“Look Elsewhere”: Literal Foreshadows in English Literature

William Sharpe

This text was automatically generated on 1 octobre 2016.
“Look Elsewhere”: Literal Foreshadows in English Literature

William Sharpe

I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,
And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.
—“My Shadow,” Robert Louis Stevenson

Shadows are always with us, but as Stevenson says, their “use” is hard to grasp. Mostly, we deal with them unconsciously. In fact, shadows generally get less attention than the Unconscious itself. Many of us are familiar with what Freud called the “dream-work”—the activity through which our dreams express and respond to our unconscious desires. But few pay attention to a parallel phenomenon. “Shadow-work” is going on around us all the time. Unconsciously and automatically we notice, evaluate, and decipher the meaning of shadows—shadows of people, things, or actions. We use them to detect motion, location, depth, danger, and a host of other contingencies. Many scientific and practical breakthroughs, from the shape of the earth to the speed of light, have come from using shadows to measure size, shape, and distance, but we don’t treat them with the same respect we give to a body of knowledge or a scientific instrument. And yet we constantly evaluate shadows in our environment, as we figure out where to reach or to walk, as we turn or look or we flinch protectively.

That process spills over into the way we look at the world in a symbolic sense too. In everyday usage real and metaphoric shadows seem to be inextricably mixed. We speak of our individuality and solitude in terms of “me and my shadow”; we fear the shadow of death; we scrutinize a government or a supposed criminal with a shadow cabinet and a detective “shadow”; we find people guilty beyond the shadow of a doubt; and under the shadow of good or evil omens we shape our behavior and live our lives. Shades of the dead haunt us. Shadows cross our faces and minds, past events or future enemies lurk in the shadows, heroes or villains named “the Shadow” entertain us with their incredible deeds. The Oxford English Dictionary lists some sixteen separate definitions of shadow,
with some forty further nuances, ranging in connotation from the extremely positive to
the direly negative, deriving from those primary meanings.

And yet the role that shadows play in artistic expression is not very well established.

In one of the few books on shadows for a general audience, Roberto Casati suggests that
shadows have been scarce in Western art until recently because they are so hard to
render effectively (156). There is a similar difficulty regarding the study of shadows.
Either shadows are so often used figuratively and unconsciously, like dead metaphors,
that audiences don’t even see them, or they are so pervasive and so varied in their
application that they elude our conceptual grasp almost as readily as they do our hands.
Art historian Victor Stoichita’s *A Short History of the Shadow* describes the shadow as a self-
reflection, as a proof of human incarnation, as a witness to the artist’s presence, as a dark
double, as an image of human identity, and, in modern art, as an artistic free agent, as
important as “the real thing” (132-133). In *The Reverse of the Visible*, cultural critic Max
Milner proposes an infinity of shadow nuances, depending on the artist or writer, from
Leonardo’s gentleness to Caravaggio’s brutality to the horror of Goya, from the saving
darkness of St. John of the Cross to the psychological abyss of Novalis (434-435). And if we
turn from meanings to shadow-shapes, Roberto Casati has proposed over fifteen
categories of shadow form and function based on the visual information that they
convey—including shadows that reveal the texture of what they fall on, shadows of things
that protrude, shadows that are clearly inaccurate, shadows that copy the features of the
caster exactly, and so on (“Methodological Issues”, 169-171).

Similarly, there is no consensus about how to approach shadow research. Are we seeking
to see something or to understand why we cannot see it? Some shadow-studies, for
example, present themselves as explorations of vision, as narratives of sight and insight,
seeking to bring what is covered by darkness (or even darkness itself) into the light of our
understanding (see Götz, Gombrich, and Stoichita). But other critics claim, almost
paradoxically, to leave in the dark the subject of their inquiries, rendering homage to
obscurity by celebrating in it qualities that our ingrained preference for light has
prevented us from appreciating. They extol the value of subliminal nuances that they try
to tease out. Milner, for example, states that a survey of shadows in art is impossible, and
so he studies a host of individual images, hoping, he says, to put some shadow-holes in
the wall of visibility that surrounds us (10). Seeing light as a prison, he speaks of shadow
as a reserve, a resource. Similarly, Michael Baxandall has argued provocatively that, while
shadows provide much information to us, it is important to let them do their work at the
edge of our consciousness. We can understand them better, he says, if we don’t focus too
intently on them. He concludes a demanding book on “Enlightenment shadows” by
warning, “The comedy is that as soon as we are addressing shadow we are liable to
denature it... It becomes something other than the shadow of usual experience simply by
being addressed as itself” (145).

Baxandall suggests that we maintain a relaxed “inattentiveness”, as he calls it, as a way of
registering how shadows imperceptibly work on us when we experience a work of art. But
that inattention enables the shadows that are controlled so consciously in art to
escape our critical scrutiny.

One such case is the fore-shadow as it is used in literature. Since literary foreshadows
must be noticed, however slightly or subliminally, in order to do their narrative work,
they challenge Baxandall’s notion that “inattentiveness” is perhaps the best way to deal
with shadows. In this essay I will explore shadows that are meant to be seen, shadows
that are registered consciously as such. The shadows that we interpret as clues and signposts enhance our enjoyment of the present text even as they point us toward its future resolution.\(^1\) By studying how literal foreshadows function in texts, we can gain a better appreciation of both narrative structure and what shadow imagery contributes to the meaning of what we read.

My starting point is the fact that in any work of art, the presence of a shadow is never an accident. When James Barrie has Peter Pan lose his shadow at the opening of the book, it reminds us of a crucial reality: in the world of art, shadows are arbitrary. In literature, especially, shadows are an optional effect; reading conventions allow us to assume that they are there when lighting conditions would create them, and when the author calls special attention to them by mentioning them specifically, they emerge as particularly motivated signs. The very act of putting a shadow in a scene makes the shadow subject to the same field of interpretation—again, conscious or not—as the rest of the work. While they may seem to the casual reader or viewer to be “just” shadows, part of the mimetic effect of the artwork, they can never be merely that. As part of the artwork they trigger in the audience a range of possible responses based on culturally assigned meanings of shadows.

