

## Exploring Dickens' *Hard Times* and *Bleak House* through Ecocritical Lens

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### Abstract:

Victorian England was boastful of its flourishing industry and urbanism, but that had a hazardous impact on the environment, ecology, and the life of ordinary people. Victorian thinkers and authors expressed their serious concerns over such impact. This paper argues that Dickens textualized all the concerns that are considered ecocritical in his novels named *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*. The novels presented the environmental depletion, the ill-effects of mechanization, the suffering of the poor, marginalized people, their miserly living conditions, unhealthy sanitation, and contagious diseases due to a noxious environment. His portrayal of the depleted ecology, endangered life-sustaining potentialities, the gap between the rich and the poor damaging mutual social relations reflect the novels' deeper ecological mode. Humane qualities like compassion and reciprocity; mutual understanding among the characters were portrayed by the author, which helped regain some positivity in ecology at the end of both novels.

**Keywords:** Victorian, Condition of England Novels, Ecology, Ecocriticism, Sustainability.

Victorian England's history books always mark the advancement of industrialism with great towns and cities. England emerged as a world economic power with wealth from industrial and imperial projects. But in that period, England also suffered the exploitation of the natural and physical environment, the exploitation of the poor people, and above all, the exploitation of the ecology. Tamara Ketabgian's *The Lives of Machines* talks of the "recuperative history of technoculture" (6) that shows how Machines reshaped victorian perceptions. That technoculture had a major contribution to the massive change in the country's natural environment and in changing human beings' essential interaction with nature.

“Industrially induced risks” (Kneitz 49) altered Victorian society into a “Risk Society” (Beck, *Living* 329), a concept proposed by Ulrich Beck where urban infrastructures such as suffocative buildings, the enormous piles of garbage, polluted rivers, lack of sanitation, air pollution, and chemical exposure misbalanced and fragmented ecology robbing of all its life-sustaining qualities.

Recently Victorian period is drawing a lot of attention of the researchers to explore the ecocritical concerns or ecological sensibilities among the Victorian writers. Charles Dickens was one of the most prominent writers of that period. This paper will try to find his ecocritical concerns by reading two of his condition of England novels - *Hard Times*(1854) and *Bleak House* (1852).

The German biologist and naturalist Earnest Haeckel defined ecology as the science that would study the relationship of the organism to the environment, conceiving the term ecology back in 1869. Ecology can be perceived as the thorough analysis of the interconnection of all living things and their connectedness with the surrounding environment. The word ‘ecology’ came from two Greek words: *Oikos* and *Logos*. *Oikos* means home, and *logos* means reason or study of ecology, which most probably hints at the bonding of human beings with their home, that is, earth.

According to Glotfelty, William Rueckert first coined the term “ecocriticism” in his essay entitled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment of Ecocriticism” in 1978. For Rueckert, the study of literature by applying ecology or ecological concepts as a critical tool is ecocriticism. To which Glotfelty added, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment...ecocriticism takes an earth centred approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty xviii). Vandana Shiva observed, “ecology movements are political movements for a non-violent world order in which nature is conserved for conserving the potions for survival” (*Staying* 37).

Greg Garrard thought whenever ecocritics try to interpret the relationship between literature and nature; they must keep in mind the two concepts of ‘nature’ - Nature as a real physical environment and nature as a cultural construct. Garrard’s observation can explain the close association between the emergence of ecology as a science, the emergence of ecological awareness, and the emergence of ecocriticism as one of the significant literary and cultural theories. Greg Garrard observed,

Ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology. Ecocritics may not be qualified to contribute to debates about problems in ecology, but they must nevertheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ‘ecological literacy’ as far as possible (5).

Ecocriticism’s project is to investigate human cultural history to observe the interdependence of human beings and other nonhuman entities. Human beings are conceptualized as a part of the cohesive whole (earth) by the ecocritics. Their goal is to maintain a healthy balance of ecology to save the life-sustaining potentialities of the earth. According to Merchant, ecocritics perceive the earth as a “living organism” (41) where human beings have a close bond with nature and the other living and non-living beings through the sustainable relationship and “I–thou ethic” (*Radical* 41).

