

# The New Perception Developed by Weekly Journals in the Mid-Nineteenth Century and Its Influence on the Narration of *A Tale of Two Cities*

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**Abstract**—This study examines the narration of *A Tale of Two Cities* (*A Tale*) to demonstrate that this work of fiction was influenced by and represents how readers of weekly journals from the mid-nineteenth century perceived the world. At this time, editors of English weekly journals began using the telegraph and special correspondents alongside other means of communication. This enabled them to regularly provide readers with information from distant lands faster than before. This acceleration of information developed the perception among readers that weekly journals reported recent events and new information on a weekly basis. *A Tale*, a serialized work published weekly in a weekly journal beside journalistic reports, conformed its narration to this newly created perception. The narrator of *A Tale*, who is referred to by the singular “they” in this paper, is not involved in the story and knows everything about it. However, they switch the narrated scenes in the novel between issues of the journal as if the story were an on-site report. They stray from this behaviour only once and switch the scene within one issue, but this seemingly exceptional case was based on the weekly journals’ principle of reporting news swiftly. They are portrayed as being well informed about the real world and the specific period when *A Tale* was published. This contrivance makes it seem consistent that the fictional narrator uses the perception that was developed in the real world.

**Index Terms**—*A Tale of Two Cities*, special correspondents, telegraph, Victorian periodicals

## I. INTRODUCTION

This study aims to demonstrate that although *A Tale of Two Cities* (*A Tale*) is set in eighteenth-century England and France, it represents a perception that was peculiar to periodical readers in nineteenth-century England. This perception was developed by weekly journals; Charles Dickens serially published *A Tale* in one of these journals. At this time, some weekly journals had begun employing the telegraph and special correspondents in addition to other means of communication. This allowed these journals’ editors to provide their readers reports from faraway places much faster. This acceleration in information transmission altered not only the contents of periodicals but also how readers understood or perceived these weekly journals.

This study contributes to three research fields. First, it contributes to literary studies. Over the years, literary researchers have discussed how the historical description in *A Tale* represents nineteenth-century England. For example, Richard Menke indicates that “[i]n its impulse to historicize

media systems, its focus on the movement of texts and persons, and its vision of how reality might register as information, *A Tale of Two Cities* is a historical novel for a new information epoch” [1]. Jonathan H. Grossman also argues that the past depicted in the novel has a “historical perception of a networked present” as its frame and represents “historical changes in transportation” [2]. This study presents a new interpretation of this work by highlighting a viewpoint that has hitherto been overlooked.

Second, this study contributes to media studies. Menke and Grossman indicate that *A Tale* represents the principle of media theory, wherein the media determine our perception and behaviour. Marshall McLuhan was the first to clearly mention the nature of media. He explains that “the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” [3]. Local and national newspapers allow readers to perceive the world in different scales, not by their contents but by themselves; monthly and daily newspapers do so at different paces. New media that emerged after McLuhan published his theory have been understood in the same way. For example, Hansen, indicates that virtual reality technology impacts our perception, saying that “emphasis falls on the content of the virtual than on the means of access to it, less on what is perceived in the world than on how it comes to be perceived in the first place” [4]. However, both authors focus on the means of communication, such as an information society and transportation, which have no direct relation to the novel. This study, on the other hand, is unique as it focuses on weekly journals, in one of which *A Tale* was serialized. This novel was affected by and represents the influence of the weekly journal. By revealing this fact, this study reassesses this work as an important part of media studies.

