“In the Know,” Victorian Style
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Introduction

“In the Know,” Victorian Style

What does it mean to point to your nose with your right index finger? The Victorians would immediately understand the meaning of this gesture that appears in George Cruikshank’s “A Chapter of Noses” from *My Sketch Book* (1834) and “The Jew and Morris Bolter Begin to Understand Each Other” for Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1838). Pointing to your nose was a way to signal to another that you share a private understanding, that you are “in the know.” Through Victorian illustrated books and periodicals, “In the Know,’ Victorian Style” illuminates aspects of Victorian culture, which—like gesturing to the nose—are not readily understood by readers today. This inside look into life in the Victorian age is designed to help today’s readers be “in the know.”

The first case, “In the Know in Victorian Life,” provides information on the economic reality of Victorian times. For example, one could buy an installment of a popular serial for a shilling, but for 1/12th of that same shilling, a family could buy a stale 4-lb. loaf of bread to feed a whole family. The binding of a bound book (boards, cloth, leather, gilding) tells us how much it was worth in Victorian times and who could afford to purchase it.

The second case, “In the Know in the Victorian Home,” recognizes that material objects spoke volumes to the Victorians. To the Victorian viewer, the small figurine of Paul Pry on Mrs. Corney’s mantel in “Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney Taking Tea” from *Oliver Twist* was immediately recognizable. Paul Pry, a stock character from a well-known play by John Poole also called *Paul Pry* (1825), was known to appear at inopportune moments and pry into another’s business. The figurine signals Mr. Bumble’s corrupt motivation for marrying Mrs. Corney.
The third case, “In the Know about Victorian Love,” illuminates Victorian courtship etiquette. For example, Victorian valentines were popular missives of love, and they contain flowers rich in meaning. Today we still associate a rose with love, but those “in the know” recognize there was an entire language of flowers to convey your sentiments.

The fourth and final case, “In the Know about Victorian Humor,” illuminates what Victorians considered to be funny. Changing dynamics of Victorian life and customs were prime vehicles for humor. While today a hat is not a necessity for a gentleman, Robert Seymour captures Samuel Pickwick at the height of indignity in Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) as he chases after his runaway hat to the amusement of the hatted onlookers.
“In the Know” in Victorian Life

How did people live in the Victorian era? What did basic necessities cost, and who could afford luxuries like books? There were stark class differences in this era, leading to different answers to these questions. The working class struggled just to survive and would not have the same literacy skills or access to books as the middle and upper reaches. The middle class could afford to acquire books in addition to basic necessities, but the books were not as upscale as the high-end books affordable to those of means. For the most part, the wealthy lived lavish lives and could splurge on many material objects including fine pocket watches and triple-gilded, beautifully bound books, rather than purchase affordably priced weekly and monthly paper serials.

To be “in the know” about the standard of living in the Victorian era, one must consider social class.

Figure 2.1
See Figure 5.3
Figure 2.2
The illustration “Oliver Amazed at the Dodger’s Mode of Going to Work,” featured originally in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, demonstrates the economic disparity in Victorian London in a flurry of action occurring outside a bookseller's stall. The lower class is represented through the pickpocket, the middle class through the bookseller himself, and the upper reaches by Mr. Brownlow shopping at the stall. This mingling of the classes in front of the bookstall demonstrates that bookstalls catered to class differences, offering paper-bound serials for the lower reaches and upscale editions for the gentility.

