

Visual Narratives: A Comparative Analysis of Charles Dickens's the Pickwick Papers and Faruk Ulay's Works

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ABSTRACT: The combination of visual elements and text is crucial for enhancing the comprehensibility and coherence of a literary work. Rather than being merely decorative, graphic components extend and clarify textual meaning. This article examines the depiction of human and social reality in the works of 19th-century realist Charles Dickens and contemporary Turkish-American writer-designer Faruk Ulay, emphasizing their shared reliance on graphic components. Although separated by more than a century, both authors describe how individuals contemplate themselves and their environment. Notably, Dickens incorporated early postmodern features—such as fragmented narration, irony, direct reader address, and the interplay between text and illustration. Faruk Ulay applies these techniques within a modern context, integrating photography and prose to explore identity, memory, and perception. Through a comparative approach, this study highlights the evolution of multimodal narration, demonstrating how the synthesis of visual and textual devices bridges historical realism with contemporary postmodern literature.

KEYWORDS: Charles Dickens, Faruk Ulay, realism, postmodernism, visual literature, human experience.

INTRODUCTION

Literature has expressed the relationship between individuals and society in various forms throughout history. While Charles Dickens represented social problems mainly with realism, Faruk Ulay attempts to unveil human emotions and thoughts with intermedial and experimental means. Dickens exposed the inequalities of his time and showed men's place in a rapidly changing world. Furthermore, his novels reveal the traces of early postmodern thought. He demonstrated how a story influences one's understanding of reality with the help of fragmented narrative combined with illustrations. Faruk Ulay, on the other hand, integrates text and images in his writing, using modern technological tools. As photography plays a significant role in most of his creations, such as in *Terra Infirma* (2005) and *Cultivation of Enigma* (2011), they differ from traditional literary forms.

METHODS

This article uses a comparative literary analysis combined with an intermedial approach to examine the symbiosis between textual and visual narratives in the projects of Charles Dickens (*The Pickwick Papers*) and Faruk Ulay (*Beldeler Kitabı*, *Instances and Distances*). The methodology focuses on how illustration and photography function not just as graphic additions but as essential tools that expand the meaning of the written word. The study researches the transition from the 19th-century illustrated novel to contemporary digital prose.

DISCUSSION

Charles Dickens (1812–1870) is considered one of the leading figures of English realism. His narratives depict the harsh conditions of industrial capitalism, the contradictions of moral institutions, and the struggle of impoverished classes to preserve their dignity in England. However, his writing style is more complex than it appears at first glance; the writer used techniques that anticipated the features of later postmodern literature (Rosengarten, 2018).

In *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–1837), Dickens's narrative approach is considerably experiential. It was originally intended as a comic series with illustrations, however the conception later evolved into a sophisticated representation of English life. Each issue of the serial was filled with humour, satire and critical depth which made it more open and self-aware than realist fictions. He described the everyday lives of ordinary people—their behaviour, relationships, and connections—and sought to expose their personalities by means of portrayals.

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MAIN BODY.

The novelist also uses a metafictional layer framing of the novel as a collection of found documents. In the first chapter, the record is "derived from the perusal of the following entry in the Transactions of the Pickwick Club" and goes on to identify himself as the editor of these papers (Dickens, 1837). This introduction shifts his role from a traditional narrator to a compiler of historical documents. This technique highlights a constructed nature of the narrative which is a core principle of postmodernist fiction.

Another significant aspect of the novel is the presentation of text and images as equally important components. In *Pickwick Papers*, the illustrations function as an integral part of a graphical narrative, where the portraits work in tandem with Dickens's linguistic style. These drawings provide a physical form to the characters' eccentricities, ensuring that their social and psychological identities are conveyed with greater clarity and humour.

Collaboration with artists—Seymour and Phiz—allowed Dickens to expand his narrative possibilities. Robert Seymour's early pictures enabled readers to visualise the characters, imagining their appearance and emotions. They were not simply supplementary; they also defined the plot's interpretation.

After Seymour's death, Hablot Knight Browne (Phiz) further enriched the novel's visual layer. The artist, capturing Mr. Pickwick's naïve gaze, Snodgrass's dreamy, romantic aura, and Mr. Weller's sharp expressions enhanced the story's humorous tone. Phiz managed to weave illustrations so tightly into the novel that the reader no longer just sees characters, but truly gets to know them by way of both the word and the sketch.

Samuel Pickwick was a bald gentleman with spectacles whose appearance reveals his kind and gentle attitude towards people, especially women.