Finally, this study contributes to journalism studies by emphasising the role of special correspondents, who emerged in the 1850s, in the context of literary research. As mentioned, *A Tale* was influenced by its medium—the weekly journal. Such weekly journals were not a simplex medium, but a complex medium that used other media. They began employing special correspondents in the mid-nineteenth century. Although it is difficult to define who the special correspondents were and what their jobs entailed, Catherine Waters points out that the “term ‘special correspondent’... was used imprecisely throughout the nineteenth century, making definition of the role and identification of those journalists... problematic” [5]. One study defines special correspondents by their techniques instead of their tasks [6], their significance has been recognized: “the special correspondent played a significant part in the popularization of news journalism from the 1850s onward” [5]. Moreover,

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Peter Blake points out that these correspondents' new journalistic style "greatly influenced the New Journalism of the 1880s and 90s" [7]. Therefore, the significance of their works is clearly shown in the history of journalism, but not in literary history. These special correspondents' works are closely related to literary works; their writing style is similar to that of fiction writers rather than that of conventional journalists. Edwards indicates that some special correspondents learned writing styles from leading authors such as Charles Dickens, W. M. Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope, but they were criticized for "aping" these authors [8], and their works were published alongside literary works in weekly journals. Consequently, it is important to assess their works as part of literary history. The current study accomplishes this by showing that weekly journals had special correspondents who played a crucial role in changing the readers' perception.

To achieve its goals, this study first demonstrates that the mid-nineteenth-century weekly journals developed a new perception among readers. Then, it illustrates that *A Tale* is narrated in accordance with this perception. Finally, it shows that the work's narrator<sup>1</sup> understands the peculiarity of contemporary weekly journals and clarifies that the novel was intentionally influenced by the weekly journal and was designed to represent this influence.

## II. PERCEPTION DEVELOPED BY MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY WEEKLY JOURNALS

The media around us impact the way we perceive the world. When bells were installed to announce the hour, for example, they changed the traditional calendar-based lifestyle, and "[t]rade, work, meals, and the market were all punctuated by the ringing of bells" [9]. People thus became aware of the time at an hourly basis; a phenomenon they had not perceived before. Such paradigm shifts in the real world are reflected in works of fiction. For example, Caroline Levin points out that students at Lowood School in *Jane Eyre* live their regular life according to bells; she says that the "patterning of experience [is] capable of crossing back and forth between fiction and the social world. Sometimes the school's forms work perfectly together: a timed bell signals a shift in spatial order" [10]. Once bells influenced the perception of writers and readers in the real world, they worked in the same way in fictitious worlds.

One of the most influential mediums in nineteenth-century England is the weekly journal. It used mail coaches, packet boats, railroads, and other media to provide information to its readers. Further, the journals began using the telegraph and hiring special correspondents in the mid-nineteenth century. The telegraph worked as a vehicle of information in the same way boats and railroads did, but it enabled faster communication with places farther away by converting information into electric signals. Special correspondents constituted a different type of medium: they were dispatched to various lands, gathered information, and sent back on-the-spot reports to editors in England by telegraph and other means of communication.

Employing these two types of media, weekly journals

changed readers' perception in two ways. First, they encouraged readers to believe that the weekly journal articles had verisimilitude. Readers had no direct experience of what was written in the weekly journals, and the same was true for writers in many cases before special correspondents appeared. For example, an article published in 1849 talks about a love story in China. This story was created based on a popular Chinese-plate design, and the writer knew no other Chinese sceneries than the one painted on the plates. Accordingly, the writer asks the reader to "provide himself with an orthodox plate" before telling the story and occasionally refers to the things painted "on the plate" that both the writer and the readers could have the same image before them [11]. Even if the picture on the plate represents a real scene precisely, viewers have no assurance that the scene remains unchanged. In contrast, special correspondents were predominantly dispatched in person to the described spots; if not, they pretended to have been there. In addition, special correspondents rapidly reported what they saw. In 1855, *The Saturday Review* published an article that says the "post waits for" special correspondents, "and twenty chapters must be sent off before the English mail is despatched [*sic*] from Balaklava" [12]. Consequently, they sent reports as fast as they could, or at least they were believed to have done so, by using communication tools faster than the mail, which must have included the telegraph. Before the mid-nineteenth century, journal readers must have perceived stories about unfamiliar places as something imaginary. However, the weekly journal made its readers believe that what was reported had just happened in reality; this was due partly, if not wholly, to the telegraph and special correspondents.

