"Surfaces and Appearances": Character, Physiognomy, and Communication in Charles Dickens’s and Wilkie Collins’s A Message from the Sea

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Honors Thesis

“SURFACES AND APPEARANCES”: CHARACTER, PHYSIOGNOMY, AND COMMUNICATION IN CHARLES DICKENS’S AND WILKIE COLLINS’S A MESSAGE FROM THE SEA

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the way physiognomy works within Charles Dickens’s and Wilkie Collins’s novella, A Message from the Sea. The novella develops and promotes a version of physiognomy with limits, illustrating these limits through the experiences of its characters and through the symbolism of various objects such as tombstones, ghosts, and—most notably—the message in the bottle. Physiognomy, used repeatedly by various characters throughout the text, is nearly always able to correctly predict people’s general moral character. However, using physiognomy alone leaves a character’s history, motivations, and deep emotions as indecipherable as the parts of the bottle’s message where the ink has faded and run. In order to understand these more complex aspects of character, observers must seek out a primary source that can fill in the gaps. Thus, physiognomy in this novella reveals itself to be an art as superficial as the message in the bottle; those who only read surfaces will never have access to the full message.
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Introduction

From 1850 to 1870, Charles Dickens edited “two of the most prominent periodicals in the Anglophone world,” *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* (Drew 301). After the great success of *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, Dickens began to use these journals to capitalize on his new reputation as “the inventor of Christmas” by publishing Christmas editions filled entirely with fiction each December. He called the stories that he published in these special editions “Christmas stories” regardless of whether or not they had anything to do with the holiday, intending “to create for his readers, not so much the trappings of the Christmas season as the moral lessons of the Christmas story” (Glancy xxii-iv). Dickens would often use these stories as opportunities to collaborate with other authors, such as his good friend Wilkie Collins, who would go on to write successful novels such as *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868). Over the years, Dickens and Collins collaborated on many short stories for Dickens’s magazines, most of which were Christmas “portmanteau” stories—“portmanteau” meaning that they combined multiple different stories into one larger fictional frame the way a portmanteau combines multiple compartments in one piece of luggage. The first Christmas portmanteau to appear in *All the Year Round* is a novella titled *A Message from the Sea* (fig. 1).

*A Message from the Sea* consists of five chapters written by six different authors, the principal ones being Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins.¹ As the “conductor” of the

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¹ Scholars are fairly certain that the other collaborators on this story are Charles Collins, Harriet Parr, H. F. Chorley, and Amelia B. Edwards (Stone 531). Many editions today have cut out the chapters that are written by these other contributors, leaving the story incomplete by keeping only what was written by Dickens.
tale, Dickens created the main characters and events; Collins and the other collaborators supplied additional quirky characters and plot elements to flesh out this lowbrow nautical romance/mystery. The story features an American sailor named Captain Jorgan, a “citizen of the world, and a combination of most of the best qualities of most of its best countries” (*Message* 24). The Captain finds a message in a bottle while at sea and delivers it to its intended British recipient, a “young fisherman of two or three and twenty” named Alfred Raybrock (25). Jorgan ends up embarking on a journey with Alfred to solve the mystery of the message whose “ink had faded and run,” making it partially undecipherable (6). This journey takes the two “tars” to a pub in rural Devonshire where they hear four fanciful stories and eventually find Alfred’s long-lost brother, who turns out to be the author of the cryptic message.

Few readers today will be familiar with *A Message from the Sea* or, indeed, with any of the collaborative Christmas stories that appeared in Dickens's periodicals. In his 1970 article “Dickens Rediscovered: Some Lost Writings Retrieved,” Harry Stone remarks that these “extra Christmas numbers of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*” are an “area of the canon which has been neglected” (Stone 527). However, even fifty-two years after Stone’s attempt to inspire more writing on these texts, very little scholarship exists. The most likely reason that texts such as *A Message from the Sea* have become invisible to today’s critics is that they have always been considered

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2 Dickens meant the word “conductor” to signify that the control he had over the content of his periodical was similar to the control a music conductor has over a choir or a train conductor has over his train.

3 Captain Jorgan was actually “based on Dickens’s American friend, Captain Morgan” (Trod, “Messages” 755).

4 Essentially, the only scholarship that exists on *A Message from the Sea* comes from Anthea Trodd, who published “Collaborating in Open Boats: Dickens, Collins, Franklin, and Bligh” in 1999 and “Messages in Bottles and Collins’s Seafaring Man” in 2001.
lowbrow fiction; such sensational stories sold on the street for one or two pennies were not read by the upper-class families of Victorian England and do not find their way into today’s classrooms or anthologies of Victorian literature. However, as the popular fiction of the time, these types of stories were what the majority of British readers—an audience of nearly three million lowbrow readers—actually read. Wilkie Collins describes this audience in his 1858 essay, “The Unknown Public,” as “the mysterious, the unfathomable, the universal” because of how vast and varied it was and how hard this made it for writers to know anything about them (217). Collins emphasizes that the growing numbers of this public made the upper-class readers of “good” literature into “nothing more than a minority” of the country’s reading population (217). This, in turn, augmented the importance this lowbrow audience would continue to have, causing Collins to predict “that the future of English fiction may rest with [it]” (Collins 222). *A Message from the Sea* may never have the cultural and literary importance of *Oliver Twist* or *Bleak House*, but if scholars want to know what huge numbers of British readers valued in literature and how they viewed the world, we need to turn occasionally to popular fiction.

As popular literature, Dickens’s and Collins’s periodical stories often focus on subjects of common discussion among lowbrow audiences. One subject of recurring

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5 I use the term “lowbrow” in reference to the readers of these periodicals because of how authors such as Dickens and Collins categorized their different types of writing; writings like *A Message from the Sea* prioritized quick production and cheap consumption, and they lacked the careful authorial control of the authors’ more formal novels. They were therefore considered “lowbrow” pieces of literature by both the authors themselves and the critics who came later to assess this work. The readers who interacted with this “lowbrow” literature were often considered “lowbrow” by extension.

