The Urban Web: Metonymic Representation in the Work of

Charles Dickens and George Gissing

by

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A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfilment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2017

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This dissertation deploys the resources of cognitive linguistics and ecocriticism to gain insight into the role of metonymy in the Victorian novel's representation of an increasingly complex and interconnected urban world. I examine Charles Dickens's novels *Bleak House* (1852-53) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), and George Gissing's novel *The Nether World* (1889), as well as Gissing's nonfiction criticism of Dickens, in order to argue that both authors use metonymy to reframe the reader's understanding of the Victorian city. Both novelists use metonymy to explore the ways in which the waste, disease and degradation we like to think of as "over there" – out of sight and out of mind – is actually deeply interconnected to our lives right here, through a myriad of unsettling, hard-to-trace and complex contiguities and connections. Both Dickens and Gissing use metonymy to suggest and explore a complex "web" or "mesh" of connections and relationships that ecological critic Ashton Nichols calls "a complex web of interdependent interrelatedness" (xiii), and which Timothy Morton terms, "the mesh," or, "a vast sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite centre or edge" (*Ecological* 8). This web or mesh of interconnections and overlapping networks is dynamic; it blurs traditional boundaries and cuts across our typical social and cognitive distinctions. Although a single novel may be limited, a finite collection of people, places, things and details bound together temporarily by the plot, metonymy lets the

novelist suggest this much larger, more complex web, and even to reframe our

understanding of it.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Kate Lawson, for sharing her knowledge and wisdom, as well as for providing such helpful support throughout the research and writing of this thesis. Without her guidance and patience, I would doubtless still be chasing after too many chickens, and capturing none of them.

This thesis would also be lacking several key ideas without the feedback of my committee members. I would like to thank Professor Ken Hirschkop for his generous time and feedback, and for pushing me in all the best ways, and Professor Andrew McMurry, likewise for giving valuable feedback on early chapters, and for providing me with a vocabulary for some of what I was attempting to do. My sincere thanks also to my thesis panel members, Professor Jennifer Stolz, from the Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, and Professor Martin Danahay, Department of English, University of Brock, for generously offering their time and their valuable feedback.

Also, I would like to thank Professor Karen Weisman, University of Toronto, who provided kindness and encouragement at a moment when I needed it most, and Professor Gillian Fenwick, University of Toronto, whose ongoing generosity was overwhelming.

Thank you also to the Ontario Graduate Scholarship Program and the University of Waterloo for their generous financial support.

To my fiancé, Erica, for her love and support, and for putting up with my inability to stop myself from shouting "Metonymy!" far too often. And lastly, to my parents, to whom I owe everything, and to whom this dissertation is dedicated.

Dedication

To my parents.

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Introduction.

Metonymy, Interdependence and the Victorian Novel

This dissertation is an investigation into the ways in which the novels of Charles Dickens and George Gissing use metonymy to figure the myriad connections and interdependent relationships of the urban world. Using the figure, they break down and complicate the boundaries separating the clean, pure domestic space and the filthy, unsanitary public space, the boundaries separating a middle-class urban society conceptualized as "right here" from the filth and pollution imagined as "over there."

The publication of Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* highlighted a horrifying excess of filth at the heart of Victorian city life, such that "middle-class consciousness […] was abruptly disturbed by the realization that, to put it as mildly as possible, millions of English men, women, and children were living in shit" (Marcus 266). Michelle Allen, noting the correlation between the rapid expansion of nineteenth-century London, the accumulation of waste, and urban poverty, writes that sanitary reformers of the period were forced to ask, "Which was more troubling, cesspools or human degradation? Pollution itself or what it represented?" (11). The realist novel was well poised to wrestle with this question, as its figuration of vision, time, space, and plot allows it to trace the indexical signs and to figure the metonymic

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links connecting the "pollution itself" to "what it represented."

In this dissertation I argue that representations of pollution, filth and excrement in Victorian realist fiction are more than abstract symbols or conceptual metaphors for understanding a "diseased" or "constipated" body politic. When they are read metonymically, signs of pollution, filth, and waste also serve as indices that point towards innumerable other aspects of the actual Victorian city, and in the right narrative context they can metonymically point towards those other aspects of the city to which they are indexically connected. As novelists working in the realist tradition, both Gissing and Dickens used metonymy, the figure of speech Roman Jakobson famously associated with the realist novel (130), to signify long chains of connections between filth and urban poverty, and between filth and myriad elements of urban life. My research combines the resources of ecocritical theory with those of cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis to understand *how* Dickens and Gissing used the realist novel to trace unseen connections between, and the interdependent nature of, filth and the rest of Victorian urban life.

I situate this dissertation in the ongoing analysis of the Victorian novel's representation of the city, and its engagement with debates surrounding the problems of urban filth and sanitary reform; as well, I situate this work as a contribution to the field of ecocritical studies turning its eye towards Victorian writing, and as a demonstration of the benefits of applying cognitive linguistics theories of metonymy to

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the Victorian novel and to the field of Victorian studies more broadly, a field which has often emphasized historiographical approaches to literature rather than theory.[1] I argue that this allows us as literary critics to gain insight into what the Victorian novel is doing in its arrangement and deployment of figurations and representations. I would like to suggest that metonymy is one of the foremost tools of Victorian realist authors, and that metonymy is a fundamentally ecological trope because it always, in some sense, figures coexistence and connection; it figures indexical, contiguous and causal relationships between entities and other life forms, and between entities and their environment.[2]

I combine a study of metonymy in the novel with ecocritical studies in order analyze the ways in which the novel navigated and figured the interdependent nature of the city and its filth. Tanya Agathocleous claims nineteenth-century realist novels imagined the city "as a complex, incoherent web of interconnections that spanned the entire globe" (xv). Much like Agathocleous's webbed city, spreading to connect with the

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[1] For example, see the "Manifesto of the V21 Collective" by a group of Victorian Studies academics. The manifesto claims, at the beginning of the first of its ten theses, that, "Victorian Studies has fallen prey to *positivist historicism*: a mode of enquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past." They also identify a "historically pervasive resistance to 'theory' in Victorian Studies" (V21). I do not agree entirely with the manifesto (I think it important not to discount the importance of interdisciplinary work between historians and literature scholars), but I do welcome its call towards the use of theory for animating the field.

[2] This is not to fetishize the figure. Metonymy is very often used to reduce a person or group of persons, as when someone refers to "the help," or "the hands," or "the poor." I would argue there is still an environmental or ecological aspect to such figurations, but in such cases, this aspect is rather dwarfed by the reductive work of the figure. In his breakdown of the four master tropes, Kenneth Burke sees metonymy precisely *as* a substitute for reduction (421).

entire globe, Timothy Morton's ecocritical concept of the "mesh" is "without a definite centre or edge," and it denotes the unbounded "interconnectedness of all living and non-living beings" (*Ecological* 28). However, the mesh not only imagines the connections between the local and the global, or between the country and the city, and it is not focused solely on economic or social connections; the mesh also imagines connections between the local and the unseen aspects of the local. I borrow this concept of the mesh, because it allows one to think through those unseen, unthought connections between the middle-class subject and London's filth and human waste, and to think through the unseen or simply unnoticed connections between the urban environment and the human subject. Metonymy navigates these complex connections and chains of connections that constitute the mesh, and it helps the reader to understand what Morton calls the "interconnectedness of all living and non-living beings."

The goal of this introductory chapter is to explain the key theoretical concepts that will inform the ensuing chapters. First I will discuss metonymy, especially its extremely subtle, pervasive presence in narrative fiction, and what I consider to be its very important link to indexical signs. Then I will discuss ecocriticism, and more specifically, Morton's concept of the mesh, as well as other forms of webs and networks of interdependence. I will tie these two discussions together to show how metonymy figures interdependence and interconnection in the novels of Dickens and Gissing, such that even works that are not ostensibly or consciously focused on "the natural" or "the

environment" nonetheless have something very important to say about such concepts. Using metonymy, a novel traces or reveals previously unseen or unthought connections, showing over the course of a full narrative how one entity's entire being is totally and completely interrelated with myriad others.

Metonymy in Cognitive Linguistics

Most studies of metonymy in literary studies build on two seminal sources: Roman Jakobson's discussion of metonymy and metaphor as constituting two distinct poles of thought, and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's publication of *The Metaphors We Live By*, which argues that metaphor and metonymy are fundamental to human conceptual thought; their book also serves as the "starting point for the cognitive-linguistic study of metonymy" (Steen 2).

Jakobson associates metaphor with the axis of selection, based on *similarity*, and he associates metonymy with the axis of combination, based on *contiguity*. He then associates metaphor and similarity with poetry, and metonymy and contiguity with realism, writing, "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details" (130). Jakobson elsewhere also distinguishes between two *types* of metonymy: "inner" metonymy includes synecdoche, that is, PART-FOR-WHOLE and WHOLE-FOR-PART relations of various

sorts, while by contrast "outer" metonymy, or "metonymy proper" as Jakobson calls it, includes CAUSE-FOR-EFFECT relations, temporal and spatial contiguity, and other such relationships (Waugh 163-4).

More recent cognitive linguists have reversed the distinction of what constitutes "metonymy proper." For example, Yves Peirsman and Dirk Geeraerts take physical PART-FOR-WHOLE relations (that is, synecdochic relations) as the "core" of metonymy (309). However, they are like Jakobson insofar as they suggest a definition of metonymy based on a prototypical definition of contiguity; the only difference is that while Jakobson suggests "outer" metonymy is "metonymy proper," Peirsman and Geeraerts suggest that synecdochic metonymy (or "inner" metonymy) is the figure's true "core." Peirsman and Geeraerts show how typical metonymic patterns can be categorized in terms of the type of contiguity they express: spatial or material relations (278), temporal relations (286), actions, events and processes (289), and assemblies and collections (301). However, in both Jakobson and Peirsman and Geeraerts, contiguity remains one of metonymy's most important features.

Lakoff and Johnson are better known for their work on metaphor than for their work on metonymy. They claim metaphor pervades everyday life and language to an astonishing degree, and that our basic conceptual system for understanding the world "is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (3). They claim that "*[t]he essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*" (5), and for them,

this understanding goes far deeper than mere figuration; it is actually how we conceive

of very basic, supposedly "literal" concepts. They write that metonymy is much the

same way, but while metaphor allows us to understand one thing "in terms" of another,

metonymy "has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to

stand for another" (36). Like metaphor, metonymy still provides understanding, just in a

slightly different way:

> But metonymy is not merely a referential device. It also serves the
>
> function of providing understanding. For example, in the case of the
>
> metonymy THE PART FOR THE WHOLE there are many parts that can
>
> stand for the whole. Which part we pick out determines which aspect of
>
> the whole we are focusing on. When we say that we need some *good heads*
>
> on the project, we are using 'good heads' to refer to 'intelligent people.'
>
> (36)

In other words, the specific contiguous part or whole that we choose to substitute for

the original entity says something about that entity. For example, Lakoff and Johnson

note that THE FACE FOR THE PERSON metonym is indicative of how we actually

conceptualize people and their character (e.g., "Look at all the faces in the crowd!"), and

what constitutes a reliable indicator of their character. They write, "In our culture we

look at a person's face—rather than his posture or his movements—to get our basic

information about what the person is like. We function in terms of metonymy when we

perceive the person in terms of his face" (37). The same would hold true if I said, "We

need another set of eyes." We understand the eyes to be an integral part of perception.[3]

This allows us to speak metonymically and say things like, "She has a good eye," when

really we mean something like, "She is good at perceiving a certain kind of detail

relevant to this conversation." Lakoff and Johnson devote only a short chapter to

metonymy because they view metaphor as the more important or more central

conceptual figure, but more recent cognitive linguists Klaus-Uew Panther and Günter

Radden claim that since Lakoff and Johnson's seminal work on metaphor and

conceptualization, "it has become increasingly apparent that metonymy is a cognitive

phenomenon that may be even more fundamental than metaphor" (Panther 1).

It is now widely agreed in cognitive linguistics that, as "a cognitive phenomenon,"

metonymy is "fundamental." However, the precise definition of the figure is a matter of

some debate (Benczes et al.). Antonio Barcelona writes that the "uncontroversial"

elements of metonymy are as follows:

> (1) the fundamentally conceptual nature of metonymy; (2) the fact that it is
>
> experientially grounded; (3) the fact that it can be the root of certain
>
> cognitive models; (4) and the fact that it involves experiential and
>
> conceptually connected, i.e., 'contiguous', elements. (8)

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[3] This is also reflected in the ways in which such perceptions influence our day-to-day biases. For example, four studies in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* showed a correlation between droopy versus alert eyelids with lower versus higher perceived intelligence respectively (Talamas).

Despite debates over the precise definition of the figure, the conceptual frame model for defining metonymy is extremely common, so much so that Panther and Radden, in a discussion of the debate about metonymy's definition, feel comfortable using "'conceptual frame' […] as a cover term for what is variously called 'domain,' 'idealized cognitive model' (ICM), 'schema,' 'scenario,' 'script,' etc. in the cognitive-linguistic literature" (9). Similarly, in their attempt to create a cohesive theory of metonymy, Radden and Kövecses take the fact that "metonymy operates within an idealized cognitive model" as one of their core assumptions (18). According to the conceptual frame model, metaphor locates a similarity between two entities from different domains or conceptual frames. Metonymy locates contiguity between two entities existing within the *same* domain or conceptual frame. Panther and Radden note that "[t]he notion of 'contiguity' is at the core of most definitions of metonymy" (19). There are obvious similarities between Panther and Radden's definition and Jakobson's contrast between metaphor and metonymy. As we saw with Peirsman and Geeraerts, in Panther and Radden's definition, contiguity remains one of metonymy's principal or "core" features.