Lawrence Buell’s book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the formation of American Culture* discussed some essential points to be considered in an environmentally aware work. The environment is a major element rather than a background in such work. In environmentally conscious works, human beings are presented as an inseparable part of the nonhuman environment as their lives are influenced by the changes in the environment. Another point is that such work should have the moral intention to show human beings’ responsibility towards the environment (7-8). “Colonial extractions of resources combined with industrial pollution and depletion have today pushed the whole earth to the brink of ecological destruction.” (Merchant, *Radical* 41). This observation of Merchant is very relevant about Victorian England because such a process of destruction that raised Merchant’s anxiety already began in the Victorian period.

In the essay named “Where is Victorian Ecocriticism?” Jesse Oak Taylor pointed out that Victorians did a form of ecocriticism without using the term. Studying industrialization, harsh criticism of depletion of nature, and the plight of the weaker section of society, deeply affected by such exploitation and depletion, are directly linked to ecocritical concerns. Such topics became a central concern for the authors of that period. They wanted to raise awareness among the reading public and thus emerged the Condition of England novels or Industrial novels or Social Problem novels influenced by Carlyle’s “condition of England question” (1) in *Chartism*. Frances Trollope,

Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley were writers of those novels. Dickens was one of the most important authors of such novels.

Peter Gould found that the 'Back To Nature and Back to the Land' movement was influenced by figures such as Carlyle and Ruskin. According to J.O. Taylor, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee in his new monograph entitled *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire: Famines, Fevers, and the Literary Cultures of South Asia* (2013),

suggests that Victorian ecocriticism will not be about "Nature" set apart from the human, but rather unearth the ecology of history as part and parcel of the human as both cultural and biological entity. That this arises not in the context of preserving an idealized nature but rather in the effort to sustain the ecology of human life is consistent both with the meaning of the term "environmentalism" in the Victorian era, when it referred to the doctrine that all organisms are affected by their environment and thus closer to "ecology" than its now familiar meaning of environmental advocacy, and to present concerns for environmental justice (Taylor, *Where* 883).

John Parham, in the chapter named "Trajectory of a Victorian Ecology" of the book entitled *Green Man Hopkins* observed that

Victorian literary culture became characterized by a conspicuous sense of social responsibility [...] which, in turn, helped prompt a spirit of campaigning, political intervention, and legislation to which literary figures, and literary work, contributed (68).

Charles Dickens wrote with such a sense of social responsibility. His writings had a profound influence on the public. "Charles Dickens is to Victorian England what Shakespeare was to Renaissance England as he was able to typify the period his writings disclose and expose" (Makati 9). His writing accurately illustrated the environmental and ecological challenges that Victorians encountered due to industrial hazards and urban infrastructures. Most notably, in Dickens' sense of ecology and Victorian sense of ecology, human lives and societal concerns were also included, as suggested by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee.

Dickens showed how environmental and ecological risks affected and degraded human lives. It is because human beings and their lives are also integral parts of nature and ecology. In the book *Victorian Writers and the Environment: Ecocritical Perspectives*, Troy Boone

contributed a chapter named “Early Dickens and ecocriticism.” There, Boone referred to Karen Chase and Michael Levenson’s essay “Green Dickens,” where according to Boone, the authors dealt “Dickens’ social- that is, human and urban –concerns as ecology” (98).

John Parham’s article named “Dickens in the City: Science, Technology, Ecology in the Novels of Charles Dickens” presents the way environmental conditions along with human lives became a matter of concern in Dickens’ writing. Dickens associated the depletion of the physical environment with a hazardous human one and that Parham believed to be specifically ecological. Thus according to Parham, Dickens foreshadowed contemporary ecological thinking. He referred to social ecologist John Clark whose idea of an alternative “social ecology of the imagination” had two dimensions. Parham argued that the two dimensions of Clark’s alternative ecology could be found in Dickens’ novels. Dickens’

novels represented a ‘concrete and experiential investigation’ of the impacts of Victorian industrialization on human and nonhuman nature alike; and that Dickens’ writing and active involvement; notably in the area of sanitation reform, constituted ‘the creation of an ecological imaginary’ (Parham, *Dickens* 10).

