jaundice appeared frequently on faces in city streets. So some of the yellow of incarceration is the hue of jaundice and bilirubin, and is probably so recorded by many describing unhealthy conditions, in and outside prisons. I do not know Monika Fludernik's book. I should. I have been reading a history of early nineteenth century London jails and prisons, and they were fetid in the extreme.

Finally—and Quabeck's note (see 15n1) brings this up—yellow takes up other associations later in the Victorian period: as a racial mark for Asians; also as a publisher's mark for a certain kind of publication—French erotic paperbacks dressed in yellow wrappers, so adopted for *The Yellow Book*; and painters showed loose women in green rather than yellow environments, associated with illicit and toxic practices.

None of these “sidebars” directly apply to the analyses of Dickens's uses of yellow in the particular examples analyzed here. But they do raise the question of whether Dickens has a color “logic” or simply uses “yellow” where it would be found in decaying houses and bodies, as a potent element in his Gothic depictions of wasting lives. For noting that usage, whether or not it is a “logic” or a pervasive practice, this article is well worth reading. I thank Franziska Quabeck and the staff of *Connotations* for bringing it to my attention.

Rice University
Houston, TX

NOTES

¹See e.g. Mighall 39-45 (on *Oliver Twist*), 69-77 (on *Bleak House*), and 103-14. I just ran across Mahawatte who claims that “Gothic writing functions as a crucial binding force within Eliot's novels, contributing to the ethical framework of the writing” (4).

²The play of white against yellows and gold in Tennyson's "The Last Tournament" might be of interest to color scholars.

³When using the concordance, one will find 166 hits for "yellow" in Dickens's novels; see <https://clic.bham.ac.uk/concordance?conc-q=yellow&conc-subset=all&conc-type=whole&corpora=corpus%3ADNov&kwic-span=-5%3A5&table-filter=&table-type=basic>.

WORKS CITED

- Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol: The Original Manuscript Edition*. New York: Norton, 2016.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. 20 numbers in 19 parts. London: Chapman and Hall, 1836-37.
- Federico, Annette. "Dickens and Disgust." *Dickens Studies Annual* 29 (2000): 145-61.
- Mahawatte, Royce. *George Eliot and the Gothic Novel: Genres, Gender, Feeling*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013.
- Mighall, Robert. *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares*. Oxford: OUP, 1999.