WORLDS MADE IN THE HEARTS OF MEN:
SYMBOLISM OF ENVIRONMENT IN THE WORKS OF CHARLES DICKENS

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Table of Contents

Acronyms............................................................................................................... ii

Introduction.......................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1. A Tainting Sort of Weather.............................................................. 12

Chapter 2. Some Quiet Country Place.............................................................. 30

Chapter 3. A Most Intricate Maze.................................................................. 46

Chapter 4. A Shriek, A Roar, and A Rattle.................................................... 61

Chapter 5. In A Smoking Humour................................................................. 76

Conclusion......................................................................................................... 93

Bibliography..................................................................................................... 95
Acronyms

In a study of this scope on the works of Dickens, the titles of his novels are of necessity repeated dozens if not hundreds of times. In order to avoid having excessive space devoted to printing the full names of these novels over and over again, I have elected, inside parenthetical citations, to use acronyms for the Dickens works most frequently referenced in this study. To ensure that there is no confusion whatsoever about which works I am citing, I present a key to the acronyms used herein:

BH: *Bleak House*

DS: *Dombey and Son*

GE: *Great Expectations*

HT: *Hard Times*

MJ: *Mugby Junction*

OT: *Oliver Twist*

TOCS: *The Old Curiosity Shop*
Introduction

The works of Charles Dickens might be imagined as a series of paintings hung on the wall of a gallery. In the foreground of each stand the familiar visages of characters that have proven so enduring in the imaginations of readers. The likes of the innocent Little Nell, the sinister Mr. Tulkinghorn, and the scheming Miss Havisham are vividly painted in bright, colorful prose as they travel their destined paths. Each of these portraits, in addition to its intrinsic literary value, is also highly symbolic in ways that advance the social criticism for which Dickens was justly famous. Symbolism surrounds these characters in facets of their characterization such as title, occupation, bearing, and even name. There is not much question, for example, about what Dickens might have meant Tiny Tim or Oliver Twist to symbolize in relation to England’s treatment of its children; and little imagination was ever needed in order to divine what the natures of characters with names like Mr. Krook, Mr. Bumble, or Mr. Slyme might be. Yet a closer examination can reveal symbolism and allegory deeply woven into the backgrounds of his works as well in factors of environment that surround the characters. These aspects of environment, which include phenomena such as weather, rural landscapes, urban landscapes, factories and machines, and fire, come forth out of the background to become almost characters in their own right. The great degree to which Dickens makes use of them as symbols, themes and
leitmotifs highlights the issues and ills of his age and even for his own prescriptions for treating them.

Each of these phenomena has two aspects to it: as an objective thing-in-itself in the real world, and as a subjective thing in relation to the fictional worlds and characters that Dickens created around it. Here it is important to note that Dickens was not a Realist in the sense in which that term was current among American authors in his era. The American Realists put great effort into making their created worlds seem as much like the real world as possible. Dickens, on the other hand, intentionally made his created worlds allegorical and dreamlike.

The scholar Ann Wilkinson remarked of *Bleak House* that its world is “a physical one which reflects its moral twin. It has physical laws which are almost exact analogues to moral laws” (Wilkinson 225). This observation, however, could be just as correctly applied to all of Dickens’s fictional worlds. Thus, the objective qualities of a phenomenon in Dickens’s works are often less important than their subjective qualities, and what they may mean in terms of the real world is often less important than what they may mean in relation to the specific moral worlds of the characters and their settings. Thus, to assume that a dreary, dark, or frightening symbolic portrayal of a certain setting, weather phenomenon, or piece of technology necessarily means that Dickens held a negative view of it as a thing-in-itself is to impute too many of the qualities of the Realists to Dickens, and risks obscuring deeper meanings behind obvious, yet not sufficiently complete, answers.
It is not the case, however, that Dickens never intended to land any blows against the explicit targets of negative symbolic portrayals. Dickens deplored the unwholesome conditions found in much of the inner city, disliked the pollution that came from factories, enjoyed country air, and had a notoriously troubled relationship with the railroad, all of which are reflected in his fiction. But, for example, to assume that the symbolic depiction of factories in *The Old Curiosity Shop* as symbols of dark and unnatural things can only mean that Dickens hated factories is to take too simplistic a view of Dickens as both an author and a social reformer. Dickens was not primarily concerned with delivering a jeremiad for or against a certain law, or a certain machine, or a certain living arrangement. Dickens was instead an author of the human condition. Public disgraces such as unjust laws, dirty factories, and unwholesome cities were to him symptoms of what sprang from the hard hearts and irrational minds of human beings. They were effects, not causes. Because of this, the horrific depictions of factories seen in *The Old Curiosity Shop* or of London in *Oliver Twist* do not necessarily mean that Dickens hated factories or cities in themselves any more than his frequent symbolic use of storms as symbols of conflict means that Dickens hated rain. The meaning of each object or phenomenon in the physical worlds of Dickens’s novels is, dependent on what they represent in their moral twins, and, as Wilkinson notes, these moral worlds are created by human beings, as represented by his characters. Thus, humanity and environment are intertwined in Dickens’s work, with each affecting the other, and any full understanding of his
symbolic use of inanimate objects and phenomena must also consider what these symbolic uses may reveal about Dickens’s view of the human condition.

This very aspect of Dickens’s novels, which angered some readers in his time (especially in regards to *Hard Times*, which many took as a missed opportunity for a literary frontal assault on the factory system), is precisely what has led to Dickens becoming timeless. One may write a novel that uses negative depictions of a factory to attack, for example, long hours or unsafe conditions in industrial work and do so to good effect. But once effective eight-hour workday and occupational safety laws are passed, the novel’s social purpose is fulfilled, and it is left open to being relegated to the status of a historical curiosity. Much to the detriment of mankind, however, hard-heartedness, lack of compassion, and lack of common sense are parts of the human condition that will always be with us. Thus, works that turn their literary and symbolic power toward combating these ailments of the human condition will always have a measure of relevance.

The specific issues facing Dickens’s times may have come and gone, but works like *Hard Times* that employ symbolism to question whether man has become dominated by mechanistic thinking or, like *Bleak House*, that use the same methods to express outrage over an uncaring, unresponsive government bureaucracy, retain as much currency now as they had in the author’s own time. Thus, an examination of Dickens’s treatment of these timeless themes, as objective and symbolic mechanisms, remains a relevant endeavor.
Because this study connects a large number of symbols with a great variety of meanings from across the Dickens canon, the works of Dickens scholars who have examined many of these symbols form crucial parts of this picture. F. S. Schwarzbach and William Burgan have done much to explain the symbolism of weather patterns in *Bleak House*, with Schwarzbach providing insights into the connection between symbolic weather and Dickens’s social criticism. In addition, the historian Peter Ackroyd provides invaluable historical context for the Victorians’ unique relationship to their weather patterns.

Rosemarie Bodenheimer’s scholarship identifies an idyllic and timeless quality to Dickens’s pastoral landscapes. William Burgan comes to the fore again in asserting the significance of the pastoral retreat in *Oliver Twist*, and Alexander Welsh solves the riddle of the apparent failure of the pastoral to save Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* by proposing a different sense in which it may have “saved” her. Murray Baumgarten notes the existence as symbols of urban labyrinths within Dickens’s cityscapes, and Trey Philpotts has described the unique place in Dickens’s urban landscape of Smithfield Market. Michael Hollington’s examination of Dickens’s personal relationship to London provides context for the author’s creation of urban mazes. Herbert Sussman’s work greatly clarifies the apparent contradiction between the positive attitude about the effects of industrialism reflected in Dickens’s speeches and nonfiction work and the often dark and sinister symbolic uses of factories and machines in his fiction, and in doing so identifies the function of these baleful symbols as representations of the
sins of mankind. Benjamin Fisher and J. Turow explore the relationship between temperament and fire in regards to the spontaneous combustion of Krook in *Bleak House*, and Sara Thornton examines a similar theme surrounding Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. Each of these critics has provided important insights about Dickens’s uses of symbolic phenomena: their meaning, their significance, or their historical context.

Yet while previous scholarship may have identified some of these symbolic phenomena and provided insight on what their symbolism might mean within a specific work or context, a full study of them will integrate them into a whole, moving beyond their importance either as objective things-in-themselves or even as individual symbols. It will place them within the larger picture of Dickens’s created worlds, in which man and environment shape each other, and where human intent and action is made manifest in the physical world. It will address the larger questions of what pattern they may collectively form and what the overall effect of them upon Dickens’s writings may have remained largely unexplored. Thus, in addition to greatly expanding upon Wilkinson’s revelation of the existence of physical worlds within Dickens’s works which manifest the moral worlds with which they are twinned, this study will use insights by other scholars to provide a foundation for a larger edifice that will connect these symbols to each other, to the idea of twinned moral and physical worlds across the Dickens canon, and to the larger question of how this reflects on Dickens both as a storyteller and as a social critic.
The first chapter examines Dickens’s symbolic and allegorical use of weather. Symbolic weather patterns in Dickens’s novels provide him with the opportunity to comment upon human behavior in both the private and public spheres of life. For example, the symbolic fog surrounding the Chancery court and rain at Chesney Wold provide Dickens with methods by which to make comment upon the stifling bureaucracy of the courts and the decline of Britain’s hereditary aristocracy. In *Dombey and Son*, the personal coldness of Paul Dombey, Sr., towards those around him, and most importantly his children, is twinned with physically cold temperatures that exist in his presence. In many novels, including *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, storms accompany conflict, moral breakdowns, and the arrival of unexpected and unwelcome people. And in *Great Expectations*, fog returns, in the guise of the marsh mists that dramatically rise in order to reveal Pip’s destiny and symbolize the falling away of his childhood illusions. Each of these meteorological phenomena illustrates the symbolic link that Dickens established between the human behavior of his characters and the physical worlds surrounding them.

The second chapter examines Dickens’s development of pastoral landscapes and his creation of mystical “green worlds,” the nurturing and restorative powers of which create spaces in which Dickens’s characters, and especially his child characters, can be healed of their physical and psychological wounds and find peace in idyllic environments. The idea of the enchanted pastoral is a very old one: Shakespeare, for example, had featured such settings
in plays such as *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Nights’ Dream*, and Wordsworth’s mystical pastoral poetry of the early nineteenth century was both wildly popular and deeply influential. Dickens’s green worlds were unique, however, not in what they were, but in what they stood in contrast to: the crowding and atomization of the nineteenth-century megacity and the pollution and blight brought by industrialism. They were also unique in being physical manifestations of the moral state of the people who inhabit them. It is the people within such green worlds that lend these places their characteristics, as the human intention to heal and nurture becomes physically manifested in the mystical ability of these locations to do so.

In the third chapter, the focus moves into the heart of the city, to explore the mazes that Dickens creates from its labyrinthine streets and in which his characters become both physically and allegorically lost. Dickens was a dedicated, lifelong *flâneur*, a term coined by Baudelaire and invoked in relation to Dickens by Michael Hollington, which describes a person who habitually explores a city with no purpose in mind other than to experience it. As an urban explorer, Dickens was unmatched in his time, and his knowledge of London gave him a unique ability to turn the streets of the city into impenetrable, inescapable novelistic mazes. Each urban maze created by Dickens, whether in London or elsewhere, reflects the circumstances and moral landscapes in which his characters find themselves. Thus, his mazes are constructed from criminality, greed, family dysfunction, inhumane philosophy, cruelty, and lack of charity as
much as from the materials of brick and steel and stone. In presenting these reimagined cityscapes, Dickens not only crafts a compelling narrative of his characters’ attempts to escape them, but also portrays some of the consequences of unbalanced moral worlds, especially as seen within the rapidly-expanding cities of the early Victorian age.

The fourth chapter will examine Dickens’s symbolic use of another phenomenon new to his age, the machine. Dickens’s speeches and nonfiction work show an embrace of industry and the new technologies they produced. And yet, in his novels Dickens often used machines and factories as symbols that were sinister and terrifying in nature. In understanding this apparent contradiction, the human factor is key. The machines themselves are just objects; it is their status as physical manifestations of man’s cruelties and follies that gives them their dark enchantment as symbols. Where they are symbols of darkness, they are symbols of darkness within the human heart, and where they are terrifying, they are so because human beings made them so. If there is a single machine that Dickens may have genuinely had mixed feelings about, it is the train. Though the trauma of his involvement in the Staplehurst railway disaster of 1865, which occurred when his penultimate novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, was nearly complete, came too late to affect the bulk of his work, the particularly dark and foreboding symbolic use of trains seen in his earlier novels seems to suggest that this experience only reinforced a pre-existing ambivalence towards that particular technology.
The fifth and final chapter is a study of the ways in which Dickens made use of that most ancient and universal of symbols, fire. While much has been written about the symbolism found in the fiery deaths of Krook in *Bleak House* and Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, a look at a wider selection of Dickens’s uses of symbolic fire, including examples from *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and *Hard Times*, reveals that there is a distinct pattern to it, one linked to the emotional and moral worlds of the human characters associated with it. Physical fire is linked to what Dick Swiveller of *The Old Curiosity Shop* referred to as the “fire of soul” (TOCS 23) and to the Aristotelian concept of the Golden Mean, which teaches that extremes of any human trait create a destructive imbalance. In Dickens’s worlds, too much of this emotional fire creates gleeful sadists, too little creates impassive masochists, and neither is healthy for the souls of those characters themselves or for the people around them. Both are linked to images of physical fire and its trappings: the former to literal heat, smoke, and fire, and the latter to dying embers and cold ash.

