



"Don't be so melodramatic!" Dickens and the affective mode

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Beginning with Martin Meisel's account of theatrical and fictional tableaux as 'effects', this article explores Dickens's staging of sentimental affect both in his performed readings of his fiction and in the works of fiction themselves. Initially focusing on a private reading of *The Chimes* in 1843, captured in an illustration by Daniel Maclise, and at which a number of his friends and colleagues openly wept, the essay moves on to give an account of Dickens's instrumental manipulation of sentimental affect in scenes from *Oliver Twist*, 'A Christmas Carol' and *Bleak House*. The essay argues, firstly, that in carefully staging self-reflexive sentimental tableaux, Dickens creates a species of 'alienation effect' that reinforces the affective power of the scenes. Secondly it contends that what Dickens was aiming for was less a representational realism than a realism of affect; and thirdly that he simultaneously engaged with and interrogated the melodramatic mode in his later works of fiction leading, in *Bleak House*, to a cross-class account of women's oppression.

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