Second, the weekly journals' readers associated the temporal period of one week with parallel time lapses in the narrative as the writer switched between places. Each week, they informed readers of the latest unfamiliar scenarios. For its readers, one week represented the time taken by the weekly journal to publish its latest issue, which would include new episodes and chapters and perhaps introduce new places. To repeat this process every single week, editors were required to receive, edit, and issue articles and, when necessary, special correspondents had to travel from one place to another within the one week between the publication of two issues. A news article in 1856 considers that there was nothing more to be reported from Crimea and expects that special correspondents "are turning their attention towards St. Petersburg... and we shall soon have some word-painting by Mr. G. A. Sala, who is to chronicle the sayings and doings in the city of the Czar, for *Household Words*" [13]. If the special correspondents remained at a place where they found no new information and were away from a place where something new was happening, the weekly journal failed to fulfil its mission. Therefore, the writer of the above article simply assumes that the special correspondent would have reached the next spot.

The weekly journals created a rhythm among its readers, that is, it took one real week before switching the reported places. It is probable that this rhythm influenced not only the readers but also the writers. At least, this rhythm explains some seemingly incoherent behaviour. For example, George

<sup>1</sup> This paper refers to the narrator of *A Tale* with the singular "they".

Augustus Sala serialized his “A Journey Due North” in *Household Words* every week except for one week. The first three parts of this travelogue describe Sala’s journey to his destination: St. Petersburg. Unlike an emergency report wherein the writer reports as if something is currently happening, this travelogue is a record of a finished journey; the flow of time in the real world does not affect its content. Sala, in fact, keeps the time in the story from flowing from the end of the second part to the beginning of the third part: he sees “the granite forts of the impregnable Cronstadt” from a ship at the end of the second part [14], and the sailors “cast anchor in the harbour of Cronstadt” at the beginning of the third part [14]. However, he does not do this between the issues of his first and second parts. He ends the first part at “Swinemunde” where he saw “the last of Prussia” [14]; he left this land and began his second part with “I am in verity journeying on the bosom of the Baltic” [14]. This indicates that he was influenced by the weekly journal. The present tense narration of this travelogue also reflects the perception developed by the weekly journal. That is, just as special correspondents had to finish traveling within a week because they were expected to report the latest information from the narrated places, Sala narrates his travel in the present tense as if he were traveling while he issued the story. Consequently, his story corresponds with the new perception developed among readers of the weekly journal.

### III. SWITCHES OF NARRATED SCENES IN *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*: THE NARRATOR AS A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

*A Tale* has several things in common with articles written by special correspondents. For example, this story was serialized alongside such articles in the same weekly journal. Moreover, the story’s structure resembles that of the articles. Special correspondents described places that the readers could not directly experience. Sometimes, the imaginary narrated settings represented travels to places where the special correspondents could not actually enter or even to different times or eras. The third and fourth parts of “Our Phantom Ship” are travelogues of imaginary trips to the Arctic and Japan, respectively [15, 16]. Moreover, “Five Hundred Years Ago” describes to its readers an imaginary time travel by beginning the journey in “the year 1360” [17]. In this sense, *A Tale*—in which the narrator reports what they observe by switching the narrated places between England and France—is almost undistinguishable from articles written by special correspondents.

The most notable similarity between *A Tale* and articles written by special correspondents is that the settings switched in the story in accordance with the issues of the weekly journal in the real world, with only one exception: August 27, 1859 (see Table I). In short, the narrator seems to travel between the two countries in the novel, and each journey takes one real week. They do not need to travel or take time out for it because they are an omniscient narrator who already knows everything about the past, present, and future of the story. These unnecessary fictional travels and duration of real weeks indicate that they perceive the world as shaped by the weekly journal, and they used this perception to make their narration more acceptable.