The importance of contiguity to metonymy links metonymy to indexical signs. Charles Sanders Peirce notes, "Psychologically, the action of indices depends upon association by contiguity, and not upon association by resemblance or upon intellectual

operations" (II 306).[4] Peirce also, like Lakoff and Johnson and a whole body of work in cognitive linguistics, regards indexical signs and the interpretation of contiguous relationships as a largely psychological, conceptual operation or "action." We often think according to indexical relationships. Carita Paradis makes a relevant and intriguing claim when she says, "Metonymization is not restricted to linguistic communication but is also a construal in other communicative modes such as pointing and gesture" (67). This draws another link between metonymy and indexical signs. As with indexical signs, metonyms can "point to" or "indicate" objects with which they are in some way contiguous in space and time. In Paradis' formulation, any given indexical sign—for example Peirce's classic examples of an arrow, a person pointing with his or her finger, or a footprint—can in the right context be regarded as a non-verbal or non-linguistic form of metonymy. Viewed in this way, metonymy need not be written down in words in order to figure in a way that is still fundamentally metonymic.

Even if we look solely at actual linguistic communication, however, metonymy is often so subtle that we do not notice when we are speaking metonymically ourselves. Lakoff and Johnson point out varied instances of metaphors in everyday speech that we don't normally notice. For example, the "time is money" conceptual metaphor allows us to use phrases like "*spend* time," "*borrow* time," "*invest* time," "run out of time," "that

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[4] Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical citations for Charles Sanders Peirce are from his *Collected Papers*, and are cited by volume number, then paragraph number. For example, "II 306" signifies volume two, paragraph 306 of his *The Collected Papers of Charles Saunders Peirce.*

flat tire *cost* me an hour," and so on (8). When we use these phrases in everyday

language, we do not think of them as rhetorical devices. We say these things when we

are attempting to speak literally, because we actually think about time as a resource we

can spend, borrow, or waste. Like metaphor, metonymy often goes unnoticed in

everyday speech or conversation. Consider the subtle nature of the following examples:

> OBJECT FOR MATERIAL CONSTITUTING THE OBJECT:
> I smell skunk.

> ACTUAL FOR POTENTIAL:
> *He is an angry person* for 'he can be angry'

> POTENTIAL FOR ACTUAL:
> *I can see your point* for 'I see your point.' (Radden et al. 32-4)

Most people would not notice these as rhetorical figures in everyday speech. They

would merely slip by, unnoticed. If you are at all like me, it takes a moment to re-read

each phrase and figure out which element of it is actually metonymical. Put another

way, outside a rhetoric or cognitive linguistics classroom, only a pedant would argue

that the people in the examples above were speaking "figuratively" rather than literally.

    This is relevant because one of the problems with analyzing metonymy in

literature, and especially in the novel, and more especially in the loose, baggy monster

of the Victorian novel, is its subtlety and its sheer ubiquity. The critic is left with the

option of briefly mentioning a massive number of instances of metonymy, but offering

little depth in his or her analysis (and probably still failing to mention most examples of

the figure), or going in depth on one or two repeating metonyms, the way one would

analyze any recurring motif or symbol.

This latter strategy is the one adopted by Elaine Freedgood, and the one I will

adopt as well. Freedgood is one of the few literary critics to really foreground and

examine (rather than cursorily acknowledge) the power of metonymy in the realist

novel. After Roland Barthes, she differentiates between "strong" and "weak" readings

of metonymy. A weak metonymic reading points out a simple figural switch between a

thing and what it metonymically signifies. For example, in Gustave Flaubert's "A

Simple Heart," Madame Aubain's barometer can be read weakly as an index of

character or the atmosphere (11), and in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) the

mahogany can be read weakly as a metonym for wealth and taste (3). However, in a

strong metonymic reading, the thing or object is investigated in much more depth; it "is

investigated in terms of its own properties and history and then refigured alongside

and athwart the novel's manifest or dominant narrative" (12). For Freedgood, a strong

metonymic reading of this sort always requires "a lengthy metonymic search beyond

the covers of the text" (5). For example, in order to understand the metonymic role of

mahogany in *Jane Eyre*, one has to understand and appreciate the actual, real history of

the depletion of mahogany and deforestation in Madeira, as well as the history of

English furniture styles of the Victorian period. Before assigning figurative meaning,

Freedgood focuses on the actual, literal meanings of objects. She offers a "literal

approach to the literary thing" (11) because metonymy "tends toward the conventional, the obvious, the literal, the material," such that "its status as a trope seems to disappear" (12).

Freedgood acknowledges metonymy's subtle and pervasive nature as a problem for literary critics. Because metonyms often figure "the conventional, the obvious, the literal, the material," they often do not seem "worth" mentioning in traditional literary criticism. Metonymic meaning is often so obvious, banal, and literal that it is ignored. For example, it is obvious that the cobwebs in Bleak House metonymically figure the house's neglect; the house has actually, *literally* been neglected. In the terms of Peirce's famous triad of icon, index, and symbol, the cobwebs are not just a symbol of the house's neglect, but an actual physical index of it. When you neglect a house, cobwebs start to show up; if you see cobwebs in a house, you know they are an indication the house has been neglected. Yet this fact is so patently obvious that a literary critic would seem to have no reason to point this out, and to understand it seems to be merely the basic processing of referential information required to make sense of what's happening in the novel's story.

However, I claim that although *individually* such metonymic links and indexical signs seem patently obvious, an entire novel of such connections can lead to something far more interesting and far more insightful. A novel or narrative can "trace" a variety of connections, and metonymy is how it does so, often repeatedly, again and again,

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subtly, pervasively, and consistently. So whereas for Freedgood a strong metonymic reading requires "a lengthy metonymic search beyond the covers of the text" (5), my argument is that a lengthy and strong metonymic search is also possible *within* the bounds of the text. The novel tells the reader what a given entity or a given sign's metonymic meaning is, provided they are willing, like Freedgood, to pay attention to "the conventional, the obvious, the literal, the material," and *also* to pay attention to how these "obvious" meanings are modified, built upon, or subverted over the course of the novel.

To take another example from *Bleak House*, the full metonymic and semantic weight of the entity or thing known as "Chancery" very slowly and deliberately unfolds over the course of the novel's narrative. Although a Victorian reader might bring to the text other common associations, which the modern critic could learn more about through external historical research (to some degree), the text very directly tells the reader what Chancery's relevant metonymic associations are, and these associations and meanings then change over the course of the narrative. The novel begins with its famous description of Chancery and the mud and muck clogging up London's streets ("Fog everywhere"). With no external historical research necessary, it is clear how we are meant, even at the very beginning of the novel, to view Chancery: it is totally inept; its role is to muddy and to obscure; it is somehow, vaguely, contiguously connected to the suffering of thousands of nameless foot passengers jostling in mire (who in turn

figure as synecdoches for the many other nameless inhabitants of London). The work of the novel and of its narrative is to draw connections between Chancery's ineptitude, its obfuscation of truth, and the actual, real human suffering experienced by specific, fully realized characters with whom we empathize.

As the novel unfolds, Chancery's metonymic associations are modified, from a more general and conventional conception of Chancery as just one of many such inept social institutions, to a concrete index of suffering. That is, there is a difference between vaguely being aware that Chancery is somehow linked with "tens of thousands of […] foot passengers" jostling each other in mud and mire, and understanding and appreciating that Chancery is responsible for Gridley's suffering, as well as the suffering of Richard, Jo, Nemo, Lady Dedlock, and Esther. Over the course of the novel, Chancery also becomes an index of the many different social problems characters in the novel are forced to face. At the beginning of the novel there is no way to know or understand the ways in which Chancery is indexically linked to the suffering of specific characters, but this changes as the novel unfolds. "What connexion can there be?" asks the third-person narrator, rhetorically. Part of the work of the novel is to map out or trace some of these connections, to thematize the problems one encounters in attempting to do so, and to implicate institutions like Chancery in the suffering of characters with whom we can directly empathize. This results in a kind of new knowledge about the interconnections between various elements and aspects of the city.

Other critics view metonymy as reliant only upon past or conventional knowledge. Lilian Furst writes, "The metonymic figure projects features on a *pre-existent* chain from one end of the link to the other" (161). She associates metonymy with denotation, or literal meanings, and metaphor with connotation, which is more suggestive and less literal (152-5). Similarly, Hugh Bredin writes that metonymy "relies wholly upon those relations between objects that are habitually and conventionally known and accepted" (57). Metonymy, for both Bredin and Furst, relies on literal and conventional referential knowledge. This is why for Freedgood a strong metonymic reading requires research of historical context to figure out what "habitual" or "conventional" background or referential knowledge is being presupposed by the text. Bredin further claims, "metaphor *creates* the relations between its objects, while metonymy *presupposes* that relation" (57). My claim is that this is only true if we analyze a metonymic figure in isolation, but in a long novel, metonyms do *not* exist in isolation. They exist within a plot. They recur, like motifs. As literary critics, we are trained to read metaphors in this way, yet with metonymy, we tend to focus only on the sentence-level figurations. In the context of a full-length novel, a single metonymic figure can "presuppose" a relation that is not conventionally known, but has only just been established, or even only hinted at. At the end of *Bleak House*, Chancery metonymically figures for different things than it did at the beginning, and to be "in Chancery" means something different at the end of the novel than it did at the beginning. The unfolding

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of the novel's plot conveys new knowledge about the metonymic significance of Chancery and being "In Chancery."

There are a number of things a narrative can do with respect to the context of a given metonymic connection. A narrative can build or trace metonymic relationships that are *not* conventionally known, accepted, or assumed; also, a narrative can *subvert* or *play* with conventional metonymic meaning, so that the metonymic meaning of an object or entity shifts ever so slightly, making us see an otherwise conventional meaning in a new light; and a narrative can concretize habitual or conventional meaning, so that a vague, abstract understanding shifts to a more particular, concrete experience and understanding, one that is perhaps more visceral, or more weighted with emotion. This latter ability is important for an ecological understanding of narrative and metonymy, in which the figure emphasizes that many connections and interdependent relationships which, to our personal experience of the world, may seem abstract or vague, but which are nonetheless very literal, real and material. In the *Bleak House* example above, Chancery shifts from a metonym for thousands and thousands of faceless and nameless people jostling in mire, people who we know exist but who are nonetheless "over there," to a metonym for the suffering of individual, fully-realized characters whom the reader actually cares about, characters whom we know first-hand. In Gissing's *The Nether World*, the metonymic weight of the nether world likewise becomes more fully realized as the narrative unfolds. To describe a London slum as the

"nether world" is a metaphor. We temporarily see a London slum *as* a hellish abyss that

is "below" the normal world. But, in this novel, the term carries with it metonymic

weight as well. The nether world environment affects and determines character, and the

range of opportunities afforded to characters in the nether world are different from the

opportunities afforded to characters in the upper world. You can better read two

people's characters based on the "world" in which they were raised, and the likely

influences that world has had upon them. The term itself, by the end of the novel,

signifies not just metaphorically for London slums, but metonymically for the contents

of those slums – the actual disgusting filth characters routinely (and often mindlessly)

trudge through – and the *effects* of those slums on human beings.

Victorian Studies, Ecocriticism, and the Mesh

  Joseph Carroll argues that although ecocriticism, at the time he is writing in 2001,

has been more concerned with American or British romantic fiction explicitly about

nature (305), Victorians also have very much to say about nature. In particular, Carroll

identifies "the way person and place interpenetrate in Victorian novels" (308), and he

argues that this interpenetration between person and place "has its necessary

correlatives in literary style" (310). He cites an example from *Bleak House*, in which

Esther's narration of her view of a thunderstorm provides a reliable index (although

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Carroll doesn't use the term) of her education and her view of the natural world. Esther's word choice and how she frames what she sees shows that she has read her Wordsworth, and that she has absorbed his lyricism, and some of his style (311). Although I am less interested in what Carroll calls a "Darwinian literary theory" (298), I am in agreement with Carroll about the interpenetration of character and place; it is a theme that will be woven through the rest of this thesis, and is a major focus in my fourth chapter. I will also emphasize the way the theme is often realized through metonymy.

Building on Carroll, but turning towards poetry, Nicholas Frankel notes the way in which Victorianists have, "traditionally left it to their Romanticist and Americanist colleagues […] to extrapolate the environmental implications of verse" (630). Frankel draws similarities between the recent environmental aesthetics of Arnold Berleant and Victorian aesthetic ideas advanced by William Morris and John Ruskin. Frankel draws a further link between Berleant and Victorian poetry itself, especially its "double consciousness," or "double awareness" (he is building heavily on Isobel Armstrong, but also earlier critics such as E.D.H. Johnson and Carol Christ) and the ways in Victorian poetry "in which subject and object, self and world, are no longer in lucid relation with one another but have to be perpetually redefined" (Armstrong qtd. in Frankel 629). For Frankel, Victorian poetry is always aware that art takes place in an environment, and Victorian art always participates in that environment. Victorian poetry, he says, "strove

hard in its own day to announce its own objecthood or 'thingness' to the Victorian reader, chiefly by incorporating visual and decorative elements into the matter of the poem" (634). This is similar to what ecocritic Timothy Morton calls ecomimesis, in which the artist self-consciously draws attention to the act of writing, to the production of the text *as* a text, as physical object created in the world and participating in that world (*Without* 30-1). Since my texts are realist prose rather than poetry, the connection between text and world I focus on is largely referential. However, novels can also participate in similar strategies of drawing attention to their own objecthood, as when *Bleak House* ends with an interruptive dash and the reader's eyes are left staring at the blankness of the page, in a similar way as with the poem "this poem intentionally left blank," which only works when it is printed on a blank page (Morton "Ecology" 10).