6 “The Unknown Public” was published in *Household Words*. In it, Collins investigates what population reads penny journals and how such an audience emerged. He attributes the popularity of such literature partly to its accessibility and marketing: “wherever the speculative daring of one man could open a shop . . . the unbound picture quarto instantly entered, set itself up obtrusively in the window, and insisted on being looked at by everybody” (217).
interest to both men was the popular science of physiognomy. Physiognomy was an ancient idea resurrected in the late eighteenth century by Johann Kaspar Lavater (Chialant 237). It held that one’s physical appearance corresponded directly with one’s virtue and character. Proponents of physiognomy believed that one could know the morality of a person just by looking at them because they “conceptualized the human body as the materialization of the ‘inner man.’ . . . They believed each physical feature—the colour of the eyes, the shape of the nose, even the precise slant of the eyebrows—revealed information” (Lennox). In its heyday in the nineteenth century, physiognomy was taken so seriously that people were sometimes accused or acquitted of crimes in court based almost entirely on their outward appearances. “Dickens and other Victorian writers,” asserts Taylor M. Scanlon, often used physiognomy “to offer their readers a sense of the appearance as true” (2).

*A Message from the Sea* does just this. One of the first characters that Captain Jorgan and his new friend Alfred meet on their quest, for example, is the father of Alfred’s fiancé. He is described as “a rather infirm man . . . with an agreeable face and a promising air of making the best of things” (*Message* 41). Similarly, upon Jorgan’s first encounter with Alfred’s mother, she is described as “a comely elderly woman” (27) who is then called “worthy” on the spot (29). Later, a supercargo is known to be a drinker

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7 One famous example of this is the Windham case, in which a man was accused of lunacy and his physical deformities were used as evidence (Degerman 460). The growing prevalence of drawing such connections between facial features and criminality or lunacy in this time period is documented by Sharrona Pearl, who recounts that Madame Tussaud’s (the popular wax museum) began providing “examples of criminals with which visitors could compare themselves” and assess their own levels of immorality (38). Furthermore, Dickens includes similar physiognomic connections between appearance and criminality in an article he wrote for *Household Words* in 1856 about a murder case he attended. “Nature never writes a bad hand,” he declares. “Her writing, as it may be read in the human countenance, is invariably legible” (505). He supports this claim with his observations of the court case, saying, “The physiognomy and conformation of the Poisoner whose trial occasions these remarks, were exactly in accordance with his deeds; and every guilty consciousness he had gone on storing up in his mind, had set its mark upon him” (505).
“judging by certain signs in his face, and by a suspicious morning-tremble in his hands” (114). It may seem illogical to infer that a man will make the best of things based solely on the agreeableness of his face, to call a woman worthy because she is comely, or to assume a man is a drinker based on signs in his face, but such descriptions and inferences are common in Dickens’s and Collins’s writing and throughout this novella. In fact, drawing these physiognomic conclusions was widely accepted as scientifically sound throughout much of Victorian society.

Dickens and Collins are known to have been very interested in the “pseudo-science” of physiognomy, but scholars differ in their opinions on the degree to which either writer supported and believed in it. Michael Hollington and Maria Chialant see Dickens as a supporter of and subscriber to physiognomy, and Eike Kronshage suggests that he became more skeptical of it as time went on. According to Jessica Cox, Collins’s engagement with physiognomy in his novels is also clear, and although most of his descriptions “appear to represent relatively conventional and common use of physiognomical ideas in Victorian fiction” (113), he also “on occasion, deliberately draws on widely held physiognomical beliefs to undermine and confuse readers’ expectations” (115).

What makes *A Message from the Sea* so interesting, however, is that its use of and commentary on physiognomy is more complicated and nuanced than can be accounted for by these explanations. Physiognomy, which within this text is a way

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8 Collins actually argues for this undermining of readers’ expectations in his essay “A Petition to the Novel-Writers,” which he published in *Household Words* in 1856. In it, he lists the way appearances are directly linked to character in novels and advocates for a change. He writes, “I know that five-feet-eight of female flesh and blood, when accompanied by an olive complexion, black eyes, and raven hair, is synonymous with strong passions and an unfortunate destiny. I know that five feet nothing, golden ringlets, soft blue eyes, and a lily-brow . . . cannot possibly be associated . . . with anything but ringing laughter, arch innocence, and final matrimonial happiness . . . I want to revolutionise our favorite two sisters . . . by making the two sisters change characters” (483).
characters assess one another’s morality, is also used by the authors as a literary device to comment reflexively on the limitations of this “science.”

I would suggest that the message in the bottle that instigates the events in *A Message from the Sea* represents a problem of readability, which strikes at the heart of physiognomy. If readers examine the illustration Dickens includes of this message (fig. 2)—the first illustration to appear in any of Dickens’s Christmas stories⁹—they find that the general idea of the message is visible, but the ink has run in places, making certain key words indecipherable. Likewise, physiognomy, used repeatedly by various characters throughout the text, is nearly always able to correctly predict people’s general moral character. However, when it comes to communicating what Jonathan V. Farina describes as “semantic plentitude” (392)—a character’s history, motivations, or deep emotions—the surface reading offered by physiognomy falls short, leaving those parts of a person as unreadable as the faded parts of the letter.¹⁰ In order to understand these more complex aspects of character, observers must seek out a primary source that can fill in the gaps. Thus, physiognomy in this novella reveals itself to be an art as superficial as the message in the bottle; those who only read surfaces will never have access to the full message.

“An Honest Man!”: Physiognomy as a Moral Roadmap

Many of the physiognomic assumptions made by characters in *A Message from the Sea* are perfectly accurate in determining a character’s general morality—a fact that

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⁹ This illustration is a wood engraving done by Freeman Gage Delamotte. That it is the first illustration to be included in any of Dickens’s Christmas novellas indicates its important role in conveying the themes of the story.

