

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Catalogues of Attention: Lists and Social Knowledge in Victorian Fiction

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Abstract

Victorian novels use lists to promise breadth while quietly deciding whose names, objects, occupations, and obligations deserve notice. This article compares enumeration in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*. It reads each list as a narrative action rather than a neutral store of detail, attending to grammatical parallelism, focalization, interruption, and the later reappearance of listed items. Dickens turns administrative accumulation into an image of responsibility endlessly deferred; Gaskell makes domestic and industrial inventories compete as forms of expertise; Eliot distributes classification among fallible provincial observers; and Trollope links catalogic abundance to speculative value. Across the four novels, apparently additive syntax produces hierarchy through order, expansion, qualification, and omission. When an item returns outside its first list, enumeration also becomes a device of narrative memory: what first appeared interchangeable acquires consequence. The comparison shows that the Victorian social world is not merely represented by abundance. It is made intelligible through selective acts of counting whose limits the novels repeatedly expose.

Keywords: Victorian fiction; enumeration; attention; social knowledge; narrative form

1 Introduction

The crowdedness of the Victorian novel is both a historical subject and a formal problem. Its engagement with contemporary institutions makes formal abundance answerable to the pressures of the historical present [1]. Expanding cities, bureaucracies, markets, print networks, and professional institutions supply fiction with more persons and things than any single perspective can fully comprehend. Enumeration offers an economical answer. A narrator can move through names, streets, documents, commodities, symptoms, or opinions in a compact stretch of prose, creating the impression that a social field has been surveyed. Yet a list never simply contains its world. It orders entries, establishes a grammatical rhythm, decides when qualification is allowed, and brings the sequence to an end. Its apparent inclusiveness is therefore inseparable from selection.

This article asks how lists distribute attention in four novels whose social ambitions differ markedly. The central claim is that catalogues act as small institutions of knowledge. They determine which particulars become comparable, which distinctions remain audible, and which agents acquire authority by nam-

ing the field. This emphasis extends accounts of how novels organize individualism through social forms rather than isolated characters [2]. Dickensian accumulation, Gaskell's contrast between household and factory, Eliot's provincial taxonomies, and Trollope's financial rosters answer different narrative pressures. Comparison is useful precisely because it reveals what changes when enumeration moves from law to labour, from community judgment to speculation.

Studies of narrative distribution have shown that character systems allocate space unevenly even when novels present themselves as capacious social forms [3]. Formal arrangements can carry hierarchy even when they appear impersonal [4]. Material objects can likewise preserve meanings that exceed their apparent narrative function [5]. Lists sharpen both insights. Their surface grammar often levels entries, but their position in a scene and their relation to a focalizer restore inequality. The first item may set the category, the final item may become a punch line, an elaborated entry may interrupt equivalence, and an absent name may matter more than those recorded. Enumeration should thus be read simultaneously as syntax, viewpoint, and plot.

The article first defines a bounded list

and its narrative neighbourhood, then compares the four institutional settings, and finally discusses ranking, narrative memory, and the historical limits of the claim.

Two studies of enumeration make the article's formal unit more precise. Belknap distinguishes the ordering work of literary lists from the continuous syntax around them [6]. Eco's comparative history demonstrates how lists stage both the promise and the impossibility of completeness [7]. The corpus consists of *Bleak House* [8], *North and South* [9], *Middlemarch* [10], and *The Way We Live Now* [11] in the editions listed below. These novels were chosen because each repeatedly joins social description to institutions that classify: Chancery, the industrial town, provincial opinion, and the joint-stock company. They are not offered as a statistically representative sample of Victorian fiction. They form a controlled comparison among four uses of catalogic prose.

The unit of analysis is a bounded enumeration and its narrative neighbourhood. A passage enters the comparison when two or more elements are presented under a shared grammatical or rhetorical heading. Four questions guide the reading. Who supplies the category? What

syntax makes the entries similar or different? Where does the list occur in relation to a scene's decision or conflict? Does the narrative later detach an item from the series and give it a new consequence? These questions separate the visible sequence from the interpretation assigned to it.

The procedure begins with punctuation and clause structure, then moves to focalization and plot. This close-reading scale differs from abstract modelling across a large corpus, while retaining comparison as an explicit analytical operation [12]. A semicolon, repeated conjunction, parenthesis, or change of descriptive scale can revise the relation among entries before any broad historical claim is made. The later return of an item is treated as a second stage of the list rather than as unrelated evidence. This diachronic attention distinguishes narrative enumeration from the static inventory: fiction can remember and rearrange its own categories.