Lawrence Buell, in a 2011 summary of trends in ecocriticism, distinguishes between first-stage and second-stage ecocritics. First-stage ecocritics privilege British Romantics and American writers like Thoreau. However, second-stage critics discover writers such as Charles Dickens (because he was "deeply involved in Victorian-era public health environmentalism"), Upton Sinclair, Rachel Carson, Michiko Ishimure, and Ken Saro-Wiwa. Second-wave ecocriticism also "attempts to infuse ecocriticism with greater theoretical sophistication" (95). In particular, Buell cites as an example Morton's *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), which deconstructs the concept of "nature" itself, and argues that the term is actually "getting in the way of properly ecological

forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art" (*Ecology* 1). Morton is not the first

ecocritic to make such a claim. Indeed, one need not be an ecocritic to be suspicious of

the word or concept of "nature" or "the natural." In *Mythologies* (1972) Roland Barthes

writes, "Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention

a natural justification" (142). Moving more directly into ecocriticism, in Neil Evernden's

The Social Creation of Nature (1992), Evernden points out that our disagreement over

what nature even is – since the concept is, indeed, always-already a social construct

going back to the Renaissance – is getting in the way of our doing the necessary work of

actually protecting it.

I borrow from ecocriticism two important concepts. First, I take the deconstruction

of the concept of nature as a separate, closed off entity that is always "'over there'

outside the city or the factory gates'" (*Ecology* 164). This deconstruction of the concept of

a natural world that's always "over there" or "over yonder" allows for a more nuanced

ecocritical reading of Dickens's and Gissing's representations of the city. In other words,

just because they focus on the city and urban environments does not mean they do not

have anything to say about "nature."

Indeed, Ashton Nichols' concept of "urbanature" emphasizes the ways in which

the urban world is not absolutely cut off from the natural one. Nichols explains:

> *Urbanature* (rhymes with 'furniture') suggests that all human and
>
> nonhuman lives, as well as all animate and inanimate objects around

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those lives, are linked in a complex web of interdependent

interrelatedness. […] The interconnectedness demanded by *urbanature*

insists that human beings are not *out of* nature when they stand in the

streets of Manhattan any more than they are *in* nature when they stand

above the tree-line in Montana. (*Beyond* xiii)

The second concept I take from ecocriticism is its emphasis on what Nichols calls "a

complex web of interdependent interrelatedness." I will be using what Morton calls

"the mesh."

The most succinct definition of the mesh Morton offers is "the interconnectedness

of all living and non-living things" (*Ecological* 28). Elsewhere he describes, "a vast,

sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite centre or edge. It is radical

intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise" (*Ecological* 8). Morton

consciously rejects the use of the terms "network" or "web" in favour of "mesh"

because such terms are now associated in our minds with the Internet. I will continue to

use the term mesh, with some qualifications, because the other terms *do* also hint at the

kinds of relationships I argue that metonymy figures in these novels. For example,

terms like "complex network" or Nichols' "complex web" connote the sheer density

and complexity of the contiguities and relationships implied by the term mesh. Indeed,

in chapter one, I build on Caroline Levine's reading of *Bleak House*; she very

productively borrows the vocabulary of network theory to think through many of the

ways in which the novel traces dense overlapping networks—social networks,

economic networks, ecological networks, and so on. A "complex web" and a "complex

network" also have the advantage of being thought of in multi-dimensional terms.

Visualizations of complex networks use *N*-dimensional space (see fig. 1). A mesh is

typically two-dimensional: imagine a wire mesh used as a fence; even if a "mesh" is

bent into the shape of a bowl (as with the mesh of a typical kitchen strainer) the mesh

itself is two-dimensional.
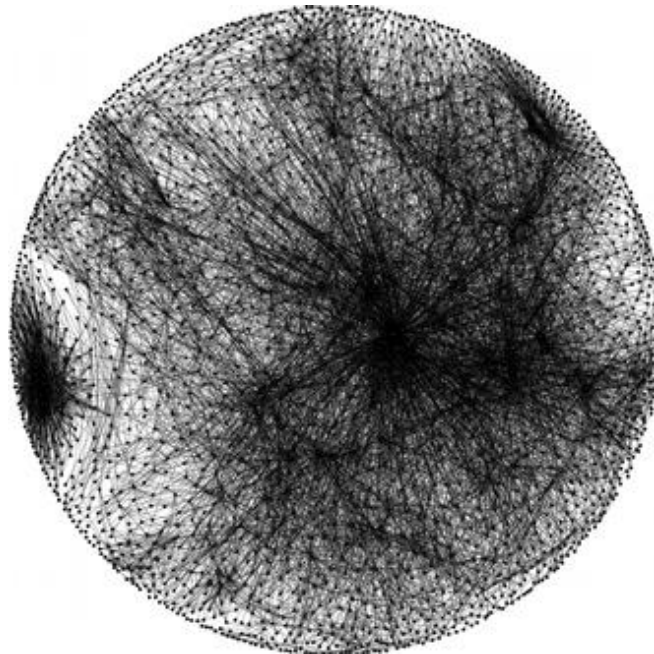

Figure 1. A visualization of a complex network as created by an open-source tool called Cuttlefish ("Cuttlefish").

The word *mesh* also has the unfortunate disadvantage of being, technically, a term

denoting the space *between* the wires or grates, such that it doesn't denote the actual

connections, links, or nodes, but rather denotes the openings, or spaces *between* these

things. For its primary definition of "mesh," the OED gives, "Any of the open spaces or interstices between the threads or cords of a net. Later also: a similar space in any network, as a sieve, a piece of knitting, etc." The second definition in the OED mentions the actual "thread, link, or stitch surrounding a single hole," and the third gives, "The threads or cords of a net collectively" ("mesh, n. (and *adj.*)"). At the same time, the term "mesh" has the advantage of bringing with it the association of being *enmeshed*, as in being trapped, or caught—and this too is useful for my purposes. One does not choose to be in the mesh; it just *is*.

Also, unlike a typical spider's web, a mesh does not necessarily have a center. A mesh can denote simply the raw principle of *enmeshment*. Morton's version of the mesh is radically de-centering. He writes, "Each point of the mesh is both the centre and edge of a system of points, so there is no absolute centre or edge" ("Thinking" 270). I find this a useful re-framing of the standard concept of the ecological web, even if it is worth keeping in mind that levels of interdependence are affected by time, space, distance, niche, and so on. The mesh, in my understanding, is not a specific ecological network, or even a collection of such networks, but a term for thinking through the complexities of "interconnected interconnectedness," and the sense that a given node or entity participates in a variety of networks. My use of the term, in this thesis, is my attempt to do representative justice to the complex chains of connection and interconnection one finds in the book of nature.

From here on out, then, I will simply use the term mesh, acknowledging both its

advantages and disadvantages as a term. In Morton's use of the term, the mesh is

strange, weird, and de-centering. It encompasses myriad sorts of indexical and

contiguous connections, relationships and presences. Like a web, it ensnares us;

existence within it is not a choice, but a core aspect of our being. Morton describes

interdependence in the mesh according to what he calls an "Interdependence

Theorem":

> What is interdependence? Let's imagine a theorem called the
>
> Interdependence Theorem. It contains two simple axioms:
>
> Axiom (1) : $\forall$ a: $\exists$ a: a = ~(~a)
>
> Axiom (2) : $\forall$ a: $\exists$ a: a $\supset$ ~a
>
> Axiom 1 states that for every *a*, the existence of *a* is such that *a* consists of
>
> things that are *not not a* … Axiom 1 states that things are only what they
>
> are in relation to other things. ("Thinking" 266)

Axiom 1 is simply basic Aristotelian logic: *A* is definable as *not-non-A*. To put it another

way, *B*, *C*, *D*, and so on, are all *not A*, and *A* is precisely the one, single thing that is *not*

those other things. The point is that *A* as such is only definable in relation to all those

other things that are *not* A. A duck is a thing that cannot reproduce with a dog, but can

reproduce with other mostly duck-like organisms sharing such-and-such a percentage

of its genes. Every entity that exists only exists in relation to other entities. Morton

compares this view of ecology and interdependence to Saussurean semiotics. In such a comparison, Morton writes that while Axiom 1 is synchronic, Axiom 2 would be diachronic; where Axiom 1 describes symbiosis, Axiom 2 describes evolution:

> Axiom 2 states that things derive from other things. While Axiom 1 is concerned with how things are (synchronically), Axiom 2 talks about origins (diachrony). In every case, things like *a* only exist such that a *not-a* exists. Nothing exists by itself and nothing comes from nothing.
>
> ("Thinking" 266)

Axiom 2, like Axiom 1, is also concerned with interconnectedness and interdependence, but vis-à-vis the element of time. Morton gives several examples: oxygen does not exist by itself or come from nothing, but is "anaerobic bacterial excrement"; and "[m]ost of your house dust is your skin" (272). This latter example is popular yet untrue; however, the association between dust and human tissue, which goes back at least as far as the Bible, will be important for my reading of the organizing dust metonym in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) in my second chapter. Axiom 2, in other words, is an attempt to incorporate process and time into Morton's conception of interconnection. This will be important for thinking through the processes of waste, renewal, and biological change in *Our Mutual Friend*.

One of the implications of the two axioms, and therefore of the mesh, is that, as with language, "[t]here is no 'outside' of the system of life forms" (268). This is another

way of saying that the city is not "outside" nature. By writing about the city, by wrestling with various modes of urban realism, Dickens's and Gissing's novels are talking about the system of life forms. As Efraim Sicher notes in a discussion of Dickens's portrayal of the city, "within the transitions and transactions in which they were written, Dickens's novels necessarily participate in the debate between the mechanical and the organic" (1). Both Gissing and Dickens are necessarily talking about ecology. Morton writes that we often wonder, "what a poem says about race or gender, even if the poem makes no explicit mention of race or gender. We will soon be accustomed to wondering what any text says about the environment even if no animals or trees or mountains appear in it" (*Ecological* 11).

Another of the implications of the mesh is the dialectical back-and-forth, give-and-take relationship between an organism and its environment. Morton writes, "From the perspective of the life sciences, the environment is nothing but the phenotypical expression of DNA code" ("Thinking" 272). Morton is describing and building on Richard Dawkins' concept of the "extended phenotype." According to Dawkins, a beaver's phenotype is not expressed only in the shape of its whiskers, but also through the dam the beaver constructs (a dam which is only possible in a specific environment, with trees and water and so forth). A spider's phenotypical expression does not end with its eight legs, but with the web it constructs to catch flies. The "inner" DNA of organisms exists in a complex relationship with the organism's external environment,

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with the food sources and environmental materials the organism has to work with, and so on. Moreover, this complex relationship between an organism and its environment is not just between the organism and its *immediate* external environment, either—extended phenotypic effects can connect life forms in causal relationships across extremely vast distances. A beaver's dam affects the flow of water in a river, and thereby affects organisms for many miles around. Dawkins proposes as a thought experiment an ectoparasite that attaches itself to a swallow's nest that could, by affecting the behaviour of the swallow, produce phenotypic effects on the other side of the world (234). The environment, for Dawkins, can be read as the complex interplay of selfish genes fighting for survival, and such is the complexity of interdependence that a gene "here" could be understood as in competition with, as well as affecting, genes halfway around the globe.

What is interesting for our purposes is that phenotypic effects can be read as indices of the organism that created them. Dawkins himself gives "the example of footprints in mud as phenotypic expression of genes for foot shape" (234). Put into the vocabulary of Peircean semiotics, a phenotypical expression acts as an indexical sign for the DNA of the animal that produced the expression. Yet one must learn to read the book of nature in this way in order to read these "long and devious chains of causal connection," as Dawkins calls these extended phenotypic effects (197). Thomas Sebeok describes semiotics as "the interplay between 'the book of nature' and man its

decipherer" ("Doctrine" 36). Sebeok is not referring only to "natural" environments, either. Urban environments are also filled with signs which, if interpreted properly, can indicate long, devious chains of connection and interdependent relationships.

Metonymy, because of its indexical nature, is a useful trope that can *figure* this book of nature in terms of interdependence, connection, and these long, complex chains. Figured metonymically, a group of trees or plants could stand for the birds and bees that the trees rely upon to circulate the trees' pollen. Various other environmental factors that allowed the trees to grow and thrive could metonymically stand for the trees. Obviously, such figurations would require the right context, or some amount of *work,* such as the work of a narrative, to trace the causal connections and establish the relationships that are based on contiguity. Metonymy does not only figure causal connections, and metonymy can figure two elements that are brought into contiguity purely by chance or accident. However, even then, there is relevant indexicality, if the reader or interpreter is aware of the circumstances or context that produced the relevant contiguity.