All of these inanimate objects and phenomena, then, find their symbolic use not in being fictional analogues to their counterparts in the real world, but in being physical twins of some facet of the moral and emotional landscapes of Dickens’s created worlds and the characters who inhabit them. In representing them, or their inevitable consequences, these symbols facilitate Dickens’s social criticism of those intentions and actions whether they are at work in the public sphere of life, the private sphere of life, or some combination of the two. In
examining how each of them integrates into a broader picture, the study of individual phenomena as symbols may be transcended, and the author's joining of human intention and action to the physical worlds created in his fiction may be revealed.
Chapter One

A Tainting Sort of Weather

Of all of the symbolic phenomena found in Dickens’s created worlds, perhaps none is as striking or prominent as his symbolic use of weather. Rain, fog, mist, mud, sunshine, wind, and, most importantly of all, storms form crucial parts of the structure of the author’s dreamlike landscapes. As notable for their unnatural actions as they are for their imaginative power, the weather patterns and microclimates found in his novels serve as symbols and leitmotifs that define people, places, events, and institutions. In the hands of a man who was simultaneously one of the greatest novelists and one of the most preeminent social critics of his day, these served both as literary devices and as tools of social criticism. Dickens, whose idea of social criticism extended to both the personal and the political spheres of life, to individual attitudes as much as to public laws (if not, in fact, more so), uses allegorical weather to comment upon situations as diverse as a hopelessly ineffectual court system in Bleak House, a father’s pride-driven coldness to his daughter in Dombey and Son, and the revelation of new life paths in Great Expectations. Each of these is surrounded by its own variant of what the sinister Mr. Weevle in Bleak House referred to as “a tainting sort of weather” (BH 467), which serves to add a taint of dramatic resonance or social criticism to the unfolding story.
Experiencing changes in weather is a universal experience, and yet the Victorians had a unique relationship to their weather patterns. Beyond the obvious of the often harsh and unpredictable weather of the British Isles, there were social factors that contributed to this as well. Up until the middle of Dickens’s career, Miasma theory, which held that “bad airs” were the cause of disease, and that, as the historian Peter Ackroyd in *London: The Biography* noted, “it was believed that ‘all smell is disease’” (Ackroyd, *London* 338), was still dominant in the medical community. Thus, the people of the early- and middle-Victorian era lived in great fear of unpleasant smells and bad airs, especially those borne upon the winds blowing out of the disease-ridden slums of the booming cities. Rain and its by-product, mud, were a far greater hazard in the days when even cobblestone-paved streets were a relative rarity, reserved mostly for the centers of the largest cities. Coal smoke, produced in massive amounts both by factories and by the heating of homes, provided ready nuclei around which fog droplets formed, making British cities, and especially London, far foggier in the Victorian age than today. This coal dust-infused fog often hung gray or black over the cities, turning day into night and creating terrible hazards. According to Ackroyd, in the year 1873 alone “there were seven hundred ‘extra’ deaths” (Ackroyd, *London* 428) in the city attributed to causes related to fog. This included numerous unfortunates who, unable to see where they were going in particularly dense fog, blindly walked off of embankments, fell into the Thames, and drowned (a fate which even befell one of Dickens’s own characters—the
villainous Daniel Quilp of *The Old Curiosity Shop*). Beyond this, fog shrouded all manner of crime in the city, from rape and robbery to the shadowy activities of pickpockets and prostitutes. With so much drama, danger, and mystery enshrouded in it, it is little wonder that Ackroyd noted, “It can be said that fog is the greatest character in nineteenth-century fiction” (Ackroyd, *London* 429). All of these weather patterns combined to create a setting that was unique to its place and time and which today exists only within the pages of the fiction produced in it.

In addition to the historical context necessary to understanding weather as a symbol within Dickens’s, or any Victorian, fiction, there is also a critical context to be considered as well. Of all of the symbolic phenomena found within Dickens’s work, weather is the one that has received perhaps the most attention from critics, especially in relation to *Bleak House*, the novel in which it is most prominent. That, for example, the fog and mud surrounding the Chancery court represent a callous bureaucracy, that the rain in Chesney Wold represents the decay of the landed aristocracy, or that the east wind serves as John Jarndyce’s personal omen of evil are ideas that have received attention from many critics over the years, including the likes of F. S. Schwarzbach and Alice Van Buren Kelley. But while they deserve some reiteration here, these serve only as supporting ideas. The task remains to establish that they are not only symbols, but examples of physical manifestations of human intention and action, and to place them within the larger pattern of Dickens’s creation of physical worlds that reflect their moral twins.
The fog that surrounds the Chancery court is, in fact, an excellent example of an environment that is inseparable from the human intention and action within it. The Temple Bar seat of the court is at the heart of a supernatural fog that makes navigation of that quarter of the city nearly impossible and an equally persistent mud that mires down anyone and anything that may be coming or going. These are components of a darkly enchanted fairy-tale world that surrounds the court, where time stands still and those trapped within lose hope of escape. These manifestations represent and complement the court, for as Dickens tells us, “Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds this day in the sight of heaven and earth” (BH 12). The weather extends inside the court chambers itself, where the Lord High Chancellor is sitting on the bench “with a foggy glory round his head” (BH 12): “Well may the court be dim, with wasting candles here and there; well may the fog hang heavy in it. . . where the attendant wigs are all stuck in a fog-bank!” (BH 12-13). The solicitors of the court slur the Lord High Chancellor’s title from “My Lord” into “Mlud” (BH 15), a word that is phonically just a hair’s breadth away from “mud,” thus identifying the Chancellor himself as part and parcel of the mire. The fog and mud are, then, inseparable from the Chancellor and the activities of the court. They are not just associated with it, but in a world in which the physical world is a manifestation of its moral twin, they are actively generated by its existence.
The causal connection between the fog and mud and the human activities of the Chancery court is so strong that the more distance the characters put between themselves and the moral world of the court, the more its physical manifestations dissipate. This is true both in spatial and temporal terms. As the trio of Esther Summerson, Ada Clare, and Richard Carstone ride away from the dark heart of the Chancery court towards their new home at Bleak House, Esther notes, “The day brightened very much, and still brightened as we went westward. We went our way through the sunshine and the fresh air” (BH 73). Thus, as they leave the court behind, they leave its fog and mud behind as well. The Temple Bar will eventually find its own reprieve from these phenomena, but only during a “long vacation,” during which “[t]he courts are all shut up; the public offices lie in a hot sleep; Westminster Hall itself is a shady solitude where nightingales might sing, and a tenderer class of suitors than is usually found there, walk” (BH 278). Only then, when the court is out of session and the physical world of the Temple Bar is unburdened of its twin, can sun and warmth exist in that location. And when it comes, it comes with such strength that it seems to be releasing all the pent-up heat that was prevented from manifesting itself by the court’s presence, for, “[i]t is the hottest long vacation known for many years. . . . Temple Bar gets so hot that it is, to the adjacent Strand and Fleet Street, what a heater is in an urn, and keeps them simmering all night” (BH 279). With the term out, “The bar of England is scattered over the face of the earth” (BH 278), and in its absence, the
dark enchantment that it casts over its surroundings is, albeit temporarily, released.

The power of allegorical microclimates to reflect what lies at their centers is an integral part of the physics of the dreamlike world of *Bleak House* that extends far beyond the Temple Bar. The twinned, opposing worlds of the Boythorn estate and Chesney Wold, though they share a much-disputed border, are dominated by completely different weather patterns that symbolize the social and moral status of those found therein. The Boythorn estate is a place of eternal warmth and sunshine, which seems to surround and reflect its eternally youthful, eternally energetic owner. Chesney Wold, inhabited by the haughty, cold Dedlocks, whose aristocratic ways are fading from relevance in a quickly-changing society, is an utter contrast—an enchanted water world of eternal rain and cold, slowly molding and rotting from the inside. The terminology describing the flooded grounds is that of languor and torpidity:

The waters are out in Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground for half a mile in breadth is a stagnant river with melancholy trees for islands in it and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain. My Lady Dedlock's place has been extremely dreary... The deer, looking soaked, leave quagmires where they pass. The shot of a rifle loses its sharpness in the moist air, and its smoke moves in a tardy little cloud towards the green rise, coppice-topped, that makes a background for the falling rain. The view from my Lady Dedlock's own windows is alternately a lead-coloured view and a view in Indian ink. (BH 17-18)

The language of this passage links the rain falling on the Chesney Wold, which drains all strength and vitality from the place, to the state of the landed
aristocracy which is represented by the estate. Like the flooded grounds, the aristocratic system is indeed “stagnant,” and there is much “melancholy” to Dickens’s representation of it. The condition of one is identical to the condition of the other. This redoubt of old, doomed ways is a place of “oversleeping Rip Van Winkles” (BH 17); while those at the Chancery court may wish for time to move on, but find that it does not, Chesney Wold is filled with people who wish that time would stand still, but find that it will not. Chesney Wold and the world it represents slowly rot; the future belongs to the Ironmaster Rouncewells of the world, and Dickens seems to find both good and bad in this, for his nameless narrator remarks:

There is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it; it has its appointed place. But the evil of it is that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller's cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air. (BH 17)

Soon enough the “larger worlds” will intrude upon the ancient aristocratic estate and those within, and their rushing will be too loud to be ignored.

The most prominent and remarked-upon of all the symbolic weather in *Bleak House* is not one that surrounds an institution, however, but a personal weather pattern: John Jarndyce’s own omen of evil, the east wind. The critic F.S. Schwarzbach has provided keen insights on this phenomenon and its historical and literary contexts. As he notes, “Whenever Jarndyce is confronted by an uncomfortable situation—made angry by a friend, embarrassed by an expression of gratitude for his largesse, or frustrated by a social evil he cannot alter—he
externalizes the emotion, transforming it into the East Wind” (Schwarzbach 82).

Yet the east wind is both a personal symbol peculiar to the character of Jarndyce, and a symbol that all Londoners would have found significance in, as Schwarzbach goes on to explain:

Today, when there is relatively little pollution visually apparent in London, the fact that the prevailing winds over the metropolis are westerly, that is blowing from west to east, is of little importance. But when London was heated and powered by some million coal fires and before there was any effective sewage disposal system, it was. It meant that the smoke and smell produced in the city would normally be blown down the Thames Valley to the sea. (Schwarzbach 82).

This would have been important enough because of the stifling odors brought by the east wind, but in a time in which the Miasma Theory of disease still held court, the east wind was not just considered unpleasant, but potentially deadly. It was, to Londoners of the time, quite literally a harbinger of doom. To Dickens, ever the social reformer, introducing the concept of the east wind allowed him to play upon this fear to illustrate a connection between the rich and the poor. As Schwarzbach points out:

The diseases produced by the accumulation of raw sewage not only affect the poor of the East End, but inevitably are borne by the wind to the West End as well. The very same idea becomes one of the most important thematic devices of Bleak House. The rotting, half-buried corpse of Lady Dedlock’s lover gives off noxious emanations which infect Jo with a fever, which he in turn passes to Esther, Lady Dedlock’s daughter, disfiguring her perhaps for life. Lady Dedlock may visit Tom-all-Alone’s if she wishes, but Tom repays the call with deadlier intentions. It is the East Wind, then, which guarantees that all classes of society will be linked, by death if not mutual responsibility. (Schwarzbach 83)
Thus, the east wind can be seen as a linking force that connects the rich to the poor. If the existence of the east wind meant that the rich of both worlds could never truly separate themselves from the poor and their sufferings, then the living conditions of the poor were undeniably the concern of the rich as well, if for no other reason than concern for their own well-being. The east wind performs double symbolic duty in both helping to vividly define a character and aiding in social criticism.

It is in this social context that the significance of the east wind may transcend previous critical evaluations and be placed within the larger picture of twinned physical and moral worlds. By creating a fictional London in which the physical and moral worlds are reflections of each other, Dickens makes a point about the real, non-fictional London. In both, the east wind, as a phenomenon feared as a bringer of disease by the middle and upper classes of Londoners, was a manifestation of the unsanitary and unwholesome conditions in which the urban poor lived, which in turn were permitted to exist by the indifference and inaction of those very higher classes of people. The literary importance of the east wind is not that John Jarndyce perceives it, nor even that he understands it, but that, as a physical manifestation of the evils of the world he inhabits, it affects him so deeply. Jarndyce may be sometimes buffoonish, but he is not indifferent, and, in his own small way, he does take action to rescue as many unfortunates as he can from the ills of his age, just as the humanitarian Dickens did in projects such as his involvement in Urania cottage. Neither Jarndyce nor Dickens could
believe that the wind could ever literally be stopped from blowing east to west, but it is the foul east wind as a manifestation of poverty and suffering in both the fictional and the real world that could be stopped by human action. Thus Dickens uses this weather phenomenon as a symbol within his fictional worlds, and symbolism as a call to action in his own world.

John Jarndyce’s character may be in part defined by his unique microclimate, but he is not the only Dickens character to possess one, nor the only one whose personal weather system is laden with social significance. The air of emotional frigidity that surrounds Paul Dombey, Sr., in *Dombey and Son* is often manifested in the form of physically cold temperatures that surround him as well. The description of the christening day of his son and heir demonstrates this and even manages to feature a guest appearance by the east wind:

> It happened to be an iron-grey autumnal day, with a shrewd east wind blowing – a day in keeping with the proceedings. Mr. Dombey represented in himself the wind, the shade, and the autumn of the christening. He stood in his library to receive the company, as hard and cold as the weather; and when he looked out through the glass room, at the trees in the little garden, their brown and yellow leaves came fluttering down, as if he blighted them. (DS 56)

Indeed he does blight them, for what should be a joyous occasion even with a child whose mother died bearing him is unbearably frosty, in both senses, with Dombey, Sr., holding court. His antipathy towards the mere presence of his unloved, unappreciated daughter seems to bring forth physical cold: “The atmosphere became or might have become colder and colder, when Mr Dombey stood frigidly watching his little daughter” (DS 60). Yet we see that the frigid
atmosphere affects even the son he so desperately desired to have: “‘Please to bring the child in quick out of the air there’, whispered the beadle, holding open the inner door of the church. Little Paul might have asked with Hamlet ‘into my grave?’ so chill and earthy was the place” (DS 61). Dombey cannot perceive, but Dickens as the author knows, that the coldness seen here portends a short and less than happy life for the child in an environment desperately short on genuine warmth. Starved of it, Paul, Jr., will wither and eventually end up in his grave tragically early. For Dickens, this symbolic representation of cold pride and selfish love (for indeed, Dombey, Sr., seems only to love his son for his ability to carry on the family name) and the foreshadowing of their eventual consequences were part and parcel of his willingness to extend social criticism to the personal and the private spheres of life. Dickens devoted great amounts of his literary effort to addressing the needs of children, and it is here where he illustrates that their need for genuine and unselfish love is nearly as important as their need for food or shelter.

Because of its great power to evoke human emotion at a basic, instinctual level, there is one weather phenomenon that Dickens symbolically uses more than any other, especially when dealing with the personal and emotional: the storm. Storms appear repeatedly in Dickens’s novels as harbingers of ill, companions of disaster, and manifestations of strife and discord. This is certainly the case when Louisa Gradgrind, the unhappy young woman trapped in a loveless marriage in *Hard Times*, is tempted to commit adultery by the roué
James Harthouse. Though she refuses his proposal, she goes to her father directly after leaving Harthouse to confront him about her doleful marriage and the misery that following his strictly factual philosophy has caused her. All through this fateful evening, a physical storm slowly builds that mirrors the building of the emotional storm surrounding Louisa Gradgrind. The storm is a physical manifestation of the crisis itself, with both intensifying simultaneously and in proportion to one another. As she delivers her rejection to her would-be lover, the storm begins with rain, and, as they part, it becomes more severe, with “heavy rain among the leaves, and a thunderstorm rolling up,” with rain coming down in “a sheet of water” (HT 197-98). But it is when she finally confronts the father who set her on her path of misery through his slavish following of an inhumane philosophy that the storm truly reaches its height: “The thunder was rolling into distance, and the rain was pouring down like a deluge, when the door of his room opened. He looked round the lamp upon his table, and saw, with amazement, his eldest daughter” (HT 200). Her words burst forth, like lightning from a dark cloud:

I curse the hour in which I was born to such a destiny. . . . How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here! (HT 200-01)

All of the righteous anger that stems from an upbringing in which all real love, attachment, and fancy were subjugated to the demands of her father’s Utilitarian
philosophy and its doctrines of logic and “fact, fact, fact” (HT 27) is loosed in this moment. All the passion that she suppressed in the name of following her father’s demands bursts forth now, made manifest in the violence of the physical storm that rages above the parent and child. The thundering of the storm matches the thundering power of her accusations against him, and the torrents of rain match the torrent of condemnation flowing from the author’s pen against the Utilitarianism that he found so inhuman and abhorrent. Again, the physical world matches its moral twin, and in representing the consequences of this philosophy as twinned emotional and physical storms, the author demonstrates his belief that it can only lead to discord and misery.