¹⁰ According to Farina, Dickens wanted his journals to “uniquely represent everything the journal described in the form of deep characters” with ‘depth that needs explicating’” (392-93).
may at first cause readers to believe that Dickens and Collins fully embrace the concept. Appearance seems to align with morality in a very straightforward way in the text, often allowing strangers to predict the character of different people they meet. One of the first examples of this is Captain Jorgan’s initial encounter with Alfred, to whom he takes an immediate liking. Jorgan describes Alfred as:

a young fellow who exactly hit his fancy—a young fisherman of two or three-and-twenty, in the rough sea-dress of his craft, with a brown face, dark curling hair, and bright, modest eyes, under his Sou’wester hat, and with a frank but simple and retiring manner, which the captain found uncommonly taking. “I’d bet a thousand dollars,” said the captain to himself, “that your father was an honest man!” (25)

In this description, physical appearance is used to tell readers a great deal about Alfred’s character. First, his “dark curling hair” and “modest eyes” which “exactly hit [the] fancy” of Jorgan (who finds him “uncommonly taking”) suggest a somewhat feminine nature, which forecasts that Alfred will remain gentle and quiet through the tale (as he does), always taking a backseat to the more masculine Jorgan. Second, Alfred’s “frank but simple and retiring manner” aligns with “the rough sea-dress of his craft,” for openness is exactly the sort of attribute sailors were known for during the Victorian era, when the “figure of the ‘Honest Tar’ . . . [who] tells the whole truth as he sees it” became popular (Schmidt 5). Jorgan even takes physiognomy so far as to make assumptions about the morality of Alfred’s parents by the way Alfred looks. This assumption turns out to be less far-fetched than it may originally seem, as Alfred’s father is, importantly, proven by the end of the novel to indeed be “an honest man.”
This is by no means the only prominent occurrence of physiognomic judgment revealing character correctly in the text. In fact, the first story that Jorgan and Alfred hear after they set out on their journey to unravel the mystery of the message—the opening of the interpolated tales in *A Message from the Sea*—offers a fully-developed example of what many Victorians believed physiognomy could offer them: a roadmap of safety through a dangerous world of strangers. This map proves lifesaving in this tale, which conveys to readers that they really can trust the impressions of people that they receive from outward appearances.

In this story-within-the-story written by Charles Collins, the fictional storyteller John Tredgear describes traveling on business in France when he stops for lunch at the only inn on his route, the Tête Noire or “Black Head.”¹¹ He recounts, “the look of the place did not please me. It was a great, bare, uninhabited-looking house, which seemed much larger than was necessary, and presented a black and dirty appearance” (*Message* 56).¹² Even the “life-size figure of a Saint” above the entrance of the inn is “grim and ghastly-looking” (56). Knowing that, as Hollington remarks, the “science of physiognomy can be, and is, applied to things as well as to people” because of the

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¹¹ Many of the examples that follow come from sections of the story that are known to have been written by Dickens’s collaborators rather than by Dickens himself. However, it is not unfair to assume that everything in *A Message from the Sea* aligns with Dickens’s beliefs, even if written by another author. As John Drew observes about Dickens’s periodical, its persona has “been approached as . . . a choric voice, reinforcing core Dickensian beliefs” (307). Anne Lohrli has a similar view regarding the journal’s integration of Dickens’s ideology. She says, “Dickens, of necessity, laid stress on consistency between what appeared in one article and what appeared in another. Informative articles were not to be contradictory . . . nor were they, obviously, to advocate ideas and opinions at variance with those that Dickens himself was ‘known to hold’” (12). In order to maintain such consistency in his periodicals, Dickens “condensed material,” “altered phraseology,” “re-titled contributions” and even changed story endings (15). And he was known to have been even more dictatorial in the stories he chiefly authored, such as *A Message from the Sea*. Therefore, the views on physiognomy presented throughout this story may be considered the views of the main authors regardless of who they were technically written by.

¹² The negative meaning implied by the color “black” in this tale is inherently racist, probably resulting from the author’s general xenophobia.
“wholesale mixing of animate and inanimate in Dickens’s vitalist world” (par. 4), readers are not surprised that John can use these physical attributes to know that the place is evil before he even enters it. Physiognomy tells him that the Tête Noire is a “bête noire” (something one detests or particularly hates) and warns him to be cautious while inside.

The straightforward physiognomic readings in this story do not stop with the inn itself; the people inside are described in a very similar manner. Immediately upon laying eyes on his unnamed host, John observes, “he was the most ill-looking man, Gentlemen, that it was ever my fortune to behold” (57). He notes that this “evil-faced man” has a “deep scar, which a scrap of frouzy whisker on his cheek wholly decline[s] to conceal” and eyes that have “an almost orange tinge” and a “blue phosphorescence” that “gleam[s] upon their surface” and gives them a “tigerish lustre” (57). A physiognomic reading of this innkeeper thus tells John (and readers) that the “tigerish lustre” in the innkeeper’s eyes is indicative of his predatory nature. The fact that his whiskers “declined to conceal” his scar mirrors the way his outward appearance cannot conceal his general immorality, suggesting that his scarred character is just as obvious as his scarred face. Furthermore, a “blue phosphorescence” that is often considered strange and eerie when it occurs in nature is even more so when it exists on the surface of a man’s eyes. From these physical characteristics, John is able to conclude that the innkeeper has a “serious defect” in his character, a “want of any hint of mercy, or conscience” (57-58).

These judgements, based solely on appearances, turn out to be perfectly accurate, as John learns to his horror during his stay at the Tête Noire. John’s physiognomic instincts—his ability to read inner nature from outward signs—save his life. The innkeeper ends up drugging John’s drinks in an attempt to poison him and steal his
belongings. Luckily, John spits the wine out and maintains most of his senses. If he hadn’t been suspicious of his host because of his appearance, John would not have hesitated to drink what the innkeeper gave him, and he never would have remained conscious long enough to be rescued by a friend and ultimately to wake up “surrounded by faces which after the dangers [he] had passed through, looked perfectly angelic” (another physiognomic judgment) (68). In this case, physiognomy is completely reliable and the use of it saves the life of a man in unfamiliar surroundings among people he does not know.