A few more examples of how metonymy figures interdependence and connection will make the point clearer. If I refer to a group of trees by saying, "Don't cut down our oxygen over there," I am using a form of metonymy: OBJECT PRODUCED FOR PRODUCER. If I refer to some brightly coloured flowers as "hummingbird food" I am using a form of metonymy that is partly synecdochic: ONE FUNCTION OF WHOLE

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FOR WHOLE. Metonymy comes from the Greek for "change of name" ("metonymy,

n.") and some actual "names" are conventionalized metonymies. The common name for

the plant *Buddleia* is, "Butterfly bush," which is a substitution of the animal which the

object attracts for the object itself. In the right context, a beaver's dam could figure

metonymically for the beaver it houses (OBJECT PRODUCED FOR PRODUCER), or for

the beaver's DNA (PHENOTYPICAL EXPRESSION FOR DNA), or for the organisms

the dam affects (AFFECTED ORGANISMS FOR AFFECTER). To use the terms of

Morton's interdependence theorem, metonymy figures *A* via its contiguous

relationships with other entities, or *non-A*. That is, metonymy figures *A* by *A*'s place

within a larger mesh or web. If you think about the mesh as a "system of points," and

more precisely, as a system of *contiguous* points, metonymy is the trope that figures

from one point to the next.

By using metonymy, Dickens and Gissing figure the experience of encountering

and discovering yourself intimately interconnected and coexisting with other life forms

and other entities you would never have thought in any way connected to you. Dickens

and Gissing also figure this experience as often rather unpleasant, and humbling. For

Morton, an implication of the mesh and of the ecological thought is that environmental

thinking is not necessarily about imagining beautiful and pleasant, calm, green pastures

and animals getting along harmoniously in an unspoiled natural landscape. Ecological

thinking can be strange, weird, and unpleasant. Morton calls such an aesthetic dark

ecology, and it "puts hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness back into

ecological thinking"; it includes "negativity and irony, ugliness and horror" (*Ecological*

16-7). It attempts to go beyond a sense of certainty; we do not know with whom or what

we are interconnected. Those other entities might legitimately disgust or horrify us, but

nonetheless they are part of the ecology in which we live. Somehow we need to deal

with this fact.

As novelists in the mid- and late-Victorian period, Dickens and Gissing were

engaging in a realist tradition that was extremely focused on facing the very disgusting,

horrifying reality of filth and urban waste. The publication of Edwin Chadwick's *Report*

on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Poor of Great Britain (1842), and then of

Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (1844) highlighted

the profusion of filth at the heart of city life, and there was a dual impulse to both face

yet contain this reality. Hisup Shin points out that the central theme in Chadwick's

Report is "the systematic removal of exposed decaying matter from living quarters and

its containment within the space of underground sewage" (317). Michelle Allen writes

that sanitary reformers of the period tried to find some way to "quarantine" this filth

and keep it out of middle-class domestic spaces (14). But, as Tina Young Choi points

out, emerging studies of risk, statistics, and disease, as well as the emerging nonfiction

subgenre of urban exploration, highlighted the problems of filth's "uncontainability"

(565). Once you knew what to look for, signs of filth could be seen everywhere. A cough

or a cold is potentially an indexical sign of some smaller, more sinister disease or virus.

Other symptoms, such as vomiting, might be a sign of cholera, which was, before John

Snow's medical maps, in turn an indexical sign of invisible miasma.

Peter Logan points out that novelists in the mid-Victorian period and after made it

a moral-aesthetic point to include vivid, in-depth and disgusting descriptions of filth.

He writes, "the more repellent the scene, the more fetid and unbearable to the

correspondent's senses, the more necessary it is that it becomes seen and smelled and

thus opened up to observation" (164). Unlike earlier Georgian novelists, says Logan, the

Victorians felt they had "the reformist task of reprinting the horrors of urban life" (165).

There was a paradoxical dual impulse to both contain filth, but also to face it and to

acknowledge its pervasive existence. People wanted to shut it out, to flush it away: it

was disgusting and vile. Yet at the same time, they felt obligated to face it, to *not* turn

away or to flinch.

Novelists complicated this dual impulse by highlighting the ways in which the

filth was interconnected and interdependent with myriad other elements of the city.

Shin, for example, writes that "the most thought-provoking turn" in *Our Mutual*

Friend's narrative is the way in which Dickens "brings in an extending cluster of filthy

objects and people in order to both accompany and complicate the financial cycle of the

city" (315). Focusing on the circulation of paper, Shin shows how Dickens links the

horrifying and disturbing topic of filth with broader social and economic concerns, such

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that filth becomes inextricably linked with those other, seemingly unrelated aspects of modern urban life. Shin writes that filth, though certainly "disturbing," is in "both Chadwick and Dickens […] to be treated as part of a broader knowledge concerning appalling living conditions of the lower classes and their potential social as well as hygienic threat" (319-20). Filth is a sanitary concern and a health concern, but it is also a class question, and it is but one of many strands in the complex web of interconnection that constitutes the Victorian city.

Metonymy and the Mesh in Dickens and Gissing

Setting aside the particular narrative strategies of Dickens and Gissing, an ecocritical account of the Victorian novel more generally, through the lens of the mesh, or what Nichols calls "a complex web of interdependent interrelatedness," would also be productive. The metaphor of a vast complex web of relationships is common in the novels themselves. The most cited example is probably George Eliot's metaphor in *Middlemarch*, when, at the very opening of chapter 15, the narrator self-consciously reminds us that she has "ha[s] so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe." Here the narrator (and, as I shall argue, Dickens himself does) hints at the multitude of connections, possible associations, and character

threads that exist beyond the boundaries of this particular narrative.

Another well-known use of the metaphor is in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, when Holmes imagines his nemesis Moriarty as a spider at the centre of a vast web of crime. This "web has a thousand radiations, and [Moriarty] knows well every quiver of each of them." From the centre, a spider can "read" the vibrations of a web by touch, and "knows" what is happening and where on its web, without having to move from its position at the web's centre. It is up to Holmes to trace the threads of the web backwards, to trace the semiotic vibrations and follow the indexical signs to get at the web's centre and discover how Moriarty is connected to, and the ultimate cause of, many of the crimes in London.

Though Holmes is concerned principally with crime (even to the point that he ignores other bodies of knowledge), Holmes imagines his detective method much like Thomas Sebeok does, as one of reading the actual book of nature. In his article, "The Book of Life," Holmes writes, "From a drop of water … a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagra [sic] without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link of it." Or, as John Muir put it, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it is hitched to everything else in the universe" (211); and as the narrator of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* phrases her difficulties of representation: "all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that

temping range of relevancies called the universe" (ch. 15). Holmes imagines the Book of

Life like the mesh, except instead of "a system of points," Holmes imagines a great

chain of links, each link leading on to the next, indexically. A footprint leads to the boot

that made it; a scuff of dirt on a shoe signifies the one area of the city where just such a

shade of dirt is common; a certain smell on a man's waistcoat serves as a reliable index

that the man has visited a specific cigar shop where just such a specific brand of cigars

is sold. Holmes makes it his life's work to learn to read these signs of the city and the

semiotics of crime. He sees how things are connected in causal relationships.

Carlo Ginzburg compares Holmes' method to that of a Giovanni Morelli, who

between 1874 and 1876 wrote a series of articles which laid out a method for divining

the authorship of paintings, by concentrating on "minor details," such as "earlobes,

fingernails, shapes of fingers and toes" (82). Ginzburg writes that in the 1870s, a

"'semiotic' approach, a paradigm or model based on the interpretation of clues, had

become increasingly influential in the field of human sciences" (88). The roots of this

paradigm were ancient. Like Sebeok, Ginzburg discusses hunting and the interpretation

of footprints, animal tracks, as well as divination and the interpretation of the stars.

Ginzburg claims it was the *novel*, in the nineteenth century, which helped give this

conjectural paradigm "new and unexpected success," because the novel "provided the

bourgeoisie with a substitute […] for initiation rites, that is, for access to real experience

altogether" (101). This desire to know the city, to have its signs and clues made legible,

at least partially accounts for the "extraordinary success of the detective story" (102).

Holmes' method, and his ability to read the signs of the city, is apropos of Dickens's method as a novelist. In his biography of Dickens's growth as a novelist, *Becoming Dickens* (2011), Robert Douglas-Fairhurst writes of Dickens's Boz as a kind of proto-Sherlock Holmes, a figure who is able to read the signs of the city in a way others cannot:

> If Boz is a prototype of any figure who would come to characterize urban experience, it is not the flâneur but the detective. Boz is like a young Sherlock Holmes in training. In Arthur Conan Doyle's story 'A Case of Identity,' Watson exclaims, 'You appeared to read a great deal in her which was quite invisible to me,' and receives Holmes's cool reply, 'Not invisible but unnoticed.' Just as Holmes can penetrate disguises by zooming in on details such as a character's limp or a scuffed toecap, produce a whole narrative from the human equivalent of a footnote, so when Boz explains that there are many cab drivers he has the honor of 'knowing by sight' he is gesturing towards a much more radical claim about his powers of observations. There is very little Boz does not know by sight. He can retrieve whole biographies at a glance. A boy and his weeping mother are seen emerging from the Old Bailey, and having scanned them for clues Boz concludes that 'their little history was

obvious'—one he proceeds to unpack with the detached professionalism

of a social worker writing up a set of case notes. (*Becoming* 154-5)

Much like Holmes, Boz can trace the indexical signs that mark up the city, and, because

of Dickens's great experience with urban life and his powers of observation, he is able

to read them correctly, to see how this sign is an index of this, this other sign an index of

that, and so on. Douglas-Fairhurst says Boz is a prototype more of the detective than the

flâneur, and Efraim Sicher, in his analysis of Dickens's London, likewise points out that

"Dickens's pace through the city streets is, perhaps, too brisk, too hurried and

purposeful, for the leisurely stroll of the gentlemanly flâneur; he is no idler" (41).

Dickens is like Holmes when the detective has a fresh case: brisk and excited,

impatient—too full of purpose to be a flâneur. Walter Benjamin, in his discussion of the

figure of the flâneur, quotes the letter by Dickens in which the novelist describes

London as his "magic lantern" (qtd. in Benjamin 49). Benjamin notes that physiologies

of the nineteenth-century city assured people that they would be able to "make out the

profession, the character, the background, and the life-style of passers-by." Delvau, says

Benjamin, even "claimed that he could divide the Parisian public according to its

various strata as easily as a geologist distinguishes the layers in rocks" (39). Benjamin

notes also Balzac's claim that "Genius is so visible in a person that even the least

educated man walking around in Paris will, when he comes across a great artist, know

immediately what he has found" (qtd. in Benjamin 39). And indeed, Boz often boasts in

just the same way.

For example, at one point, Boz takes on the role of a Sherlock Holmes lecturing his Watson (or in this case, the reader), on how to read the meaning of a man's clothing:

> We needn't tell you all this, however, for if you have an atom of observation, one glance at his sleek, knowing-looking head and face—his prim white neckerchief, with the wooden tie into which it has been regularly folded for twenty years past, merging by imperceptible degrees into a small-plaited shirt-frill—and his comfortable-looking form encased in a well-brushed suit of black—would give you a better idea of his real character than a column of our poor description could convey. (*Sketches* ch. 18).

The clothes act as reliable indices of the man's "real character," and they do so better than any normal description ever could, assuming one has the right powers of observation. This is a hint to what will later become a common technique in Dickens: his excessive use of exterior details as metonyms of character. However, though in this earlier work Boz is able to deduce a man's character from "one glance" at the man's clothes and face, in Dickens's later novels, the possibilities of reading these relationships are more subdued and complicated.

Dickens is more suspicious than Holmes is of one man's ability to read the great Book of Life, and to perceive the great chain of connections that constitute it. Dickens

constantly problematizes the nature of connections within the great city; he reads the

city not as a clearly delineated web of threads, but as a more complex, murkier mesh of

interconnections, where the exact nature of the contiguity is not always known, or

perhaps even knowable. The semiotics of Dickens's city are not so neat as they are in the

Holmes stories. Gissing describes Dickens's version of London in *Bleak House* as "a great

gloomy city, webbed and meshed, as it were, by the spinnings of a huge poisonous

spider" (I 74).[5] Dickens himself is the spider, the one who has woven a gloomy, meshed

city where connections and causal relationships are not always easy to see. As with

Morton's mesh, characters are caught or enmeshed in it whether they like it not. They

suspect they are embroiled in connections they do not fully comprehend or understand.

In *Bleak House*, Snagsby worries that he has "to do with so much in this connexion that

is mysterious that it is possible he may even be implicated, without knowing it, in the

present transaction" (ch. 33). Even Esther, as the novel's second narrator, cannot at first

see many of the connections, for she does not have "a quick way, oh, no!—[but rather] a

silent way of noticing what passed before me and thinking I should like to understand

it better" (ch. 3). She cannot trace connections as easily and simply as Boz does, but her

desire for understanding allows her *eventually* to trace several of these connections, over

the course of the narrative. As the narrative unfolds, it reveals some of these

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[5] Unless otherwise noted, all references to Gissing's criticism of Dickens use the three-volume Grayswood Press edition of the *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*, edited by Pierre Coustillas.

connections, but also problematizes our ability to see other ones; Dickens self-consciously shows the way some signs wander off beyond the bounds of Esther's individual narrative, leaving some questions unanswered. He also draws attention to the ways in which we learn to ignore connections we find unpleasant.