Let’s consider what those meanings might be. If we look carefully at the dozens of metaphorical meanings that “shadow” can have, it turns out that there are four main areas of significance which line up with four types of shadow function. Each has to do with the ways in which we respond to how a literal shadow is cast. They may overlap at times, but each still has a distinct core identity. There is the shadow as influence, the shadow as an insubstantial version of something, the shadow as a close companion, and the shadow as “escapee”—a rebellious part of a personality that can elude human control.

The first group of meanings depends on the sense of being close to or literally in the shadow of something that projects its influence via its shadow, for good or ill. We are now in the shadow of an economic crisis. The second group moves further away from the caster and highlights the distance between them, stressing the weak, insubstantial, secondary quality of the shadow. After he was arrested, Louis XVI was only the shadow of a king. The third group accentuates the ways in which shadows almost constantly accompany their casters, completing them as it were. This group turns back toward the caster to emphasize connection and companionship, although the connection can be broken. Raskolnikov was shadowed by his guilt, just as a detective shadows a criminal. And the fourth group evolves from the apparently independent way shadows seem to behave, as if they have their own agency; they can seem willfully to change shape, size, or direction; or disappear and come back. As the lovers walked along the road, their shadows played hide and seek in the trees. Provocatively explored by Carl Jung as a projection of the Unconscious, this willful, psychologically potent shadow has become a familiar part of modern artistic expression. It is especially associated with the expression of repressed desires, often sexual or violent. Since the nineteenth century this semi-secret shadow has manifested itself in every artistic medium, in the form of doubles, alter-egos, nemeses, and “dark sides” of all sorts, from Mr. Hyde to Darth Vader.

Conventional shadows, then, can be presented as strong “Vital” shadows that convey some part of the substance of the caster; or as mere, weak, “Look Elsewhere” shadows that send us to the object itself for substance. Imaginative, fanciful, disconnected shadows will either be company-keeping “Completing” shadows that, because they contain some vital quality, need to be joined to a caster to complete its identity; or else
they will be disruptive, attention-seeking “Independent” shadows that have been liberated from their casters so that they can exist and act on their own. The Vital shadow shares the substance of its caster; the “Look Elsewhere” or mere shadow has no substance; the Completing shadow adds to or subtracts from the caster’s substance; and the Independent Shadow is its own substance, needing no caster at all.

How do we recognize or differentiate these sorts of shadows when we see them? In literary texts the author can summon up for the mind’s eye the main visual properties of shadows—they double, distort, and give dimension to their casters. In addition they have the fourth effect of adding a dark “shape” or presence that contributes to formal properties (the pattern of light/dark imagery, for example) while simultaneously adding a symbolic element—fear, protection, mystery, and so on—that we can interpret. But often in texts the physical properties of the shadow are rather vague. Instead the writer’s language makes quite explicit the type of shadow, and hence its larger symbolic import. In *A Christmas Carol* Dickens tells us that the shadow of Scrooge cast gloom on the Crachits’ holiday dinner (Vital shadow). In *Great Expectations* Dickens writes of a sick man, Arthur, who has declined into a mere shadow of himself (a Look Elsewhere shadow). In *Little Dorrit* the title character tells a story of a woman who keeps a hidden shadow of a departed loved one near her (a Completing shadow), while in his journalism Dickens wanted to create a magical *flâneur* called The Shadow who could spy on all of London, exposing the wicked and lauding the good (an Independent Shadow).

I will devote the rest of this essay to presenting the characteristics of one of my four shadows, what I call the “Look Elsewhere” shadow, which demonstrates the shadow’s narrative possibilities. After looking at the shadow-substance opposition that helps define the Elsewhere shadow as mere and inconsequential, I will show how this “nothing” of a shadow in fact plays a considerable role in how stories—including that of Divine Providence—are told.

The shadow-substance opposition runs through Western thought from Plato onward. A substance-less shadow may have a likeness to its caster, but this is regarded as only a deceptive appearance, an illusion, and often it is just the faintest replica of its caster. Sometimes it is even physically weak: Raphael Sabatini’s popular novel *The Sea Hawk* tells us that after a duel the wounded Sir John is “reduced to half the bulk that had been his before, a mere shadow of a man” (27). This feeble shadow makes up a part of the ghostly, un-embraceable “shade” that appears wispily in many a story, and the “shadow of a doubt” upon which many legal cases depend is almost equally intangible. On the surface of it, the weak shadow is usually something fleeting or intangible to be avoided, since the shadow-substance tension implies there is only one right choice between them. When Joseph Conrad says of his main character in *The End of the Tether*: “He had thrown away the substance for the shadow” (119), it is a sad moment. Such shadows may be attractive, but sensible people will shun them. When Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott gets tired of looking at life through a mirror, she comments “I am half-sick of shadows.” In John Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga*, Annette and her mother see marriage in practical terms and are thus worthy of merging with the hard-headed Forsytes: “They knew so well what they wanted. They were almost Forsytes. They would never grasp a shadow and miss a substance!” (572).

Yet one main reason why Plato’s allegory of the cave, in which shadows are shown to be the antithesis of real knowledge, continues to fascinate us is that we don’t really believe what Plato is saying. Try as he may, Plato can’t quite kill the idea that the shadow has
some sort of substance, hence its fascination in shadow/substance oppositions. We see this fascination when Virginia Woolf writes in *Jacob’s Room* (1922): “In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows” (70; my emphasis).