"A casual observer, adds the secretary, to whose notes we are indebted for the following account—a casual observer might possibly have remarked nothing extraordinary in the bald head, and circular spectacles, which were intently turned towards his (the secretary's) face, during the reading of the above resolutions: to those who knew that the gigantic brain of Pickwick was working beneath that forehead, and that the beaming eyes of Pickwick were twinkling behind those glasses, the sight was indeed an interesting one" (Dickens, 1837).

Pickwick's companion, Mr. Augustus Snodgrass, was portrayed as a poet of the Pickwick club. He was a sensitive young man who approached life with a romantic and slightly theatrical outlook. He always carried a notebook, yet it remained almost empty.

The dismal individual took a dirty roll of paper from his pocket, and turning to Mr. Snodgrass, who had just taken out his notebook, said in a hollow voice, perfectly in keeping with his outward man— 'Are you the poet?' 'I-I do a little in that way,' replied Mr. Snodgrass, rather taken aback by the abruptness of the question (Dickens, 1837).

Nathaniel Winkle considers himself a sportsman; however, in reality, he was clumsy and unskilled at sport. His portrait complements his verbal description in the novel.

On the left of his great leader sat the poetic Snodgrass, and near him again the sporting Winkle; the former poetically enveloped in a mysterious blue cloak with a canine-skin collar, and the latter communicating additional lustre to a new green shooting-coat, plaid neckerchief, and closely-fitted drabs (Dickens, 1837).

Tracy Tupman was a middle-aged, overweight man whose posture expresses his enthusiasm and emotions as a real lover.

"On his right sat Mr. Tracy Tupman—the too susceptible Tupman, who to the wisdom and experience of mature years superadded the enthusiasm and ardour of a boy in the most interesting and pardonable of human weaknesses—love" (Dickens, 1837).

The heroes of "*Pickwick Papers*" - Mr. Samuel Pickwick and his friends Winkle, Snodgrass, and Tupman - travel across England, observing everyday events and recording them in the club's records. They speak humorously, express their opinions, intervene in events, and sometimes find themselves in absurd situations.

Hence, Dickens is known not only as a realist writer of his time, but also as an author who bridged realism and postmodern literature via intermedial synergy.

Dickens used hand-drawn illustrations to ground his critiques in tangible reality, however the 21st century requires a new graphic language. Faruk Ulay reimagines the text and image partnership, once configured by writers like Dickens, with the lens of modern design and photography. For Dickens, images clarified humans' social status and presence. In contrast, Ulay employs photos to delve into themes such as fragmented memory and evolving identity in the globalised world.

Faruk Ulay is both a graphic designer and a writer. He got his bachelor's degree in Graphic Design from Istanbul and then his master's degree in Visual Communication from Goldsmiths College in London (Topçu, 2009). He has lived in California since 1982, where he continues his creative work. Ulay writes in both Turkish and English. He does not adhere to traditional novel forms; his writing style is experimental, graphical, and abstract.

Writing both in Turkish and English, and targeting a specific audience, Ulay characterises some of his works as "invisible literature" (Lock, 2012).

According to Ulay, his English texts consist of pieces based on internal logic. His goal is to create prose that is free from ornate language but carries deep meaning. In one of his interviews, Faruk Ulay stated,

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"I erase recognizable features from my imaginary landscapes. The same deliberate 'absence of identity' applies to my characters—they have strong voices but no names. Their personalities are defined by their behavior and gestures. I also distort time. My stories are not full of events, but everyone and everything moves in a kind of lethargic motion." (Lock, 2012).

Ulay deliberately distorts reality by adding visual elements to his books, provoking critical engagement in the reader. He is one of the few contemporary Turkish-American writers who tests the intersection of photography and literature.

The application of visual components expands the boundaries of traditional narrative. His "photo-stories" analyse the relationship between memory, time, and reality from an intermedial perspective.

"Eyes of a bicycle.

Glimmers of possibility.

On the verge of multiple dimensions, but

no familiar faces around.

Standing tall is not enough to drown the feeling of estrangement" (Ulay,2020).

In the interview, the author explains his work in the following way "I will draw an imaginary city block complete with buildings, for example, and then let the characters wander around in it. I had to create thirty-three different lands for 'The Lands Between' and map out their positions in such a way that from the borderland, a reader can see and 'enter' another land." (Lock, 2012). The application of visual components fundamentally expands the boundaries of traditional narrative, transforming literature into a multidimensional medium. Faruk Ulay's innovative "photo-stories" systematically analyse the intricate relationship between memory, time, and human reality from an explicitly intermedial perspective, where the photographic image and the written word co-constitute the meaning of the text. This aesthetic fusion is vividly reflected in his creative prose, where the prose itself adopts a cinematic, visual rhythm. This poetic fragment illustrates how Ulay uses fragmented, highly visual descriptions to evoke a profound sense of existential alienation and psychological detachment. The visual imagery of the "eyes of a bicycle" and "glimmers of possibility" functions not merely as a background setting, but as a structural device that projects the character's internal disorientation onto the external, spatial environment. To fully comprehend this structural-semantic mechanism, one must look closely at Ulay's deliberate design strategy. In an interview, the author explicitly explains his creative methodology and architectural approach to text construction in the following way:

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This architectural mapping demonstrates that for Ulay, narrative is inherently spatial and cartographic. By conceptualizing the literary text as a physical, navigable space where the reader can "see" and "enter" overlapping dimensions, Ulay successfully bridges the gap between literary postmodernism and visual art. Just as Charles Dickens utilized early illustrations to guide the reader's spatial perception of 19th-century London, Ulay employs modern photography and cartographic text structures to simulate the fractured geography of the contemporary human experience. The writer avoids exotic themes and challenges Western readers' expectations of "Eastern romanticism.

"For him, the primary focus is the inner crisis of a human being, his sense of alienation, and his lonely life (Lock, 2012). He says: "What interests me is to record conflicts occurring within my characters' vulnerable minds because of oppressive environments—magnified by their inability to manage their crises by any other means than losing themselves in imagined worlds" (Lock, 2012).

In his works, Ulay constructs personages and settings with a visual detail. A photograph functions here as more than a simple image; it serves as a medium for capturing memory. The writer tells how people recall and reinterpret the past.

"No house is visible, but a sound of a doorbell

ringing in ears

Past experience does not help

evoking convenient memories" (Ulay,2020).

His narratives are frequently fragmented, allowing imagery complexity and reader interpretation to replace linear progression. He prioritises the immediate impact over the continuity of the plot. This approach clearly demonstrates the influence of modern visual culture on literature.

"Food is not on the table anymore.

Useless trees grow on pavements

Real life when copied on paper

become a fake

So many variations of meaninglessness

And yet no one asks

How many rays a sunbeam has" (Ulay,2020).

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As the author himself explains in his interview: "If I add a visual layer to a piece, I take it from my own environment. I try to reduce the artistic beauty of the pictures so that they blend into the spirit of the text" (Lock, 2012). The ontological tension between objective reality and its textual representation represents a core thematic nexus in contemporary visual literature. Faruk Ulay explicitly challenges the traditional boundaries of mimetic prose by questioning the capacity of language to capture the authentic human experience without losing its essential truth.

Within the context of multimodal narrative strategies, Ulay's assertion that "real life when copied on paper becomes a fake" serves as a meta-literary justification for his reliance on graphic and photographic components. For Ulay, a monochrome text confined to the printed page risks reductionism; it flattens the chaotic, existential reality of the modern individual into "variations of meaninglessness." To counteract this literary artificiality, the integration of visual media becomes a vital semiotic necessity. The imagery of the sunbeam and its uncounted rays symbolizes the multi-layered, unquantifiable nature of human perception, which cannot be fully decoded through linear syntax alone. This thematic concern establishes a profound historical and structural bridge to Charles Dickens's nineteenth-century realism. Although Dickens operated within a different socio-cultural paradigm, his collaboration with illustrators like George Cruikshank and Phiz stemmed from a similar realization: text alone requires a visual anchor to effectively mirror the dense social realities of urban life. While Dickens utilized early graphic illustrations to amplify social critiques and prevent his narratives from becoming detached from reality, Ulay employs modern photography to navigate the fragmented interiority and "estrangement" of contemporary life. Consequently, both authors utilize a synthesis of text and image not as a decorative afterthought, but as a deliberate epistemological tool to rescue "real life" from becoming a mere facsimile on paper.

Beledeler Kitapı (The Book of Districts) is a project where Faruk Ulay synchronises thirty-three desert photographs with a meticulously structured narrative. The work functions on two dimensions: the left-hand pages present a formal prose exploring the triad of space, objects, and humanity, and right-hand pages offer italicised commentary alongside photos. Ulay emphasises that the essence of the place is not fixed, but rather fundamentally shaped by the interaction between an individual's internal state and material world. (Ayan, 2023) Each district possesses a name that defines not only the place itself but also the internal world of people who live there.

Among these metaphorical places, Town of Objects that sound in the Wind (Rüzgarda Ses Çıkaran Nesneler Beldesi) stands out as haunting reflection on the past. In this district, finding the old does not bring comfort to those who miss it because the environment has lost its cultural and ontological identity.