Scenes of trouble signaling or foreshadowing a moment of discord or disaster are a common theme in Dickens’s novels, and thus Louisa Gradgrind’s is hardly the only storm that gathers around such events. A similar one occurs when Nell’s grandfather gives in to his compulsion by gambling away the last of their money in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. This time, the gathering storm guides the pair towards doom, for they are out for no more than an innocent walk in the country when

The wind began to moan in hollow murmurs, as the sun went down carrying glad day elsewhere; and a train of dull clouds coming up against it, menaced thunder and lightning. Large drops of rain soon began to fall, and, as the storm clouds came sailing onward, others supplied the void they left behind and spread over all the sky. Then was heard the low rumbling of distant thunder, then the lightning quivered, and then the darkness of an hour seemed to have gathered in an instant. (TOCS 223)
Just as the distant thunder in this passage foreshadows a physical storm, so too it foreshadows a crisis that will quickly come to a head. The two seek shelter from the storm inside an inn where a game of cards is in progress. Trapped inside by the storm with the object of his addiction, the old man quickly gives in to temptation. A chain of events takes place in which the storm builds as the old man sinks deeper into a mad determination to win, eventually going into a frenzy equal to the frenzy of the storm outside. Both the physical storm and the moral/emotional storm work to mirror each other, and in a sense, create each other. The physical storm traps them inside, prolonging and worsening the situation, and the old man’s anguish and the child’s desperation manifest themselves in the storm. The storm finally comes to a head at the moment of one of the greatest traumas that the narrative will visit upon the child—her grandfather sneaking into her room as she lies not quite asleep and outright stealing from her the last few coins secreted inside her dress. It is little wonder that she finds reason to exclaim, “Oh! what hard fortune brought us here!” (TOCS 227). Indeed the storm is both an enabler and a manifestation of this hard fortune, with the guiding hand of the author using a great storm as both symbol and instrument.

As storms are an unexpected phenomenon that can bring great destruction in their wake, it is perhaps natural that when people who have destructive histories or destinies unexpectedly arrive upon the scene, they should be attended by storms. One such violent storm appears in the sky over Coketown as Stephen Blackpool arrives home to find that his estranged, dissolute, drunken
wife unexpectedly returned in *Hard Times*. Other storms prominently accompany a pair of highly similar encounters in separate Dickens novels. In *Bleak House*, a storm hits during Esther Summerson’s first encounter with Lady Dedlock, the woman she does not know is actually her mother; in *Great Expectations*, a storm hits during Pip’s second encounter with Abel Magwitch, the man he does not know has actually been his benefactor. The power of the storm image is attested to by the critic William Burgan, who notes that “the storm portends evil, in association both with Lady Dedlock and with Hortense. . . . The dramatic irony implicit in Lady Dedlock’s coming, and the behavior of her French maid, is closely associated with the storm, itself an intrinsically adverse element in the scene represented” (Burgan 298). The sentiment could apply equally to both novels.

Both encounters foreshadow ruin and eventual doom for those who have arrived borne by the storm: Lady Dedlock will die of exposure, in rags, at the grave of her former lover, Hortense will hang for shooting the sinister lawyer Tulkinghorn, and Magwitch will have his fortune seized by the state and die in prison while awaiting hanging. Their pasts, and their futures, are made symbolically manifest in the physical storms that accompany them at crucial moments.

In the same manner that the storm that accompanies Magwitch to his meeting with Pip arrives to announce the convict’s destiny, another meteorological phenomenon acts as a gateway to the discovery of the young protagonist’s own destiny. Physical mists which obscure the landscape accompany the appearance and disappearance of possible destinies that lie
before Pip, lifting to reveal and open the way to them, and lowering to obscure
them and close them off. The mists are first prominently mentioned during a
fateful occurrence: his mission to deliver food and drink to the mysterious
escaped convict, later revealed to be Magwitch, hidden in the marshes. As Pip
tells us, on that morning

\[
\text{[t]he marsh-mist was so thick, that the wooden finger on the post directing people to our village \textendash\ a direction which they never accepted, for they never came there \textendash\ was invisible to me until I was quite close under it. . . . The mist was heavier yet when I got out upon the marshes, so that instead of my running at everything, everything seemed to run at me. (GE 16)}
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This is a critical moment, one that will change the young man’s destiny in ways
he cannot imagine. His future until that moment seemed assured: an
apprenticeship with his brother-in-law, then a life as a simple village blacksmith.
Though Pip does not understand the ways in which that occasion will obscure
that path, eventually cutting him off from it forever, the mist nevertheless arrives
to physically represent this clouding of his once-certain future. Thus the mist
becomes ever more intense and seems to get him ever more lost, the closer he
gets to the man whose secret munificence will so greatly alter the course of his
life.

Eventually the mists will lift; they do so prominently at the end of part one
of the novel and again at the tale’s end, and Pip will perceive his future laid out
before him in both instances. The first time, as he leaves his village for London,
he relates that “the light mists were solemnly rising, as if to show me the world,
and I had been so innocent and little there, and all beyond was so unknown and
And the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me” (GE 157). Pip is now able to understand that the lifting of the marsh mists physically manifests a new path, yet here naively assumes that the new path is a certain one. It is not to be so, for the destiny of gentlemanhood and happiness with Estella that Pip believes has been laid out before him will, as he will eventually admit, end up having “dissolved, like our own marsh mists before the sun” (GE 464). Here, Pip’s use of the simile of the mists illustrates that once again a path that he was sure was clearly laid out before him has turned into one that has been obscured and cut off from him. It is only at the conclusion of his journey that a final lifting of the mists will occur. The novel, and Pip’s journey, ends with the words

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. (GE 479)

This ending is somewhat ambiguous, leaving the mists cleared away to reveal a destiny for the pair that may or may not ever be realized. Yet the invocation of the lifting morning mists of long ago, paired with the lifting evening mists of the present, indicate the idea of a journey come full-circle. The rising mists have revealed this path to a far less naïve and innocent Pip, whose much increased wisdom has been bought at the cost of great pain, and who may now be able to walk the path that has been opened to him.
In all of these cases, weather that represents a physical manifestation of the emotional and moral states of the worlds in which they exist is crucial to Dickens’s narrative and allegory. These weather patterns are generated by and reflect the worlds that surround them, and in creating them, the author enables himself to illustrate these states in ways important both to the building of his drama and to his social criticism. By making situations that range from public policies like the state of the landed aristocracy to matters of the private sphere like the changes in course of a young man’s destiny manifest through symbolic weather, Dickens brings an added dimension of tangibility and immediacy to them. Thus weather, a phenomenon with great symbolic power, forms one of the most important pieces of Dickens’s allegorical literary worlds.
Chapter Two:

Some Quiet Country Place

Dickens was the quintessential author of the city and particularly of London. The rhythm and bustle of city life served as his muse, and every one of his novels is set predominantly in an urban milieu. And yet, consummate urbanist though he may have been, Dickens as a social reformer could hardly ignore the dark side of life in the city, with all of its anonymity, atomization, pollution, crime, and poverty. In order to present a contrasting environment to his often bleak urban and industrial settings, the author created within his novels a series of “green worlds,” idealized pastoral settings to which his characters could retreat to be nurtured and healed by the power of nature and the slow, gentle texture of life in the countryside. Though representations of the restorative power of mystical green worlds were hardly new in literature even in the nineteenth century, Dickens’s use of the concept touched upon some of the enormous social, environmental, and economic changes that came to Britain in his time by contrasting them with the effects of city life and industrialism. And while the Dickensian city could never become a green world, simply being located in the countryside was not enough to make a place a green world either. To the humanistic Dickens, creating an ideal environment was not just a matter of gaining distance from madding crowds or noisy machines, nor could such a place be created by the magic of fairy kings. It was human qualities, such as
compassion, humility, mercy, and honesty, that were as necessary in creating a green world as were open fields and fresh air. Thus, while previous critics have asserted, correctly, that Dickens created idealized pastoral landscapes that provided refuge from these places and the ills they contained, it is worthwhile to undertake a deeper examination of the concept of them as places imbued with supernatural powers of healing and nurturing that are generated by the humane and charitable spirit of the people who inhabit them.

Though the concept of a restorative green world was not an innovation on Dickens’s part, his were uniquely adapted to a nineteenth-century context. The Shakespearean green world, as seen, for example, in *As You Like It*, was a place where the characters could retreat from circumstance and wait for contrivance to allow them to return to the normal world with all their problems resolved. There was little systemically wrong with the world from which they came, and their reason for fleeing stemmed only from immediate circumstance. The Dickensian green world, on the other hand, heals both injury and illness, and also, crucially, provides a place of refuge from the systemic ills and excesses of the Victorian age. Its characters come to it with wounds both of the body and of the soul, often inflicted while they passed through nightmarish urban or industrial landscapes (scenes that were often full of physical manifestations of the indifference, bad intent, and misguided philosophy often found therein), or faced problems that were based in some very real social ills of the day. By creating a fictional rural setting in which the very landscape is imbued by the kindness of good people
with a mystical ability to heal those wounds, Dickens suggests that the right combination of setting and human intention can ameliorate the harm inflicted by the worst facets of his time.

Oliver Twist’s journey takes him through the range of these environments, and certainly he has harm inflicted upon him by some of them. He starts off from his birthplace, which, despite being a country town, is not at all a green world, travels to the heart of the metropolis, and then returns to the countryside, this time to what is most definitely a green world, with his entire support system of adults in tow. The first of these locations is as dirty, unkempt, and decayed as it is mean, corrupt, and loveless. Whatever benefits it may gain from its distance from London are negated by the low character of its people, which manifests itself in the condition of the town:

The houses on either side were high and large, but very old, and tenanted by people of the poorest class: as their neglected appearance would have sufficiently denoted, without the concurrent testimony afforded by the squalid looks of the few men and women who, with folded arms and bodies half doubled, occasionally skulked along. . . . Some houses which had become insecure from age and decay, were prevented from falling into the street, by huge beams of wood reared against the walls, and firmly planted in the road; but even these crazy dens seemed to have been selected as the nightly haunts of some houseless wretches. (OT 37-38)

The poor here are pathetic, yet lack any of the nobility in poverty that is seen in Oliver. If their surroundings are wretched and squalid, they are no less so, and the squalid environment and its squalid inhabitants reflect each other. Yet there is a reason why Oliver’s hometown must be as horrid and corrupt as it is. That is in order to drive him as a penniless refugee into the great and terrible metropolis, so
that Dickens may show Oliver, a country naïf, experiencing it with an initial awe
that is quickly replaced by terror and disillusionment. He has high hopes and
expectations for his new life in the city, expressing an optimism in his ability to
find refuge and, eventually, make his fortune there:

London! – that great large place! – nobody – not even Mr. Bumble –
could ever find him there! He had often heard the old men in the
workhouse, too, say that no lad of spirit need want in London; and
that there were ways of living in that vast city, which those who had
been bred up in country parts had no idea of. (OT 54)

Yet all of these hopes will be dashed before too long, as the reality of city life for
a poor orphan reveals itself to him. Indeed there will prove to be “ways of living”
there that he has “no idea of,” yet they will be so morally horrifying that he will
eventually “will that he should die at once, than be reserved for crimes, so fearful
and appalling” (OT 157). Indeed he will be able to disappear into the anonymity
of the city, and yet the fact that it will be difficult for anyone to find him will also
mean that it will be difficult for anyone to help him or to apprehend the criminals
who have victimized him. Oliver will not be in the city long at all before he
understands that he has made a terrible mistake by coming there.

Oliver will eventually make two escapes from the crime and squalor he
finds at the heart of the metropolis: the first a false start, and the second a
permanent liberation from them. Mr. Brownlow’s initial attempt to save Oliver, yet
keep him in the city, is doomed from the very start. No protective green world
may exist there: the boy may be safe inside Brownlow’s house, but the wolves of
the city are too close by the door, they know the lay of the land too well, and the
support system around Oliver is too small to keep them at bay for long. All of the facts of city life—the anonymity of it, the smallness of an individual within its enormity and complexity, the crime so persistent that it fades into the backdrop—work in favor of Fagin and his cohorts. When the girl Nancy accosts him on the street in order to drag him back to Fagin’s lair, it is in front of a crowd of strangers who, unlike a community in a tight-knit country village, don’t know either of these children and don’t know any better than to accept Nancy’s explanation for her actions. Thus Oliver’s cries of protest are meaningless: “It was of little moment, indeed, whether they were intelligible or no, for there was nobody to care for them, had they been ever so plain” (OT 118). The people in the neighborhood around Oliver neither know him well enough to know whether he is in real danger, nor feel a close enough connection to him to be compelled to intervene. Once Oliver is returned to Fagin, Brownlow can never hope to find him; he has become a needle in the distinctly urban haystack of the vast, bustling city. The city may have been able to provide some limited, temporary respite, but only by leaving its confines permanently and escaping to a place where the environment does not work in favor of the malefactors can he ever hope to find a place truly capable of providing him the sheltering and nurturing environment he needs.

In order to draw a sharp contrast with his previous environments, Oliver’s countryside refuge, in the hands of the Maylies and their retinue, is depicted as both supernaturally beautiful and filled with superhumanly kind and decent folk. As Alexander Welsh notes in his tome, The City of Dickens: “In Oliver Twist,
building on the satiric contrast of city and country, Dickens. . . associates the far-away place with an almost Platonic idea of a previous existence” (Welsh 198). This seems to resonate with the critic Rosemarie Bodenheimer’s assessment of this bucolic locale: “[C]alling upon the past, it creates a pre-Bumble village world” (Bodenheimer 456). Certainly, Dickens’s portrait of this environment shows in it a transcendent beauty that seems very far away from all of the ills of modernity:

> Who can describe the pleasure and delight, the peace of mind and soft tranquillity, the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods, of an inland village! . . . Men who have lived in crowded, pent-up streets, through lives of toil, and who have never wished for change; men, to whom custom has indeed been second nature, and who have come almost to love each brick and stone that formed the narrow boundaries of their daily walks; even they, with the hand of death upon them, have been known to yearn at last for one short glimpse of Nature's face; and, carried far from the scenes of their old pains and pleasures, have seemed to pass at once into a new state of being. . . . The memories which peaceful country scenes call up, are not of this world, nor of its thoughts and hopes. . . . Oliver, whose days had been spent among squalid crowds and in the midst of noise and brawling, seemed to enter on a new existence there. (OT 253)

This passage illustrates the degree to which Dickens’s pastorals were not just places of escape from the ills of industrialism or the city, but were idealized, perfect places. It is this portrait of place that is already supernaturally perfect that lays the foundation for the establishment of its supernatural powers of healing and nurturing. Rose Maylie brings up this promise when she tells Oliver that, in his new surroundings, “[t]he quiet place, the pure air, and all the pleasures and beauties of spring, will restore you in a few days” (OT 248). Yet even these quantities are not enough by themselves to make this the sort of mystical, healing
Dickensian green world that Oliver will need in order to recover physically and psychologically. What makes this town such a place is that here, the environment and the nature of the people within it complement and reflect each other. The beauty of the landscape is matched by the selfless, reflexive goodness of the people that Oliver finds in it, and both combine to heal Oliver’s wounds. The connection between the hopes and intentions of this retinue and Oliver’s state of well-being is illustrated here:

Oliver gradually throve and prospered under the united care of Mrs. Maylie, Rose, and the kind-hearted Mr. Losberne. If fervent prayers, gushing from hearts overcharged with gratitude, be heard in heaven – and if they be not, what prayers are! – the blessings which the orphan child called down upon them, sunk into their souls, diffusing peace and happiness. (OT 247)

The happiness brought to the retinue by Oliver, the love and empathy that they in turn express towards him, and the progress of his physical recovery are all here intertwined, with each of them inseparable from the others. The nature of the setting plays a part, and the Christian God is given a measure of credit, but the connection most strongly expressed by this passage is that between intention and reality. The adults around Oliver wish that he should heal, and thus he does heal.