16 Despite Plato’s lesson, knowing that shadows are “mere” shadows does not prevent us from caring about them. In fact the very insubstantiality of shadows seems to make them all the more precious. In Dickens’ *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44), the narrator addresses one of his characters, “Look round and round upon this bare bleak plain, and see even here, upon a winter’s day, how beautiful the shadows are! Alas! it is the nature of their kind to be so. The loveliest things in life, Tom, are but shadows; and they come and go, and change and fade away, as rapidly as these!” (257).

17 In its opposition to substance, the word “shadow” has an array of extended meanings that take shadows right to the heart of artistic representation. So it is no wonder that literature should be especially rich in shadow imagery and nuance, especially in the Renaissance, when classical and Christian doubts about earthly vanities collided with the birth of modern theatre and the deliberate orchestration of political events as a “show” of princely power. If we examine the main branches of shadow-meaning in Shakespeare’s day—as a mere image, a reflection, a portrait, a dream, and a play or an actor—we can see how ephemeral shadows tempt, tease, and even fulfill those who dwell upon them.

18 In its simplest terms, the elsewhere or insubstantial shadow is an idea or image of a thing, and not the thing itself. Early in the sixteenth century the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, complained that Henry VIII’s machinations were undermining his priestly authority: “I . . . should be as a shadoo and ymage of an Archebisshop . . .voide of auctoritie and jurisdiction.” (1526). In *Euphues* (1578), John Lyly wittily sets up a discussion of shadows right before dinner, so that his heroine can make the figurative opposition literally true: “ ‘Well gentlemen,’ answered Lucilla, ’in arguing of the shadow we forgo the substance. Pleaseth it you, therefore, to sit down to supper?” At the end of *All’s Well that Ends Well*, Shakespeare’s Helena appears to the husband who abandoned her and thought her dead: “Is’t real that I see?” to which Helena replies, “No, my good lord, / ‘Tis but a shadow of a wife you see, / The name and not the thing” (5.3.304-8). Only when they reunite will she be a real wife, and not the shadow of one.

19 Probably the most extended treatment of the substance-less shadow comes in John Donne’s poem “A Lecture Upon the Shadow” (c1600, pub. 1635). Using the literal shadows of lovers, Donne’s speaker argues that where shadows are, the substance of true love cannot be. Having strolled together for a few hours with their morning shadows stretched out before them, the couple in the poem come to the noon-day moment when their shadows have disappeared. Now they have openly declared their love for each other, but earlier they had had to conceal their love, in effect creating shadows:

So whilst our infant loves did grow,
Disguises did, and shadows, flow
From us and our cares; but now ’tis not so.
The presence of shadow indicates that love itself is in the shadow, since “That love hath not attain’d the highest degree, / Which is still diligent lest others see.” And so the speaker hopes that they can preserve this special moment, because if they don’t, new shadows will creep in, this time shadows of self-deception:

Except our loves at this noon stay,
We shall new shadows make the other way.
As the first were made to blind
Others, these which come behind  
Will work upon ourselves, and blind our eyes.

Since shadows belong to a world of becoming, it is only when we don't see them, at high noon, that we are in a world of being. Since shadow is not substance, love and shadow cannot exist simultaneously. With his warning, Donne creates a narrative with a fatal trajectory, as the afternoon shadows begin to lengthen:

The morning shadows wear away,  
But these grow longer all the day;  
But O! love’s day is short, if love decay.  
Love is a growing, or full constant light,  
And his short minute, after noon, is night.

It’s as if the speaker is trying to find a clever way to get rid of his girlfriend. Because love is always waxing or waning, this shadowless noon will be short. In effect the poem is written to prove the irony of its opening two lines: “Stand still, and I will read to thee / A lecture, Love, in Love’s philosophy.” Love, like the sun or shadows, can’t stand still, so the lecture on the shadow can only demonstrate that for Donne, “love’s philosophy” is platonic in a cruel sense: love can’t last in a shadowed world. Like Plato, he sets up the shadow to show that truer rewards lie elsewhere.

When shadows become reflections a different set of disappointments emerges. Plato would have known Aesop’s fable about the dog who crossed over a brook on a log and saw the shadow of another dog looking at him from the water below. Since that reflected dog was carrying a piece of meat too, the real dog snapped at him to get it, but in so doing lost his own piece of meat. Moral of the story: Take care not to lose the substance by grasping at a shadow. For Plato, reflections are a slightly higher level of false image, but false nonetheless, as the denigration of the mirror-holding artist in The Republic shows. Shakespeare uses an actual mirror in Richard II (1595), which the ill-fated monarch smashes in a fit of rage as he studies the effect of his misfortunes on his face. Bolingbroke comments that “The shadow of your sorrow hath destroyed /The shadow of your face”(4.1.291-292). But it’s as if two negative numbers were multiplied to make a positive, as Richard feels the pain all the more:

The shadow of my sorrow—ha, let’s see:  
’Tis very true, my grief lies all within;  
And these external manners of laments  
Are merely shadows to the unseen grief  
That swells with silence in the tortured soul. (4.1. 293-297)  
For Richard, shadows speak louder than words. Richard breaks the mirror, but what it mirrors has already broken his heart.

Shakespeare reaffirms the conventional shadow/substance hierarchy in his use of the shadow portrait in The Merchant of Venice. To win Portia’s hand, her suitors must choose between a gold, silver, or leaden casket to find the one that contains her portrait. When the Aragon selects the silver one, he finds a verse inside that tells him, “Some there be that shadows kiss; / Such have but a shadow’s bliss. / There be fools alive, I wis, / Silver’d o’er; and so was this”—the casket is silvered like a mirror and reveals his love of himself (2.9.66-69). But when Bassanio correctly choses the leaden casket, he finds Portia’s “shadow” portrait. He rhapsodizes over it, then catches himself:

Yet look, how far  
The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow  
In underprizing it, so far this shadow  
Doth limp behind the substance. (3.2.130-133)
His praise is a substance unfit for this shadow, a shadow that “limps behind” the substance of the actual Portia’s beauty. Here the art of the portrait, like the art of its praise, do not measure up to the “real” thing, the character of Portia.  