2 Chancery's paper world in *Bleak House*

Dickens repeatedly constructs institutions through accumulation. In *Bleak House*, offices, suits, claimants, addresses, and documents appear in sequences whose length exceeds any practical act of comprehension. The effect is not merely comic abundance. Grammatical continuation simulates an administrative system able to receive another petition, bundle, or identity without reaching judgment. This relation between narrative form and diffuse institutional discipline provides the relevant context for the reading [13]. Because the entries remain formally processable, the institution appears active even when responsibility has stopped moving.

The opening movement through fog provides an important analogue. Repetition joins places and bodies under a single atmospheric condition, but the apparent equality of exposure does not erase social distinction. Instead, the list makes diffusion perceptible: no one point seems to cause the obscurity, and no observer commands the whole. Chancery later gives this diffuse structure an institutional form. Papers circulate, names multiply, and the case survives the people whose lives it governs. Enumeration therefore does two things at once. It displays the court's extensive reach and dramatizes the failure to convert collected information into accountable action.

Lists also regulate sympathy. When persons are introduced as parties, wards,

claimants, or examples, an administrative category precedes individual history. Dickens can then reverse the sequence by returning to a formerly minor entry. A name that first occupied one position among many acquires a household, a bodily presence, or a consequence. The later scene does not simply add detail; it indicts the earlier act of equivalence. Catalogic memory becomes ethical because the novel makes readers experience the difference between being entered into a system and being understood.

3 Competing inventories in *North and South*

Gaskell's novel places enumerative habits on both sides of the contrast between Helstone and Milton. Rooms, fabrics, foods, landscapes, machines, and groups of workers are apprehended through different kinds of practical knowledge. Margaret Hale initially reads environments through cultivated domestic perception. The industrial town confronts her with scales and processes that cannot be absorbed by the same vocabulary. Lists mark this adjustment: items that appear as atmosphere to one observer become costs, tasks, or risks to another. The novel's competing descriptive regimes also recall the nineteenth-century production of facts through social and economic classification [14].

The distinction between domestic and industrial inventories is not absolute. Both select and order materials, and both may conceal labour. A household list can present comfort as a finished arrangement while omitting the work that maintains it; a manufacturer's account can present production as quantities while muting embodied strain. Gaskell's achievement lies in making these regimes of description intersect. Conversations and visits force objects to change categories. Cloth may be a commodity, a household possession, the outcome of mechanical coordination, and evidence of contested working conditions. The same material is not simply redescribed; authority over its meaning is redistributed.

Parallelism is especially important in this process. A balanced series can imply that different persons or concerns have received equal consideration, while the surrounding scene reveals unequal power to speak or refuse. Conversely, an interrupted list can register the pressure of information that does not fit an established category. Such moments prevent the novel's social argument from resolving into two stable camps. Enumeration becomes a site where partial expertise is

tested: household judgment needs industrial knowledge, and economic calculation is shown to depend on social relations it cannot fully tabulate.

4 Correctable classification in *Middlemarch*

Middlemarch distributes the labour of classification among narrators, professionals, families, and neighbours. Characters are repeatedly known through sets of expectations: eligible marriages, respectable occupations, symptoms, debts, alliances, and reputations. These series create the town as an intelligible whole, but they are always vulnerable to revision. No list of traits can secure the future conduct of the person it describes.

Eliot's narrator frequently changes scale, moving from a clustered social judgment to a discriminating account of one consciousness. This movement exposes the cost of provincial shorthand without pretending that classification can be abandoned. People must act with incomplete information; the ethical problem is whether their categories remain correctable. Lydgate's professional ambitions, Dorothea's projected vocation, and the town's judgments of marriage and money all pass through catalogues of attributes whose coherence later weakens. The relation between scientific classification and fictional knowledge is especially pertinent here [15]. The narrative does not replace false social knowledge with an omniscient inventory of truth. It shows how a category becomes more responsible when it can be altered by another person's history.

Recurrence gives these classifications narrative depth. An obligation, opinion, or minor name may return after the context that first made it legible has changed. The reader then remembers not only the item but the inadequate series in which it appeared. This retrospective pressure differentiates Eliot's lists from explanatory summaries. Enumeration becomes provisional argument: a way of organizing the town that the plot subjects to correction.