This leads to a certain self-consciousness with respect to Dickens's use of metonymy. Freedgood calls Dickens "one of the master metonymists of all time," but one who "seems to betray an anxiety about the potential semiotic waywardness of this trope in the very face of his overproduction of it" (17). Dickens knows that, read one way, a single link on the great chain of life could lead you in one direction, but if it is read in only a slightly different manner, it could lead you in a totally different direction. The book of life is difficult to read, because it is possible to trace signs in any number of directions. Signs are overdetermined, rather than being reducible to a single cause. For every connection in *Bleak House* that is drawn, traced, and concretized, there is — as in *Middlemarch* — the self-conscious hint that there are a hundred more connections just beyond the borders of the narrative, a tempting range of relevancies. We learn of Lady Dedlock's connection to Esther, and both Lady Dedlock's and Esther's connection to "Nemo" ("no one"). Yet there are also plenty of other "no ones" mentioned in the novel whose connection to the characters we never learn, but their existence is nonetheless cursorily hinted at.

Robert Tracy points out that Dickens's novel is chock full of these "half-glimpsed

stories" (31). Tracy writes, "Again and again we glance down an enticing narrative vista, but Dickens calls us away. There are more stories than even he can tell" (31-2). There are unnamed corpses and characters, as well as instances of realization for the main characters that, as the saying goes, *there but for the grace of God go I*. For example, when Esther chases after her mother, she and Inspector Bucket come across a drowned corpse, as well as a bill posted for someone *else* who has been "Found Drowned." These signs hint towards Esther's "awful suspicion" about the fate of her own mother (ch. 57). Nemo's fate hints at the fates of actual "no ones" whose history we will never find out, as we do when Nemo turns out to be not truly nameless or a nobody, but Captain Hawdon, a man with a rich history, with loves and friendships in his past life as a Captain, but also in his current life as a "no one" – for example, his friendship with Jo. In naming Nemo as he does, Dickens's use of metonymy is ironic and self-conscious (recall that metonymy means, literally, "change of name"). Metonymy tempts us down these stray narrative paths, but Dickens calls us back, even as he draws our attention to the existence of these alternate paths and these alternative, untold stories.

Most analyses of Dickens's use of metonymy fall under what Freedgood would call a "weak" metonymic reading. Freedgood posits that the "neglect of metonymy" in literary studies is likely a "result of a certain discomfort with the potential vagrancy of this figure—its inability to stop wandering and the unpredictability of the associations that it may spark in the minds of readers" (13). She argues that this is precisely what

makes metonymy valuable, and I agree. Yet still I do not think a "strong" metonymic

reading is one that must attempt to divine at what associations are brought to the text

by the reader. The novelist establishes and concretizes a few key associations of the

many that are possible. To analyze metonymic play in this way does not make for a

weak reading if the full semantic weight of the metonymic associations within the text

are fully explored, instead of being understood only as a simple figurative switch.

John Reed sees Dickens's peculiar use of metonymy as a way for the novelist to

violate the rules of realism. Reed takes the instances in *Oliver Twist* in which "the

gentleman in the white waistcoat" comments on Oliver as an example of a technique

central to Dickens's form of realism. The gentleman in the white waistcoat is not "one of

those gratuitous items that occur in Dickens's narratives, items that do not seem to have

any integral function but merely extend or enhance a given situation"; rather, the

gentleman in the white waistcoat is an example of a "conscious narrative technique that

Dickens employs to distance his work from what we normally identify as realist fiction"

(413). Reed argues that Dickens's use of metonymy is complex, sustained, and integral

to the overall thematic meaning of his work. He writes, "To connect patterns of

metonymy over whole novels is to raise his [Dickens'] narrative from simple realism to

a style that prefigures the leitmotif technique of Richard Wagner in music, or Thomas

Mann's application of that technique to fiction" (414). Reed's analysis of Dickens's use

of metonymy as leitmotif is profoundly useful for analyzing the changing metonymic

weight of a given recurring motif within the narrative itself. For example, "Chancery" in *Bleak House* reoccurs, again and again throughout the narrative, always loaded with slightly shifting metonymic weight. The dust of *Our Mutual Friend* does so as well, and as I will show in my second chapter, it is not just a recurring *metaphor*, but an important metonym. And indeed, the same can be said of Gissing's use of the nether world figure in *The Nether World* (1889).

Critical work on Gissing's use of metonymy and his framing of the urban world is less extensive than similar work on Dickens. John Halperin argues that Gissing experienced a kind of "neurasthenia" to city life, and that large portions of Gissing's oeuvre express his environmentalism and his hatred of "industry's rape of the landscape" (181). The "natural" world, the world of Wordsworthian landscapes, provides a refuge from industry. The character Eldon, in *Demos* (1886), expresses Gissing's own attitude when, responding to the question whether he places more value in trees and grass than human lives, he replies that he sees "no value in human lives in a world from which grass and trees have vanished" (qtd. in Halperin 183). Halperin notes that the urban setting of *The Nether World* is precisely such a world in which trees and grass have vanished, and human lives lose their value as they lose contact with the natural in this urban wasteland. Gissing has characters in the novel board trains and travel from the city to the country and back again precisely "in order to underline once again the contrast between urban slums and what lies beyond them" (184). Halperin is

correct about Gissing's desire to escape the urban, but in chapter four I will emphasize that the point of the passage in which this occurs is that the older Michael Snowdon is concerned that his granddaughter, Jane, who has lived her entire life in the nether world, has actually grown so accustomed to it that she does not notice the filth and degradation they see on their trip. He is worried that the environment has affected her ability to read the environment.

Subjectivity is a key feature of Gissing's realism, and of his conception of how one relates to one's environment and the mesh. In Gissing, any given sign will signify in different ways, depending on the subjective position of the perceiver. Christine Huguet points out that the Thames in Gissing's fiction is "at once a static and a dynamic feature, a natural and an urban sign" (162). She writes, "Gissing's figurative representation of the river necessarily includes memory and subjectivity," and his representations are weighted by the "likes and dislikes of the characters," which are in turn "lifted straight" from his own life's impressions (163). Thus, the river acts as a sign which "triggers off varying responses" depending on the person viewing it, and quite often, that person's class. The responses can vary "from plain disgust at the offensive sewage effluents" to "grateful acknowledgement of the river's attractions and beauties" (169). The Thames can serve as a sign of trade and a sign of London's modern commercial success, and its status as an urban center, or it can stand as a sign of the human biological waste it contains. In my chapters on Gissing, I focus on the ways different characters read their

urban environments in different ways, depending on their subjective point of view. My

third chapter argues that Gissing's realism is an almost subjective, impressionistic one,

in which individual details can "trigger off" different responses, depending on the

subject-position of the viewer.

Gissing was intensely involved in the "realism wars" of the late nineteenth

century, and he was against many of the popular definitions of the term. Aaron Matz

writes that Gissing "wrestled with the idea of realism throughout the entire second half

of this career" (214). Matz places the ambivalent attitude towards realism that one can

find in *New Grub Street* (a realist novel in which characters write "monstrously

ludicrous" realist novels) within the context of Gissing's nonfiction writings, and in the

context of some of his writings on Dickens. In these nonfiction writings, Gissing is

always against the idea that realism "implie[s] something unimaginative" (220), or that

it should "mean either mere vulgarity or else 'the laborious picturing of the dullest

phases of life'" (221).[6] Matz also usefully points out how Gissing's writings on Dickens

are always implicitly concerned with whether or not Dickens is a realist. Although at

first the answer appears to be no, simply because Dickens shares little in common with

"the Zolaesque, pseudo-documentary griminess so characteristic of fin-de-siècle fiction"

(235), Gissing defends Dickens's work as being above "mere realism," and thus

[6] Matz is quoting from Gissing's article, "The Place of Realism in Fiction." I use this article in my third chapter; it clarifies and emphasizes many of the points Gissing makes in his critical writings on Dickens.

"render[s] the term elastic enough to accommodate Dickens" (237). Matz's account is also one of the first to emphasize the ways in which Gissing's criticism of Dickens is in many ways an attempt to understand his *own* project and position himself against his predecessor.

Prior to Matz, the most in-depth account of Gissing's "patrilineal" relation to Dickens is in John Goode's *Ideology and Fiction* (1978). Goode writes that Dickens represents for Gissing "specific success in the face of which Gissing has to define himself" (15). Goode argues that what separates Gissing from Dickens is Gissing's knowledge of his own ideological limitations, and the way in which the author's access to the world is mediated by his own subjective position, and his own place within history. Goode writes, "To put it crudely, most critics treat Gissing as a 'realistic' novelist, who offers his material as a transparency, only to find that transparency is obscured or misshaped by his particular preoccupations" (14). However, on the contrary, says Goode, Gissing's particular preoccupations are precisely what makes Gissing's fiction worthwhile. Gissing is *aware* of his preoccupations, and his realism is one that is self-consciously informed by the pre-occupations of its author. And one of Gissing's preoccupations or ideological influences, of course, is Dickens. This is especially true with respect to London. When Gissing first visits London he is "mainly preoccupied with 'making real to [his] vision' the London Dickens has excited in his imagination" (Goode 20). As Gissing writes, "In time I came to see London with my

own eyes, but how much better when I saw it with those of Dickens!" (I 50). Gissing

acknowledges the power of the novelist to influence our ability to see, to shape the

subjective associations we bring to bear when we make sense of the urban environment.

This affects his view of Dickens and Dickens's realism, as well as his own artistic

practice.

Raymond Williams, prior to both Matz or Goode, claims that Gissing's description

of Dickensian London as "a great gloomy city, webbed and meshed, as it were, by the

spinnings of a huge poisonous spider" is actually a description by Gissing "more

accurately of himself than of Dickens" (*Country* 235). Gissing understands the

Dickensian city, and the ways that in it, diverse, myriad aspects of it are always

interconnected in ways we cannot see or understand. And because Gissing's city is so

influenced by his predecessor, it is much the same way: interconnected, with a given

sign capable of metonymically pointing to a variety of other entities with which that

sign is contiguously or indexically connected or associated. However, the entities it can

point to or indicate is determined by the subject viewing it, and that subject's own

impressions, memories, associations, knowledge of the city, and the influence of the city

upon them. As many characters in his novel discover, the web and mesh of

interconnections in Gissing's city are a net, or trap, ensnaring characters and preventing

positive social change or social mobility.

Summary of Chapters

My first chapter examines the nature of connections and personal identity in *Bleak House*. I take the third-person narrator's question of what "connexion" there can be between different characters and aspects of London as a central thematic question in the novel. I first show how Dickens self-consciously uses metonymy to figure these mysterious connections, and to figure the difficulties in perceiving them, as well as the ways we purposely choose not to see them. I then compare and contrast the novel's opening description of London and Chancery with a curious, under-appreciated moment in the novel when Esther, after her long chase after he mother, returns to Chancery, but does not at first recognize it. She has just waded through mud, muck and filth. She has come upon drowned corpses. She is herself soaked through with filth and wet snow. Chancery seems totally different to her. It is no longer just a signifier of inept government institutions. She has herself very personally and directly experienced the suffering Chancery causes. She has met actual people who suffer. She has waded through the muck and mire that plague the thousand of foot passengers described in the novel's opening.

In the second chapter I look at the "dust" in *Our Mutual Friend* as the novel's organizing metaphor—and, more importantly I claim, its organizing metonym. This is a new way of understanding the "meaning" of the novel's most important motif. By

reading the figure as a metonym rather than "just" a metaphor, we can read dust not just as conceptually *similar* to wealth and the emptiness of society's need to accumulate more and more of it (Johnson 1030) but as something which is very literally, contiguously, and causally connected with wealth, class, and the economic basis of society. In the novel, dust is not just a conceptual metaphor for understanding some other entity that exists in a totally different conceptual domain. The novel shows how dust, when understood properly, actually exists in the *same* conceptual domain as wealth and class. However, as in *Bleak House*, to understand dust in this way takes time; it takes the course of the whole narrative and its plot.

This is an important point with respect to the power of metonymy in narrative. In the preface to the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur describes the power of metaphor as "seeing-as." You see one thing *as* another. This is similar to Lakoff and Johnson's claim that a metaphor allows one to understand one thing *in terms* of another. However, Ricoeur makes another intriguing claim when he says that a narrative can accomplish much the same thing as metaphor: "It is this synthesis of the heterogeneous that brings narrative close to metaphor" (ix). He adds, "The plot of narrative is comparable to this predicative assimilation [of metaphor]. It 'grasps together' and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole" (x). It is my claim that narrative does indeed do this, and it uses metonymy to do so.

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Metonymic link builds upon metonymic link. Each individual link ostensibly connects

two items in the "same" conceptual domain, but when all the links are taken together,

the first link and the last link in the chain have created a connection between two

domains we would previously have considered "separate"—except of course that by

the end of the narrative, we have the actual metonymic chain figuring the contiguous

connections for us, link by link. ("So all life is a great chain" writes Holmes.) In other

words, the dust can serve as a metaphor for wealth because it ostensibly connects two

entities from two totally separate domains. The work of *Our Mutual Friend*, then, is to

create the chain of metonymic links that show the dust is not just conceptually, but very

literally and contiguously, connected to the empty accumulation of wealth, as well as to

the economic systems the novel critiques.

In this way, the metonymic links also serve as signifiers of the mesh, whether we

imagine the mesh as a great chain of links connecting together disparate life forms in a

complex interconnected and interdependent ecology, or as a "system of points," with

each point or node as a metonymic link. The mesh deconstructs the boundary

separating the natural from the nonnatural, and the boundary separating the organic

from the inorganic. In *Our Mutual Friend,* the connection between the very physical,

organic dust and the socio-economic systems sustaining Victorian society is a

connection which deconstructs the nature/nonnature divide. The very modern, urban

socio-economic systems of London are absolutely interdependent with the most organic

and so-called "natural" parts of city life; to separate the two into separate conceptual domains is a mistake.