TABLE I: PUBLICATION DATES AND SETTINGS OF *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*

Publication date	Chapter(s)	Point of View(s)
April 30, 1859	Book 1 Ch. 1-3	England
May 7, 1859	Book 1 Ch. 4	England
May 14, 1859	Book 1 Ch. 5	France
May 21, 1859	Book 1 Ch. 6	France
May 28, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 1-2	England
June 4, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 3	England
June 11, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 4-5	England
June 18, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 6	England
June 25, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 7-8	France
July 2, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 9	France
July 9, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 10-11	England
July 16, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 12-13	England
July 23, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 14	England
July 30, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 15	France
August 6, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 16	France
August 13, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 17-18	England
August 20, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 19-20	England
August 27, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 21	England France
September 3, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 22-23	France
September 10, 1859	Book 2 Ch. 24	England
September 17, 1859	Book 3 Ch. 1	France

The rest of the story is set only in France.

Book 2 Chapter 23 of *A Tale*, for example, concludes with the scene in which the revolutionaries assault a château in France. It took one week in the real world before the next chapter depicted events in England. Book 2 Chapter 24 begins with the phrase: “In such risings of fire and risings of sea” [18]. If this passage refers to events in the previous chapter, it would be more advantageous to include the two chapters in the same issue of the journal. It seems inconsistent that these chapters were published in different issues given the fact that these two chapters were connected. Nevertheless, these two chapters are physically and temporally detached, which makes it difficult for readers to identify what “such risings of fire” are. Besides, it was unnecessary to publish these chapters in different issues because the narrator did not actually travel from France to England. Moreover, the narrator skips “[t]hree more birthdays of little Lucie” in Book 2 Chapter 24. This differentiates the process of time in the story from that in the real world. All these facts demonstrate that the passage of one week in the real world between these chapters was unnecessary. This is only accounted for by the perception that readers of weekly journals shared in mid-nineteenth century England. They were accustomed to waiting for one week during which special correspondents travelled from one place to another. The seemingly unnatural separation of chapters in *A Tale* is in fact natural in the newly developed perception of time.

However, only once does the narrator of *A Tale* switch the setting from England to France in the same chapter without the passage of a week in the real world—this is the part concerning the storming of the Bastille. Such exceptional behaviour was also encouraged by the weekly journal. When an incident occurred, special correspondents were expected to travel to that place, observe everything, and provide a report as quickly as possible for the journal’s readers. Likewise, the narrator is convinced that the historical moment must be reported immediately in *A Tale*. They outline what has happened over at least six years in “the still house [of Doctor Manette] in the tranquilly resounding corner” of England [18]. Then, they mention that it is 1789 in the novel,

describe a short conversation among the residents of the house, and suddenly change the setting to France to depict the “[h]eadlong, mad, and dangerous footsteps” moving toward the Bastille with a “tremendous roar” [18]. They describe this fictional uprising as if it is a real news report by using two kinds of contrast. The first between the stillness and noisiness: the point of view is switched from “the still house” in England to the noisy mob moving violently in France, which presents the occurrence of an extraordinary incident to the readers. The second is observed in the narrative mode. The narrator uses their ability as an omniscient narrator and moves the calendar in the story forward by summarizing events from the last six years, approximately, within a dozen paragraphs. In contrast, they describe the beginning of the storming of the Bastille as if they are present at the scene. The first sentence after the setting is switched lacks a verb and only describes the sight and sounds: “Headlong, mad, and dangerous footsteps to force their way into anybody’s life” [18]. They pretend to be so busy noting down the situation that they cannot follow grammatical rules. They resume narrating in full sentences soon, but they do not summarize what is happening. Rather, they pretend to report what they hear and feel on the spot in detail: “Alarm-bells ringing, drums beating, the sea raging and thundering on its new beach, the attack begun” [18]. The narrative changes from a comprehensive one to a record of a personal experience within a chapter, which indicates the occurrence of a significant incident—that requires a detailed description—to the reader. Thus, in only this instance, the narrator of *A Tale* switches the setting of the novel without waiting for the next issue of the weekly journal. This not an inconsistency; this indicates that the narrator perceives the world in the way the weekly journal has determined.

Consequently, although the narrator of *A Tale* switches between places in subsequent issues, they decide to switch from England to France in one of the issues to represent the beginning of the French revolution. These seemingly contradictory actions reflect the perceptions developed by the weekly journals.