When a shadow-imposter looks at a shadow-portrait, as in Two Gentlemen of Verona, reality cedes the stage to shadows alone. “Come, shadow, come and take this shadow up, / For ’tis thy rival,” says Julia as she looks at the portrait of Sylvia, her rival for the affections of Proteus (4.4. 194-195). But Julia has disguised herself as a young man in order to follow Proteus, so she is a mere shadow identity, in dress, social role, and gender. Furthermore, her discovery that Proteus is drawn to Sylvia has left her stunned, a shadow of her former, self-assured self.  

When we enter the world of dreams, the shadow reasserts its attractions (or distractions) once more. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet 43, in the absence of the beloved, the shadow is the substance of the poem. Because he can’t see his beloved, the speaker finds her (or his) shadow-image dazzling him in dreams, and imagines how much more dazzling than daylight the lover’s actual presence would be:   

Then thou, whose shadow shadows doth make bright,  
How would thy shadow’s form form happy show  
To the clear day with thy much clearer light,  
When to unseeing eyes thy shade shines so!  

The shadow’s “form” is its caster, which would create a “happy show” for the beloved. But until then “thy fair imperfect shade” will still light up the night: “All days are nights to see till I see thee, / And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.” So Shakespeare draws light from shadow. It’s a vision that would make its way into a popular song that won an Oscar in 1965: “The shadow of your smile / When you have gone / Will color all my dreams / And light the dawn.”

Shakespeare generally takes a doubting view of dreams, but he inevitably plays on their tangible aspect in his poems or his dramas. When in The Tempest Prospero tells his audience, “we are such stuff as dreams are made on” and that “the great globe itself” is but part of the illusion, he speaks as a flesh and blood actor in the wood and plaster Globe theatre. Shakespeare is always ready to tell his audience that they are witnessing an illusion, but also ready to imply that this shadow world leads to a knowledge of the real one. If Sonnet 43 seems to reverse the worlds of shadow and light, Sonnet 53 contends that the lover’s shadow is so much a part of beauty itself, that everything beautiful must have the lover’s shadow in it:   

What is your substance, whereof are you made  
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?  
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,  
And you but one, can every shadow lend.  

It’s the lover’s substance to be an inexhaustible shadow, part of everything—“In all external grace you have some part”—and yet superior to shifting shadows: “But you like none, none you, for constant heart.” When shadows enter Shakespeare’s vocabulary of love, they seem determined to redefine their substance as opposites to their conventional counterparts.

This tension comes to the fore when the shadows are actors. The more Shakespeare calls attention to the shadow-substance of dramatic art, the more his presentation calls into question the substance of life. “If we shadows have offended” says Puck at the end of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, “Think but this, and all is mended, / That you have but
slumber’d here / While these visions did appear” (5.1.418-421). But if the play is just a
dream of shadow-like images, why should we pay attention when they tell us they are just
shadows? The message is similar but far darker in Macbeth:

Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (5.5 23-28)

30 Here life is not only a shadow, but a poor actor as well. Life does not imitate art, it is art.
Is a “poor player” a bad actor, an unfortunate one, or an underfunded one? His trademark
is his brevity; like Pindar’s man he is just “a creature of a day”—or of a night, since he is a
candle too. Shakespeare again makes shadow and light interchangeable in the service of
an idea, the idea that for all its opposition to substance, shadowness defines our very
being. For all that literature warns us away from deceptive shadows, the one certain
substance of the Elsewhere shadow seems to be our human condition.

31 But the Elsewhere shadow also has a narrative function that looks ahead to our future
salvation from the world of mere transitory shadows. Dickens has his Christmas ghosts
speak of shadows of things to come, things that are not yet present but whose causes or
indications announce—“foreshadow”—an eventual arrival. The shadow that is now
lacking in substance will be replaced by what is solid and secure once the caster arrives.
The key idea driving this perception is the Christian typologist’s assertion that the Old
Testament is the shadow of the New, and it was through this religious usage that the
word “foreshadow” entered English. In the Epistle to the Hebrews 8:5 we read that the old
law is “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things” and in 10:1 that the old law is “a
shadow of the good to come, not the very image of the things,” and in Colossians 2:17
where old customs are “a shadow of the things to come; but the body is Christ’s.”

32 It was Tertullian (160-225), sometimes called the father of Latin Christianity, who first
used the typological method. He applied the word figura (in Greek, typos) to a reading of
Hebrew scripture, the “Old Testament,” by discovering in it anticipatory “figures” or
“types” of events and ideas more fully revealed in the later “New Testament” written by
the followers of Jesus (Auerbach, 11-76). For Tertullian, the people and actions of the
earlier scripture had a concrete reality in themselves, but their meaning was fulfilled by
further developments in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Adam is a figure of Jesus, and “Jesus is
... a figure of things to come.” Just as Joshua led the Hebrews into the promised land of
Israel, so his namesake Jesus, a second Joshua, leads his people into eternal life in the
promised land of heaven.

33 This framework of interpretation meant that as God’s book unfolded in time, its events
had a double reality planned out by their Author. Since it has actual historical truth, the
“figure” or “type” or “shadow” is a shadow only temporarily, to the extent that its
meaning is not yet fully revealed. For the typologist, Jonah really was swallowed by the
whale and re-deposited on land alive three days later, but that “shadow” is illuminated by
its fulfillment in Jesus’s death and resurrection three days later. Like a skillful novelist,
God provides prefiguring foreshadows to show where his text is leading. Christians can
see the Bible as one book and can read events as foreshadows, just as readers of secular
novel can see certain details as foreshadowings because they know this is a book
operating with certain literary conventions.
To this way of thinking what is now lacking in substance (true religion, the true presence of God) will eventually be fulfilled. What is in secular terms a difference in space—here is the shadow, there is the substance—becomes a deferral in time. Where the shadow is, the fulfillment will be—the shadow reconnects to the caster. Hence, a material event can still seem to lead us toward some future and equally actual event of which it is the mere image or precursor. The theological perspective demotes a real thing into a shadow of a “realer” thing. Just as Plato’s idea of divine forms demotes everyday reality to shadow status, so the Christian prospect of heaven turns earthly riches into mere shadows in comparison to heavenly rewards. By extension, any clue used in a text or film or visual image to give us a hint about a fuller development that will occur later has come to be called “foreshadowing.” And this type of anticipation has indelibly shaped the way stories are told, novels are written, and films are made.