According to Parham, Dickens instigated what Lawrence Buell called a tradition of “toxic discourse” (*Writing* 30). Parham identified that Dickens succeeded in anticipating the current concept of ecosystem health. He thought that Dickens was closer to social ecology rather than deep ecology.

In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Lawrence Buell observed that Dickens’ “sense of ecology” was as ‘keen’ like that of his ‘ruralizing counterparts’ like Thomas Hardy (46). In “The Literature of Toxicity from Rachel Carson to Ana Castillo,” Terrell Dixon perceived that the urban novels of Charles Dickens have some trace of the elements of literature of toxicity. Dickens’ descriptions are not exactly ‘nature writing,’ but his texts deal with the environmental hazards, pollution, insanitation, public health that came to the public through Edwin Chadwick’s *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Classes* (1824), Friedrich Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) and Henry Mayhew’s report of *London Labour and London Poor* (1861). Makati rightly pointed out that from the early 1840s onwards, Dickens was involved in the sanitary reform movement and had an active role in acquiring political support for the public health act of 1848. Dickens’ two condition of England novels *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*, reflect

the accurate picture of the contemporary English situation. These novels reveal how the industrial revolution and the rise of mechanical urbanization brought ecological and human damage.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens tried to render the rapid changing of the English landscape. English countrysides and towns changed into a place of factories and pollution. In his portrayal of Coketown, he showed how a place became an accurate representation of a mechanism where nature was walled out completely. Every brick of Coketown, unnatural red and black colour of every corner, smoke, soot, the smell of thick dye, presented the actual picture, the physical manifestation of industrialization. According to Darcy Lewis, the monotony of the two colours, red and black were used by Dickens to compare how far the place, Coketown, was different from “verdant green nature” (20). Unnatural red symbolizes death, danger. Brick and black symbolize colourlessness.

Smoke and soot covered the deep blue of the sky, and tall chimneys obscured the skyline, and thus “nature is invoked in its most debased form” (Lewis 20). Sunshine could not break the thick mists of Coketown. There was perpetual fog, smoke, soot giving an effect of darkness, vapour even in sunlight. “Down upon the river that was black and thick with dye, some Coketown boys who were at large- a rare sight there- rowed a crazy boat, which made a spumous track upon the water as it jogged along, while every dip of an oar stirred up vile smells” (*Hard* 87). The description of the river indicates how the hazardous influence of industrialism damaged the natural environment. The river became the trash where industrial waste was dumped, making its water black and thick with dye. The water had a strong, foul smell that if boys sometimes dared to boat in the water, the foul smell increased with every stroke of their oars. The author suggested that human interference is preventing the “eye of heaven” from looking the “the things it looks upon to bless” (*Hard* 87).

Human intervention was responsible for the destruction of the system of nature again and again. The sun lost its purifying power over the river in Coketown, where nature was carefully bricked out. “In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortification of that ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in;” (*Hard* 51).

Following Shiva, it can be said that industrialism, its mechanism, “is at the root of the growing ecological crisis, because it entails a transformation of nature such that its organic

processes and regularities and regenerative capacities are destroyed” (*Staying* 24). The bright moon shone with disappointment down the bricks and high chimneys of Coketown and failed to console its people with any hope. The personification of smoke as a monstrous serpent swallowing the sky of Coketown represents the destructive, annihilating nature of pollution.

Dickens described the morning as dull and pale, which would repeat the routinized life of every day. The rain lost its life-enhancing qualities, its nurturing power there. The rain was only degenerating the environment of the place, making it more polluted and filthier. The rain was over the piles of garbage, coals, and ashes making the streets and the entire environment gloomy and dreary.