In the Victorian era, a new style of publishing emerged where books were published in either monthly or weekly installments known as serials and sold for one shilling. While this seems like a small price in modern times, it was still a considerable sum in the Victorian age. As Sally Mitchell notes in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, one shilling could also purchase 12 day-old 4 lb. loaves of bread (or 1½ fresh loaves of the same size), or a week’s worth of soap and candles for a family of seven. According to Arthur Sherwell’s *Life in West London*, a shilling could buy about half a week’s worth of tea, milk, and sugar for a family. While serials were marketed towards the rising middle class, the poor still could not afford to purchase an installment of a serial, leading families and friends often to share one copy.
Two Versions of the Same Title

Figure 2.5: Cover for a full leather, gold-tooled, and gilt-edged copy of *The Ingoldsby Legends, or Mirth and Marvels* by Richard Harris Barham, published by Richard Bentley, 1864; Figure 2.6: Cover for a less costly cloth version of *The Ingoldsby Legends, or Mirth and Marvels* by Richard Harris Barham with neatly cut edges and spine with some gold impress, published by Richard Bentley, 1855.
Books designed for a middle-class readership are not particularly elaborate in order to be sold at a reasonable price. Many books like these volumes of *German Popular Stories* have pages with roughly cut edges. The inside covers are plain with no gilded markings, but these books include a decorative paper label to identify the owner. A bookbinder did not sign his name on these “cheap editions,” as they were called, because such books were valued for their reading value only and not seen as a work of art. Even a cheap edition such as this cost about 20 shillings in the Victorian era. Alternatively, the 20 shillings could instead be spent on a used bicycle or a ready-made women’s dress according to Sally Mitchell in *Daily Life in Victorian England*. If one shilling could purchase 12 loaves of day-old bread, then consider how much food could be bought with the same amount of money used to purchase such a book! An average middle class family made between 300 and 800 pounds per year as Liza Picard notes in “The Victorian Middle Classes,” and some in the middle class made as little as £100 a year. Thus 20 shillings or £1 would have been a considerable sum to spend on a single novel.

Books designed for the upper reaches were leather bound, brightly colored, and decorated in gilt. They were printed on quality paper with neatly cut and gilt edges. Decorative features like marbleization, gold tooing on the cover, and gilding on the neatly cut edges of books made them works of art. The decision of how many of the edges to gild increased the quality of a book, which could cost over 30 shillings, more than the average farm laborer or domestic servant made in a year, according to Sally Mitchell in *Daily Life in Victorian England*. In the Fox Collection, there is an elegantly bound edition of *German Popular Stories* in red Moroccan leather signed by its binder—Rivière—showing its value as a work of art. For *The Comic Almanack* volumes above, the three edges are neatly cut with marbleization, and the leather spine has gold tooing. Artistic books had more variety as well as decoration and became symbols of wealth, education, and prestige. Not surprisingly, portraits of the wealthy often show people posing with an elegant book in hand.
Economic Reality of Victorian Times

One shilling = Serial installment = 1 ½ fresh 4 lb. loaf of bread or 12 day-old loaves the same size (See Figures 2.3 and 2.7)
“In the Know” Inside the Victorian Home

A Victorian home spoke volumes about its inhabitants. Material objects including figurines, paintings on a wall, or household items were particularly valuable to Victorians, and they also revealed both the wealth and identity of their owners. Illustrators such as George Cruikshank used interior scenes to allude to characters’ personalities and motives.

The first illustration of Cruikshank’s 8-plate Temperance tract depicts a typical middle-class home. Victorians placed heavy value on material things—the more objects in the home, the more comfortable the family. The ornaments on the mantle (including portraits of Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert), as well as the church painting on the wall and tea chest behind the table, portray this family as wholesome and middle class. The Victorian interior intentionally showcased a family's interests and values, so the presence of religious objects, such as a Bible and a painting of a church, and patriotic objects, such as the Royal portraits, signify that this family honors God and country above all. However, as gin replaces tea in Plate III of *The Bottle*, the family will be forced to sell these and other possessions, signifying their fall from grace into alcoholism.

Figure 3.1
If a Victorian family could afford just one book in their home, that book would be the Bible. Having a Bible in your home signified your commitment to religion and morality, two things that the Victorians valued highly. This Bible belonging to Skidmore College founder Lucy Scribner Skidmore was printed in 1847, the same year that *The Bottle* was published by David Bogue.