Eskiye bulmuş olmak eskiyi özlemişleri mutlu kılmaz. Çünkü buradaki sesler ürkütücüdür. Eskiye bilenler trenlerin böyle ötmediğini anımsar. Bekçiler de düdüklerini böyle çalmazlar. Tramvayların pencereleri sallandığında böyle tangırdamaz (Ulay, 2003).

Finding the old does not make those who long for it happy. Because the sounds here are terrifying. Those who know the past remember that the trains would not go like this. Nor would a watchman blow his whistle like this. The windows of the tram would not rattle like this when they shook. (Ulay, 2003 trans. by author)

Ulay's depiction of the Town of Objects that sound in the Wind functions as a critique of artificial nostalgia. He reminds us that visual recognition does not guarantee spiritual and historical continuity. Unlike humorous and fixed pictures of Dickens's heroes, Ulay's sensory landscape is one of the evocative fragments where the image and the soul of the object have permanently drifted apart.

Ulay's approach extends beyond just image addition to narrative. He seeks to create a literary form in which words and photography function collaboratively to convey awareness and meaning.

CONCLUSION

Illustrations can highlight key moments, emotional tone, or provide additional features that texts alone may not fully convey. When placed alongside the text, they guide a reader's interpretation, create stronger thematic connections, and help establish a clear atmosphere. This interaction between language and visual representation enables a profound comprehension of a story, follows the development of events, and experiences the plot in multiple layers.

Charles Dickens and Faruk Ulay, though different in historical periods, share the same artistic goal: to understand human existence in a changing reality. They achieve it using words and visual elements that complement each other to enrich the idea.

Dickens, while deeply engaged with England's realities, transcended the boundaries of realism. He positioned his reader not as a passive observer but as an active participant who can navigate shifting meanings and interpretive gaps. He demonstrated how the reality represented in stories was constructed through irony, fragmented narrative structures, and the integration of text and illustration – features that indicate an early postmodern approach.

Faruk Ulay continues this search in a modern visual language. His literary output reflects an era in which images speak louder than words and in which meaning emerges from the tension between what is presented and what is withheld. Ulay's concept combines photography, design, and a story, transforming the reading process into a multi-layered experience. His works mirror the uncertain, changing nature of modern human experience, continually reframed by visual culture.

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The semiotic synergy between text and illustration fundamentally redefines the cognitive parameters of literary reception. Visual components do not merely supplement the written word; they actively delineate pivotal thematic moments, amplify emotional resonance, and introduce socio-cultural dimensions that linear textual configurations cannot fully encapsulate. When strategically juxtaposed with prose, graphic elements serve as hermeneutic guides that shape the reader's interpretive trajectory, establish rigorous thematic architectures, and construct a cohesive aesthetic atmosphere. This dynamic interaction between linguistic syntax and visual representation facilitates a multi-layered comprehension of the narrative, allowing the audience to simultaneously track temporal plot developments and navigate complex spatial structures.

Multimodal Narrative Space

[Linguistic Syntax] <--- Interaction ---> [Visual Media]
(Textual Prose) (Graphics/Photos) |

[Hermeneutic Guide] --> Polyphonic & Multi-layered Interpretation

A comparative analysis of Charles Dickens and Faruk Ulay reveals a shared ontological imperative: to decipher and critique the fluid nature of human existence within a rapidly shifting socio-historical reality. Despite the obvious chronological chasm that separates their respective eras, both creators deploy a multimodal methodology where word and image co-constitute the core ideology of the work.

1. While firmly anchored in the socio-economic realities of nineteenth-century Victorian England, Dickens progressively transcended the epistemological boundaries of classical realism. By utilizing stylistic irony, fragmented narrative techniques, and a deeply integrated relationship with early graphic illustrations, he dismantled the convention of the passive reader. Instead, the Dickensian audience is repositioned as an active agent tasked with negotiating shifting meanings and filling interpretive lacunae—a strategy that denotes a distinct proto-postmodern sensibility.

a. Faruk Ulay extends this aesthetic trajectory into the contemporary digital era, where visual culture increasingly dominates linguistic communication. In Ulay's conceptual framework, narrative meaning is generated precisely through the semiotic tension between explicit textual presentation and visual omission. By synthesizing professional design, experimental photography, and minimalist prose, Ulay transforms the act of reading into an immersive, multi-dimensional experience.

Ultimately, both authors demonstrate that capturing the fragmented, uncertain nature of the human experience requires a rejection of monomedial constraints. Whether through the early satirical etchings of *The Pickwick Papers* or the sophisticated photo-stories of the twenty-first century, the cross-historical dialogue between Dickens and Ulay highlights the enduring evolutionary arc of visual literature, proving that the integration of the visual and the textual is an essential tool for representing the complexities of social reality.

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