This is the “science” of physiognomy at work. Dickens—who heavily edited all of the writing that appeared in his journals and made sure pieces by other authors conformed with his opinions—was a frequent user of physiognomic descriptions in his writing. Like Charles Collins in this story, he often created texts that allow for “reading the inner and invisible human character on the outer and visible human face” (Kronshage 168). “Throughout his fiction,” explains Maria Chialant, Dickens “‘uses a language of appearance, developing an iconography of physique, gesture and appurtenance that he intends to convey meaning about character and emotion’” (McMaster qtd. in Chialant 237), a literary feature so characteristic of him that it is often called “Dickensian.” Dickens was especially fascinated by facial expressions and, according to his daughter, would test out “extraordinary facial contortions” in a mirror as he wrote (Zirker 379n3).

13 Nayder states, “the Christmas Numbers highlight Dickens’s desire to be part of a creative community. Yet they also demonstrate his need to wield the authority within any such community and set himself apart from and above his collaborators,” so we can assume Dickens controlled which ideas were supported by these stories and which ideas were criticized (27). However, Collins sometimes rebelled against such management and his “noncompliance with Dickens’s aims becomes a theme of the 1860 Christmas Number,” as he wrote the last chapter using written mode of narration rather than relying on “the pretense of oral narration” that Dickens desired (132).
Dickens not only utilizes physiognomic descriptions, but he also mentions physiognomy by name in multiple novels. According to Hollington, “the word [physiognomy] itself appears . . . twice . . . in Our Mutual Friend, once each in Pickwick Papers, David Copperfield, Great Expectations and Edwin Drood—and on more than one occasion Dickens seems to indicate that he regarded the study of physiognomy as a science” (par. 2). Wilkie Collins also specifically mentions the word “physiognomy” in The Dead Secret (245), and he includes “direct references to physiognomy in a number of his [other] novels” (Cox 110). Notably, multiple scholars have called attention to the various ways physiognomy is used by characters in these novels. For example, Hollington observes that in Dickens’s texts, the “nature and use of physiognomics . . . involve[s] both the question of false and deceptive surfaces . . . and of difficulties of correct reading on the part of the numerous interpreters at work” (“Monstrous” 7). Characters, Hollington asserts, are likely to interpret appearances incorrectly if they lack sufficient understanding of physiognomy. Similarly, Zirker discusses the ways in which failed attempts at physiognomic readings by characters in Dickens’s novels teach readers how to decipher appearances correctly.

One of many reasons why Dickens and Collins may have been drawn to exploring the pseudo-science of physiognomy was that physiognomic descriptions in literature appealed to the expansive readership of Victorian England. Juliet John suggests that “simplify[ing] and externaliz[ing] that which is normally invisible,” as physiognomy does, actually increases a story’s accessibility by giving it “an inclusive, populist aesthetic” (134). Lower-class readers who did not have the benefit of formal education may not have felt confident in their abilities to correctly interpret and read into texts, so
the transparency that physiognomy provided would have kept them from feeling excluded and ignorant when they read these stories.

In addition to making fictional characters more accessible to the Victorian readers of popular literature, a physiognomic “externaliz[ation] [of] the invisible” provided a sense of security. There was a drive in this time period “towards exposure, towards bringing things to the surface, towards making things available to the eye and hence ready for interpretation” (Flint 8). Being able to accurately predict the morality of a stranger from outward appearance alone must have been very attractive to Victorians, as growing urbanization brought with it a rise in crime and a new inability to personally know all of one’s neighbors. Such changes were potentially frightening, and the idea that a person’s trustworthiness could be determined at a glance was probably quite comforting.\textsuperscript{14} It is certainly comforting in the story of John’s escape of the murderous innkeeper.

However, \textit{A Message from the Sea} suggests that, however comforting, such simple physiognomic readings may not always be possible. The characters in this novella become less transparent as the text develops, modeling a version of physiognomy with definite limits. The surface readings in Collins’s tale of the French inn work because the judgments his character, John, makes need not function beyond the most superficial level. No subtlety is required: good and bad are the only operative moral qualities in the story, and the innkeeper and his inn are simply and unequivocally bad. When an evaluation of

\\textsuperscript{14} Pearl makes this same assumption: “The city was becoming increasingly illegible and confusing, its possibilities and dangers mixing as freely as its inhabitants. As part of their attempts to make sense of their city, Londoners read faces as a way to read their surroundings . . . Visual judgment offered a way for some to ease the crisis of confusion and overstimulation of the city streets” (26-27).
more than the most general moral character is needed, however, the use of physiognomy in this text becomes much more complicated.

“The Evil and Injustice of Such Judgments”: The Limits of Physiognomy

To understand where and how physiognomy becomes more complicated in *A Message from the Sea*, one first has to understand the character of the sailor, or “tar,” in Victorian song, drama, and literature. Nautical stories like *A Message from the Sea* were all the rage in the decades after the Napoleonic Wars. According to John Peck, this is because “Britain’s success at sea” affected every aspect of British life—including its literature (1). Peck argues that the popularity of the sea and sailors in Victorian fiction was a direct result of the country’s naval success and suggests that this explains the sudden increase in nautical and maritime novels, songs, and plays. Nautical stories were “a common enthusiasm for Dickens and Collins” (Trodd, “Messages” 752), which is probably why they, together, wrote three: *The Wreck of the Golden Mary, The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*, and *A Message from the Sea*—all published as Christmas stories in Dickens’s periodicals.