Though the city and its attendant corruptions are not quite through with Oliver yet, as the reconnaissance expedition by Fagin and Monks into the green world illustrates, the boy is never again in serious danger after being removed to his new home. Unlike the environs around Mr. Brownlow’s city residence, the lay of the land in the green world does not favor the malefactors. The protection
afforded to the child by his enchanted surroundings and its preternaturally charitable inhabitants is too strong to be overcome, and the villains return to the city empty-handed. Indeed, it is soon they who are the ones being pursued, for the support system that has coalesced around Oliver has such strength and dedication that it is able to pursue his victimizers even to the heart of the city and affect their capture there. Yet even after this victory, Oliver’s idyllic green world continues to enchant, drawing to it those who have cared for him as if by magic. All of the Maylies, including Rose’s new husband, make their permanent home there, as does Mr. Brownlow, and even his motherly housekeeper. With the child at its center, they form “a little society, whose condition approached as nearly to one of perfect happiness as can ever be known in this changing world.” (OT 437). As Bodenheimer notes, with the conclave permanently seated there, “the pastoral world is soon revealed to be the place for the careful cultivation of middle-class behavior” (Bodenheimer 456), and Oliver is left, inevitably, to the greatest of Dickensian fates: to grow into solid middle-class respectability.

Oliver Twist is not the only Dickensian child-hero who journeys towards a mystical, salvific pastoral world; *The Old Curiosity Shop’s* Nell is a character who resembles Oliver in many ways and who undertakes an odyssey that is in many ways remarkably similar. Both are impossibly virtuous children who are trapped in damaging environments found within the great city, and both eventually leave it on a path that will, after some false starts, bring them to a rustically ideal place. Master Humphrey, the narrator of the first few chapters, establishes that Nell is
out of place where she is, remarking that she lives “in a place that appeared so unsuited to her” (TOCS 14). Indeed she does, and yet the specific qualities that make Nell’s environment so deleterious to her are different from those that Oliver faced. He faced crime and danger. She faces isolation and loneliness. Master Humphrey notes that as he leaves her, she is “[a]lone! In that gloomy place all the long, dreary night!” (TOCS 16). Indeed, she is, other than her grandfather and the servant boy Kit, fundamentally alone. She has her grandfather’s love and Kit’s fellowship, but desperately needs more than that. She needs the full support system offered by something much more like the “little society” which formed to protect Oliver Twist in his rural green world. The shop in the city, where life is atomized and such a thing does not exist for her, is no place for a child, and her life there consists of

monotonous days unchequered by variety and uncheered by pleasant companionship. . . dark dreary evenings. . . long solitary nights. . . the absence of every slight and easy pleasure for which young hearts beat high. . . the knowing nothing of childhood but its weakness and its easily wounded spirit. (TOCS 74-75)

This environment provides nothing to nurture her, and she seems to molder away in it, suffering from a deep isolation, a lack of community, and the absence of an environment able to nurture children.

Because she is so unsuited to city life—or, perhaps, because it is so unsuited to her—Nell seems to actually welcome the loss of her grandfather’s shop. Even before Daniel Quilp takes possession of the shop, Nell reveals to her grandfather how much she deplores city life and longs for the pastoral: “Oh hear
me pray that we may beg, or work in open roads or fields, rather than live as we do now” (TOCS 78). When William Burgan asserts, “In The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens elaborates the idea of a pastoral retreat more fully than in any other novel” (Burgan 313), he is reflecting the resonance between Nell and the green world, which is stronger than it is with any other Dickensian character. Even Oliver simply stumbles into finding his green world by apparent random chance, yet Nell’s green world seems to be mystically beckoning her towards it. Without knowing precisely where it will be found, she is drawn towards a vision of a pastoral paradise that she is sure exists in the countryside somewhere. So clear is this vision in her mind that she is able to describe it to her grandfather in great detail:

The child’s heart beat high with hope and confidence. She had no thought of hunger, or cold, or thirst, or suffering. She saw in this, but a return of the simple pleasures they had once enjoyed, a relief from the gloomy solitude in which she had lived, an escape from the heartless people by whom she had been surrounded in her late time of trial, the restoration of the old man’s health and peace, and a life of tranquil happiness. Sun, and stream, and meadow, and summer days, shone brightly in her view, and there was no dark tint in all the sparkling picture. (TOCS 101)

She has never seen any such thing in all her life within the shop in the heart of the city, and yet somehow it calls to her so strongly that, as this passage shows, she both longs for it and is able to form an exceptionally clear picture of it in her mind. Yet for all the clarity of Nell’s vision, it is not entirely accurate. There is a “dark tint” to it, and Burgan rightly notes that Dickens’s portrayal of the pastoral in The Old Curiosity Shop contains elements of “both its escapism and its
melancholy” (Burgan 313). The destiny to which Nell is drawn will prove more complex and more bittersweet.

Nell’s relationship to the green world is different from Oliver’s, and her fate within it will be different as well; yet it might be said that this is due to one fundamental difference between the two children: while Oliver is too good for the city, Nell is too good for this world entirely. Dickens’s depiction of the bucolic village where Nell’s journey finally ends could hardly sound more paradisiacal: “It was for such a spot the child had wearied in the dense, dark, miserable haunts of labour. . . visions of such scenes–beautiful indeed, but not more beautiful than this sweet reality–had been always present to her mind” (TOCS 352). Yet it is in this ideal pastoral spot that she dies. Here, it is useful to consider Welsh’s reminder that although Dickens’s readership found her death tragic, death was by no means the worst fate that a Victorian audience could have imagined for Nell:

Subconsciously, at least, he [Dickens] realizes that Nell is on her way beyond this life – the life in the city that is defined by death in the final, destructive sense. The death in the country by which Nell will escape from life and death is merely a passage. . . . The danger that they flee, the grandfather almost reluctantly and the child with heroic determination, can be more clearly described as the loss of salvation. It has to be expressed negatively because the alternative, damnation, is not conceived in The Old Curiosity Shop as parallel to salvation, but as a disaster in life: the disgrace of the grandfather (Dickens seems to care little about his guilt) or the sexual violation of Nell. Since life threatens only evil, the heroine, who is nearly crippled with pain, walks inexorably toward death. (Welsh 119-20)

Welsh provides an insight that is invaluable: while it is true that the green world she finally found did not keep her from dying, it is also irrelevant, for death is in no way the worst fate that could befall her. Her death is devastating to those who
loved her, yet for her it is more akin to a liberation. Though Dickens describes the country village as being “another world, where sin and sorrow never came; a tranquil place of rest, where nothing evil entered” (TOCS 403), there is an unearthly paradise that the author, and most of his Victorian readership, would have considered to have those qualities in even greater measure. For Nell, her green world is a waypoint on what is “merely a passage” towards that destination.

Oliver Twist had his life saved by the green world, and while Nell died in hers, she was saved in a sense that held even more importance for a Victorian audience; but there is one child in the Dickens canon who never finds a proper green world despite his great need and desire for one and whose fate is perhaps the unhappiest of all of them. Though neither Dombey child lives in an environment conducive to healthy growth, Paul, Jr., the titular son of Dombey and Son, withers from the lack of one and eventually dies even younger and more tragically than did Nell. Dombey, Sr., loves his son in his own cold and ambitious way, but he is so fixated on the child becoming an adult as soon as possible that he does little to assure his son a happy childhood. The elder Dombey declares his son’s childhood a “waste of time” (DS 50), and Dickens reveals,

If there were a warm place in his frosty heart, his son occupied it; if its very hard surface could receive the impression of any image, the image of that son was there; though not so much as an infant, or as a boy, but as a grown man – the ‘Son’ of the Firm. Therefore he was impatient to advance into the future, and to hurry over the intervening passages of his history. Therefore he had little or no anxiety about them, in spite of his love; feeling as if the boy had a charmed life, and must become the man with whom he held such
constant communication in his thoughts, and for whom he planned and projected, as for an existing reality, every day. (DS 97)

This desire for early adulthood is what motivates Dombey, Sr., to make the fateful decision to place his son in Doctor Blimber’s school. Doctor Blimber, while not an evil, or even ill-intentioned man, runs his school according to a set of ideas every bit as wrong as those of the Gradgrind school in Hard Times:

In fact, Doctor Blimber’s establishment was a great hothouse, in which there was a forcing apparatus incessantly at work. All the boys blew before their time. Mental green-peas were produced at Christmas, and intellectual asparagus all the year round. . . Nature was of no consequence at all. No matter what a young gentleman was intended to bear, Doctor Blimber made him bear to pattern, somehow or other. (DS 150)

The author has chosen his words carefully, and the word “hothouse” is key— for a hothouse is nothing more than an unnatural green world created through artificial means. Doctor Blimber’s school is just such an environment, and for all its promises of increased speed and guaranteed yield, it can never be more than a grotesque imitation of a real green world.

The child himself, wiser even in his young years than the adults around him, knows what it is he truly requires. What he requires is that which is genuine: genuine love and a genuinely nurturing environment in which to experience a genuine childhood. It is this that he most desires: he does not seek money, nor education, nor a continuance of the glory of the family name, but only to find a pastoral, nurturing green world where he can live simply and enjoy the love of his adoring older sister. Just as Nell Trent had a vision of a pastoral green world that seemed to call to her despite her never having seen any such thing in person, so
one seems to call to young Paul. He reveals his heart’s desire to his guardian, Mrs. Pipchin, when he tells her that his singular goal is “to put my money all together in one Bank, never try to get any more, go away into the country with my darling Florence, have a beautiful garden, fields, and woods, and live there with her all my life! . . . That’s what I mean to do when I. . . . If I grow up” (DS 202).

Despite this, Dombey, Sr., completely insensible to the real needs of his son, simply tries pushing him harder into adulthood via the “forcing apparatus” of Doctor Blimber’s “hothouse”:

Thus in the case of Paul. When Doctor Blimber said he made great progress and was naturally clever, Mr Dombey was more bent than ever on his being forced and crammed. . . . In short, however high and false the temperature at which the Doctor kept his hothouse, the owners of the plants were always ready to lend a helping hand at the bellows, and to stir the fire. (DS 178)

Yet this effort is doomed to failure. No counterfeit, however cleverly constructed, will suffice to allow Paul, Jr., already a child with “a want of vital power. . . and great constitutional weakness” (DS 203), to grow and thrive. This, too, is something that the child knows, as evidenced by his caveat about what he will do “[i]f I grow up.” In the end, he will not find what he needs to nurture him, and he will not grow up.

Though the Dickensian green world is a construct normally associated with the needs of children, adults are not excluded from enjoying their mystically restorative powers. Both Rose Maylie in Oliver Twist and Esther Summerson in Bleak House make recoveries from near fatal diseases with the aid of such
environments. When Rose becomes grievously ill, Oliver believes that the green world that restored his health is capable of restoring hers, as well:

There was such peace and beauty in the scene; so much of brightness and mirth in the sunny landscape; such blithesome music in the songs of the summer birds; such freedom in the rapid flight of the rook, careering overhead; so much of life and joyousness in all; that, when the boy raised his aching eyes, and looked about, the thought instinctively occurred to him, that this was not a time for death; that Rose could surely never die when humbler things were all so glad and gay. (OT 262)

Oliver will turn out to be correct, and these surroundings will indeed restore Rose to full health. Other surroundings, first the sanctuary of Bleak House itself, and then the rustic paradise of the Boythorn estate, will facilitate Esther’s similarly dramatic recovery. In contrast to the barren, gray, moldy water world of Chesney Wold, which reflects the autumn of the age of men like Sir Leicester Dedlock, Boythorn’s neighboring estate bursts with vitality in a seemingly eternal summer. The gregarious, eternally youthful Boythorn, a man still as boyish and energetic as his name suggests even “more than five and forty years” (BH 128) after first meeting John Jarndyce, seems to impart his very essence into his house and premises. This is reflected in the description that Esther, as narrator, gives us of the grounds. She described the Edenic scene by revealing that “everything about the place wore an aspect of maturity and abundance. . . . every foot of ground appeared a vegetable treasury” (BH 266), an illustration of the mystically life-giving properties of the estate. Even the breezes of the place bear no trace of the dreaded east wind and contribute to Esther’s recuperation: “The air blew as freshly and revivingly upon me as it had ever blown, and the healthy color came
into my new face as it had come into my old one” (BH 531). Slowly but surely, this place, infused with the vitality of Lawrence Boythorn, the caring of John Jarndyce, Esther’s own indefatigable goodness, and the loyalty of her maid Charley, works its restorative magic upon her, and she is soon able to not only return to Bleak House, but to report that “I was perfectly restored to health and strength” (BH 562).

In each of these cases, human intention and action have combined with a physical environment in order to create a setting with powerful, supernatural properties. The paradisiacal green worlds that welcome Oliver, Nell, Rose, and Esther are physical twins of the moral worlds of kindness, mercy, and charity created by their inhabitants. Conversely, Oliver’s hometown is the physical twin of the debased, selfish nature of its people, and Doctor Blimber’s school is the physical twin of the misguided, shortsighted philosophy behind it. These are more than simply a reflection of consequences, for in the dreamlike worlds of Dickens, there are very real enchantments to these places. Yet these are not simply settings located with the unexplained magic of fairy kings, which is in no way reproducible by mere human beings. If there is magic in the Dickensian pastoral, it is as much a case of magic generated by people acting upon a place, as of magic generated by a place acting upon people. In the novels of Dickens, whose works reflect the idea that better worlds can be created by the actions of each individual, so long as they combine human kindness with common sense, this sort of magic is eminently possible.
Chapter Three

A Most Intricate Maze:

It would be a difficult task to find any author who was as thoroughly associated with a specific setting as Dickens is with London. So completely did it dominate his artistic vision that only one of his novels (*Hard Times*, the industrial theme of which required a location in the mechanized north) is set entirely outside of the great metropolis. The city dominated his personal life as well; when he proudly stated that “I know London better than any one other man of all its millions” (qtd. in Baumgarten, Fictions 117), it was hardly mindless boasting. Dickens, who loved and drew inspiration from his city, was infamous for wandering every corner of it in long walks through neighborhoods rich and poor, by day and by night, alone and with others, in his own persona and in an array of disguises. This habit of *flânerie*, which Dickens pursued throughout his life, gave him an unmatched knowledge of London’s labyrinthine streets. Drawing inspiration from his experiences as a *flâneur*, Dickens created a series of urban mazes in his novels in which his characters find themselves both literally and symbolically lost. As with his pastoral green worlds, his urban mazes reflect the circumstances of his characters and the moral worlds that they inhabit as they deal with the disorienting, deracinating, and isolating effects of life in the chaotic megacity. From the perspective of Dickens’s readership, these literary urban mazes not only served to draw them deeper into the author’s fictional worlds and
the stories taking place therein, but also served to illustrate the very real social ills to be found in the city that Dickens loved, but about the dark sides of which he harbored no illusions.