The typological shadow makes explicit what is implicit in Plato, namely a narrative thrust, as it forms part of a unidirectional narrative that stretches from Adam and Eve to the culminating events described in the book of Revelation. Still, the Christian treatment of shadows in typology represents a momentous shift in interpretation from Plato’s allegory, as shadows were promoted from being mere misleading or insubstantial nothings into being signs of Eternal life. One implication of the Christian schema is that when we recognize the elsewhere quality of the shadow, its pointing function, we are also free to enjoy the materiality or beauty of the shadow too. Its fulfilling substance may lie elsewhere, later, and beyond this world, but in the meantime, unlike Plato, we can admire the shadow for its ability to instruct and inspire.

Belief in typology’s literal applicability waned in the nineteenth century, as it came to seem likely that New Testament writers had deliberately echoed Old Testament passages as they constructed their own, and historical scholarship made it harder to read the Bible as one unified text. But Victorian preachers, writers, and artists remained enthralled by typology’s capacity to generate rich webs of interlocking prefigurings and fulfillments. In fact, “foreshadow” enters English as a noun only on the brink of the Victorian period, in 1831 in Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus.* “Fore-shadows ... of that Truth and Beginning of Truths, fell mysteriously over my soul,” writes Carlyle’s soul-searching narrator, using shadows to guide him into the Light (94).

Given the central role that foreshadowing played in how Christians understood narrative structure, it was inevitable that the rise of secular narrative would include shadowy elements as well. England’s greatest novelist was not only a huge employer of literal and symbolic shadows; he also regarded typological-style foreshadows and fulfillments as essential to the way he worked as a writer. Charles Dickens called his interlocking motifs “shadowings” and in 1859 he explained to his friend and fellow author Wilkie Collins:

I think the business of Art is to lay all that ground carefully, but with the care that conceals itself—to shew by a backward light, what everything has been working to—but only to suggest, until the fulfilment comes. These are narrative ways of Providence—of which way, all Art is but a little imitation. (Hutton, 95)

For Dickens, the light of a story’s ending casts its shadows backward to earlier points in the text, illuminating just a bit the earlier parts of the story. This foreshadowing is based on a spatial model but the narrative adds a temporal element: we come to the shadows before we reach the substance or full development, to which Dickens give the typologically charged name, “fulfillment.” The job of the author is to “lay all that ground
carefully” by hinting yet concealing, though the use of shadow-clues, what the final outcome will be. In narratives, the Elsewhere shadow points, like the Bible, toward “the fullness of time,” toward the moment when what is shadowed now will be illuminated for good.

Since “these are narrative ways of Providence,” Dickens viewed his own art as itself being a sort of shadow, “a little imitation,” of that overarching divine structure. Biblical shadows beget novelistic shadows. And indeed, Dickens wove in Biblical references throughout his works, and there are plenty of instances where his own characters play out a biblical destiny, such as the sacrificial-lamb-like Agnes and her unlucky admirer Uriah Heep (Uriah the Hittite) in David Copperfield. Overall, Dickens viewed his own artistic life as form of shadow-work. He told his best friend John Forster how he used to look at the big house that would one day become his own, “when I was a very odd little child with the first faint shadow of all my books in my head” (Hartley, 302).

In A Christmas Carol, Dickens uses forecasting and backward-looking shadows to construct the entire action of the story. Each episode is orchestrated by Ghosts who present shadows, or apparitions, of Ebenezer Scrooge’s life, a life whose selfish actions create foreshadows of a grim fulfillment. The climax comes when the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge a miserable gravestone with his name on it. The frightened miser begs for a flexible interpretation of foreshadows:

“Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point,” said Scrooge, “answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they shadows of things that may be, only?”

Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

“Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!” (124)

Scrooge guesses rightly: if one changes one’s life, the foreshadowed end will change accordingly. In a combination of begging and promising, Scrooge talks himself into a new life, a new future shadow for himself and Tiny Tim: “Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life! . . . I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.” In a curious logic, Dickens suggests that if you change your life, your foreshadow will follow accordingly, as the backward light cast by a happier ending will adjust its prediction.

Late in his career, Dickens even turns the concept of foreshadowing into a mental activity, using the word to mean “foresee”: When the protagonist of Our Mutual Friend (1864-1865) ponders the difficulties of faking his own death, Dickens writes, “Another consequence that he had never foreshadowed, was . . .” (473).

Narrative fore-shadows have a multiple purpose, since they both hint at what will come and try to conceal it--their purpose is “only to suggest,” as Dickens says. Like actual shadows they lend a form to approaching events, but remain dark at their interior, creating suspense, encouraging guesses that may well misleading us, thereby increasing our surprise at the ending. Literal literary foreshadows follow the typological model in having a reality that only a larger sense of an overall narrative renders as a forecast as well as an actuality. To the characters in story they are just ordinary Elsewhere shadows of a spatial rather than temporal sort--but they are perceived by readers to be hints or threats. Yet, if the art is properly concealed, as Dickens wishes, both characters and readers will not know just what lies ahead “until the fulfillment comes.”
Foreshadows of a general sort can be found everywhere in narrative, whether it’s literary or pictorial. “Every detail is an omen and a cause,” said the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges. But actual shadows that foreshadow form a special group that helps us see further into the properties of artistic shadows. In Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson” (1839), the narrator explains why he is confessing his misdeeds: “Death approaches, and the shadow which foreruns him has thrown a softening influence over my spirit” (351). This backward-cast shadow most often points toward the end, to mortality, sending its darkness from the other side, the beyond of the narrative, the time-ending far side of Revelation. Narrative foreshadows, unless used comically, almost inevitably threaten life and herald death.