The family in *The Bottle* shows patriotism by placing portraits of Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert, prominently on their mantle. Good British citizens showed they held their Queen and her consort in high regard by displaying their portraits in a place of honor in their home.
When the scheming Mr. Bumble tries to woo Mrs. Corney in this episode of *Oliver Twist*, he takes note of the objects in her home as signs of her modest wealth. Mrs. Corney owns objects that seem valuable, such as a portrait of her in her youth, a dainty tea set, and an exotic rug. Mr. Bumble pries to see what other possessions Mrs. Corney has when she leaves the room. Cruikshank foreshadows this development by including a figurine of the well-known Paul Pry, a character known to pry into private situations. Mr. Bumble later regrets marrying Mrs. Corney for her possessions, noting that he sold himself for “for six teaspoons, a pair of sugar tongs, and a milk-pot; with a small quantity of second-hand furniture.”

Paul Pry, the comical character famous for interrupting delicate situations in John Poole’s *Paul Pry* (1825), has a prominent position on Mrs. Corney’s mantle. In his depiction, Pry carries his trademark umbrella. He often leaves it in places he’s visited, giving him an excuse to return to the area, interrupt, and eavesdrop. Victorians “in the know” would recognize Pry’s presence on Mrs. Corney’s mantle as an allusion to the scheming nature of Mr. Bumble, who also bursts into the room to propose for mercenary reasons.
See Figure 3.5
“In the Know” about Victorian Romance

In the Victorian era, there were unspoken rules about love and courtship. Being in love during this time period meant engaging in specific courtship rituals, such as the importance of having a chaperone. Since courtship was an important aspect of life—a Victorian woman’s mission was marriage—this topic regularly appeared in sources ranging from serious advice books to satirical representations. In regards to matters of love, you had to be “in the know.”

“The Morning Promenade” (right) provides a lively and colorful image of how Victorians used public gatherings as “chance encounters” to initiate romance. Amidst the confusion of the crowd, the lovers have the rare opportunity to flirt unobserved. The smaller vignettes depict couples engaging in more intimate scenes. Since unchaperoned meetings were frowned upon in the Victorian era, people had to develop secret signals for communicating their feelings and find ways to meet discreetly in public settings.

Figure 4.1
In the Victorian era, valentines were a common way to show love and grew in popularity with the advent of the Penny Post in 1840. The plate “Something Like A Valentine” in The Comic Almanack mocks the process of courtship, specifically through elaborate valentines. This valentine details each step in the courtship process, from the exchange of expensive gifts to romantic evenings at the opera. The sheer number of required gestures and the title “Something Like a Valentine” emphasizes and exaggerates the seemingly ridiculous ordeal of courtship.

This poem satirizes the public’s constant obsession with love. Confessions of love became overwhelmingly popular as Valentine’s Day gained importance in the Victorian era. On this day, people expressed their love in the form of poems and letters, which could now be sent affordably through the mail with the invention of the Penny Post. This poem dramatizes a man’s sorrow at not receiving a valentine, mocking the mania of sending valentines with extravagant declarations of love.
These two plates by George Cruikshank provide clashing perspectives on Victorian courtship, a ritual governed by specific and unspoken rules. The first image from Mayhew’s guide informs readers on the proper conduct of courtship, detailing the rules and customs that young couples must follow in order to seek a partner.