To understand Dickens’s creation of literary urban labyrinths, we must first understand how he experienced the real urban labyrinths of London. That he considered the city to be his muse and inspiration is a well-established fact; in a letter quoted by Hollington, Dickens once wrote, “For a week or a fortnight I can write prodigiously in a retired place (as at Broadstairs), and a day in London sets me up again and starts me. But the toll and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic lantern, is IMMENSE!!” (Hollington 71). Yet Dickens’s wanderings through the city provided him with more than either the motivation to write or the ability to create vivid urban settings. They also provided inspiration and raw material for the creation of symbolic cityscapes. As Hollington informs us, “Dickens. . . traverses vast tracts of London by night, and stresses the labyrinthine nature of his wanderings, finding in them a psychological and social allegory” (Hollington 76). Building on this insight, Elana Gomel, in her own critical essay, remarked on the “labyrinthine nooks and crannies of the city Dickens maps out as early as Sketches by Boz, in which he combines the reformer’s indignation with the fascination of the flâneur” (Gomel 307). Thus it is in his creation of allegorical urban mazes that three aspects of Dickens’s personality intersect: his passion for urban exploration, his desire for social reform, and his authorial vision.
Oliver Twist becomes lost, in more ways than one, inside the urban labyrinth from the moment he enters it. Guided into it by the corrupted child John Dawkins, otherwise known as the Artful Dodger, and unknowingly on his way towards a situation that he will spend the rest of the novel desperately trying to escape, Oliver immediately encounters the city at its most crooked and confusing. Here, in Dickens’s introduction of Oliver to the city, language is as crucial as geography. The construction of this passage is of a mercilessly rapid-fire staccato that delivers the impression of whipping the boy through the maze at breakneck speed:

They crossed from the Angel into St. John's Road; struck down the small street which terminates at Sadler's Wells Theatre; through Exmouth Street and Coppice Row; down the little court by the side of the workhouse; across the classic ground which once bore the name of Hockley-in-the-Hole; thence into Little Saffron Hill; and so into Saffron Hill the Great: along which the Dodger scudded at a rapid pace, directing Oliver to follow close at his heels. (OT 59).

The structure is of short, declarative clauses that keep the action moving from one place to another. The general lack of descriptive adjectives leaves the impression of going rapidly past them without stopping to notice their finer attributes. The effect is highly disorienting, and intentionally so, for by using intentionally disorienting language in introducing Oliver to London, Dickens communicates a sense of Oliver being lost in the great and terrible city, inside “a most intricate maze of narrow streets and courts” (OT 92). And while his experience in a strange new place among strange new people would be
confusing and frightening under the most ideal of circumstances, Oliver has wound up in circumstances that are far from ideal.

The labyrinth of the city is indeed entrapping, and it seems to cooperate with Fagin’s band of brigands in drawing Oliver back into it. Oliver’s placid time with Mr. Brownlow described as having come to an abrupt end when he “accidentally turned down a by-street which was not exactly in his way; but not discovering his mistake until he had got half-way down it, and knowing it must lead in the right direction, he did not think it worth while to turn back; and so marched on” (OT 114). It is this path that brings him straight into the arms of Nancy and Sikes, and thence directly back to Fagin. In a flash he finds himself in the clutches of the criminals, with no one there to help him: “In another moment, he was dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow courts: and forced along them, at a pace which rendered the few cries he dared give utterance to, wholly unintelligible” (OT 118). Here both the convoluted, entangling mesh of city streets and the feeling of being shot through them at dizzying speed appear again. One simple wrong turn, and in a flash Oliver is brought right back to his starting point, with all his gains erased. The maze, it seems, will not let him escape so easily.

So confounding is the urban maze that even after Oliver escapes it, he is instantly lost again the moment he returns to it. As Murray Baumgarten reveals, “The labyrinthine passages keep repeating and changing; the solid realistic location gives way to a shape-shifting world” (Baumgarten, Reading Dickens 223). Like the urban maze of Coketown in *Hard Times*, which contains “several
large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another” (HT 26), the nature of the maze of London slums, which are simultaneously crazily different and monotonously the same, causes Oliver to be unable even to find his way back to places he knew well. During his attempt to identify Fagin’s den to his adult benefactors and the police, he finds that it has become “a place which he cannot describe or point out” (OT 239). He finally spots a house that he is sure is the right one, only to cause his ally, Dr. Losberne, to go crashing through the door of a total stranger. Even when searching for the benevolent Mr. Brownlow’s residence, Oliver initially stops at the wrong door; and when they arrive at the right one, they find that Mr. Brownlow and his servant have utterly vanished—to the West Indies, so they hear, though it might as well be into thin air for all the good it does the boy. His attempt to lead others into the maze to reveal its secrets is an utter failure.

Unlike the saintly Oliver, the malevolent Fagin is depicted as being an autochthonous being of the urban maze: always at home in it, never lost in it, as intimately connected to it as if he sprang fully formed from its streets as a hideous and malignant old man, like Athena from the head of Zeus. Oliver stumbles lost through the city, but Fagin, as the following passage illustrates, glides through it effortlessly:

He kept on his course, through many winding and narrow ways, until he reached Bethnal Green; then, turning suddenly off to the left, he soon became involved in a maze of the mean and dirty streets which abound in that close and densely-populated quarter. The Jew was evidently too familiar with the ground he traversed to
be at all bewildered, either by the darkness of the night, or the intricacies of the way. (OT 147)

Even in the darkest hour of the night, and in the most labyrinthine quarter of the city, the urban maze does not entrap him. But he is a creature of these streets, while Oliver is not. Unlike Oliver, Fagin cannot get lost in the maze; he is too much a being of the maze. If the maze is a manifestation of the social ills of city life and the indifference and malevolence that create them, then it is only natural that it should not hinder him, for he is a part of that complex of social problems and bad intent.

In contrast to this, Nell, the ingénue heroine of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, who, despite apparently being a native of London and its labyrinth of streets, is lost in the urban maze both literally and figuratively. It is in the first chapter of *The Old Curiosity Shop* that Master Humphrey, Dickens’s personal avatar in his early fictional works, while engaging in Dickens’s own avocation of *flânerie*, first encounters her, hopelessly lost in the streets of her own city. Even within the immediate area surrounding her home in the shop, Master Humphrey is able to keep Nell disoriented such that she cannot find her way home without him:

There was no reason, however, why I should refrain from seeing the person who had inconsiderately sent her to so great a distance by night and alone, and as it was not improbable that if she found herself near home she might take farewell of me and deprive me of the opportunity, I avoided the most frequented ways and took the most intricate, and thus it was not until we arrived in the street itself that she knew where we were. (TOCS 10)

This seems like an improbable feat when one considers that any normally inquisitive child brought up in a city might be expected to have explored the
precincts around their own home quite thoroughly. One might think that doing so
would leave her with the ability to navigate it as expertly and gracefully as Nancy,
Charley Bates, or the Artful Dodger navigated their quarter of London. But it is not
so, for as Master Humphrey can perceive, in a very real sense, Nell is not a
creature of the urban maze. She does not belong to it; it is utterly alien to her and
to her nature, and the fact that she becomes so easily lost in it reveals those
truths just as clearly as Oliver’s incongruously middle-class manner of speech
reveals that he is not a creature of the seedy lower classes in which he finds
himself trapped. Like Oliver, Nell is manifestly a poor fit for the city; both are
intrinsically too virtuous for London, and both are destined to leave it to find a
place more suitable to them.

The entire neighborhood around the Chancery court in *Bleak House* is a
labyrinth, and, as noted when touching on the subject of weather, it is one that is
made exponentially worse by the fog that hangs ceaselessly over it. It entraps
many within its reach, including the man from Shropshire, the elderly Miss Flyte,
and eventually the unfortunate Richard Carstone, all of whom are driven mad and
ultimately ruined by their inability to escape its grasp. Even those not involved in
a suit in Chancery, such as the urchin Jo and the woman-child Charley and her
siblings, are caught in the mesh of poverty and filth within the urban maze. John
Jarndyce, in his boundless generosity, is able to save a few lucky souls from it,
guiding them out to the safety of Bleak House. Yet his successes are outweighed
by his failures; he fails to pull Jo or Miss Flyte from its reach, Lady Dedlock
eludes him in it long enough to die there, and Richard Carstone is led by the
eternally childlike, eternally selfish Harold Skimpole back into its recesses.
Jarndyce is a man not without wealth or resources, yet the force emanating from
the maze is gravitational and very strong. That Jarndyce should lose more than
he wins in a contest against it is only to be expected.

Though escape from the maze is difficult, there are those who find, or are
guided to, a way out. This is what we see in the story of the naïf Florence
Dombey, who, in the sixth chapter of *Dombey and Son*, is literally stampeded into
the maze by mad bulls escaped from Smithfield Market. There, lost in the
anonymity of the city, where, as with Oliver Twist, no one knows whose child is
whose, she is promptly taken and robbed of even the clothes on her back by
“Good” Mrs. Brown. Left to wander the streets in only the rags given her by Mrs.
Brown as a replacement, she experiences the city as its poorest and most
alienated residents do. In a passage constructed in the same fast-paced manner
as other such descriptions of the urban maze, Dickens shows her:

> Tired of walking, repulsed and pushed about, stunned by the noise
and confusion, anxious for her brother and the nurses, terrified by
what she had undergone, and the prospect of encountering her
angry father in such an altered state; perplexed and frightened alike
by what had passed, and what was passing, and what was yet
before her; Florence went upon her weary way with tearful eyes,
and once or twice could not help stopping to ease her bursting
heart by crying bitterly. But few people noticed her at those times, in
the garb she wore: or if they did, believed that she was tutored to
excite compassion, and passed on. (DS 80)

Florence does eventually find her way to “a kind of wharf or landing-place upon
the river-side” (DS 81), where she has her chance encounter with the young
Walter Gay, the man whom she will eventually marry and who will introduce her to a world outside the urban maze and outside of her own world of alienation and familial pain. Fortuitously, he brings her not directly home, but first to rest at his uncle’s nautical equipment shop. This place, though located by the city, is not of the city. It belongs to a different world and a different culture, that of the sea. Its inhabitants are portrayed as an eccentric, noble breed who live by an honorable and merciful code of conduct that the modern world, exemplified by the city, has passed by. This world will become her place of escape and refuge, not only after her harrowing childhood experience in the market and maze, but after fleeing her home when her tenuous relationship with her father finally breaks down completely. This latter experience parallels the first, and she again finds herself lost, exhausted, and alone in the city streets, as she seeks:

Somewhere, anywhere to hide her head! somewhere, anywhere for refuge. . . . Where to go? Still somewhere, anywhere! Still going on; but where? She thought of the only other time she had been lost in the wild wilderness of London – though not as lost as now – and went that way. To the home of Walter’s uncle. (DS 705)

This passage connects Florence’s two journeys into the maze and illustrates the parallels between the two. Both occur, ultimately, due to the neglect of her father: the first because she is abandoned to the care of a servant, the second due to his outright rejection of her. Both occur during times of chaos: the first during the tumult caused by a stampede, the second during the tumult caused by the departure of her stepmother. And she ultimately winds her way through both to the same destination: the nautical world of Walter Gay and his retinue. A
combination of her father’s antipathy towards her and some of the inherent social problems of the city have forced her into an urban maze, and the chivalrous culture of the sea and the kindhearted nature of those she finds in it create an environment that is able to provide her with an escape from it.

At the beginning of her childhood misadventure Florence passes through a place that holds a key position in the urban maze: Smithfield Market. Trey Philpotts notes, “As used by Dickens, Smithfield Market serves as a liminal space, and signals a transition into unfamiliar territory” (Philpotts 25). Indeed, Dickens uses Smithfield Market both to represent a point of entry into the urban maze, and also to represent its very heart. Still in operation today, the Market is housed in three historically-listed buildings constructed in the late 1860s, and according to its website “is a fully EU approved wholesale market. . . . with each stall meeting the latest hygiene regulations” (smithfieldmarket.com). In Dickens’s time, however, and especially during his early career, Smithfield Market was a riotous, dirt-floored, open-air affair, where livestock were brought in on the hoof (the only practical way to do so before the railroad infrastructure was built up), penned in excruciatingly cramped quarters, and cruelly beaten during drives. And it was not only the animals that experienced filth and danger at Smithfield. The crowding and the cruel practices there often left customers mired in a mixture of blood, dung, and mud that would, if they were lucky, only be ankle-deep. Escapes of mad bulls from the Market such as the one that Florence Dombey experienced were not a figment of Dickens’s literary imagination, but a common
occurrence at Smithfield. But despite this, the customers did come, by the thousands. Early in the morning the meat-buyers would file in, pushing, shouting, shoving, bidding, arguing, haggling, and occasionally even bare-fistedly fighting over who would take away which cuts of meat at what price.

Dickens, who knew what every inch of London looked like at every hour of the day, could not have found a better place to represent the chaos, danger, disharmony, or filth of city life at its worst than the Market. And Dickens represented it as such repeatedly: passages describing Smithfield appear in *Oliver Twist*, *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, and *Great Expectations* and are all remarkably similar in tone. All portray the market as a place of callous cruelty and of suffering met with utter indifference. Here, for example, is some of *Bleak House*’s description:

> It is market-day. The blinded oxen, over-goaded, over-driven, never guided, run into wrong places and are beaten out, and plunge red-eyed and foaming at stone walls, and often sorely hurt the innocent, and often sorely hurt themselves. Very like Jo and his order; very, very like! (BH 237)

*And Oliver Twist*’s:

> It was market-morning. The ground was covered, nearly ankle-deep, with filth and mire; a thick steam, perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle, and mingling with the fog, which seemed to rest upon the chimney-tops, hung heavily above. All the pens in the centre of the large area, and as many temporary pens as could be crowded into the vacant space, were filled with sheep; tied up to posts by the gutter side were long lines of beasts and oxen, three or four deep. Countrymen, butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers, and vagabonds of every low grade, were mingled together in a mass; the whistling of drovers, the barking of dogs, the bellowing and plunging of oxen, the bleating of sheep, the grunting and squeaking of pigs, the cries of hawkers, the shouts,
oaths, and quarrelling on all sides; the ringing of bells and roar of voices, that issued from every public-house; the crowding, pushing, driving, beating, whooping, and yelling; the hideous and discordant din that resounded from every corner of the market; and the unwashed, unshaven, squalid, and dirty figures constantly running to and fro, and bursting in and out of the throng; rendered it a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confounded the senses. (OT 164)

In both Dickens employs the same rapid-fire style, the same structure of intentional run-ons, the same description of noise and filth and chaos and unnaturalness. And yet if Smithfield Market was unnatural, it was also central to the city in every way. The article on Smithfield that Dickens co-authored with W. H. Wills which appeared in the May fourth, 1850, edition of Household Words, was entitled, “The Heart of Mid-London.” As Philpotts notes, “it was the market’s centrality that was inevitably mentioned in contemporary accounts. . . . In fact, this identification of Smithfield with the ‘center’ and ‘heart’ of the City made it a useful synecdoche for the City itself, particularly for the most troubling and reactionary aspects of City administration” (Philpotts 34). This identification gave Smithfield its central place in Dickens’s symbolic vision of London as a great urban labyrinth. Dickens’s urban mazes are manifestations of these very “troubling and reactionary aspects of City administration” and the indifference on the part of the public that allow them to continue. Thus, if Smithfield Market stands as a synecdoche for these problems, then it is only fitting that it takes a special place within his mazes.