Perhaps because Victorians were so used to the revelatory shadows of biblical typology, the most common motifs involving shadows in the nineteenth century stressed their predictive quality. “It’s no use to guess the shape of trouble till it casts its shadow ahead,” went one folk saying. Asserting the shadow’s usefulness, the expression asks us to wait for the shadow to clarify the actual problem we are facing. “Coming events cast their shadows before” became a common saying applied in circumstances where people were certain where current events were leading. The catch phrase acquired near-proverbial status, and was used as the title of paintings, novel chapters, humorous sketches, and even a political cartoon predicting that Abraham Lincoln would not be reelected in 1864. The source was a poem by Thomas Campbell, Lochiel’s Warning (1802), in which an aging wizard warns the Scots warrior Lochiel of the disaster awaiting his army at Culloden Field in 1745:

Lochiel, Lochiel, beware of the day!
For, dark and despairing, my sight I may seal,
But man cannot cover what God would reveal:
’Tis the sunset of life gives me mystical lore,
And coming events cast their shadow before,
I tell thee, Culloden’s dread echoes shall ring
With the bloodhounds, that bark for thy fugitive king. (lines 52-58)

Invoking God’s revelation, Campbell connects divine shadows with earthly events, and the old bard’s sunset knowledge casts bloody shadows of prophecy.

Precisely because “coming events” had such a portentous ring, the phrase could as easily turn comic. Anthony Trollope wrote in Barchester Towers (1857) that “Coming events cast their shadows before, and the coming event of Mr. Quiverful’s transference to Barchester produced a delicious shadow in the shape of a new outfit for Mrs. Quiverful” (257). In an American painting, Coming Events Cast Their Shadows Before (1871) by Charles Caleb Ward, a group of children look wonderingly at a poster for Barnum’s circus—the poster is the shadow of the performance, but a boy playing with a puppet suggests that he might be casting a shadow of his future career. The shadow becomes more literal in Helen Allingham’s painting Coming Events (1886) in which an excited cat sees the shadow of a hand coming in with a saucer of milk.

But sometimes the foreshadows are less precise or predictable. In The Forsyte Saga, Galsworthy says of Old Jolyon, “Impending events over which he had no control threw their shadows on his head” (148). And once we get away from the “coming events” formula, the shadows often make more of an impression on the reader than they do on the people who encounter them. In Sabatini’s The Sea Hawk, mentioned above, the hero receives a visit from his nemesis: “a shadow fell athwart [the window] which he little dreamed to be symbolic of the shadow that was even then falling across the sunshine of
his life. After that shadow came the substance . . . Swinging a long beribboned cane the figure passed the windows, stalking as deliberately as Fate” (6). Here in an unusually obvious way we see how a literal shadow of a man stands symbolically for a menace that will eventually become a literal threat, real physical danger. As a metaphoric shadow of a larger development, the shadow creates a secular typology that is reinforced by a conventional shadow-substance contrast that hammers home the notion of grim foreshadowing by concluding with the mention of a Fate that stalks the hero.

While Sabatini is heavy-handed with his shadows, many writers count on the reader's sensitivity to them to hint at coming events that the characters may be unconscious of. In a novel of the American Civil War, Across Five Aprils (1964) by Irene Hunt, the author lingers on a description of the day-end shadows forming in the woods on the edge of a family farm, and sure enough, the shadows of coming war are raised explicitly in the next chapter. The actual shadows lead to metaphoric ones, which in turn signal actual death in the battles ahead. So what we can call “foreshadowing shadows” or “literal foreshadows” will shift back and forth between literal and symbolic registers. They already have physical causes, light sources and light-blockers that are “real” within the narrative. But then they are metaphorically joined to what they forecast when the dangerous situation arrives—the “fulfillment.” So the literal foreshadow acts like the metaphoric foreshadow, as both shade and shape of things to come.

A foreshadow, if noticed, says something is coming—but it can also be a representation of what can’t be represented. For shadow representation can even say that a shadow is coming. In James Joyce’s story “The Dead,” the memory of his mother’s opposition to his marriage casts a shadow over the face of the protagonist Gabriel. As we discover later in the text, this is a foreshadow of a shadow on the marriage produced by the memory of his wife’s dead lover. The shadow of a shade darkens the story; the shadow is a sign of itself; shadow foretells shadow.

Probably no recent work uses shadows as anticipatory forebodings as thoroughly as J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings (1954-1955). The shadows that often cover the heroes, or darken their surroundings, as they approach the shadow-land of Mordor announce the danger that they are putting themselves in. And since Mordor means shadow in Elf-language, the literal shadow shows a symbolic menace that is then re-literalized: the shadow itself is both the sign and the actuality of the danger. Ominous narrative shadows are perceived by the reader (or the viewer of the films) to be just that, grim forebodings. While the characters in the story may feel them as actual shadows bringing a physical chill or a darkness that limits visibility, for the audience they are clear signs of something sinister ahead. But if literal foreshadows stand out for us as intimating that “something bad is going to happen,” the strategy of Tolkien is to scatter the shadows so thickly that when light does penetrate the shadows readers or viewers feel a weight lifting and hope rising. “A light from the shadows shall spring,” as the ring’s prophecy goes (170). Since the epic does end (mostly) happily, in a sense the profoundest foreshadows in the book are actually fore-lights.