Within popular Victorian fiction, sailors took on a unique characteristic: they were believed to be physiognomically straightforward, or perfectly easy to read. Once considered dubious, sailors had evolved by the 1850s from immoral, dirty, pirate-esque characters into “moral icon[s],” who were “sign[s] of manly virtue” (Trodd, “Collaborating” 209-10). The transformation of the tar in English literature took place when the British began to realize how important the sea was to them, both politically and economically. As potential protectors of the sea, fictional sailors, while often uneducated
and lacking psychological depth, could be heroic. In fact, the supposed simplicity and good-natured naïveté of the stereotypical British tar in fiction associated him with “qualities of honesty and openness . . . national character virtues” (Peck 73). Sailors soon became synonymous with “openness of feeling, comradeship, self-sacrifice, and yarning” (Trodd, “Collaborating” 211). This last quality—the ability to tell tales of adventure—meant that in Victorian nautical tales, songs, and plays, the British tar is often a storyteller, someone who weaves the stories (and lives) of others into happy endings. In short, sailors were thought to be icons of physiognomic simplicity: walking moral exemplars who were both incredibly easy to read and eager to share their stories.

At first glance, Captain Jorgan seems to be this kind of classic Victorian sailor, an open book that is perfectly readable by anyone, anywhere. He expresses every emotion freely and visibly, “[striking] his leg with his open hand” every time he is pleased and “holding converse with everybody within speaking distance” (24-25). Perhaps it is this friendliness that makes Jorgan’s occupation instantly obvious to everyone who sees him. “‘He’s a sailor!’ said one to another . . . although his dress had nothing nautical about it” (26). Even Jorgan himself is shocked by his identifiability. “I don’t know what it is, I am sure, that brings out the salt in me, but everybody seems to see it on the crown of my hat and the collar of my coat,” he tells Alfred (27). The recognizability of his career marks him as a paragon of physiognomy, and his good-natured openness indicates his trustworthiness. In addition, the moral connotation that many Victorian readers attached to British tars means that Jorgan’s “identifiability as a seaman is indistinguishable from his moral authority” (Trodd, “Collaborating” 211).
Captain Jorgan may appear to be physiognomy personified, a man whose outward appearance matches his inward character, but a closer look reveals that this is not actually the case. Though he is friendly and seemingly open, Jorgan has secrets which make him partially unreadable, and he often feels that privacy, rather than honesty, is the best policy. The first instance of this occurs when he makes sure the women of Alfred’s household remain in the dark about the bottle he has found and come to deliver, its message, and the quest that it sends him and Alfred on. Although the text offers no reason why, Jorgan won’t deliver the message in the bottle to Alfred until they are alone, and he agrees wholeheartedly when Alfred declares, “not a word of this writing must be breathed to my mother, or to Kitty [Alfred’s fiancée], or to any human creature” (Message 37). By purposely keeping such important information from the women, the Captain provokes their anger. Alfred’s mother—who was initially very fond of Jorgan—calls him “a wicked stranger” full of “dark secrets and counsels” once Jorgan begins to hide his motives and actions. Similarly, Alfred’s sister-in-law declares, “I wish this gentleman [Jorgan] had never come near us” (39). Thus Jorgan, an old tar whom characters assume will be as transparent as he seems on the surface, soon proves resistant to a simple physiognomic reading. The result is resentment; characters feel cheated by his furtiveness, which contradicts his outward appearance.

If this were the only example of Jorgan’s secrecy it might be overlooked as simply a manifestation of the time period’s sexist treatment of women. However, this is not an isolated case. Captain Jorgan hides his motives from men as well. When Alfred and Captain Jorgan arrive at the pub where they will hear the stories that make up a large portion of the novella, Jorgan warns Alfred against revealing their reason for being there.
Instead of straightforwardly telling the men at the pub what he and Alfred are seeking, Jorgan advises Alfred to stall and dissemble, trying to pry information about the mysterious message from the men obliquely. “Don’t force it [the subject of the message in the bottle],” Jorgan tells Alfred “behind their hands. . . . ‘Try if it won’t come natural’” (50). He then spends the rest of the night whispering to Alfred in the corner of the pub and trying to smooth over any outburst from Alfred that he considers too revealing. By teaching Alfred, a young and inexperienced sailor whose identity should make him the most readable character in the novella, to misdirect others about his intentions and to keep secrets, Jorgan demonstrates how extensive the limits of physiognomy’s reliability really are.

In fact, Jorgan offers Alfred a lesson about the way that surfaces can be misleading and the need to look deeper when the two men are walking alone together. While they cross a desert-like moor on their way to Devonshire, Jorgan remarks on the bleak landscape, the “brown desert of rank grass and poor moss” that surrounds them in what is, essentially, a mining district (46). “A sing’lar thing it is,” he says, “how like this airth is to the men that live upon it! Here’s a spot of country rich with hidden metals, and it puts on the worst rags of clothes possible, and crouches and shivers and makes believe to be so poor that it can’t so much as afford a feed for a beast. Just like a human miser, ain’t it?” (46). His comparison of this visually-misleading land with humans evinces that he understands surface readings of people to be incomplete and often flawed. Clearly, the Captain is aware that the most valuable things are sometimes hidden below surfaces, unseen, the way that valuable metals can be hidden beneath an unproductive-seeming moor. As Jorgan explains to the father of Alfred’s fiancé, “you and I are old enough to
know better than to judge against experience from surfaces and appearances; and if you haven’t lived to find out the evil and injustice of such judgments you are a lucky man” (41).

The second story told in the pub, very different from John’s tale of the French innkeeper, demonstrates a complex view of physiognomy similar to that embodied by Jorgan, offering further support for the idea that surface readings can be reliable in the acquisition of superficial information but are unreliable in communicating deep emotions or entire stories. This story is written by Dickens’s friend Harriet Parr and tells of a young man, James Lawrence, who by his cruel and careless treatment of a young girl in love with him, causes her to commit suicide. James imagines that this girl, Honor, is haunting him after her death. He gets more and more paranoid until his delusions eventually cause him to leap off the very same cliff as Honor did. In this tale, Honor’s character and story initially seem perfectly readable at the surface level. Her physical appearance as a “pretty little lass” matches her moral quality as someone whose “heart was as good as gold” (74). The more closely we read, however, the more apparent it becomes that surface readings are deceptive and incomplete in this tale.