#### IV. THE CONTRIVANCE TO APPLY THE PERCEPTION IN THE REAL WORLD TO THE FICTIONAL WORK

The narrative of *A Tale* is deliberately composed to avoid appearing unrealistic by using the real-world perception of the time in a fictional story. The world of the contemporary readers and that of *A Tale* are distinctly different. Therefore, any concept that is developed in the former is not supposed to influence anyone in the latter. *A Tale*, however, obscures the boundary between the two worlds: the narrator implies that they know the state of affairs in the real world at the time of publication of the novel.

Analysis of the work’s narration reveals that the narrator is aware of the current state of affair in the real world. This is suggested in two ways: one, they mention topics that the contemporary journal readers knew well, and two, they show that they understand the development of the telegraph and its significance.

First, although the narrator is a fictional character, they know about the year 1859 of the real world. They state in the novel that “the period was so far like the present period”, and

it was “the year of Our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five. Spiritual revelations were conceded to England at that favoured period, as at this”; this clearly shows that the story is set in the past [18]. Readers cannot initially tell whether “the present period” and “this [period]” refer to the period in the fictional world or the real world. Then, the narrator mentions incidents from the real world: the appearance of a self-styled prophet Joanna Southcott and the transmission of messages by the Cock Lane ghost. In this context, the latter has greater importance. The narrator explains that “the Cock-lane ghost had been laid only a round dozen of years [*sic*]” since the year in which the scene is set [18]. This topic is associated with other similar incidents as “the spirits of this very year last past... rapped out theirs” [18]. This indicates that they know not only about the real world but also exactly when this story is published. Andrew Sanders points out that Dickens’s weekly journals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* “carried many articles satirizing spiritualist phenomena” [19], and the rapping ghosts, which were reported a year before the publication of *A Tale*, were no exception. The earliest readers of *A Tale* were also readers of *All the Year Round*. Some of them might have read articles about the rapping ghosts in the journal’s predecessor. Accordingly, it is effectively hinted that the narrator has the same knowledge as the contemporary readers.

Moreover, these topics that the narrator mentions were persuasive in making readers believe that the narrator is aware of the real-world in the mid-nineteenth century because both Mrs. Southcott and the Cock Lane ghost were familiar subjects among journal readers. Mrs. Southcott herself died in 1814, but “in the year 1851 there were several congregations who met to worship God in the name of Joanna Southcott” [20]. This attracted people’s attention to her, and as a result, periodicals in the mid-nineteenth century mentioned or featured her. For example, a newspaper published an article titled “The History of Joanna Southcott” in 1851 [21]. In 1852, Dickens’s *Household Words* compared an incident in Germany with “that of our own Joanna Southcott” [22]. Also, the Cock Lane ghost was so popular in periodicals in the 1850s that an article infers that “[m]ost of the readers of the Lady’s Newspaper have read or heard of the famous Cock-lane ghost” [23]. Like these, the topics that the narrator refers to in the story were common subjects in real-world periodicals of the time. This accord serves to leave the impression that there are no boundaries between the fictional narrator and the real readers.

Second, the narrator knows the process of telegraphic development and comprehends its significance. Their reference to the Cock Lane ghost and its imitative spiritual phenomena reveals that they understand that the telegraph had changed the perception of people and society. Their choice of mentioning the rapping ghosts has another significance. The Cock Lane ghost in the eighteenth century and many ghosts reported in the nineteenth century had one thing in common: they sent messages by rapping. However, the former’s sounds are distinguished from the latter’s. The pre-telegraphic Cock Lane ghost used simple signals such as “one knock for yes and two for no” [24]. Conversely, ghosts in the telegraphic era sent more complicated signals similar to Morse code. In 1858, Dickens published an article in his journal, in which the writer feels “seventeen heavy throbs or