The name of the chapter “NO WAY OUT” truly depicts the hopeless aspect of natural soothers like moon and rain there. So, in Coketown, there was no way out from such a dismal condition. Dickens most probably tried to emphasize the failure of nature in regaining the balance in the environment. Nature struggled there for existence. There was so much filth from the mechanized production that even rain could not wash it. Human intervention in nature through industry and technology was so extensive that –

the rain fell, and the Smoke serpent, submissive to the curse of all that tribe, trailed themselves upon the earth. In the waste- yard outside, the steam from the escape-pipe, the little barrels and old iron, the shining heaps of coals, the ashes everywhere, were shrouded in a veil of mist and rain (*Hard* 56).

The invisible wall locked the toxic air inside the locality. “First of all, you see our smoke. That’s meat and drink to us. It’s the healthiest thing in the world in all respects, and particularly for the lungs” (*Hard* 97). Bounderby’s words to Mr. Harthouse were ironic. Dickens satirized the false sentiment regarding industrialization. Coketown air acted as a poison for health, particularly for lungs that inhale the smoke, soot, chemical, and fluff. Environmental pollution made the weather unevenly hot. Dickens pointed out the unnaturalness of Bitzer’s skin to show how pollution affected human health. The people of Coketown only saw a glimpse of nature through the polluted lens (Lewis 25).

Coketown was typically representing the “risk society.” There were environmental, ecological risks. Dickens described the squalid misery of the working people in their slum life. He

showed how they worked and lived in unhealthy working and living conditions. The air was polluted, there were harmful gas and toxic chemicals in factories. In the slums, there was no proper sanitary system. Their lives were at risk in factories because they had to work in an unsafe way. Both in-home and work, they were prone to infectious diseases. So, the risks were unequally distributed.

The weaker section, the poor working-class, were at higher risk. They were deprived of the opportunity to get life-sustaining ways of living. Characters like Stephen Blackpool, his wife, and Rachel were portrayed to indicate the suffering that the poor working people have to endure in their lives. Stephen realized that the poor people's lives were in the muddle - they were treated like machines. Dickens rendered how the change of season did not have any effect on the gloomy atmosphere and the lives of the factory workers. They led a dull, monotonous life that tested their patience, leading them to frustration. Not everybody was like Stephen and Rachel, who tried to overcome those. Blackpool fell into a coal pit. Dickens criticized the negligence of the miners by that incident. In a coal pit, poisonous gas was generated. Blackpool referred to those workers who worked in the pit and became victims to the poisonous gas that sometimes exploded, leading to frequent fatal accidents.

In the manifestation of the ecological hazards due to industrial pollution Dickens also indicated how environmental pollution and gloom affected the psychology of human beings and their lives. According to Lewis, in *Hard Times*, Dickens'

dystopia is manifested on two axes- the physical landscape of Coketown and psychic "mindscape" of Louisa Gradgrind to illuminate the effects of industrialization on the environment and the resulting implications of utilitarianism that would reverberate in the individual psyche (18).

Industrialized urbanization and utilitarian education produced mechanized minds and mechanized, monotonous, routinized human lives. The mechanized life of the workers made them 'hands' for the masters who thought of them only as machines. They were dehumanized used only for production and profits.

The people of the upper class and educated middle class were also mechanized and dehumanized but differently. Gradgrind's utilitarian education made the students hardcore, factual,



calculative machines who were selfish, lacking natural, humane qualities. His education produced mechanized minds devoid of human emotions and sensibilities. Gradgrind's children Louisa and Tom were incapable of any human emotion and sensibilities. They felt a kind of void in their mind. Other students were also reflecting selfish attitudes. So, the effect of industrialization and its destructive influences had different impacts upon the upper and middle classes. It affected mainly their mind and thus had negative impacts on their lives.

The entire ecology of Coketown was severely affected by the altered situation. It was misbalanced, and Dickens well represented that. Sissy's happy married life and her evergreen "interconnected sense of self" (Gaard 3), Louisa's attempt to find her lost emotions through the love of Sissy's children, Mr. Gradgrind's realization of his 'factual' mistakes, and his moral conversion by devoting his skill and money to the well-being of society, Rachel's honest; hardworking life with voluntary help to destitute, leave some hope of positivity in the ecology of Coketown. It is true that the environment remained the same, but love, compassion, generosity of the characters, and the reciprocity, emotional understanding in their relationships improved at least human ecology.