This insight prompts us to ask how well foreshadows should or must hide themselves, so that the light that springs from them will contribute to the pleasure of the narrative without spoiling it. And if these “incomplete” shadows are leading or misleading us toward a final revelation, will it be clear from internal evidence that these are not yet completed, that they are part of a story? Are there clues that inevitably tell a reader or viewer that this is a foreshadow?
It's only the end of the story that provides an answer to the questions of how much shadow is desirable, and how well the shadows are hidden. As readers and re-readers we find what we are looking for. Re-reading shadows helps us to determine which signs lead to substance. The elsewhereness of the shadow-sign helps generate a narrative linking the unreal shadow to some “realer” entity yet to come. The story shows us how shadow eventually meets substance, but only from the point of view of the “backward light” that reveals “what everything has been working to.” Even as it helps tell the story, the Elsewhere shadows says, “I am not the story.” The story is told fully only when the shadow meets its maker.

If every shadow tells a story, every good story tells us something about shadows. Often they are metaphoric, but often too they are literal foreshadows that enrich the texture of our encounter. “Fail to foreshadow and the readers will have no expectations,” explains a manual for writers, “because you haven’t provided them with any” (Chapman, web). Since shadows create expectations, we can expect particularly engaging shadows from Dickens’ novel Great Expectations (1860-1861). And such is the case. In a sense Dickens uses the novel to comment on the nature of novel writing and reading. “Great expectations” drive readers and characters alike forward into a story, and how we respond to the denouement depends on how the expectations are realized, as the author teaches both readers and characters about the challenges of life and their ability to meet them. Dickens starts his novel like a fairy tale, with the young Pip thinking he has been promised future riches. He believes that he has been offered the chance to break the spell that imprisons the jilted old Miss Havisham and holds the beautiful young Estella aloof. Pip hopes, he says, “to do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance, and marry the princess” (253). But shadows cast by past deeds and ill intentions frustrate his plans. The aim of the novel is to show not only how expectations can fail in the face of reality, but also how expectations cast their own shadows that increase life’s suffering.

While actual shadows are not especially numerous in Great Expectations, they do occur at two crucial points in the text, creating a puzzle for the reader to solve. In the first instance Dickens calls special attention to a figurative shadow that causes readers to think hard about what has already happened, and to turn the pages faster to find out just what the shadow will reveal once explained. Still smitten with Estella, the now grown-up Pip learns that Miss Havisham has taught her to take advantage of men, and he begins to wonder about her family background. Instead of concealing his foreshadow, Dickens places it at the cliff-hanging ending of a weekly installment. Chapter 32 closes with Pip saying, “I saw her face at the coach window and her hand waving to me. What was the nameless shadow which again in that one instant had passed?” (284; my emphasis).

It is not until Chapter 48 that Pip realizes who Estella’s parents really are: “I thought how the same feeling had come back when I saw a face looking at me, and a hand waving to me, from a stage-coach window...” (403). What he had seen then was the similarity between Estella’s face and that of her mother, Molly, whom Pip at that point knew only as a servant spared from the gallows for murder. (He may also have seen in her face the shadow of her father, Magwitch, whom Pip had seen long ago). So the nameless shadow that Pip scrutinizes in chapter 32 is a shadow in the sense of portrait, image, or reflection, a visual clue.

But it is also a shadow because of Molly’s lowly, murderous, past, as well as being the dark cloud of Miss Havisham’s man-hating influence over Estella, and the over-arching mystery of how Pip’s social, romantic, and momentary expectations are tied up with
them. Pip's quest for understanding echoes a passage in Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1848), “The feeling . . . of which he had had some old foreshadowing in older times—was full-formed now” (356; Chapter 20). Here in *Great Expectations*, it takes fourteen chapters to match the foreshadowing with the “fully formed feeling” that cast it. Like Scrooge, Pip has to connect “shadows of things that have been”—the past that created his troubled life—with “shadows of things that will be”—a final resolution in which the shadows will be dispelled (Allingham, 50-56).

But that final ending is itself obscured by one last shadow. Dickens concocted two endings for *Great Expectations*, and the one that was published brought Pip and Estella together a final time in ambiguous circumstances described in three different sets of words. Now chastened by life, the confirmed bachelor Pip and the widowed Estella meet by chance one evening in the ruins of Miss Havisham's house. After they compare notes on what life has taught them, they resolve to remain friends—“friends apart,” Estella specifies. The novel ends with Pip writing, “I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw …” (493).

What Pip saw took three forms, and what Pip meant to say (or conceal) became more obscure with each rewriting. In manuscript Dickens finished his sentence, “the shadow of no parting, but one.” This suggests they remained together, or friends, until death did them part. But what Dickens published in his final installment and again in the full book form was “I saw the shadow of no parting from her.” Which mean in effect that Pip saw no shadow at all, and their togetherness, Platonic or romantic, was clear to Pip then, even if he was—as he had been throughout the book—deluded about where his life was leading. But then Dickens gave one more twist to the tale, concluding the authoritative Library Edition of 1862 and Charles Dickens Edition of 1868 with what is now the accepted ending: “I saw no shadow of another parting from her.” Here “no” modifies shadow, not parting, and by adding the word “another” Dickens adds further ambiguity. While most critics and readers see this as possibly promising a reunion, one that may well be at odds with the book’s central theme of disillusionment, the fact that the tranquil light of evening shows “no shadow” suggests at least an unshadowed or untroubled conclusion in which a sad parting plays no part.