beats” on his forehead [25]. He asks what they are, and a ghost answers “Yesterday” by “throbs or beats upon the forehead” to this non-dichotomous question [25]. Within a century after the Cock Lane ghost attracted people’s attention, the electric telegraph was invented, Morse code was created, and electric signals were converted into consecutive sounds to instantly send messages to remote places. This new means of communication was soon believed to transmit messages between the world of the living and that of the dead. As Friedrich Kittler points out, “the invention of the Morse alphabet in 1837 was promptly followed by the tapping spectres of spiritualistic seances sending their messages from the realm of the dead” [26]; thus, ghosts began imitating the telegraph immediately after its invention. In recent years, it has been suggested that the invention of new technologies did not unilaterally influence the manner of spiritual phenomena; Anthony Enns argues that “the development of spiritualist writing machines and the development of technological writing machines can be seen as deeply interrelated and interdependent” [27]. However, whether the relationship between the telegraph and spirits is one-sided or not, it is not denied that telegraphic ideas were adopted in spiritual phenomena. In this way, at the opening of *A Tale*, the narrator introduces the setting of the story and simultaneously demonstrates their understanding of the impact the telegraph has had on nineteenth-century England.

The narrator’s use of a simile also indicates that they understand the significance of the telegraph. In Book 2, Chapter 22 of the novel, the revolutionaries surround the Hôtel de Ville to see the trial of Foulon. In this scene, some men climb up the wall and convey what is going on in the building to those who cannot see it. The narrator compares these climbers to “a telegraph” [18]. Indeed, they create the same environment as the telegraph did in the real world, wherein people could learn the latest news from remote places without traveling. It is also notable that the process of information transmission in this scene is elaborately connected to that of telegraphic communication. Madame Defarge, who is at the forefront of the crowd, cries, “See!” as she observes the trial [18]. Then, she claps her hands, and what she sees is told to the people who are standing behind her, one after another. Eventually, people who do not actually see the trial begin clapping: “the neighbouring streets resounded with clapping of hands” [18]. The originally visual information is converted into the sound of clapping that is similar to the telegraphic (and therefore spiritual) rapping. The narrator does not forget to mention that this information transmission is achieved “with marvellous quickness, at a distance” owing to the men they liken to the telegraph [18]. This also shows that they understand the new way of communication facilitated by the telegraph in the real world.

As shown above, the narrator of *A Tale* is presented as a character who knows the real world as well as the fictional world. They refer to two incidents that took place in the real world, both of which contemporaries had opportunities to read about in the periodicals of the time. Moreover, their understanding of the telegraph is current with the time of the work’s publication. Through these devices, the narrator makes an impression as if they transgress their own world and therefore avoid leaving an unnatural impression when they employ the real-world perception in the work of fiction.

## V. CONCLUSION

Weekly journals in the mid-nineteenth century employed the electric telegraph and special correspondents, which accelerated their information transmission. Because of this, readers of the journal came to believe that they could perceive what had actually happened in remote places inaccessible to them, and that it would take the journals one week to provide them with stories from a different spot. *A Tale* was serialized in a weekly journal, and its narrator uses these beliefs and perceptions. Although the narrator does not physically travel between England and France while narrating the story, they switch the settings in the novel between in subsequent issues of the weekly journal in the real world with only one exception. This made the work of fiction seem like the journalistic reports written by special correspondents, sent from spots immediately after the occurrence of the reported incidents. The narrator changes the point of view within one issue of the weekly journal only once. Although this technique is applicable to only a fictional work, it makes the narrator seem like a special correspondent who is always ready to be dispatched to any place where an emergency occurs. The novel thus uses the influence of the weekly journal in the real world; it contrives to make itself compatible with the real-world perception. It convinces its readers that they share the same knowledge about the real world with its narrator.

This study interprets *A Tale* as a work of fiction that represents English society during the period in which it was published, in a different way from recent literary studies. Further, it reaffirms the classic concept of media theory—that is, the media determine human perception and behaviour—and it evaluates the novel as an important subject of media studies. Furthermore, it illustrates that special correspondents played a role in creating the peculiar perception of weekly journal articles, and this perception was adopted into a work of fiction. These facts show that it is meaningful to consider the impact special correspondents and their works have had on literary works. This will help advance the analysis of readers’ perceptions of fictional characters in other contemporary works of fiction.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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