James, who has died by the beginning of Parr’s tale, is recalled by a narrator, David Polreath, who knew James in life. Polreath begins his story by describing James’s death and his grave, which is marked by a large stone that describes “what a great man he was in his day, and what mighty engineering works he did at home and abroad” (74). The story engraved on the surface of James’s tombstone is clear and easy to read, but it is completely unreliable. The narrator says of the tombstone, “I have known folks come away with tears in their eyes after reading the flourishing inscription: believing it all like
gospel, and saying how sad that so distinguished a man should have been cut off in the prime of his days” (74). Polreath, however, has had enough interaction with the primary source—James himself—that he does not have to rely on this reading of the tomb’s surface for the real story. In fact, Polreath doesn’t believe any of the tombstone’s flattering words. In contrast to the visitors who come and accept the narrative on the tombstone as it appears, Polreath knows that the inscription conveys an incomplete message: “I don’t believe it,” he says (74). James “was never any more than plain James Lawrence to me . . . who had dazzle[d] most people’s eyes, and [broken] little Honor Livingston’s heart” (74). Thus, the tombstone acts as yet another example of surface readings being inaccurate when it comes to a person’s true history.

Like the story on his tombstone, James himself conveys to readers the idea that one cannot trust what one sees because appearance does not convey truth. His heavy reliance on physiognomy alone leads to misunderstandings and trouble as he makes assumptions about Honor based on her appearance. Unfortunately, he doesn’t realize these assumptions are incorrect until it is too late. He writes in his journal, “I did not expect she [Honor] would make a tragedy of a little love story; she did not look like that sort of thing” (76). But regardless of whether or not she looked like the sort who would, she did, in fact, make a tragedy of it—committing suicide when she finds out James had been lying to her all along. In assuming he knew the extent of Honor’s emotions based solely on his evaluation of her looks, James had been trying to use surface readings to discern complicated elements that are beyond the scope of physiognomy in this novella, and the inaccuracy of his expectations are exposed.
Even as James continues to be proven wrong and readers begin to realize how faulty his readings of surfaces actually are, he remains convinced that everything is exactly the way he sees it. This becomes especially apparent when he begins to see Honor’s ghost. After her first appearance, James insists, “I saw her . . . as plainly as I now see this pen I am writing with . . . exactly as she looked the last time I saw her alive . . . it is all nonsense to talk about fancy and optical delusions in this case; I saw her with my eyes as distinctly as I ever saw her alive in the body” (75). Comparing the way he sees Honor to the way he sees his pen effectively establishes his sight as so surface-level that it objectifies those he looks at. But unbeknownst to James, his understanding of Honor (or any human being) is never going to come as easily as his understanding of a pen, where what you see is what you get, because people are more complicated than they may appear on the surface. This is emphasized when he describes what Honor’s ghost actually looks like and readers learn that his vision of it isn’t nearly as “plain” or as “exact” as James makes it out to be. It is rather “a wan, vague, misty outline” (76). Thus, although James remains adamant that his “distinct” vision of Honor’s ghost is completely accurate, we realize this isn’t correct. This vision of Honor as “wan” and “vague” truly is the way Honor appeared to James in life; his refusal to look deeper than the surface meant that even while Honor was living, James was only ever able to understand the vague outline of her character, missing her deep emotions, desires, and motivations. The story exposes the true nature of such judgements, equating his physiognomic assessments with a “misty outline.”

Because he is so certain that everything there is to know about a person is inscribed on the surface, James eventually becomes terrified that the people around him
can read the truth about his guilt over Honor’s death on his face as easily as they’d read words on a tombstone. He becomes paranoid and writes in his diary, “Anne [his wife] watches me stealthily, I see . . . she suspects something” (79). She can, in fact, tell that something is not right. After witnessing one of James’s encounters with a ghost that she is unable to see, Anne exclaims, “you had an awful face, James, for a moment” (78). She sends for a doctor who, according to James’s paranoia, has “a sort of suspicious scrutiny in his eye” (78). Although James endorses physiognomic readings when he is the observer, he resents them being used by others to study him. He grows increasingly wary of such observations and begins to fear the arrival of other “spying relatives” as well. As a result of this obsession with how he is perceived, James is “grievously tormented both in mind and body,” and he does everything he can to isolate himself (79-80). His belief in (and fear of) the readability of surfaces is so firm that this eventually drives him insane, and he kills himself. His death acts as a final validation of the dangers of relying solely on surface readings when attempting to really understand others.

James is like Captain Jorgan in that both men demonstrate the unreliability of exteriors when it comes to fully understanding people. While James serves as an example of the dangers of depending solely on physiognomic readings, Captain Jorgan serves as a good example of using physiognomy in a balanced way. If James had understood physiognomy’s limits as well as Captain Jorgan does, he may have had a much happier ending. It appears that what Angelika Zirker observes about Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend is also applicable to A Message from the Sea; both texts are “sceptical as to the scientific value of physiognomy studies, and even more sceptical about people who too confidently perceive themselves as physiognomists” (382).
“The Sea-Faring Man”: Going to the Source

Polreath’s haunting story of James and Honor, like Tredgear’s story of the villainous innkeeper, are told as part of the larger cycle of narratives in *A Message from the Sea* that, readers eventually discover, are being exchanged among friends in order to soothe feelings that have been offended by the earlier appearance at the pub of a mysterious “sea-faring man.” Captain Jorgan and Alfred learn that just before they arrived, this strange sea-faring man had been admitted to the pub and “invited . . . to make his footing good by telling a story.” The young sailor “had, after some pressing, begun a story of adventure and shipwreck; at an interesting point of which he had suddenly broke off, and positively refused to finish” (*Message* 51). Just like Alfred’s mother, who grew angry when Jorgan withheld information from her, the club members resent this man for being so stand-offish. When he refuses to bear his soul and instead goes up to bed, the club members are furious that he is so different from the open, story-telling man they expect in a sailor.

