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## The Gothic Heart of Victorian Serial Fiction

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### Abstract

This essay theorizes the productive potential of the Victorian serial as a form that fosters literary wandering. Anchoring the analysis in John Ruskin's recuperative reading of Gothic irregularity, the essay argues that the open-endedness of the Victorian serial creates the conditions for productive nonlinear wandering by both writers and readers. Despite a surface rigidity in publication format that might prompt us to set the serial novel against the irregular Gothic, these texts produce surprisingly similar reading effects. Underneath the façade of regularity, the Victorian serial—even the comic *Pickwick Papers* or nostalgic *Cranford*—has a wandering, Gothic heart.

## The Gothic Heart of Victorian Serial Fiction

JULIA MCCORD CHAVEZ

On 7 October 1837, Charles Dickens's serial novel *The Post-humous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1836–37) received a negative review in *The Idler, and Breakfast-Table Companion*, with the reviewer concluding: "To write for the sake of making up a certain quantity of matter, is unprofitable to both author and reader."<sup>1</sup> The final double number of the novel, issued for November 1837, counters this charge of unprofitability through Dickens's affable protagonist, who insists: "I shall never regret having devoted the greater part of two years to mixing with different varieties and shades of human character, frivolous as my pursuit of novelty may have appeared to many. Nearly the whole of my previous life having been devoted to business and the pursuit of wealth, numerous scenes of which I had no previous conception have dawned upon me—I hope to the enlargement of my mind, and the improvement of my understanding. If I have done but little good, I trust I have done less harm, and that none of my adventures will be other than a source of amusing and pleasant recollections to me in the decline of life."<sup>2</sup> In this statement, the loveable Pickwick justifies his wandering adventures as a method for personal growth.

Pickwick's adventures do cause harm, however, in Elizabeth Gaskell's series-turned-novel *Cranford* (1851–53), when the charismatic Captain Brown perishes in a violent railway accident while, according to the fictitious county paper, "deeply engaged in the perusal of a number of 'Pickwick,' which he had just received."<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, *Cranford* links the dangerousness of *Pickwick Papers* specifically to its serial production. According to the village's central keeper of rules and regulations, Miss Deborah Jenkyns, serialization is "vulgar, and below the dignity

<sup>1</sup> Julia McCord Chavez is a visiting assistant professor at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



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