Yet Dickens’s urban mazes are not restricted to London; Hard Times features one despite never spending a single moment of its time within the
capital. Its city, Coketown, though loosely based on the northern industrial center of Preston, was an entirely artificial creation that the author could have shaped in any way he wished. In Coketown, too, Dickens constructs an urban maze, though one with a completely different character. If London’s maze has a heart of chaos that results in a zigzag labyrinth of crookedness, Coketown’s maze has a heart of excessive regimentation that results in a monotonous labyrinth of sameness. In London, everything in the maze is haphazard and dilapidated. In Coketown, it is built to such an inflexible and restrictive plan that all the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. (HT 26-27)

If Dickens’s London is confusing because the landmarks given us are too obscure, Coketown is equally so because the landmarks are all so like one another that they can’t be told apart.

Coketown is still a maze, but it is a different maze because a different sin lies at its heart. This sin is the sin of lack of heart, of overuse of logic and fact to the point that it excludes every other quality of man. Everything in Coketown reflects the philosophy that built it and that runs it: one that has no use for
individuality or expression of personality. Its indistinguishable streets contain indistinguishable people who do the same thing every indistinguishable day:

It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. (HT 26)

Once again, Dickens has created a physical landscape that reflects its moral and philosophical twin. There is “[f]act, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial” (HT 27). The obsession with cold, hard fact makes Coketown a cold, hard city, and its disdain of fancy and imagination makes its streets as uniform, repetitious, and dull as entries in a ledger. The town and the philosophy are as one, and both are dehumanizing and ensnaring.

The key to the urban maze, then, is intersection: the intersection of Dickens as flâneur, author, and reformer; the intersection of physical worlds and their moral twins within his fiction; and the intersection of author, character, and setting. By using his unique knowledge of London to reimagine the cityscape in ways rich in symbolism and allegory, Dickens was able to both create literary worlds and to shine a light upon some very real social issues of an age in which cities reached a scale that they had not seen since the days of Rome. Beyond this, Dickens was able to share his vision of a world that, despite whatever problems it may have faced, was still one that he loved intensely. No one other
than he who knew his city “better than any one other man of all its millions” could have created such compelling, meaningful portraits of it.
Chapter Four:

A Shriek, A Roar, And A Rattle

Dickens lived in an age in which technology utterly transformed the lives of the English people. A firsthand witness to the heyday of the Industrial Revolution, Dickens was born into a world of stagecoaches, painted portraits, and country blacksmiths, and lived to spend his later years in a world of railways, photographs, and factories. Ever the social critic, Dickens could not, and did not, ignore the vast changes to society brought about by the mechanization of Victorian society. And yet, unlike so many other social issues, on which Dickens’s positions are clear-cut, his attitude towards industrialization and the machines it created seems to remain mixed or ambivalent. Dickens, whose bookshelf at Gad’s Hill held a series of dummy tomes that included “seven ‘volumes’ entitled The Wisdom of Our Ancestors—the first volume on Ignorance, the second on Superstition, and so forth down to the last on Disease” (Ackroyd, Dickens 632), was a man who had little use for the nostalgia for times past that was fashionable in his age and that manifested itself in the likes of the poems of Tennyson or the anti-mechanical utopian ideals of William Morris, and there is much, especially in his non-fiction, to suggest admiration for industry and the progress it brought. And yet, when used in a symbolic way in his fictional works, factories and machines are often seen as pointedly unnatural: bringers of despoilment and despair, destroyers of the human spirit, harbingers of evil, and handmaidens of
inhumane philosophy. In attempting to reconcile these seemingly conflicting views on Dickens’s part, it must be reemphasized that he was not a Realist. While he may have personally viewed industrialism as a double-edged sword that brought great good in addition to whatever harm it brought to society, this would by no means restrain him from using symbolic machines, factories, and other trappings of industrialism within his fictional worlds as a tool of social criticism, especially when directed against what the critic Herbert Sussman referred to as “the union of economic power with moral indifference” (Sussman 56).

Dickens’s real-world relationship to industrialism and the technology that it produced was a complex and mixed one; but then, the effects that these phenomena had upon the society in which Dickens lived were complex and mixed as well. Certainly, Dickens expressed some real praise for industrialists and their inventions. In an 1851 letter to W. H. Wills, outlining an upcoming article for Household Words, Dickens went so far as to satirically suggest that titles be taken from their hereditary holders and given out based on


In the article, eventually published in the 12 February, 1853, edition as

‘Electric Telegraph Garter’ (Sanders 167). Just how much of this reflected Dickens’s antipathy towards the hereditary aristocracy and how much represented his genuine admiration for industrialists remains perhaps a bit unclear, but certainly there were genuine quantities of both in his sentiment. There could be no question that machines had measurably improved the lives of the vast majority of common Englishmen, and (aside from his somewhat troubled personal relationship with the railroad) Dickens certainly expressed little desire to return to the pre-industrial age beyond some typical middle-aged nostalgia for the trappings of his youth.

However, just as Dickens, though a consummate urbanist, was not blind to the dark side of urbanization, so also Dickens the modernist was not blind to the dark side of the rise of industrialism. He may have admired the good that could be done by the industrialists and their machines, but that did not exempt them from being used as monstrous and unnatural symbols in his fiction. As Herbert Sussman notes of Dickens’s different treatment of the subject in his journalistic and literary spheres,

[F]or all their imaginative power, Dickens’ accounts of technology in his occasional writing [as a journalist] are merely isolated descriptive pieces, filled with pride an wonder because Dickens, as a journalist is only considering the machine in itself, not as part of its social and moral environment. But once these vivid evocations of technology are placed in a social context, as in Dombey and Son and Hard Times, the machine becomes a symbol for the sins of society as a whole. (Sussman 48)

Sussman’s insight is crucial, for it ties Dickens’s creation of darkly symbolic machines and factories to the larger theme of his creation of worlds that are
physical twins of the moral world underlying them. Machines and factories as things in themselves are only objects, which, like any object, can be used for good or ill. Dickens’s nonfictional treatment of these objects certainly indicates that he believed that much good could come from them. But just as Dickens created symbolic cityscapes in which the streets of his beloved London were transformed into an ominous and terrifying place that mirrored human malice and indifference, so too did he create worlds in which the fruits of the Industrial Revolution were turned into earthly horrors. Specifically, Dickens used these symbols to expose the inhumane nature of philosophies based on mechanical thinking, which reduces all of mankind to no more than dehumanized parts in a society turned into one great machine. Nowhere was this more on display than in his most explicit novelistic commentary on industrialism, *Hard Times*.

From the very beginning of the novel, the language of industrialism and machinery is found applied to areas in which it does not belong, imputing an unnatural, mechanical quality to the things, and, more often, the people that it describes. The emphasis placed on this is revealed in the very short (barely a single printed page) first chapter, in which the students of the Gradgrind school are referred to as an “inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim” (HT 7). This place is, and is intended to be, not a place to grow the minds of young human beings, but instead a sort of assembly line. The students are stripped of their humanity and individuality by a system that not only sees
them as, but believes that they ought to be, cogs in the machinery of the industrial society of Coketown. The hapless, flighty Cecelia Jupe serves as an example of the sort of meachanicalization to which the students are subjected. The schoolmaster Gradgrind not only strips her of her familiar appellation of Sissy by insisting that “Sissy is not a name. . . . Don’t call yourself Sissy. Call yourself Cecelia” (HT 8), an injunction that perhaps, by itself, would be understandable as a bit of Victorian formality, but he goes further by insisting on referring to her as “girl number twenty” (HT 9). This is not an affectionate nickname, nor a formal Christian name, nor even a name at all—it is a part number. It implies interchangeability: only Sissy Jupe can be Sissy Jupe, but anyone could be “girl number twenty.” It implies also disposability: if one girl number twenty fails, another can be swapped in; installed quickly and with minimal disruption to the system. The dehumanizing nature of the philosophy that built both this school and the factories of Coketown could not be on clearer display than in these passages.

That such conditions exist in this factory-schoolhouse is little wonder, for the men who produce and advance this system have such machinelike qualities associated with them that it could hardly be otherwise. In a 2000 essay for *Papers on Language and Literature*, John Harrison points out the number of times that Thomas Gradgrind is referred to as being “square”: “Gradgrind, who prides himself on being eminently practical, a ‘man of realities’, is in every respect square, with a square coat, square legs, square shoulders, a ‘square wall
of a forehead’ (HT 7), and a square forefinger with which he inflicts verbal emphasis on his assistant master’s sleeve, as if this pervasive shape is the physical equivalent of fact” (Harrison 117). Of Josiah Bounderby, the man whose money and philosophy founded the school, Harrison notes: “With his ‘metallic laugh’ (HT 19) and ‘brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice’ (HT 19), Bounderby clearly is of a metallic disposition, and in his wooing of Louisa love takes on ‘a manufacturing aspect’” (Harrison 120). Even the humble teacher Mr. M’Choakumchild turns out to have been less raised or educated than manufactured upon a lathe, for we see that “[h]e and some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters, had been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs” (HT 12). The impression left is of men who are sometimes hard to tell from machines, and indeed the cad James Harthouse even finds occasion to refer to Gradgrind as “being a machine” (HT 216). Their physical aspects of these men have become a manifestation of their philosophy: mechanical thinking has turned them into something hard to distinguish from machines. Thus we see machine-men armed with a machine-philosophy, who produce machine-children, until everything they touch has become machinelike in ways moral, intellectual, and physical.

While Coketown certainly has a surfeit of machinelike humans, it has one other significant thing in abundance as well, and that is machines themselves. To say that the machines in Hard Times are symbolic is to understate the case: in fact, they are entirely so. Dickens never explains what precisely the machines of
Coketown do, nor what the town actually produces. This information is something that might be of concern to a Realist, but to Dickens, and within his dreamlike worlds, it is so irrelevant as to not be worth a single sentence of explanation. Within the context of the novel, the factories of Coketown and the machines within them do not exist to produce anything tangible. From a literary standpoint, they exist solely to loom dark and large in the background, and to operate night and day to produce as much darkness and melancholy as can possibly be consumed locally. Coketown is, certainly, a city that need never worry about its supply of these quantities being allowed to dwindle. Indeed, as Dickens tells us, the tone of life in the city is set entirely by the factories: “These attributes of Coketown were in the main inseparable from the work by which it was sustained. . . . You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful” (HT 26). This illustrates what is perhaps Dickens’s most explicit example of a moral position being reflected in the physical properties of the landscape in which it is found. The Utilitarian philosophy of the men of industry in Coketown created the factories there, and it is the factories that define everything about life in that place. The city is built around them, and the whole place seems as if it were no more than an extension of them. The square brick buildings, the cold hearths, the empty churches, and the identical streets are just as “severely workful” as are the factories, and as the philosophy that built Coketown has no use for artistry or fancy, the city has none.
Even more sinisterly, trappings of Hell surround the factories and the machines therein. While the fancy of Sissy Jupe represents the natural, happy state of man, the Utilitarian philosophy of Bounderby and Gradgrind (and, via them, of Jeremy Bentham, whose grim visage lurks silently offstage) represents its inhumane and unnatural opposite, and the factories, which were built by this philosophy, teem with symbolism of despoilment and damnation. This is emphasized by repetition; four times in three separate chapters, Dickens refers to the chimneys of the factories producing “serpents of smoke” or “smoke-serpents” (HT 26, 69 [twice], 237), in imagery that recalls the serpent that destroyed paradise and caused the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. Here, in Hard Times (as also in The Old Curiosity Shop) the factories and the philosophy that built them have despoiled the bucolic English countryside and corrupted the people just as thoroughly as the serpent despoiled the first paradise and corrupted the first man and woman. This imagery moves even beyond the factories themselves, as the unfortunate Stephen Blackpool meets his fate at another manifestation of Coketown’s industrial system after falling down an abandoned coal pit known as the Old Hell Shaft. The Utilitarian philosophy that Dickens regarded as so misguided, corrupting, and grotesque is reflected in features of the landscape that are strongly connected to Christian symbols of evil, and thus are shown leading to a sort of literal Hell.

As Dickens’s misgivings about the effects of industrial thinking upon society remained a consistent theme in his writing, the concept of factories and
industrialism as despoilers of the land is found in more than one of his novels. In *Hard Times*, Dickens counseled his readers: “Never fear, good people of an anxious turn of mind, that Art will consign Nature to oblivion” (HT 69), and this biting sentiment of indignation mixed with inevitability might be said to show through even more strongly in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Though this work spends a far smaller percentage of its time on the subject of industrialism, the picture that it provides is particularly devastating. Nell’s journey through the unnamed industrial town in which she and her grandfather find themselves toward the end of their journey is harrowing, and include some of the most doleful and terrifying imagery to be found anywhere in the Dickens canon. The city seems a prototype and mirror image of Coketown. Like Coketown, the machines there have set the tone and tenor of life for the factories, the factories for the city, and the city for the people. Like Coketown, it is a dirty, ugly scar upon the land; a dismal, cheerless place crowned with “tall chimneys vomiting forth a black vapour, which hung in a dense ill-favoured cloud above the housetops and filled the air with gloom” (TOCS 329). Like Coketown, its streets lack any artistic or fanciful flourishes to distinguish them from one another and are described as “presenting that endless repetition of the same dull, ugly form, which is the horror of oppressive dreams” (TOCS 338). Like Coketown, its factories are places of dark enchantments and demonic imagery, as Nell discovers during her night in the factory, as she observes that within “this gloomy place, moving like demons among the flame and smoke, dimly and fitfully seen, flushed and tormented by the burning fires,
and wielding great weapons... a number of men laboured like giants” (TOCS 333). Like Coketown, its people seem to have been stripped of their humanity and capacity for kindness; the sole exception is the factory hand who takes Nell and her grandfather in for the night, and even he seems to have been driven mad by a life spent among the fires and machines of the factory. Like Coketown, it rends the spirit of a young woman who deserved better: the end of Louisa Gradgrind’s story sees her so damaged that she never remarries or has children, and Nell is never again the same after leaving the factory town, having seemingly been mortally wounded by her experiences there. Like Coketown, its purpose and usefulness are left undeterminable, as the author never reveals what exactly it produces. And like Coketown, it stands as a manifestation of all the physical, psychological, economic, and social damage that could be caused by industrial ideas run amok.