The third chapter offers a slight detour from fiction, and also serves as a pivot from Dickens to Gissing. Before looking at Gissing's actual narrative fiction in my fourth chapter, I first turn to Gissing's critical writings on Dickens and his writings on the art of fiction more generally. Gissing is suspicious of Dickens's propensity to make that which is vile and disgusting seem somehow delightful or cheerful. Thus Gissing is able to note that the opening description of *Bleak House* "makes one rather cheerful than otherwise" (II 153) and that Mrs. Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44) gives the reader "delight" where one should really feel "disgust" (II 78). In his own fiction, Gissing wants to portray the unpleasant *as* unpleasant, to give the reader the precise sense and impression of disgust which an unpleasant entity should instill in him or her. This affects the metonymic details he chooses to focus upon.

My main claim is that Gissing's realism is impressionistic and subjective, and that this necessitates what he considers an honest portrayal of the subjective experience of encountering filth. Gissing's realism is not about painstakingly accurate representations of objective life, but a rendering of the artist's and the characters' own subjective view or impression of the world. In an essay titled, "The Place of Realism in Fiction," Gissing writes that "every novelist beholds a world of his own, and the supreme endeavour of his art must be to body forth that world as it exists for him" (219). Realism for Gissing is

not a transparent lens to the "real world," but a literary style that bodies forth the world

it pretends to describe. Dickens succeeds as a realist because he bodies forth his mental

picture of the world, and creates a unique version of London unlike any other, but one

that is true to his personality. Reminiscing over Dickens's influence on his own vision,

Gissing writes that, walking in London as a young man, "The very atmosphere declared

him [Dickens]; if I gasped in a fog, was it not Mr. Guppy's 'London particular'? […] In

time I came to see London with my own eyes, but how much better when I saw it with

those of Dickens!" (I 50). Importantly, Gissing claims Dickens does this through his use

of suggestive external details. Gissing's only problem with Dickens's "realism" is not

that it is inaccurate or unrealistic, but that Dickens refuses to engage with the truly

unpleasant, and he consciously omits the details Gissing feels are the most important. It

is a moral-aesthetic point for Gissing that "realism" should not fail to capture the actual

impression of living in muck and squalor, or of seeing the landscape and air we breathe

ruined by modern urban industry.

The fourth chapter then builds on this point by turning to Gissing's long narrative

fiction, and in particular, to Gissing's *The Nether World*. In his introduction to the Oxford

edition of the novel, Stephen Gill writes that the novel "continually invokes Dickens

only to subvert the Dickensian" (xix). The novel is unique insofar as it explores

precisely those aspects of society which, in a Dickens novel, various characters would

want to ignore or unsee—yet in this novel we explore these parts of the city from the

point of view of the nether world itself. Gissing refuses condescending pity, and instead

attempts a subjective realism from the point of view of different members of the

working classes. He attempts to capture not just how a middle-class subject ignores or

attempts to shut from their conscious mind various aspects of urban life, but also to see

things from the perspective of members of the working class, and to do so without

idealism. Characters in the novel grow accustomed to filth, to the point of not even

noticing its presence. The final result is that the environment, or mesh, becomes

implicated in its own interpretation. The subject trying to view or understand the mesh

is limited by their place within it, and has been influenced by their upbringing within it.

Moreover, as with Dickens, changes in perception and signification occur only

over the course of the narrative's plot. For example, when Clara returns to the city after

being disfigured (which has crushed her dream of a successful career as an actress), her

view as a recently returned outsider lets her see the city in a new light. Clara looks out

her window, whose view now has "a gloomy impressiveness well in keeping with the

mind of her who brooded over it." The description that follows, filtered through Clara's

recently altered subjective view, finally foregrounds the smoke, filth, and the now

seemingly useless toil of London's urban working classes (ch. 31). She sees the same

things she saw before, but they take on entirely different metonymic significance: the

errands of workers are "a mockery"; the market of Smithfield, Bartholomew's Hospital,

is metonymically signified as "the tract of modern deformity"; and so on. Everything

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she sees now metonymically signifies the oppressiveness of modern urban life. What she sees outside her window are now indexical signs of the vast "forces" that drive the workers, and which are likewise arrayed against her. From her own position, though, she cannot understand the complexity of those forces—merely their overwhelming power. The ending offers little in the way of hope. Gissing refuses Dickensian solutions, so while the novel itself at times deconstructs the actual geographical divide between the nether world and the "normal" one, for the novel's characters, the divide becomes even more subjectively entrenched. Characters do *not* always learn to see the ways in which they are interconnected with myriad other parts of the city; they are trapped in their own small, personal nether world, with their own immediate material needs and desires taking precedence over any desire to understand why their world exists as it does, and how that world exists within a larger context and a larger urban ecology. In this way, Gissing adds an exploration of the subjective limitations and factors affecting one's view of the mesh.

My hope is that these chapters, along with providing new insights into the work of Dickens and Gissing, will also extend our understanding of how the Victorian novel engaged with contemporary representations of the urban environment and the problems of filth and sanitation, and how the form of the Victorian novel itself affected its exploration of potential solutions to these problems. Also, my further hope is that, by deploying some of the tools and resources of cognitive linguistics and ecocriticism,

this research will broaden our understanding of metonymy's role in narrative,

especially its ability to figure various forms of contiguities, interconnections, and

hidden relationships.

Chapter One.

Metonymy and "Connexion" in *Bleak House*

The abundance of metonymy in *Bleak House* (1852-53) is how the novel figures the complexities of interdependence, and what Timothy Morton calls *the mesh*: the interconnectedness of all living and non-living beings. What seems like an unjustified use of metonymy at the beginning of the novel is justified over the course of the narrative, as Dickens uses the figure to show just how deeply the interdependence rabbit hole goes, and just how troubling it can be. In doing so, the novel demonstrates the degree to which metonymy is a fundamentally ecological figure, long before a Victorian like Dickens would ever have used such a vocabulary.

I begin by looking at the "excessive" use of metonymy in the novel's opening chapter, in which the third-person narrator presents a grand, all-encompassing view of London, fog, mud, mire and the proceedings of the Court of Chancery. The narrator suggests a metonymic connection of some sort between these things. I use the language of cognitive linguistics to explain why such a metonymy is unjustified, and what the novel would need to do in order to justify such a connection—then I show what the novel does instead. That is, rather than showing a single, linear chain of contiguous links connecting Chancery to the fog and filth of London, the novel complicates the

nature of connections and contiguity, as well as our ability to grasp and comprehend the sheer scale of interconnectedness in the city. This is what J. Hillis Miller calls the novel's "law of interdependence" ("Interpretation" 180). I suggest that Esther, the novel's other narrator, also reads the city metonymically, but that she offers a view of the city and its law of interdependence from the perspective of the individual subject. This perspective is more personal, more disturbing and strange.

One way to approach metonymy in a novel is to focus on the way metonymy in a novel indicates or points to elements out in the real world◦ rather than how the figure constructs a world in itself. I will offer a few examples of this, both in criticism about metonymy in the novel more generally, and in criticism about metonymy specifically in *Bleak House*; then I will provide an alternative way of approaching the figure in the novel. Elaine Freedgood notes metonymy's "inability to stop wandering and the unpredictability of the associations that it may spark in the minds of readers" (13). In her words, "'We follow' novelistic things out of novels" (21). Similarly, J. Hillis Miller argues that metonymy is one of the strategies authors use to perform realism, but that "metonymy is as much fiction as metaphor" ("Fiction" 145). He argues against the idea that metaphor and metonymy should be in "diametrical opposition" (149) or that they are "polar opposites" (150). Partly this is because Miller's understanding of metonymy actually privileges similarity rather than just contiguity. In his discussion of synecdoche and metonymy specifically in *Bleak House*, Miller points out that individual characters

can stand for entire classes of people because those characters are *like* other, actual

members of that class ("Interpretation" 180). This is a form of synecdoche based on

similarity: the individual is *similar to* every other individual that constitutes the whole,

and therefore can stand for that whole. A character in a novel can stand for an entire

class of actual, real people because he or she is similar to them. Unlike Miller and

Freedgood, I want focus on how metonymy points to or indicates other elements within

the novel itself, and how it does so through contiguity, causality, and indexicality. Put

another way, I am less concerned that Jo is a synecdoche for a whole class of actual

street sweepers, and more concerned with the way he stands metonymically linked to

myriad parts of the city and urban life, as these things are represented within the novel

itself.

Mary-Catherine Harrison likewise notes Dickens's use of synecdoche as a strategy

of realism, and as a strategy for eliciting empathy for real people out in the real world.

And like Miller she too focuses on similarity. She writes, "Dickens emphasized that his

characters were one of many; the suffering of imagined individuals, he reminded his

audience in numerous ways, is like the suffering of 'your' contemporaries." She points

out that when Jo dies, the narrator interjects to note that "it is not merely Jo who has

died, but a much larger group of people who are 'dying thus around us, every day'"

(267). Jo is similar to the other street sweepers who exist out there in real life, beyond

the bounds of the novel's pages. Because we feel empathy for Jo, we feel empathy for

actual street sweepers in Victorian England who are similar to Jo.

Interestingly, Caroline Levine emphasizes an important point that is almost opposite to the arguments of Miller and Harrison:

> *Bleak House* uses networks to reconceptualise character. Most conventional novels that seek to capture a whole society use character to stand for entire social groups—the dissipated aristocrat, the honest labourer—but this one goes to some trouble to stress that characters are less important because they are exemplary or synecdochical than because they play crucial roles in social, economic, and institutional networks. For example, Jo first appears in *Bleak House* not because he is a typical abandoned child forced to work on the streets, but because he is a point of contact between a dead man and the law. (126)

Levine uses network theory rather than the language of linguistics; this means that although she highlights that Jo's role goes beyond the synecdochic, she does not acknowledge that the role she does identify for him—as a point of contact between a dead man and the law, and as a point of contact within a variety of networks—is still fundamentally metonymic. His metonymic role is not to point to other "actual" or "real" crossing sweepers to whom he is similar, as in Harrison and Miller, but to point to or indicate the various networks in the novel of which he is contiguously a part, or to point to or indicate the other nodes in those networks to whom or to which he is

connected. (Levine rightly emphasizes that the networks are not only social networks or kinship networks but also networks of space, disease transmission, manufacturing networks, global postal networks, and so on.) I take after Levine in largely ignoring Jo's synecdochical role, but I want to emphasize this does not make his role any less metonymic. He is a figure of connection. His participation in a variety of networks means he is contiguously and metonymically connected to those specific networks, and to troubling forms of urban connection and interconnection more generally. By definition, to be a point of "contact" is to be contiguous, and Jo is directly and contiguously connected with myriad elements of the city, even more so than many of the other characters, and to a troubling degree—a point I will return to later on.

Benjamin Bishop's look at metonymy in *Bleak House* also widens the focus away from synecdoche. He sees Dickens's excessive use of metonymy as something that prevents his first-person narrator, Esther, from getting to the interior core of various elements of the world around her. Instead, the "excessive practice of metonymy" produces only external traits, never getting to that nearer approach that George Eliot espouses in "The Natural History of German Life." In Bishop's summary: "if you '[a]pproach nearer,' George Eliot claims, then this vague image gives way to a much harsher reality" (793). Bishop focuses on the way in which the excessive metonymy in the novel endlessly points from one external object or trait to the next. One would expect Esther to offer a more personal view, but even with her, the focus on external

traits and metonymies prevents her from accessing that inner core. So while Esther's

first-person narration might seem to achieve an "intimate interiority," it is always

"displaced by Dickens's focus on 'external traits' of other characters and objects" (794).

However, I argue that the excessive metonymy does not displace access to the core of

Dickens's object; rather, this constant displacement *is itself the core* of Dickens's object, if

we allow that his object is interconnectedness itself.

Bishop is right that Dickens presents an excess of metonymy, but it is not so much

that the excessive metonymy fails to reach the core of Dickens's object; it is, rather, that

the excessive metonymy, what Bishop calls the "dense contiguity of referents," *is* that

core. No entity in the mesh stands on its own, with its own, unique core; each entity's

core is always-already constituted by its connection with *other* entities. Morton writes

that in the mesh, "Nothing exists all by itself, so nothing is fully 'itself'" (*Ecological* 15).

He echoes the same thought later: "If everything is interconnected, there is less of

everything. Nothing is complete in itself" (33). The core of any object can only be

understood vis-à-vis its connection to other beings, other life forms, and the

environment. The third-person narrator, in the opening description, presents what Eliot

might call a "distant" view of its object—and indeed, as George Gissing points out, this

view is not all that dark, and in his words, it "makes one rather cheerful than

otherwise" (II 153).[7] But, as Eliot says, as you "approach nearer" you find things are far

different. Esther's first-person narration delves into the fog and mud and muck, so that

the "vague image gives way to a much harsher reality." Bishop is right: Esther still

encounters an excess of metonymy. But I would argue that at ground level,

interconnectedness is much stranger and weirder than it at first appears. To understand

this difference, though, and how it works through narrative, requires looking at the

opening description's view of London, and comparing it to Esther's view much later on

in the novel.