The imagery used by Dickens in *Bleak House* reflects environmental consciousness. Dickens began his novel with the depiction of London's air pollution from coal-burning and wrote: "Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun" (*Bleak* 3). Soot was so big that it looked like snowflakes. The coal burning was dense enough to obscure the sunlight. Dickens portrayed how pollution was, "Adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest" (*Bleak* 17). The mud banks grew and deposited several layers of mud until life became unsustainable.

Gradually he began the description of the infamous London fog. The fog was not simple moist air. It was the result of smoke, and itself was smog. London fog symbolizes "a literal economy of filth and disease" (Buell, *Writing* 132). Martha Rogus, in her essay on *Bleak House*, referred to Steven Johnson's concept of miasma in describing Dickens' nineteenth-century London. Rogus used this concept of miasma in describing the fog.

According to Rogus, this miasma was manifested as fog in *Bleak House*. There the fog wanted to obliterate the gap between the social classes. That was why the fog spread widely and affected everyone, polluting, harming everyone irrespective of class, race, gender. Fog dominated every corner.

Dickens portrayed how people of different classes were affected by the fog. He probably hinted that industrialism and its consequences left incalculable damage to the environment and ecology, damaged human lives, and negatively influenced the sense of morality. The fog hovered over the river. It blackened the meadows and the city. The fog was dirty and symbolized the corruption of the chancery. The fog slowly covered everything, like the slow-going procedures of chancery. The fog disturbed the skipper and the apprentice boy on deck. Dickens there alluded to the mistreatment of the apprentice children. Apprenticed children had an essential role in producing by their continuous labour most of the industrial profits. Dickens used environmental images to show the oppression the little children had to endure in their workplaces.

Most interestingly, retired industrialists were significantly affected by the fog. So, nature was taking revenge there. The fog choked and blinded the pensioners who once supported and helped create huge factories and industrial projects. The environment took revenge on them.

Dickens compared the countryside and the city to emphasize the city's desolate, ruined, polluted condition. Esther, Ada, and Mr. Jarndyce made a pleasant journey to Lincolnshire. On their way to the little village, Esther portrayed the serene beauty of the weather and landscape through her words. The way was full of natural beauties and greenery. The green corn waved in the wind. The trees had bright green leaves. The birds sang melodiously. Colourful flowers enhanced the beauty of nature. The air was fresh and sweetly fragrant. The bean fields were waived by the mild wind. People spent time lazily, fishing, and sleeping in the sunny afternoon. Lincolnshire's scenic beauty, sunny, bright, picturesque landscape, the cheerful ways people greeted each other emphasized the fresh, earthly beauty and less complicated, peaceful life in the lap of nature. The surrounding of Boythorn's home had natural beauty, with clean air scented with flowers and natural herbs. In the countryside, the environment was not exposed to pollution yet. So, nature, with its pure beauty, could still be found in Lincolnshire.

Another important thing to notice in the countryside was the fertility of the soil. The soil was so rich that various fruits and flowers, and herbs bloomed. The soil fertility also suggested the

purity of soil and environment still untouched by pollution and industrial filth. The view of Chesney Wold was also very picturesque. The Park was full of greenery and flower trees, making the place beautiful and tranquil. A few lines later, when Esther, Ada, Mr. Jarndyce went to the little church in the park, they strolled the pleasant footpath “winding among the verdant turf and the beautiful trees” (*Bleak* 215). Such footpaths covered with trees were in stark contrast with the London filthy streets.

Esther and Charley went to live in Lincolnshire after recovering from the deadly disease. The beauty of nature enchanted Esther in her second visit to the little village of Boythorn. She was delighted by the friendly behavior of the village people. People were frustrated and fragmented, living an isolated life, alienated from each other in London. But in the village, Esther had a kind of communal living with all the friendly villagers. She played with the little children, was invited to other cottages, and enjoyed the company of the villagers a lot.

It was important to notice that Esther was sent to the lap of nature for getting all the nourishment of nature to regain her health, mental strength, and peace. The influence of fresh, pure nature made Esther and Charley radiant and glowing. Dickens showed the soothing, nourishing qualities that nature possesses with its full power in the countryside. It is because nature, the environment, all the life-sustaining forces in the countryside were undisturbed and unharmed by any human intervention like the industries, factories, urbanized projects.