Because it occupied such a special place in both his personal life and his fictional worlds, no discussion of Dickens’s literary relationship to technology would be complete without a special place reserved for his symbolic use of the railroad. Much has been said about the trauma caused to the author by the Staplehurst rail disaster of 1865, in which Dickens, along with his companion Ellen Ternan and her mother, were passengers on a train that partially plunged into the River Beult while crossing a bridge that was under repair. While Dickens and his retinue escaped injury, and he was even said to have shown considerable personal courage in assisting injured fellow passengers, the wreck
affected him terribly for years afterward. Jill Matus, in her essay *Trauma, Memory, and Railway Disaster: The Dickensian Connection*, describes symptoms in Dickens that today one might associate with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder:

He suffered repeatedly from what he called “the shake”, and, when he later traveled by train, he was in the grip of a persistent illusion that his carriage was down at the left side. Even a year later, he noted that he had sudden vague rushes of terror, which were ‘perfectly unreasonable but unsurmountable’. At such times, his son and daughter reported, he was unaware of the presence of others and seemed to be in a kind of trance. His son Henry recalled that he got into a state of panic at the slightest jolt; Mamie attested that her father’s nerves were never really the same again: he “would fall into a paroxysm of fear, tremble all over and clutch the arms of the railway carriage.” (Matus 413-14)

This shows that any antipathy Dickens may have felt towards the railway before this disaster, which occurred when his penultimate novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, was partially complete, was only magnified by this experience. Yet Dickens’s authorial use of trains as symbolic harbingers of destruction began long before that, with perhaps the most prominent example coming a full twenty years before the Staplehurst accident in the pages of *Dombey and Son*.

*Dombey and Son* was written at a time in which railroad expansion had entered its most explosive phase and had indeed reached an extent and a prominence in everyday life such that Britain’s preeminent literary social critic could hardly avoid saying something about it. When the railroad does make its first appearance in the novel, it is in starkly symbolic terms, as its effects on the neighborhood of Stagg’s Gardens are described in terms of a disaster:
The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped. . . . Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth. . . . In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilisation and improvement. (DS 68)

Perhaps the railroad would indeed bring some measure of “civilization and improvement,” but if this description of Stagg’s Gardens is anything to go by, there would surely be a steep price to pay for it in disruption and despoilment. The machine’s arrival has destroyed the old landscape and cityscape, and for all the faults those may have had, the author assures us that “[n]othing was the better for it, or thought of being so” (DS 69). The symbolic image of the train as a herald of destruction, one that will continue throughout the novel, is established here.

And continue it does, for so effective a herald of destruction does Dickens find the train that, in his hands, it becomes a herald of personal destruction as well. Two major deaths in the novel, those of Paul Dombey, Jr., and of James Carker, are associated with imagery of railroads. Though only the latter is actually caused by a train accident, the symbolism attached to the former is some of the novel’s most powerful. Dombey, Sr., embarks on a train journey intended to allow him an escape from the horror and sadness of his son and heir’s untimely passing, and yet that escape is impossible, for
the very speed at which the train was whirled along, mocked the swift course of the young life that had been borne away so steadily and so inexorably to its foredoomed end. The power that forced itself upon its iron way—its own-defiant of all paths and roads, piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind it, was a type of the triumphant monster, Death. (DS 297-98)

Here, in one of Dickens’s most striking passages, the symbolic parallel between the train, which proceeds unstoppably forward “with a shriek, a roar, and a rattle” (DS 298), and the terrifying, melancholy progress of death is made over and over, in paragraphs rife with repetition like the stanzas of a poem. Each ends with the train traveling not only its physical track, but also the metaphorical “track of the remorseless monster, Death!” (DS 298).

It may be tempting to believe that Dickens attached such monstrous imagery to the railroad simply to emphasized the tragic nature of the passing of Dombey, Jr., and that no greater symbolic importance may be attached to it. Yet looking forward in time again to his Christmas story collection, Mugby Junction, written the year after the Staplehurst disaster, we see the railroad described in language that is remarkably similar to that in Dombey and Son. The otherwise-nameless Gentleman for Nowhere, upon his arrival at the Junction, observes,

Mysterious goods trains, covered with palls and gliding on like vast weird funerals. . . . concurrently, shrieks and groans and grinds invading the ear, as if the tortured were at the height of their suffering. . . . An earthquake, accompanied by thunder and lightning, going up express to London. (MJ 8-9)

Here again we see the train shrieking hellaciously and again surrounded by imagery of disaster and death. If these trains, so far removed in time and
distance from the one ridden by Dombey, carry the same imagery of death with them, we can surmise with some confidence that it was not only the death of the child that was to be mourned. The arrival of the railroad brought much good, but something placid and elegant died with its arrival, crushed under its wheels like the unfortunate Mr. Carker. A glimpse of what was lost can perhaps be seen in this passage from *The Old Curiosity Shop* in which Nell travels in a stagecoach by night:

> What a soothing, luxurious, drowsy way of travelling, to lie inside that slowly-moving mountain, listening to the tinkling of the horses' bells, the occasional smacking of the carter's whip, the smooth rolling of the great broad wheels, the rattle of the harness, the cheery good-nights of passing travellers jogging past on little short-stepped horses – all made pleasantly indistinct by the thick awning, which seemed made for lazy listening under, till one fell asleep! (TOCS 349)

Though Dickens was not generally known for being a nostalgist, the difference in his descriptions of these two modes of travel indicate that exceptions could sometimes be made for what the author may have considered quieter, more personal, and better for the soul.

Taking his symbolic treatment of the railroad and of all the fruits of industrialism as a whole, a definite thread of sentiment can be detected. While Dickens was hardly one to be swept up in the sort of romanticism about the past that produced so many Victorian poems set in medieval times, neither was he, as John Ruskin accused him of being, “a pure modernist—a leader of the steam-whistle party *par excellence*” (qtd. in Sanders 157). Dickens understood that the advance of technology brought gains and losses that came as an inseparable
package and that the great benefits brought by the machines were accompanied by great dangers as well. And yet, as an eternal realist about the human condition, he understood that the most dangerous thing that accompanied the rise of industrialism was not machines themselves, but the human capacity for indifference, cruelty, and belief in unworkable or inhumane philosophies. It is these human factors that create the nightmarish industrial landscapes found in Dickens’s fictional works. The moral and physical worlds seen there are true reflections of each other. Throughout Dickens’s works the idea that the world would be most improved by people displaying a combination of compassion and common sense is a constant theme. His symbolic treatment of industrialism and its fruits suggests a belief that even new wonders of technology, if unaccompanied by these important elements, were insufficient to create a better world.
Chapter Five:

In A Smoking Humour

Both feared for its destructive properties and valued for its many practical uses, fire has captured the imagination of mankind since time immemorial. Fire imagery appears in virtually every culture: in religion, in literature, and perhaps most notably in philosophy, as one of the classical elements that formed the basis of much of ancient philosophical and scientific understanding in both Europe and Asia. Though the Victorians took a view of fire that was more in line with modern science, the power of fire imagery to evoke an emotional response at a visceral level remained largely undiminished. Dickens certainly made much use of symbolic fire in his works. While the majority of the attention paid by critics to fire in his novels focuses on just two cases—the immolations of Mr. Krook in *Bleak House* and Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*—a look at the symbolic use of fire in a wider selection of his works suggests that a greater theme may be found there. Specifically, he uses physical fire, smoke, and ash to mirror the fire of human passion, or lack thereof, in a way that spoke to the ancient ideal of the Golden Mean. The manner in which Dickens connected these images to the narratives of certain characters suggests that he believed that either too much, or too little, “fire of soul” in a human being was an unhealthy thing. In his works, too much is associated with wickedness and sadism and too little with impassivity and hopelessness. The consequences of either are invariably disastrous.
Of all of Dickens's characters, perhaps none is as unbalanced, sadistic, or gleefully wicked as Daniel Quilp, the primary antagonist of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In the first conflict we see between him and his longsuffering wife, Quilp announces that “I feel in a smoking humour, and shall probably blaze away all night” (TOCS 42), after which he does indeed stay awake all night smoking, keeping her by his side to attend him and preventing her from resting for even a moment until the dawn comes. His pleasure in doing so is immense, as we see that he sits with a “dog-like smile always on his face, save when Mrs. Quilp made some involuntary movement of restlessness or fatigue; and then it expanded into a grin of delight” (TOCS 42). As this scene demonstrates, a “smoking humour” describes Quilp’s personality perfectly. Quilp is a creature of fiery and evil passions that “blaze away” all throughout the novel. For no other reason than his own amusement, he inflicts pain and discomfort on his wife, on her mother, on his boy servant, on his attorney, on Dick Swiveller, on Nell and her grandfather, and in general on anyone unlucky enough to cross his path. Unlike Frederick Trent, he has no practical interest in pursuing Nell or her grandfather all around England, for he has already taken all that they had before they left London, but he does so for the simple wicked joy of it. He materially gains nothing from his actions, but they fit a pattern of sadism that he displays throughout the novel. All the while, he is surrounded by imagery of heat, smoke, and fire, which, like the sadistic passion that blazes away inside of him, does great harm to others, and yet seems to leave him unaffected to the degree that even the malevolent Trent...
is left to wonder “whether a fire-proof man was as a matter of course trustworthy” (TOCS 179).

Trent’s concern is well founded, for Quilp inflicts his “smoking humour” on many more people than Mrs. Quilp, using heat, smoke, and fire frequently to keep allies and adversaries alike uncomfortable and off-guard. The hapless Dick Swiveller becomes one of the victims of this when, during their meeting at a broken-down pub, the dwarf orders a powerful liquor to serve to him, knowing that it will be more than the young man can handle. It does prove to be so, and Quilp taunts the suffering Swiveler by demanding to know: “Is it good? . . . Is it strong and fiery? Does it make you wink, and choak, and your eyes water, and your breath come short – does it?” (TOCS 168). When Swiveller pointedly exclaims, “[w]hy man, you don’t mean to tell me that you drink such fire as this?” (TOCS 168), Quilp proves that he is immune to “such fire” by downing three glasses, then immediately taking “a great many pulls at his pipe, and, swallowing the smoke, discharged it in a heavy cloud from his nose” (TOCS 168). A nearly identical scene involves Quilp’s lawyer, the corrupt Samson Brass, in which Quilp forces the unwilling attorney to accept the “hospitality” of a draught of rum that has been heated in a saucepan until it is “burning hot” (TOCS 464). So painful is this experience that when he eventually turns against the imp, Brass will loudly denounce “Quilp, who deludes me into his infernal den, and takes a delight in looking on and chuckling while I scorch, and burn, and bruise, and maim myself” (TOCS 498). And though the liquor that tormented Mr. Brass is indeed so hot that
it is “bubbling and hissing fiercely,” we nonetheless see that “Quilp raised the hot saucepan to his lips, and deliberately drank off all the spirit it contained” (TOCS 464), another taunt directed by the “fire-proof man” against one of his non-fireproof victims. His equally sadistic use of, and personal imperviousness to, smoke is demonstrated after he takes possession of the Old Curiosity Shop, when we see him summon to the premises both his lawyer and his servant boy and force both against their will to smoke along with him. Quilp is described as “smoking violently” (TOCS 93), and the atmosphere is filled both with his smoke and with the threat of violence. The boy is told “continually to smoke a great pipe which the dwarf had provided for the purpose, and to take it from his lips under any pretence whatsoever, were it only for a minute at a time, if he dared” (TOCS 91). As for Mr. Brass, “tobacco-smoke always caused him great internal discomposure and annoyance” (TOCS 91), something that Quilp likely knew, yet he instructs the lawyer, “‘Smoke away!’ cried Quilp. ‘Never stop! You can talk as you smoke. Don’t lose time’” (TOCS 92). Quilp regards this torment “with chuckling satisfaction, and remarked that he called that comfort” (TOCS 91). All of these scenes, taken together, demonstrate that Quilp uses physical smoke, heat, and fire as extensions of his own fiery personality. That they have no effect on him reinforces the fact that they serve as physical manifestations of his malignant intentions, which are, after all, sadistic and not masochistic.

It is poetically fitting that Quilp’s death should be caused by fire’s natural adversary, water. In the hurry of attempting to escape the authorities after the
discovery of his framing of the innocent Kit, Quilp accidentally sets fire to his
“infernal den.” And yet, ever the fire-proof man, it is not the flames or smoke that
kill him. Instantly lost in a blinding fog after fleeing out of doors, he unintentionally
walks off a pier and falls into the Thames. It is only the millions of gallons of
water in the great river that are finally able to quench Quilp’s spark of life. He
drowns, and his lifeless body is washed up in a dismal swamp. Yet even in
death, the description of his corpse is full of fire imagery: “The sky was red with
flame, and the water that bore it there, had been tinged with the sullen light as it
flowed along. The place, the deserted carcase had left so recently, a living man,
was now a blazing ruin. There was something of the glare upon its face” (TOCS
510). This description of the manner in which Quilp dies, in water and yet still
surrounded by imagery of fire, shows the degree to which his sadistic nature is
reflected in, and inseparable from, such imagery.

Quilp was far from the only despicable predator found in Dickens’s works,
and as such is not the only one surrounded by hellacious, fiery imagery. The
malevolent Fagin of *Oliver Twist* is also repeatedly associated with fire, and is
frequently depicted as standing over one, roasting, or toasting, or frying, or
boiling something. The demonic imagery surrounding Quilp surrounds Fagin, as
well. The very first glimpse of him to appear in the novel is an illustration by
Cruikshank, in which Fagin, with his narrow face and pointed beard, is depicted
in the distinctly devilish pose of standing over a fire, holding a large three-
pronged fork (OT 62). This reflects Dickens’s text, in which the very first sentence introducing Fagin starts out with fire imagery:

In a frying-pan, which was on the fire, and which was secured to the mantelshelf by a string, some sausages were cooking; and standing over them, with a toasting-fork in his hand, was a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. (OT 60-63)

The entire passage is imbued with satanic attributes attached to Fagin, from the fire and the ersatz pitchfork to the red hair that, in old folklore, was associated with the devil. The fire may be taken to symbolize Fagin’s passionate malevolence, greed, and desire for self-preservation, and the sausages in his pan are stand-ins for the young people who wind up trapped in what the sinister Monks (expressing an identical sentiment to Mr. Brass) calls Fagin’s “infernal den” (OT 206). The sausages slowly fry until Fagin is ready to consume them; similarly, the adolescents who serve Fagin do so until the life that he forces them into consumes them, leaving them either convicted before the law or, more likely, dead. Fagin gives the fates of his young victims no more thought than he gives to the fates of his morning sausages: to his mind, both exist only to sustain him. That he leaves his companions constantly exposed to the “fires” of danger and damnation means nothing to the devilish Fagin.

It is in moments of particular malice, or particular danger to those to those around him, that Fagin is most frequently seen around fire. Unfortunately for Oliver, these moments abound and usually involve him. On the morning after Oliver first meets Fagin, and during which he is first made aware of the nature of
their enterprise and his expected role in it, he awakens to the sight of the old man “boiling some coffee in a saucepan for breakfast” (OT 64). When the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates return to bring him news of Oliver’s capture by the police following their attempt to pickpocket Mr. Brownlow, they “roused the merry old gentleman as he sat over the fire with a saveloy and a small loaf in his left hand; a pocket-knife in his right; and a pewter pot on the trivet” (OT 93). As he gives Oliver over to Bill Sykes to join the criminal crew that will attempt to rob the Maylies, he is shown “stooping over the fire toasting a piece of bread” (OT 156). When he receives word of the failure of the enterprise, he does so while “brooding over a dull, smoky fire” (OT 190). Each of these occurrences associates an image of Fagin and fire with Fagin’s willingness to endanger Oliver over the only principles to which the old man is unquestionably, passionately dedicated: his own self-preservation and enrichment.