The Third-Person Narrator's "Excessive Metonymy"

The opening image of London begins with an abundance of metonymic slips and

shifts, so that objects and concepts are not signified directly, but metonymically. The

opening presents the reader with metonymic overload. The narrator shifts his

description from place, to time, to weather, now back to space, and now to an upset

version of time, in which "it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus." Many of

the actual people involved in the day's Chancery proceedings are referred to only

metonymically. The third-person narrator describes the "[m]aces, bags, and purses"

who "indignantly proclaim silence and frown at the man from Shropshire." Mr. Tangle

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[7] I return in my third chapter to this point. George Gissing's problem with Dickens's realism might be
said to be akin to how Bishop reads Eliot. That is, Dickens never fully represents the full harshness of the
harsher reality, but takes too much delight in that which should instill a more visceral, less pleasant
feeling.

metonymically skirts around the people about whom he is speaking: Richard and Ada are referred to mistakenly at first as "the young girl," then as the "boy," then no, correction, they are together "the young girl and boy," and then finally, "the young people." Tom Jarndyce is not named, but referred to only as the grandfather of the young people, and then as a "victim of rash action—brains," a rather grim metonymic shift if ever there was one. After this, a "very little counsel" speaks up from "the back settlements of the fog," because this little counsel is appearing on behalf of a cousin to the young persons, though even the little counsel is not sure "in what exact remove [the cousin] is." Persons appear for other persons, who are in turn connected to other persons, none of whom have actually been named properly, and nor are any of them physically present in the court, despite all of them being involved "in Chancery." A variety of connections between the various characters and elements of the opening chapter are implied, but not explained. There is a connection between the young persons and their cousin, though in "what remove" he is we do not yet know; there is a connection between the young persons and the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case as a whole, yet we don't know what that connection is, either; there is a connection between the proceedings in Chancery being narrated and the rest of the story, yet that connection too is left unclear.

By the end of the first chapter, the narrator has introduced several of the main characters (Richard, Ada, Mr. Jarndyce), but has named them only metonymically, and

the most important decision in the chapter—that Ada and Richard will go to live with

Mr. Jarndyce—technically has not been narrated, either. The Lord Chancellor has not

made this decision yet; we are told he's going to do it tomorrow morning. Formally

speaking, Dickens could have begun the narration a few days later, when the actual

decision was reached, but he does not; he alludes to it metonymically, rather than

directly. At this point, assuming the young persons do go live with their cousin, we

don't know why such an event is important to the novel we are reading; we must

simply trust that it is important, and that there is a good narrative reason for this

description of a day in the life of the Court. The following chapters continue this

strategy even further. They present, in Miller's words, "a series of disconnected places

and personages," and "though the relations among these are withheld from the reader,

he assumes that they will turn out to be connected. He makes this assumption

according to his acceptance of a figure close to synecdoche, metonymy"

("Interpretation" 182). As with all narrative, we must trust that there is a connection

between the events of this first chapter, and whatever is to come in the rest of the story.

Before the third-person narrator makes the rhetorical question explicit in chapter 16, we

must ask, in more ways than one, "What connexion can there be?" This question is

implicit on the level of form and the level of content. On the level of form it is the

connection between this chapter and the events to come, and on the level of content, it is

specifically the connection between the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit and between the

characters who have just been (barely) introduced.

I want to focus in particular on what connexion there can be between Chancery and the fog and filth of London, for there is an implied metonymic link between them. The third-person narrator tells us that Temple Bar is located where "the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest," and inside the Court of Chancery, the Lord High Chancellor sits "at the very heart of the fog." Similarly, the little counsel who appears for Mr. Jarndyce appears "from the back settlements of the fog" (or to be precise, in yet more metonymy, his *voice* arises from there), and when the little counsel is done speaking, "the fog knows him know more." Over the course of its narrative, the novel will unpack and complicate this connection—Chancery will often metonymically stand in for the social structure more generally, and the fog and mud in the streets will stand for urban waste and filth more generally. The filth and mire are problems in themselves, but they also act as metonymies for other social issues. Disgusting and unsightly though these things are, they signify problems beyond themselves—they are signs of urban poverty, and they carry with them the threat of miasma and disease transmission. Michelle Allen writes that sanitary reformers of the period were forced to ask, "Which was more troubling, cesspools or human degradation? Pollution itself or what it represented?" (11). After the opening image, *Bleak House* traces the metonymic links connecting the "pollution itself" to "what it represented," and then in turn connects them back to Chancery, and to the other social institutions responsible for

them.

As Bishop points out, when Dickens sets the Lord Chancellor at the heart of the fog, and uses the fog as a metonym for Chancery, there is "no tradition binding these two together. […] The metonymic connection is therefore artificial, a product of writing and reading rather than a discovery of the nature of things" (800).[8] In other words, by not relying on tradition, Dickens is breaking the rules of metonymy. Metonymy relies on tradition, on what is conventionally and habitually known. Hugh Bredin writes that although "metaphor *creates* the relation between its objects, […] metonymy *presupposes* that relation. […] Metonymy is irresistibly and necessarily conventional" (57). Writing about realism specifically, Lilian Furst writes, "The metonymic figure projects features on a *pre-existent* chain from one end of the link to the other" (161). Since there is no pre-existent chain connecting fog and Chancery, to suggest a metonymic link between them goes against the basic workings of the figure. However, I claim the above arguments only hold true if this metonym is viewed in isolation. *Bleak House* is a novel—an unusually long one. The metonymies proposed in the opening image can be explicated, unpacked, repeated within new contexts, and re-examined over the course of the narrative, so that although at the beginning there is no pre-existent chain connecting

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[8] In "The Fiction of Realism," J. Hillis Miller makes a similar point about Boz. Miller writes, "The metonymic associations which Boz makes are fancies rather than facts […] A man's doorknocker is no necessary indication of his personality. It only seems so to the imagining mind of the inimitable Boz" (145). This is part of Miller's argument that metonymy is as much a fiction as metaphor.

Chancery and the filth of London, by the end of the novel, such a metonymy is justified,

and a "tradition binding these two together" has been established.

To put it in the language of cognitive linguistics, the problem with Dickens's use

of metonymy in the opening description of London is that the proposed metonymy

should rely on pre-existing domains or Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs).[9] That is, it

should rely on the pre-existing cognitive models we have and use for seeing,

categorizing and understanding the world around us. Dickens is suggesting a

metonymic link between two sets of objects—Chancery and the High Chancellor on the

one side, and the fog and mud and mire on the other side—which exist in two totally

different Idealized Cognitive Models, or two separate domains of experience. Metaphor

bridges across two different domains, bringing the two separate domains together

across a great gulf. Etymologically, the word means to bear or carry across or over. This

is why in Bredin's understanding, metaphor "creates" a new relation: it bridges across

domains, and brings them together, suggesting something new.[10] To suggest that

Chancery is *like* "fog," because it is opaque, because it tends to blur boundaries, because

it is seemingly "everywhere," and so on, is acceptable. (Certainly there is a large degree

to which the two are also linked metaphorically, so that Chancery conceptually takes on

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[9] An idealized cognitive model or ICM is effectively a synonym for conceptual frame, schema, scenario, or script. See Introduction p. 8-9, and Panther and Radden 9.

[10] For some, even metaphors can seem to go too far. For example, consider Samuel Johnson's well-known opinion of the metaphysical poets: "The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together."

the properties of fogginess.) But a metonymy between the Chancery and fog and mud and mire is not. Metonymy does not bridge across such a large gap; instead, it enacts a shift within a single, pre-existing domain. The ICM or domain within which this shift occurs has to already exist in order for the shift to make sense. By suggesting a metonymy across separate domains, Dickens is breaking the rules, and risking readerly confusion.

In a narrative like *Bleak House*, however, the proposed figure does not exist in isolation, and the narrative that follows the opening image can re-structure the reader's understanding of the world. A long novel can, over time, *create* a new cognitive domain—construct a new frame or new way of seeing and understanding certain aspects of our world—in which Chancery and fog and filth all exist within that single, newly-created domain. The opening chapter breaks the rules of the figure, but Dickens has the rest of the novel to justify his metonymy, to slowly and over time create the larger bridge across domains that is typically associated with metaphor. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur writes, "With metaphor, the innovation lies in the producing of a new semantic pertinence by means of an impertinent attribution" (ix). Metaphors take what "at first seem 'distant,'" and brings them "suddenly 'close'" (x). The plot of a narrative, though, is similar: "By means of the plot, goals, causes, and chance are brought together within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action. It is this synthesis of the heterogeneous that brings narrative close to metaphor" (ix). Plot is

"comparable" to the "predicative assimilation" of metaphor, because "it 'grasps together' and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events" (x). Peter Brooks, similarly, sees metonymy (and repetition) as a death-delaying figure that leads eventually to something akin to metaphor. Metaphor is death, because it is the end of desire, the end of delay, and the end of lack. It is *la petit mort*. But a novel's metonymies, its delays of gratification and repetitions, always lead eventually to that final metaphor. Metonymy extends life and delays death, but metaphor condenses and kills desire. He writes, "repetition as binding works toward the generation of significance, toward recognition and retrospective illumination that will allow us to grasp the text as total metaphor, but not therefore to discount the metonymies that have led to it" (108). Individual metonymies lead, eventually, to a larger act of binding akin to metaphor.

How this might work over the course of a narrative can be explained with a bit more discussion of cognitive domains. In his discussion of cognitive domain theory, Ronald W. Langacker writes that any given concept we encounter will be characterized by the observer "relative to one or more cognitive domains, collectively called a matrix." He adds, "Most concepts presuppose other concepts and cannot be adequately defined except by reference to them" (*Foundations* 147). That said, not everything that is related to a given concept is of equal "centrality." In Langacker's example, "The cultural association of cats with witchcraft and Halloween cannot be put on a par with a

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specification of their size and shape" (159). In other words, the size and shape of a cat is a primary association, central to the basic definition of a cat. If I see the word "cat," or any signifier for the concept *cat*, I will probably think of a cat's basic size and shape. By contrast, the cultural association of cats with witchcraft is a contingent one, and therefore less central, so I may or may not think of it; it would probably depend on the context in which the signifier appears, as well as my own experiences with cats, witches and Halloween. Different parts of our knowledge have different degrees of centrality to different concepts, based on the association's "prominence and likelihood of activation" (165). If I think of a cat, I am very likely to think of its size and general shape; I am less likely to think of every single one of its myriad cultural associations.

Similarly, if I am a mid-Victorian reader opening up the first installment of *Bleak House*, and I think of Chancery, I might think of "London," or the Lord High Chancellor, or Temple Bar, or the physical location of these things, but I probably won't bring to my reading a very central association between Chancery and London's fog and filth. In Elaine Freedgood's strong metonymic reading of a text, the job of the critic would be to figure out what associations a reader *would* bring to the text. The critic's job would be to organize and understand which concepts were most central, most prominent, and most likely to be activated by the concept "Chancery." However, since Dickens has already proposed a metonymic association between Chancery and the fog, mud, and filth of London, right from the novel's opening pages, this strategy does not

help us understand how the narrative itself can justify such an association if the association is not already habitually known in the minds of readers. Going outside the text will not help us. Instead, what is required is an analysis of how the narrative unpacks and justifies this metonym over time, and how it bridges across domains, bringing close together and binding the associations that at first seem distant.

For Langacker, it is possible to *adjust* the degree of centrality between an object and an association, or to introduce a new association, via a long, more complex chain of associations. For example, say you have the nodes [A], [B], [C], and [D]. Each "node" is linked to the next one in the sequence. If I think of [A], then [B] will be activated. If I think of [B], then [C] will be activated. But the whole chain is not activated at all times. Normally, if I think of [A], then [B] will be activated to some extent, but perhaps not [C]. This is what can be changed. The "repeated co-activations" of [[A]-[B]], and [[B]-[C]] can encourage the creation or concretization of the more complex structure [[[A]-[B]]-[[B]-[C]]] (i.e. the activation [A]-[B] leads to the activation [B]-[C]), so that this more complex structure "achieves the status of a unit," and thinking of [A] frequently leads all the way to [C] or even beyond, in a longer, more complex chain.

Here is Langacker's more concrete example, again, going back to cats:

The notions *cat* and *cheese* are linked in our culture through a chain of associations: we conventionally attribute to cats the property of chasing mice, and to mice that of eating cheese. We would nevertheless not say

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that the concept [CHEESE] figures directly in the meaning of *cat* (or [CAT]

in that of *cheese*); neither has any particular tendency to elicit the other,

since the associative chain lacks the status of a unit and hinges on

noncentral specifications activated only on a contingent basis. Consider

now a community of cheesemakers that is suddenly overrun by hordes of

mice. To protect their livelihood, the cheesemakers sensibly decide to

import a felony of cats, which chase away the mice and then remain to

ward off any further threats. It is reasonably maintained that [CHEESE]

now figures directly in the meaning of *cat* for members of this community.

Their sole purpose in tolerating the continued presence of cats is to protect

their cheese from mice; this conceived relationship, linking cats, mice, and

cheese is a well-entrenched unit that is central to the expression's semantic

value. (*Foundations* 166)

Take the above example, and replace [CAT] and [CHEESE] with [CHANCERY] and

[FOG] or with [CHANCERY] and [MUD] and you will begin to see where this

argument is heading. Were it not for the way the novel complicates our ability to

pinpoint and delineate strict chains of connection and cognitive association, one could

argue that the novel provides the context such that the links between [CHANCERY]

and [MUD] are repeatedly co-activated and filled in.