In contrast, “Whom to Marry” presents the improper way to court by ridiculing Mr. Lambkin, a bachelor who flaunts his intentions with a placard on his back. The depiction of Mr. Lambkin through the caricature style openly mocks disregard for the conventions of courtship that the Mayhew’s guide perpetuates.
Victorians were well versed in a visual vocabulary of love to tacitly convey their romantic feelings, specifically using the language of flowers and fans to reveal their true intentions. This fan is decorated with red, pink, and yellow roses, each of which carried distinct meanings that Victorians would be familiar with. Red roses symbolized true love, while yellow roses stood for joy and friendship as well as jealousy, and pink roses represented gentleness and grace. Similarly, fans also had specific meanings: an open fan indicated love while a closed fan signaled dislike.
“In the Know” about Victorian Humor

Comical illustrations from the Victorian illustrated book required that one be "in the know" to appreciate Victorian humor. The Victorian caricature-style illustrations from two figureheads of this movement, Robert Seymour and George Cruikshank (both of whom illustrated for Charles Dickens), demonstrate Victorian humor through visual literacy. Caricature-style illustration is exaggerated and dramatic with emphasized facial features and gestures, making it perfect for satirical depictions. The evolution of the Victorian illustrated book to realism—a style of illustration that was life-like and approximated photography as displayed in John Tenniel’s illustrations for Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865)—changed the way humor is portrayed. Nevertheless, humorous themes cut across both styles: for example, Victorian fashion malfunctions appear as a source of jest in Seymour’s Pickwick and Cruikshank’s Sketches, and an obsession with time in this industrial age is mocked in Cruikshank’s Illustrations of Time and Tenniel’s drawing of the White Rabbit in Wonderland.

As a first example (right), Seymour presents Mr. Pickwick running after his hat after it has blown off his head, displaying a humorous violation of Victorian norms regarding their hat attire. A large audience laughs at Mr. Pickwick, some passing by and others in an open carriage. Hats are not a fashion necessity today, but in the Victorian era, a misplaced hat in public was a wardrobe malfunction. The fact that Mr. Pickwick’s hat is "gamboling, playfully away" and the audience members are either wearing their hats correctly or waving their hats in response to his folly highlights this faux pas. Mr. Pickwick’s large size, emphasized by caricature style, would also have been funny to Victorian reader-viewers, who associated chubbiness with a humorous character.
The next Pickwick illustration presents Mr. Pickwick in a nightcap looking fearfully at Miss Witherfield once he realizes that he has entered the wrong room at the inn. Miss Witherfield, soon to be engaged to Mr. Magnus, enters her room and prepares for bed as Mr. Pickwick looks on in horror. The scene foreshadows Miss Witherfield's melodramatic reaction as she calls Pickwick "a strange man!" and "thrust him into the passage, and locked and bolted the door behind him." Hablot Knight Browne depicts Miss Witherfield in a full-length dressing gown and places Pickwick behind the bed curtains, but the lady has still removed her dressing gown and nightcap to comb her hair. Whilst being in the same bedroom with an unknown member of the opposite sex would not automatically be scandalous today, this plate is a great example of "Victorian bedroom farce" where a mistaken action—one that could compromise Pickwick's good character—is a source of humor.

Another facet of Victorian humor is anthropomorphism. A prime example is the White Rabbit of Alice in Wonderland dressed like a Victorian gentleman in his waistcoat, checking his pocket watch for the time. Tenniel combines realism with whimsy in this image, still sticking true to the anatomy of a rabbit by allowing us to see his paws, long ears, and fluffy, white tail. In the Victorian era, new technologies, such as the clock-in clock-out system for workers and railway schedules, meant that the Victorian society was obsessed with being on time.

The fact that even a rabbit in a world as wild as Wonderland is worried about the consequences of being late—"Oh! The Duchess, the Duchess! Oh! Wo'n't she be savage if I've kept her waiting"—would have been humorous to a Victorian reader-viewer. In addition, the fact that the White Rabbit carries an umbrella would have been funny to English readers who would be amused that Britain's notoriously damp weather even carries into Wonderland.
In this full spread of funny time-related vignettes, Cruikshank creates snapshots of Victorian life humorous to those “in the know.” In “Time to Be Off,” we see a gentleman “running for his life” from a lady who looks determined to marry him. Here, Cruikshank pokes fun at women’s desperation for marriage in the Victorian age. In “Bed Time,” a boy is hunched over and engrossed in a Victorian illustrated book; his mother ironically scolds him and tells him to use his time more wisely. A third vignette is on “Christmas Time.” The Victorians “reinvented Christmas” with Christmas cards, carols, and, of course, Father Christmas. In “Christmas Time,” Cruikshank depicts a fat and rather drunk Santa to poke fun at the festive atmosphere of a Victorian Christmas.