But the fact that Dickens takes pains to describe the scene first as shadowy, and then lit by the rising moon, suggests another reading. “The silvery mist was touched with the first rays of the moon-light, and the same rays touched the tears that dropped from her eyes,” he writes a bit earlier (492). Ever sensitive to lighting effects, Dickens makes his moonlight bright enough to strike Estella’s tears of remorse, so we can imagine it is bright enough to cast an actual shadow in front of them as they stroll holding hands. When Pip sees “no shadow of another parting from her” he may well be seeing no second shadow by her side—no shadow of another person parting from her. Instead, he sees the shadow of two people close enough together to cast a single shadow. Dickens would not have mentioned the light or the shadow if it were impossible for a shadow to be cast. Moonlight for Dickens is usually associated with spiritual ascent, as in *American Notes*. So while Pip does not see a shadow of a parting, he may well see a shadow of togetherness. His final words may or may not foreshadow marriage, but they refuse to foreshadow parting.
As critics have noted, Pip and Estella walk hand-in-hand out of a troubled past like Adam and Eve leaving Eden. Estella’s father’s first name was Abel, so it is possible that Dickens is telling the story of Providence in reverse. When Pip leaves his childhood home for the first time, with his Great Expectations still intact, Dickens had him use words that invoked the ending of *Paradise Lost*: “The mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me” —echoing Milton’s “the world was all before them.” In the final sentence, Dickens/Pip uses words that again suggest departure from Eden and entry into the wide world: “I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.”

Dickens leaves us with a shadow of an ending. But whether Dickens speaks of no shadow parting or no friends parting—and the two can overlap—the operative word is “no.” And when there are no more shadows that look ahead, our expectations come to an end, along with the narrative. Whether Pip is right or wrong about his vision, he sees no more shadows, no other shadows. Foreshadows end; the story is over.

So while the Look Elsewhere shadow may seem at first to be a “mere” shadow that has a minimal impact, thanks to its narrative quality it has a reach that may well exceed that of any other type of shadow. Narrative pleasure depends heavily on foreshadows, and when the foreshadows are literal shadows as well, they lead us, as the typologists said that they would, to a final, if secular, revelation.

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Allingham, Phillip. “Shadows of Things that Have Been and Will Be.” *English Language Notes*, 41.3 (2004): 50-56.


NOTES

1. A few words about my method. I discuss literature alongside visual art because they coexist in a common cultural field; their meanings are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. I subscribe to the theoretical stance outlined by W. J. T. Mitchell in *Iconology*: “pictorial images are inevitably conventional and contaminated by language . . . The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs” (42-43). To study one medium necessarily involves studying the others, and for shadows painting has a certain primacy. We think of shadows in artworks, even if they are written, as primarily visual entities, and painting has set the terms for that representation over the course of centuries. This is probably why we have authoritative histories of shadows in painting that also take up shadows in photography or film, while as yet there are no full-scale treatments of shadows in those latter two media. But as those histories show, cheek-by-jowl with the painted shadow there lurks a huge body of literary shadow, influencing it and being influenced by it. Textual shadows stretch from the shades of Homer and the protective shadow of the Lord in the Hebrew bible, to the shadows of Plato's cave and the providential fore-shadows of Christian typologists, to the shadow-substance motifs of Renaissance poetry and drama, to the dark shadow-double that haunts the good intentions of post-Enlightenment humanity. To speak of the painted shadow is to work with its textual shadow as well, and vice versa. There is no type of shadow image or meaning in one medium that does not have its counterpart in the other arts.

2. Of course, all shadows used in art are imaginative in some way; here I am referring to those that deliberately violate any realist convention in order to act in a way that would be impossible in everyday life.

3. Ellis, *Original Letters* Ser. III.II.42—OED, ”shadow”.


5. The OED offers a similar instance from 1679: "he was wont to gaze away whole days on her picture . . . practising upon the shadow to fit himself for the substance." In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde offers a hideous reversal of this idea, as the portrait becomes the substance of Dorian's evil being.


7. Also on typology see Earl Miner, *Literary Uses of Typology*.

8. The idea of someone else's shadow lurking there, in order not to be seen, could be viewed as Pip's seeing through the shadows cast by Estella's parents at the end of chapter 32. See Thomson, 94-96.

ENDNOTES

1. When we study a shadow, Baxandall says, "it becomes something other than the shadow of usual experience simply by being addressed as itself." We need a means of "in-attentive perception" to be able to register and read shadows effectively, he suggests: "For many purposes 'attention' effectively disables itself as a concept by reducing the 'in-
attentive’ to a negative or absence of something, rather than the active, determined and structured field in which consciousness plays” (145).

ABSTRACTS

This essay presents material from a book I am writing about shadows in literature and visual art, a book aimed at explaining how shadows communicate to us. Here I focus on the use of shadows in English literature, particularly Shakespeare and Dickens. Critics have paid little attention to the narrative quality of shadows, but from Plato’s allegory of the cave, through Christian typology, and on into techniques of literary foreshadowing in the novel, shadows play a key role in directing our attention toward future developments. The shadow-substance tension that underlies so much writing about human perception forms an integral part of this process, guiding readers toward a substantial “something” — an object, an event, a revelation—elsewhere in space or time that will fulfill the expectations raised by the chimeras of the present moment.

Cette étude présente quelques éléments devant trouver leur place dans un ouvrage consacré au traitement des ombres en littérature et dans les arts visuels, actuellement en cours de rédaction. Je m’attache ici à explorer l’utilisation des ombres dans la littérature anglaise, particulièrement chez Shakespeare et Dickens. Les critiques ont dans l’ensemble négligé la qualité narrative des ombres, mais de l’allégorie de la caverne de Platon aux techniques liées à la prolepse (foreshadowing en anglais) en passant par la typologie chrétienne, les ombres jouent un rôle essentiel lorsqu’il s’agit de diriger notre attention vers des événements futurs. La tension entre l’ombre et la substance qui informe tant de pages consacrées aux modes de perception humains constitue une partie intégrante de ce processus dans lequel les lecteurs sont guidés vers du concret — un objet, un événement, une révélation — intervenant ailleurs dans l’espace et le temps et venant combler les attentes suscitées par l’ombre chimérique.

INDEX


Mots-clés: annonce, ombre portée, littérature, ombre, typologie

Keywords: foreshadow, cast shadow, literature, shadow, typology

AUTHOR

WILLIAM SHARPE

Barnard College, Columbia University

Professor of English

wsharpe@barnard.edu