This sea-faring man who so upset the club by depriving them of his story’s ending turns out to be Hugh Raybrock, Alfred’s long-lost brother and the man who put the message in the bottle when he was shipwrecked on a tropical island. The next chapter of *A Message from the Sea* (written by Wilkie Collins) is narrated by Hugh. When Jorgan and Alfred turn in for the night, they have no idea that the man assigned to share a room with Alfred is exactly the man they’ve been searching for. Hugh wakes up the next morning to discover his brother in the room’s other bed, and he is amazed. After a very happy reunion, Alfred and Hugh step outside to update each other on their lives during Hugh’s mysterious absence. Eventually, Alfred asks Hugh why he refused to tell his tale
of accident and adventure to the men in the pub. Hugh explains that he is a bad storyteller. He laments ever starting the story in the first place, “having all [his] life been a wretched bad hand at such matters—for the reason . . . that a story is bound to be something which is not true” (107). For Hugh, it is impossible to accurately convey every detail of a story, even if it is not fictional, because truth is lost in the telling. It is even more impossible for the hearer to accurately and fully comprehend what’s being told because nobody can actually know another person’s experiences. Thus, in Hugh’s mind, the only way to preserve an honest truth is to keep it hidden, which is the exact opposite of physiognomic reasoning.

Hugh’s distrust of narratives openly told, and his similarity to Captain Jorgan in preferring to keep some things unreadable to others, is also seen in the way he and his brother react after unexpectedly finding each other. Their reunion is a very emotional one because Hugh had been lost for so many years that his family had assumed he was dead. As the two brothers sit side by side and hold onto each other, Alfred “burst out crying” (110) with happiness and relief. But Hugh reflects, “no tears came to help me . . . [M]y troubles have roughened and hardened me outside. But, God knows, I felt it keenly; all the more keenly, maybe, because I was slow to show it” (111, emphasis original). Hugh believes that deep feelings, like personal stories, cannot be accurately portrayed and because of this, he actually distrusts outward displays of emotion, viewing them as less sincere than stoic silence. Hugh, whose exterior is “rough” and “hard” but whose interior is “keenly” affected by emotion, believes that surfaces and the things that play upon them—like easily-told stories and emotional presentations—cannot be trusted. If the British tar is supposedly the embodiment of transparency, Hugh breaks the mold by,
ironically, being the embodiment of unreadability and highlighting the limitations of physiognomy. For the truth about a person’s inner depths, their feelings, motivations, and personal history, Hugh knows one has to dig deeper, to seek out a more primary source.

In fact, it is this distrust of surface narratives that leads Hugh to create the message in the bottle in the first place. When Hugh’s ship wrecks in a storm off Cape Horn, he finds himself stranded on an island with only the ship’s supercargo, a terrible man named Mr. Clissold. Clissold provokes Hugh’s hatred by telling him that Hugh’s father stole five hundred pounds when he was a young man and that Hugh’s family was therefore built on a lie. Hugh is skeptical of the story, told so quickly and easily that he feels sure it is untrue. “‘My father wronged nobody . . . He was a just man in all his dealings’” he insists (115). Determined to defend his dead father’s honor, he decides to dig beneath the surface of the rumor and seek out a primary source. He recounts, “the notion came to comfort me of writing the Message . . . and of committing it in the bottle to the sea” (135). He uses a scrap of paper to do so, addressing it to his brother Alfred and putting it in a bottle from a medicine chest. In this letter, he urges Alfred to investigate further by seeking out people with deeper knowledge of what happened.

However, being a one-dimensional, surface-level communication itself, the message Hugh sends in the bottle is impossible to read fully. The words are limited by the area of the paper and damaged by the distance they have to travel. The message arrives at its intended recipient warped and incomplete (see fig. 2), no longer any more transparent than the bottle it came in, which had darkened from its time in the sea. Thus, although Alfred and Jorgan understand the general character of the message, they cannot decipher it on a deeper emotional or narrative level. The communication circuit is
eventually completed not when the bottle gets to its intended recipient (Alfred, whose reading can only be superficial), but when it gets back to the sender, who can then explain what’s missing. Upon seeing the message again, Hugh reflects that “it looked to my eyes like the ghost of my own past self” (112). However, by itself, this “ghost” offers no more clarity to its viewers than the ghost of Honor did to James, and Hugh has to explain everything, going way back into the time of their father’s youth. He tells Alfred “that where the writing was rubbed out, I could tell him, for his necessary guidance and mine, what once stood in the empty places” (112). Just like physiognomy, the message in the bottle is a good attempt at communication, and it can be read in a superficial way, but when it comes to solving the mystery of the £500, it is futile. Only Hugh can reveal what the message meant, just like only those who actually experience events or feel emotions can convey those stories or feelings. This is because the messages observers receive physiognomically always arrive as damaged or incomplete as this message in the bottle did.

Fortunately, even if the message did not prove very useful, the brothers are able to trace the money and find out the truth: that it was actually Clissold himself who stole the money, framed a colleague, and implicated Alfred and Hugh’s father. The poor colleague, we learn, was fooled by Clissold because he had “no experience of ill-judgments on deceiving appearances” (144). Even though he had “always had suspicions” concerning Clissold, “the writing [on a forged document] was wonderfully like his,” and so the deceitful appearances of both Clissold and his handwriting had convinced this colleague to trust him with the money (145). Had only this man sought a deeper understanding of Clissold rather than relying on appearances, he would have been
spared the loss of the money, and Alfred and Hugh’s father would not have been slandered.

Hugh exemplifies better than any other character in the novella the limitations of physiognomy. He is neither readable nor forthcoming because he is very conscious of the fact that his exterior may not reflect his interior at all. This understanding of physiognomy seems closest to that of Dickens and Collins in this text; Hugh relies on physiognomy to make quick assessments of character, but also realizes that it cannot convey the larger truths that lie beneath the surfaces of people and their attempts at communication. Perhaps this is the reason his story is so miraculous; the authors may be indicating their approval of Hugh’s use of physiognomy by allowing him to repeatedly survive perils that should have been fatal.