Despite Fagin being the character most associated with fire imagery in *Oliver Twist*, it is another character, Oliver’s greedy, long-lost half-brother Monks, who makes the comment which is perhaps most illustrative of the connection the author makes between physical heat and excesses of malevolent selfishness. At a meeting between them, the following exchange between Monks and the wicked Mr. and Mrs. Bumble takes place on a rainy night:

‘What the devil made you stand lingering there, in the wet?’ said Monks, turning round, and addressing Bumble, after he had bolted the door behind them. ‘We – we were only cooling ourselves,’ stammered Bumble, looking apprehensively about him.
‘Cooling yourselves!’ retorted Monks. ‘Not all the rain that ever fell, or ever will fall, will put as much of hell's fire out, as a man can carry about with him. You won't cool yourselves so easily; don't think it!’ (OT 297)

This exchange shows that whatever heat may be coming from them is not caused by the purely physical and cannot be cooled by the purely physical.

Where heat is a manifestation of malevolence, it will take more than water to cool it. The scene is mirrored by another written by Dickens, this one appearing fifteen years later in *Bleak House*. Lady Dedlock’s evil French maid Hortense undertakes a similar inexplicable-seeming trip through cold rainwater, removing her shoes and walking through the wet grass left after a rainstorm at the country church near Chesney Wold. True to the prevailing English stereotype of those from continental, Catholic countries, the soon-to-be murderess is described as “mortal high and passionate – powerful high and passionate” (BH 277). This passion is illustrated, and the eventual “mortal” consequences of it foreshadowed, as John Jarndyce asks the church’s groundskeeper about the Frenchwoman’s mysterious actions:

> ‘But why should she walk shoeless through all that water?’ said my guardian.
> ‘Why, indeed, sir, unless it is to cool her down!’ said the man. ‘Or unless she fancies it's blood,’ said the woman. ‘She’d as soon walk through that as anything else, I think, when her own’s up!’ (BH 277)

Both answers have an aspect of truth to them, as they represent both cause and eventual effect. Her walk through cool rainwater does seem to be an attempt to physically cool the heat of her “high and mortal passion,” but it will fail, and this
passion will indeed cause her to spill blood, leading to the deaths of both Mr. Tulkinghorn and herself (for she will hang for killing him). As Monks could have told the murderous maid, no such simplistic attempt to cool the fire of passion and hatred that she carries with her could ever hope to work.

Within the pages of *Bleak House*, Dickens’s most controversial use of symbolic fire is to be found, as the passionate malevolence found within yet another of its characters, the disreputable rag and bottle dealer Krook, bursts forth into a literal fire that consumes him from within. While Dickens took tremendous pains to defend the scientific validity of spontaneous human combustion, its symbolic qualities are of perhaps greater interest to the modern reader. Other critics have noted the significance of Krook’s death as it relates to Dickens’s social commentary. As Benjamin Fisher and J. Turow note in their essay “Dickens and Fire Imagery,”

> Krook’s death has functional significance in representing the decaying but potentially explosive destructiveness underneath English Society. Accusations of ‘obsolescence and divine judgment, extinction and damnation, pestilence and irresponsibility, and death by fire and water’, function symbolically in this vast panorama of defeated expectations. (Fisher and Turow 364)

This is true enough, and there is without doubt a degree to which Krook’s death was a commentary upon the callous and corrupt Chancery court. And yet Krook’s unusual manner of death is personally fitting as well. Certainly, Krook’s personality matches the “fiery” imagery associated with him: he is greedy, ruthless, miserly, sadistic, too selfish to bother learning to read, and, as his tenant Miss Flyte repeatedly warns the wards of Jarndyce, “a little – you know –
“M – I!” (BH 63). These qualities are symbolically brought to life both in his familiar, the vicious cat Lady Jane, and in fire imagery that surrounds him from his introduction to his last appearance. The villain’s manner of death is foreshadowed in Esther Summerson’s description of him as having “breath issuing in visible smoke from his mouth as if he were on fire within” (BH 62). The presence of signs of an actual fire inside him is reinforced in a later encounter we witness between Krook, Guppy, and Weevle, in which “his hot breath seems to come towards them like a flame” (BH 304). These passages provide a context in which Krook’s combustion seems less truly “spontaneous” and more a natural, though dramatic, fulfillment of the fiery forces at work inside of him. So reflective of the internal qualities of the man is his death that even the by-products of his combustion that linger after it are as distasteful as he ever was, for the smoke and ash left in his room have the same properties as their source, and it is noted that there is a “hateful soot” (BH 474) left hanging in the air of that “evil place” (BH 479).

Krook’s death is also quite unique, however, in that it parallels Dickens’s other most infamous literary death by fire, that of the scheming Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. There are many similarities between the two that make their similar deaths fitting parallels to each other, as the critic Sara Thornton explains:

A spinster burns, an old bachelor explodes; Miss Havisham catches fire, Krook spontaneously combusts. . . . Living in the dark confines of his cluttered shop, he slowly poisons himself with gin, just as Miss Havisham poisons herself with hatred. . . . She has been consuming herself slowly, as Krook does, and finally both ignite in an instant. (Thornton 87)
As Thornton demonstrates, both have a fire of passionate hatred that smolders away within them, finding expression in inflicting harm on others, in self-harm, and ultimately manifesting itself in a physical fire that burns them up from inside.

In fact, Miss Havisham’s immolation may be considered to be as much a case of spontaneous combustion as that of Krook. The passage describing it never provides its exact cause:

I looked into the room where I had left her, and I saw her seated in the ragged chair upon the hearth close to the fire, with her back towards me. In the moment when I was withdrawing my head to go quietly away, I saw a great flaming light spring up. In the same moment, I saw her running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her, and soaring at least as many feet above her head as she was high. (GE 397)

This passage gives no actual physical cause for the conflagration. Some may assume that it was simply a stray ember from the hearth that was to blame. Yet just as likely is that Miss Havisham, ever unable to escape her past, finally spontaneously combusted due to the long, slow buildup of bitterness and spite within her at just the moment when she finally made what amends she could for her actions. Certainly, the former theory is the more realistic, yet allegory consistently trumps realism in Dickens’s created worlds, and the latter explanation is far more consistent with his other depictions of “fiery” characters.

As Thornton notes,

But it is Miss Havisham’s devouring and cruel qualities which link her to other fiery and dangerous women destined for destruction in Dickens. Their “fire” comes not from their deaths but from the same self-consuming fire of revenge which slowly burns Miss Havisham and fuels her “burning love” for Estella. (Thornton 80)
This insight links her to Hortense, but also to all of Dickens’s passionate and fire-related characters. Yet her case is unique among them in having about it a touch of the tragic: despite any late attempts at atonement, she cannot break the grip upon her destiny held by the effects of the cruelties done to her and those done by her to others. Just as her life was defined by the effects of the fires of hatred and misandry that smoldered within her, so her death is caused by the effects of a literal fire that burns no less hot and causes no less pain.

If, in Dickens, too much passion turns to selfishness and hatred, and eventually to fire, then it is equally so that too little turns to despondency and hopelessness and eventually to ash. Examples of this are found throughout the Dickens canon. *Mugby Junction*'s lost, disaffected Gentleman for Nowhere is described as “a man within five years of fifty either way, who had turned gray too soon, like a neglected fire” (MJ 7). In *Dombey and Son*, John Carker, a man beaten down by a past scandal from which he never recovered, is so described:

> The fire of his eyes, the expression of his features, the very voice in which he spoke, were all subdued and quenched, as if the spirit within him lay in ashes. . . . And yet his interest in youth and hopelessness was not extinguished with the other embers of his soul. (DS 83)

Both of these passages establish a symbolic link between physical ash and a passionless resignation in the heart of the character associated with it. Yet nowhere is the connection between a dearth of passionate will and physical fire (or lack thereof) and ash more strikingly illustrated than with the images that surround the lonely, alienated Louisa Gradgrind in *Hard Times*. 
From the very moment when the Gradgrind children are introduced, the depths of Louisa’s emotional and spiritual deprivation are described in terms that invoke fire imagery:

There was an air of jaded sullenness in them both, and particularly in the girl: yet, struggling through the dissatisfaction of her face, there was a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression. Not with the brightness natural to cheerful youth, but with uncertain, eager, doubtful flashes, which had something painful in them, analogous to the changes on a blind face groping its way. (HT 17)

The metaphor of her soul being “a fire with nothing to burn” is the first of many symbolic links that Dickens makes between the girl and dying fires, embers, and ash. These are connected to her lack of passion, lack of will, and impassivity in the face of her fate, which are in turn related to the emotional deprivations that she faced during a life dominated by her father’s cold, stonily factual Utilitarian philosophy. Thus, these artifacts of dying fires become reflections of her damaged emotional state and of the inhumane philosophy of which it is a consequence. Deprived of the natural affection and fancy that might enable her to develop healthy relationships to the world around her and the people who inhabit it, she becomes obsessed with cold fires and their trappings. She is described as having become “much given to watching the bright ashes at twilight as they fell into the grate and became extinct” (HT 90), and her brother relates, “I have often known her to sit and watch the fire – for an hour at a stretch” (HT 128). Dickens, in relating this, establishes an affinity between the cold and passionless girl and the remnants of physical fires gone cold. Her own lack of
internal fire gives her cause to identify with the ashes and dying embers that represent her own joyless, hopeless existence. She is the only one who can perceive anything of significance in these dead fires. Indeed, one early event in which she is left to “contemplate the fire which so engrossed her” (HT 55) causes her brother to remark, “You seem to find more to look at in it than ever I could find. . . it looks to me as stupid and blank as everything else looks” (HT 54-55). If, as this statement shows, she is the only one who can perceive the significance of these fires, it is because they manifest something unique to her, which no one around her possesses the sensitivity to see: the terrible effects of her father’s philosophy upon her development as a human being.

Fire represents, then, three forces within her: her curiosity as to what the future will bring, her despondent fear that it will hold no joy for her, and her passive acceptance, despite this, of whatever will come. Dying embers reflect and symbolize her resignation in the face of what may lie ahead of her, which in turn ties deeply into the idea that she lacks the personal “fire” within her necessary to resist the forces that sweep her along to an unhappy destiny. If the fires within Quilp, Fagin, Krook, and Miss Havisham make them too willing to hurt others in furtherance of their own goals, the lack of fire within Louisa makes her too willing to be hurt in furtherance of the goals of others. She does not resist, nor try to flee, nor even voice objection, but simply stares into the fire with a detached curiosity, hoping to divine her future there. This is reflected in an exchange in which, after being chastised by her mother for wondering about her future, she
replies, “I was encouraged by nothing, mother, but by looking at the red sparks dropping out of the fire, and whitening and dying. It made me think, after all, how short my life would be, and how little I could hope to do in it” (HT 55). The sparks and ash that she sees represent her own dim spark of life. Dickens takes this metaphor a step further in one particularly poignant exchange, in which she responds to her father’s decision to, in essence, sell her to Josiah Bounderby as a trophy wife in terms that are particularly damning, yet the which he is too insensitive to understand:

‘What do I know, father,’ said Louisa in her quiet manner, ‘of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished? What escape have I had from problems that could be demonstrated, and realities that could be grasped?’ As she said it, she unconsciously closed her hand, as if upon a solid object, and slowly opened it as though she were releasing dust or ash. (HT 98)

Here again dust and ash represent her emotional and spiritual state. The fact that she seems in this passage to be releasing dust or ash that only she can see reflects the level of her isolation. Her father cannot understand the importance either of her words or of her symbolically charged gesture.

Only her near-adulterous relationship with the aptly-named James Harthouse (his name combines “heart” with “hothouse”) finally manages to elicit some inkling of passion within her. It is one that her uncaring husband is oblivious to, even at the moment of an illicit exchange between Louisa and her would-be lover. As his housekeeper Mrs. Sparsit suspiciously eyes the couple in the shadows, the industrialist and his servant have the following exchange:
“What's the matter, ma'am?’ said Mr. Bounderby; ‘you don't see a Fire, do you?’ ‘Oh dear no, sir,’ returned Mrs. Sparsit, ‘I was thinking of the dew’” (HT 176). Tremendous irony is present in this moment, as the housekeeper’s inability to see any literal fire matches Bounderby’s inability to detect a fire of passion springing up inside his neglected wife. Only, however, when Louisa ends the unconsummated relationship with Harthouse and goes to confront her father about the damage that her upbringing has wrought does finally some real fire of soul becomes evident within her. This confrontation is described in terms that include fire imagery, with Dickens describing her as having “a wild dilating fire in the eyes steadfastly regarding him” (HT 203). Afterwards, as her father attempts to console her and apologize for all his mistakes, the righteous indignation within her continues to make itself apparent: “A dull anger that she should be seen in her distress, and that the involuntary look she had so resented should come to this fulfilment, smouldered within her like an unwholesome fire” (HT 208). The repression of her natural emotions in the name of Utilitarianism and the imbalance that this creates in her personality is reflected in the “unwholesome” nature of this metaphorical fire, showing that the application of unwholesome philosophies can lead only to unwholesome consequences.

Fire, heat, smoke, ash, and dust serve as some of the most potent manifestations of emotional and moral states in Dickens’s novels, and they are also generally the most personal. Even when connected to bad philosophy or public policy, this imagery represents personalities that are fundamentally
unbalanced. The people who possess these unbalanced personalities, that are either too fiery or too cold, create destructive outcomes around them in every sphere: in their public and their private lives, and in matters personal, legal, or societal. By symbolically depicting these destructive outcomes as literal trappings of fire, Dickens represented the moral, philosophical, and emotional realities of them in symbolic language that brought them to life in vivid, even unforgettable ways.
Conclusion

Pulling back from a close look at each of these symbolic elements into a wider view, a greater realization is made possible regarding just how different the literary stances of the Victorians were from those of their contemporaries both on the continent and in America. In particular the American writers of the 19th century tended to present fictional worlds that were close reflections of the actual world, and to find both their drama and their social significance in exploring man’s reactions to the actual world’s often harsh realities. For these authors, creating entire fictional worlds wherein the physical construction of the world itself was a manifestation of the moral, mental, and emotional states of the characters who inhabited them, and that could physically change as these states did, would have been utterly alien to their artistic and philosophical sensibilities. Dickens, however, was both distinctively Victorian in his outlook, and a unique creative force in and of himself. His created fictional worlds, with their dreamlike and allegorical nature, were both particularly suited to the sensibilities of the author’s time and place, and products of a most uncommon mind.

This examination of Dickens’s treatment of these elements is intended to allow a new insight into the ways in which the author created physical worlds that reflect their moral and emotional twins. It is therefore not meant as a comprehensive listing of every such symbolic usage in the Dickens canon, but rather as a starting point for a dialog that may explore more deeply some of the
pieces of the worlds laid out in Dickens's novels in order to find previously-obscured significance therein. Just as this study has expanded and built upon Rosemarie Bodenheimer’s invaluable revelation about the nature of the fictional world found in *Bleak House*, it is itself open to being expanded and built upon by other scholars whose own insights, it can be hoped, will add further to the base of critical understanding about one of the English language’s greatest novelists.
Works Cited