5 Speculative rosters in *The Way We Live Now*

Trollope's novel tests the relation between naming and knowledge under conditions of financial speculation. Directors, guests, titled supporters, potential spouses, newspaper claims, and rumours accumulate around Augustus Melmotte. Each name appears to add evidence of solidity. Yet the roster's persuasive force depends less on verified information than

on the fact that other names are already present. The resulting collective image depends on association across a print-mediated social field [16]. Enumeration imitates due diligence while substituting circulation for confirmation.

This is a distinctive catalogic logic. In Dickens, institutional accumulation delays responsibility; in Trollope, accumulation actively manufactures value. The order of entries matters because proximity confers association. A socially recognized name can authorize the next, weaker entry, and a long sequence can discourage inspection of any one relation. The list behaves like speculative credit: it expands so long as readers, investors, and guests accept the series as a collective guarantee.

The plot eventually reverses this movement. Once confidence breaks, the same catalogue no longer proves reach; it maps exposure. Individuals try to detach themselves from the sequence that previously magnified their importance. Trollope thereby shows that inclusion is not stable privilege. A name can gain force from a list and later inherit its discredit. This resistant case clarifies that enumeration does not only represent social knowledge. Under speculative conditions, it can become the mechanism by which insufficient knowledge is converted into action.

6 How additive grammar produces rank

Across the four novels, ranking occurs without explicit numerical order. Position supplies one mechanism. Initial entries define the class to which later entries must conform; final entries may cap, revise, or mock the sequence. Expansion supplies another. A noun accompanied by a relative clause or narrated history occupies more attention than neighbouring nouns even when the syntax presents them as equivalent. Focalization supplies a third. What appears exhaustive from one position may be exposed as narrow when the narrative shifts to another observer.

Omission is equally consequential. Lists present boundaries as if they followed naturally from the category, yet the novels repeatedly disclose agents whose work makes the category possible without earning a place in it. Servants, clerks, labourers, dependants, and minor creditors may appear at the edge of a catalogue or enter only when the plot can no longer ignore their effects. Reading for omission is not an invitation to invent absent evidence. It asks which enabling relations the text makes perceptible while

withholding the status of a full entry.

These devices explain why frequency alone is a poor measure of importance. A repeated item can remain background, while a single interruption can reorganize the sequence. Close reading of lists must therefore attend to duration and consequence: how long a category governs perception, and what happens when a person or thing escapes it.

7 Discussion

The most significant common pattern is the return of an item after its initial enumeration. At first appearance, list grammar encourages interchangeability. Later narration restores difference by giving one entry a changed setting, a decision, or a consequence. The reader is asked to remember both appearances. Meaning arises from the distance between the item's earlier comparability and its later singularity.

This structure has ethical and epistemic force. It does not guarantee sympathy, and it can intensify satire as readily as compassion. What it guarantees is a test of classification. The second appearance asks whether the first list knew what it claimed to organize. In *Bleak House*, bureaucratic entries acquire human cost; in *North and South*, materials cross the boundaries between household and factory; in *Middlemarch*, social descriptions become correctable; in *The Way We Live Now*, prestigious rosters become maps of compromised association.

Narrative memory also prevents a simple opposition between list and story. Lists are often described as pauses in narrative, but these novels place them inside causal and retrospective structures. Enumeration can prepare action, distribute expectations, and leave unresolved entries for later development. The catalogue is thus not the opposite of plot. It is one of the means by which plot stores uneven possibilities.

8 Conclusion

Lists in these novels are neither ornamental excess nor transparent social records. They are selective forms that make abundance readable by establishing temporary equivalences. Dickens uses accumulation to expose administrative deferral; Gaskell sets domestic and industrial inventories into productive conflict; Eliot makes classification answerable to later knowledge; and Trollope shows a roster creating the confidence it seems merely to document. Their differences reveal a shared principle: additive grammar can distribute rank through position,

qualification, viewpoint, and omission.

The return of listed items gives this principle a narrative history. An entry can move from type to person, from commodity to labour, from judgment to revision, or from prestige to liability. Victorian fiction manages social scale not by completing the catalogue but by teaching readers to notice where catalogues fail. The list becomes most revealing at the moment its order can no longer contain the consequence it has helped produce. Because the corpus is selective and edition-dependent, the argument does not establish a complete history of Victorian listing; broader comparison across genres, editions, and reading communities should test its reach.

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