Conclusion

The nuanced view of physiognomy promoted by Dickens and Collins in A Message from the Sea is underscored by the fact that the characters who do not acknowledge its specific limitations end up badly, while those who understand when it is or isn’t appropriate end well. Both Honor and James trust surface readings without qualifications, and in both of their cases this unconditional reliance leads to their deaths. As Honor fell in love with James, he often “said more than [he] meant, and she took it all in the grand serious manner” (77). Because of this, her shock at discovering his dishonesty is too much, and she jumps off the cliff. James’s overreliance on physiognomy means that he meets the same fate. Likewise, Clissold’s colleague (who trusted Clissold’s forged handwriting) loses his job and a great deal of money.
There is, however, one character who gets his happy end despite his complete reliance on physiognomy and his ignorance of its limitations: John Tredgear is saved by his use of simple physiognomy. This is a lucky exception to the rule, as almost every other character who trusts physiognomy as fully as John does gets into trouble for doing so. This is likely because the world of the other characters is much more complex and much harder to interpret. Black and white morality is all that John needs to discern for his survival, but the other characters who end happily in this novella do not have it so easy; they must navigate trickier waters in order to make sense of their world. Things and people that should be readable are not, and things one can read (like James’s tombstone) prove to be a deceptive part of a much larger and more complicated story. Neither physiognomy, James’s tombstone, nor the message in the bottle can tell a complete story because bottles, faces, tombstones, and letters are superficial and likely to mislead those who rely on them alone. All these objects help to illustrate how, according to A Message from the Sea, physiognomy is useful and necessary in determining a person’s general morality, but anything deeper (such as personal histories or complex emotions) requires a primary source in order to be reliable.

This suggests that Dickens’s and Collins’s take on physiognomy is more complex and more nuanced than many critics have realized. Physiognomy works differently in this Christmas story than it does in most of these authors’ more respected, classic novels—a fact that suggests the importance of reading non-canonical, popular literature alongside canonical works. Texts that often go unstudied (such as A Message from the Sea) can provide valuable insights into debated ideas such as physiognomy, thus
changing the way we read not only these stories themselves, but the better-known works of these authors as well.
MESSAGE FROM THE SEA.

THE EXTRA CHRISTMAS NUMBER OF ALL THE YEAR ROUND.
CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS.
CONTAINING THE AMOUNT OF TWO ORDINARY NUMBERS.

CHRISTMAS, 1860.

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CHAPTER I. THE VILLAGE.

"AND a mighty singular and pretty place it is, as ever I saw in all the days of my life!" said Captain Jorgan, looking up at it.

Captain Jorgan had to look high to look at it, for the village was built sheer up the face of a steep and lofty cliff. There was no road in it, there was no wheeled vehicle in it, there was not a level yard in it. From the sea-beach to the cliff-top, two irregular rows of white houses, placed opposite to one another, and twisting here and there and here and there, rose, like the sides of a long succession of stages of crooked ladders, and you climbed up the village or climbed down the village by the stairs between some six feet wide or so, and made of sharp irregular stones. The old pack-saddle, long laid aside in most parts of England as one of the appendages of its infancy, flourished here intact. Strings of pack-horses and pack-donkeys toiled slowly up the stairs of the ladders, bearing fish and coal, and such other cargo as was unshipping at the pier from the dancing fleet of village boats, and from two or three little coasting traders. As the beasts of burden ascended laden, or descended light, they got so lost at intervals in the floating clouds of village smoke that they seemed to dive down some of the village chimneys and come to the surface again far off, high above others. No two houses in the village were alike, in chimney, size, shape, door, window, gable, roof-tree, anything. The sides of the ladders were musical with water, running clear and bright. The stairs were musical with the clattering feet of the pack-horses and pack-donkeys, and the voices of the fishermen urging them up, mingled with the voices of the fishermen's wives and their many children. The pier was musical with the wash of the sea, the creaking of the boats and windlasses, and the airy fluttering of little vanes and sails. The rough sea-bleached boulders of which the pier was made, and the whiter boulders of the shore, were brown with drying nets. The red-brown cliffs, richly wooded to their extreme vertige, had their softened and beautiful forms reflected in the blue water, under the clear North Devonshire sky of a November day without a cloud. The village itself was so steeped in autumnal foliage, from the houses giving on the pier, to the poorest round of the poorest ladder, that one might have fancied it was out a birds'-nesting, and was (as indeed it was) a wonderful climber. And mentioning birds, the place was not without some music from them too; for, the rock was very busy on the higher levels, and the gull with his flapping wings was fishing in the bay, and the lusty little robin was hopping among the great stone blocks and iron rings of the breakwater, fearless in the faith of his ancestors and the Children in the Wood.

Thus it came to pass that Captain Jorgan, sitting balancing himself on the pier-wall, struck his leg with his open hand, as some men do when they are pleased—and as he always did when he was pleased—and said:

"A mighty singular and pretty place it is, as ever I saw in all the days of my life!"

Captain Jorgan had not been through the village, but had come down to the pier by a winding side-road, to have a preliminary look at it from the level of his own natural element. He had seen many things and places, and had showed them all away in a shrewd intellect and a vigorous memory. He was an American born, was Captain Jorgan—a New Englander—but he was a citizen of the world, and a combination of most of the best qualities of most of the best countries.

For Captain Jorgan to sit anywhere in his long-skirted blue coat and blue trousers, without holding converse with everybody within speaking distance, was a sheer impossibility. So, the captain fell to talking with the fishermen, and to asking them knowing questions about the fishery, and the tides, and the currents, and the race of water off that point yonder, and what you kept in your eye and got into a line with what else when you ran into the little harbour; and other nautical profundities. Among the men who exchanged ideas with the captain, was a young fellow who exactly hit his fancy—a young fisherman of two or three-and-twenty, in the rough sea-dress of his craft, with a brown face,
Figure 2. Household Words. Dec. 13, 1860, p. 5. Courtesy, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602.

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