Figure 5.4
In “Elbow Room,” Cruikshank shows a Victorian lady sitting in front of her vanity; however, no toiletries or cosmetics are in view since the humongous sleeves of her dress block our view. Here, Cruikshank pokes fun at the ridiculous fashions in the Victorian era and how far women would go to be in vogue and keep up with beauty standards.

The Mock Turtle, created by Lewis Carroll, is a fictional melancholy character, who constantly reminisces about his good old days as a real turtle. Carroll names the character the “Mock Turtle” to poke fun at a Victorian custom of making “turtle soup” out of less expensive calf meat instead of expensive turtle meat. John Tenniel’s illustration of the “Mock Turtle” amplifies the joke by making a realistic hybrid animal that contains the ingredients of “Mock Turtle” soup; the creature has the authentic shell and flippers of a turtle but the realistically rendered tail and hooves of a calf.
And Now You Are “In the Know,” Victorian Style
Introduction

1.1 Vignette from “A Chapter of Noses.” Illustration by George Cruikshank for My Sketch Book, 1834. Print.

I: “In the Know” in Victorian Life

2.4 “Oliver Amazed at the Dodger’s Mode of Going to Work.” Illustration by George Cruikshank for Charles Dickens’s “Oliver Twist” in Bentley’s Miscellany, July 1837. Print.
2.5 and 2.6 Covers of The Ingoldsby Legends, or Mirth and Marvels by Richard Harris Barham, published by Richard Bentley, 1864 and 1855;

II: “In the Know” Inside the Victorian Home

3.1 “Plate I,” The Bottle, In Eight Plates. Illustration by George Cruikshank, 1847. Print.
3.2 “Plate III,” The Bottle, In Eight Plates. Illustration by George Cruikshank, 1847. Print.
3.3 Victoria and Albert portraits. Web.
3.4 Lucy Scribner Skidmore’s “Bible.” 1847. Print.
3.5 “Mr. Liston as Paul Pry.” Illustration by George Cruikshank for *Paul Pry: in which are all the peculiarities, irregularities, singularities, pertinacity, loquacity, and audacity of Paul Pry* Paul Pry, as performed by Mr. Liston, at the Theatre Royal, 1826. Print.
3.6 “Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney Taking Tea.” Illustration by George Cruikshank for Charles Dickens’s “Oliver Twist” in *Bentley’s Miscellany*, February 1838. Print.

**III: “In the Know” about Victorian Romance**

4.5 “Mr. Lambkin Goes a Courting.” Illustration by George Cruikshank for *The Bachelor’s Own Book or The Adventures of Mr. Lambkin*, 1848. Print.
4.10 “Forget-me-nots.” Illustration by Kate Greenaway for Language of the Flowers, 1884. https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/5d/80/09/5d8009799b1a4afecfa7dfb00e65bd3f.jpg. Web.


IV: “In the Know” about Victorian Humor

5.1 “Mr. Pickwick in Chase of His Hat.” Illustration by Robert Seymour for Charles Dickens's The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, 1837. Print.

5.2 "The Middle-Aged Lady in the Double-Bedded Room." Illustration by Hablot Knight Browne for Charles Dickens's The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, 1837. Print.


5.4 "Vignettes of Time." Illustration by George Cruikshank for Illustrations of Time, 1827. Print.

5.5 "The Mock Turtle." Illustration by John Tenniel for Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 1865. Print.

5.6 "Elbow Room." Illustration by George Cruikshank for Scraps and Sketches, 1828. Print.
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