The fresh greenery of the village was contrasted with the desolate condition of London and the iron country of the north. That place was a perfect industrial place with coalpits, tall chimneys, red bricks, smoke, ashes, and “scorching fires” (*Bleak* 713) in the environment. The canal was black with iron, and the roads were dusty with coals. Dickens rendered the usual scenario of a manufacturing town.

At the end of the novel, Esther and Mr. Woodcourt started a happy marital life in the countryside of Yorkshire. The weather was portrayed as one of the finest. There the little cottage of the couple reminded the readers of Mr. Boythorn’s cottage in the village. The cottage enjoyed the beauty and nourishment of nature. There was a flower garden, orchard with cherry and apple trees. Dickens ultimately celebrated the beauty and nourishment of nature by placing the offspring of the original bleak house in a beautiful natural setting and by decorating the cottage with rich,

natural beauties. The two bleak houses were lively with love, affection, children, and friends. Thus, there was at least some fictional regaining of ecological balance.

The visit to the brick maker's house reflects the naked poverty of the poor people. They lived in the unhealthiest situation with the worst sanitary systems. The most desolate place in the novel was Tom All Alone. The people who lived there were deprived of all the developments of society. Tom All Alone was a crowded, cramped living place with heavy air and foul smell where mal-nourished people struggled to live in filthy slums. They were at risk of health hazards due to infectious diseases. There was a high infant mortality rate. When Mr. Snagsby went to the street of Tom All Alone, he could not believe that the place was part of London. He was in the middle of a "villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and corrupt water – though the roads are dry elsewhere- and reeking with such smells and sights" (*Bleak* 268).

In the character of Jo, Dickens probably tried to suggest the fact that the environment has an inescapable influence over the people. Jo lived in one of the most desolate places of London that was Tom All Alone. Every day he went to sweep the filthy streets of London and came to sleep in the darkest and filthiest corner of the slum. Such miserable life led Jo to exist in a kind of deathlike life. Human lives were literally at risk in Tom All Alone. So, the entire ecology in the London slums was shattered. Oak Taylor referred to MacDuffie, who found "one of Dickens's most significant ecological insights" in, of all people, Skimpole, whose "self-justifying fictions" transform material loss into fictional gain, in a model that is followed to disaster by Richard Carston" (Taylor 888).

Dickens wrote in London newspapers and was familiar with the "Poor Law." But he did not believe in its effectiveness. The "Poor Law" emphasized the importance of England parish for taking care of its own poor. But Dickens was well aware that the parish was not playing their role seriously. He showed the failure of the "Poor Law" through the character of Jo. Jo was sweeping the filthy paths with a broom, which was helpful for the rich passerby, but Jo himself failed to earn enough livelihood.

Dickens portrayed the inequalities in the lifestyles of the people of different classes. Environmental risks increased the pre-existing social inequalities. Lower class people like Jo, Charley, brick maker's family, the residents of Tom All Alone became more vulnerable to the environmental and ecological damage.

So, Dickens revealed many of ecocritical theory's most regularly avowed tenets in his novels *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*. He showed how the environment was damaged by factories, industrial waste, and pollution. He also portrayed some pure, natural environment in the countryside still undisturbed by such human interference. This contrast only highlights the environmental, ecological cost of aggressive industrial and urban projects. His idea of ecology includes human lives, social concerns. He tried to present how the damage to the environment and ecology had an intense reaction in human lives, minds, and society. He ultimately echoed the ecocritics' claim that humans are not superior to nature but part of nature. They are part of the cohesive whole that is earth. If the earth's ecological balance is disturbed, it will affect not only the environment but also the entire ecology and human beings as they are interconnected. He tried at least to bring some ecological balance in these novels by regaining the happiness, peace, and balance in the characters' lives by enhancing true humane qualities and healthy, sustainable relationships. So, it can be said that Dickens attempted a kind of "ecological literacy" (Garrard 5) in these two novels: *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*.

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