    In other words, in the third-person narrator's grand all-encompassing view of

London, he proposes a link between [A] and [D], but there is no tradition binding the two, either directly or even by a well-known chain. In order to justify this, the narrative either has to present a new, direct link between [A] and [D], one previously unseen or unacknowledged, or it has to fill in the multiple nodes or links between them, and then emphasize the repeated co-activations of the entire chain. *Bleak House* does a little bit of both. That is, *Bleak House* does not propose single, simple chain of connection between Chancery and the fog and mire of London. Instead, *Bleak House* proposes a dense *mesh* of connections and interconnection, and it "co-activates" such connections repeatedly— indeed excessively. You cannot see or delineate the simple [A]-[B]-[C]-[D] chain, but that doesn't mean it is not there, or that [A] might not actually link directly to [D] in a certain context, or in a way that we, in our limited capacity to view the various networks and connections of the city, simply cannot see or comprehend.

A Dense "Mesh" of Contiguity

Isolating a single, linear [A]-[B]-[C]-[D] chain is more difficult when each node exists in a variety of networks, and a variety of what Langacker calls "dimensions." For example, Langacker writes that even in a network of kinship relations, you must account for several different dimensions to it. One is "the 'vertical' dimension of ascending/descending generations; another is the 'horizontal' dimension of collateral relationships; in addition, each node in a kinship network is potentially specified for

gender and other properties" (*Foundations* 151). Even within a single network there are

a variety of dimensions or directions towards which a sign or node can point. On top of

that, though, is the fact that *Bleak House* presents a variety of overlapping networks.

Caroline Levine points out that *Bleak House* presents a "dense overlapping of networks"

(125). This is what Langacker might call a dense "matrix" of networks. Levine writes

that "these sprawling, overlapping, and indefinitely expanding processes of

interconnectedness, from law to disease to kinship, can never be fully grasped all at

once," and therefore "the emphasis on withholding knowledge may actually be

essential to the task of representing multiple distributed networks" (129). In the

introduction I wrote that Dickens knows that, read one way, a single link on the great

chain of life could lead you in one direction, but if it is read in only a slightly different

manner, it could lead you down a totally different one. This is because a node is always

a node in a variety of overlapping networks or matrices, and read in different ways, it

can signify towards any of them, trailing off now in one direction, now in another.

The narrative does not follow a linear, straight, metonymic chain from

[CHANCERY] to [link] to [link] to [link] until finally it gets to [FOG] and [MUD] and

[MIRE], thus justifying the initial metonymy.[11] Instead, the narrative discovers a vast

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[11] In a limited capacity, several of the characters do accomplish something like this by tracing a chain of
connections and clues with respect to the central mystery of the novel regarding Lady Dedlock's past.
Tulkinghorn, when initially threatening Lady Dedlock, refers to the "train of circumstances" that led to
his discovery of her past (ch. 40). Inspector Bucket, likewise, traces the "train of circumstances" that will
no doubt give Sir Leicester a shock (ch. 54). A few chapters later, Bucket tells Esther, "I only want to have
everything in train and to know that it is in train by looking after it myself" (ch. 57).

and dense mesh of relationships and connections of different kinds. This is why George

Gissing calls the London of *Bleak House* "a great gloomy city, webbed and meshed"

(*Collected* I 174). Bishop calls the cosmos of *Bleak House* "dense" because the heavy use of

metonymy in the novel creates a "dense contiguity of referents" (809). Levine refers to

the "dense overlapping of networks" in the novel (125). She adds that once you factor in

the complexity of the "indefinitely expanding processes of interconnectedness" the text

reveals that there is no way that all the various overlapping networks can be "fully

grasped all at once." She adds, "to put it another way: in order to represent the world of

networks, the text must refuse totality" (129). The novel shifts from networks of disease

transmission, to networks of kinship relations, to causal relations, to indexical signs

leading from one clue to another. There is no simple, easy-to-delineate single chain of

connections linking Chancery to the filth, mud and fog of London. There are too many

dimensions, matrices, or networks to consider. Yet their interconnectedness is

nonetheless signified, again and again.

In other words, *Bleak House*'s "excessive" or "dense" use of metonymy figures for

what Timothy Morton calls the mesh. Every sign points to another sign, and back again,

even if you cannot always delineate each and every connection. The mesh is profoundly

de-centered, for "Each point of the mesh is both the centre and edge of a system of

points, so there is no absolute centre or edge" ("Thinking" 270). The mesh signifies

interconnected interconnectedness, and there is no "outside" of it. Morton writes that

this mesh "is infinite and beyond concept—unthinkable as such […] This is not just

because the mesh is too 'large' but also because it is also infinitesimally small"

("Thinking" 268). In *The Ecological Thought*, he writes, "The mesh is vast yet intimate:

there is no here or there, so everything is brought within our awareness" (40). On one

side, the mesh thinks through things like Edward Lorenz's butterfly effect: that long

chaotic chain of variables and circumstances by which, in a nonlinear system, the

flapping of a butterfly's wings can cause something as profound as a hurricane on the

other side of the world, even if it is impossible to witness that hurricane and thereby

trace back and pinpoint a single butterfly whose wing-flapping was a lynchpin initial

condition for the eventual generation of the hurricane. On the other side, the mesh

thinks through the terrifying closeness and intimacy of other life forms, such as the

bacteria and microscopic beings living on our skin or in our eyelashes, or the kinds of

filth and disease Jo is carrying with him.

By refusing totality, and by deconstructing our ability to delineate strict chains of

causality, Dickens opens the way for an ecological view of the Victorian city, long

before any Victorian could have used such a vocabulary. Dickens repeatedly signifies

what Miller calls the novel's "law of this interdependence" ("Interpretation" 180). For

Miller, the third-person narrator formulates this law of interdependence succinctly in

chapter 16.

What connexion can there be between the place in Lincolnshire, the house

in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabout of Jo the outlaw

with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he

swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between

many people in the innumerable histories of this world who from

opposite sides of great gulfs have, nevertheless, been very curiously

brought together!

Jo sweeps his crossing all day long, unconscious of the link, if any

link there be. (ch. 16)

Jo is separated from the place in Lincolnshire (and the upper classes more generally, for

whom the Place in Lincolnshire stands in metonymically), by a "great gulf." But Jo is

also right there, right in front of everyone's eyes. There are very direct links between Jo

and the place in Lincolnshire—indeed, he is linked with that place in multiple ways,

given his connections with Lady Dedlock, with Esther, and with Nemo, and who knows

what else. Would a metonymic link between Jo and the place in Lincolnshire be

justified? No, because there is no tradition binding the two together. And yet, the

narrator suggests, the connection is there, even if we would like to deny it. Most people

would prefer the great gulf between themselves and Jo to remain in place, for Jo is not

only dirty and disagreeable to the senses, but disease-ridden. The narrator describes Jo

as follows:

Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of

the common streets, only in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrimes him,

homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are

on him; native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his

immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish. (ch. 47)

Because of his filthiness, his being devoured by parasites and disease, Jo is constantly

being "a-chivied and a-chivied" and being asked to "move on" by police constables.

This imperative is "the one grand recipe" of his life, "the be-all and the end-all of [his]

strange existence upon earth" (ch. 19). He needs to be kept from sight, or at arm's

length. He seems barely human. When Allan Woodcourt, a doctor and Esther's love

interest, comes upon Jo towards the end of the novel, Jo is huddled up "like a growth of

fungus or any unwholesome excrescence" (ch. 46). As Robert Lougy points out in his

analysis of filth and the abject in the novel, "Jo is an extraneousness that is very much a

part of that which wants to exclude or deny him" (484). According to Lougy, Jo, like

Nemo, testifies to the "ineffectuality of any attempt to create wholly stable and fixed

boundaries" (484). These include the boundaries between middle-class subjects over

here and the barely-human Jo over there, between life and non-life, human and the non-

human, even animal and vegetable. We want there to be a "great gulf" separating us

from him, but such a gulf is not really there. It is in our heads. Any gulf there might be

is a social construction of class, not a natural one. Jo is especially troubling because he is

actually *more* connected than most characters. Levine points out that Jo is one of the

most highly connected characters in the novel, just by virtue of his literal physical

location in the city at various times (126). Jo, despite being a-chivied and a-chivied on

towards the social margins, is nonetheless at the center of numerous webs of

connection.

The connection goes uncomfortably deeper. Looking at the mesh diachronically,

life forms come from other entities, and are made up of other entities. Our bodies are

made up of the converted tissues of other living beings. Tyson Stolte claims that *Bleak*

House charts "matter's movement (at the atomic level) through a variety of forms," and

he claims "the circulation of matter in fact constitutes the vehicle by which *Bleak House*

makes its boldest assertions about both the connection between rich and poor and the

destructive effects of Chancery" (403). The "novel insists at length that the matter of rich

and poor mixes after death, so the rich are composed of the atoms of the poor (and vice

versa)" (413-14). Stolte shows how the abundance of putrefying corpses in *Bleak House*

registers mid-century anxieties about materialism, the mind and soul, and the afterlife.

The raw facts of materialism collapse social distinctions, and bring together elements

we want to keep separate. We imagine there is a great gulf between rich and poor,

between someone like Sir Leicester and someone like Jo, but as the novel makes clear in

multiple ways, there isn't. With the circulation of matter, the two are connected and

even intermixed—literally. And Chancery, which has, we are told, "its dead in every

churchyard" is directly implicated here as well. The contiguities are dense, and

troubling *in* their density.

On the other side of the social scale, Sir Leicester stands in for those members of the upper classes who want to distance themselves from the uncomfortable realities of this mesh of interconnection and interdependence. Rather than admitting that his current aristocratic position is dependent on a whole host of social structures and relations, Sir Leicester has the reverse opinion that the world depends upon the Dedlocks:

> He has a general opinion that the world might get on without hills but would be done up without Dedlocks. He would on the whole admit nature to be a good idea (a little low, perhaps, when not enclosed with a park-fence), but an idea dependent for its execution on your great county families. (Ch. 2)

Even nature as such he thinks is dependent upon his family name, rather than the other way around. Along with this denial, he wants nature enclosed in a park fence (though in fairness to Sir Leicester, given the filthy, terrifying portrayal of natural processes and the movement of matter in this novel, who wouldn't?). When Tulkinghorn has something unpleasant to report about the death of Nemo, Sir Leicester protests, several times. He is "[n]ot so much shocked by the fact as by the fact of the fact being mentioned." When Tulkinghorn goes on about the "miserable, poverty-stricken place" in which Nemo's corpse is found, Sir Leicester interrupts: "I think the less said—"

before he is interrupted in turn by Lady Dedlock (ch. 12). On some level, Sir Leicester

knows such things happen, that people fall into such a state of filth, poverty and

degradation, but it is important to him that such things are not mentioned, that they are

kept from sight and from his view. Indeed, his inability to see or acknowledge such

things is part of the very foundation of his psychological world—once he learns of Lady

Dedlock's true connections to Nemo, his world is shattered, and he has a stroke. How

could one such as *she* be connected to one such as *him*? The knowledge nearly destroys

him.

"Esther's Narrative" and Her View of Interconnectedness

Esther, unlike Sir Leicester, is extremely aware of her precarious place in the

world, and the interdependent nature of her position. As the alternative narrator of the

novel, she provides a subjective, non-omniscient view of the novel's law of

interdependence. Rather than believing the world is dependent upon her, as Sir

Leicester mistakenly believes about his family name, Esther knows that her birth and

the circumstances of it are owing to a long chain of circumstances that might easily not

have been. She holds a strange place in this world. After the meeting with her mother

upon the Ghost's Walk, Esther remarks, "So strangely did I hold my place in this world

that until within a short time back I had never, to my own mother's knowledge,

breathed—had been buried—had never been endowed with life—had never borne a

name." She realizes that she herself was almost herself a "no one," a nameless creature.

Throughout, she constantly refuses to take credit for any acts of generosity or kindness, and instead displaces praise onto others. Speaking about the way all newcomers were confided to her care at Greenleaf, she says, "They said I was so gentle, but I am sure THEY were!" (ch. 3). Later, she says, "It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself! As if this narrative were the narrative of MY life!" (ch. 2). Of course, in many ways it *is* the narrative of her life—most of her chapters are titled, "Esther's Narrative." If not hers, then whose?

Another instance of Esther's refusal to take credit for her actions takes place when, as a favour to an old woman in Lincolnshire, she writes out a letter to the old woman's grandson, who is now a sailor. At the top of the letter Esther draws a picture of the chimney from the house in which the old woman had brought the man up as a child. The sailor replies to the letter from "all the way in Plymouth," and he mentions that "he [is] going to take the picture all the way to America, and from America would write again." When this news is heard in the Lincolnshire community, everyone is delighted and amazed not only that the picture will make it all the way to America, but also that they will hear from the sailor again when he is himself all the way in America, and Esther says that she "got all the credit that ought to have been given to the post-office and [she] was invested with the merit of the whole system" (ch. 36). From Esther's perspective, she is but one node in a vast, complex network. Esther knows that her

ability to send the letter is dependent on a pre-existing network external to herself, which she is dependent on to do this small good deed, yet the people in Lincolnshire see her as invested with the merit of the network as a whole.

Recall Morton's claim that nothing in the mesh is fully itself, but reliant on beings external to it. He writes, "Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, so nothing is fully 'itself'" (15). He claims, later, that, "If everything is interconnected, there is less of everything. Nothing is complete in itself" (33). Any given entity exists within an ecology of other life forms, and it is interdependent with them to such a profound extent that in many ways it is inseparable *from* those other life forms. For example, seeds and pollen use birds and bees to circulate them (34). Richard Dawkins's concept of the "selfish gene" reduces the individual organism to a mere gene vehicle or gene carrier, and his concept of the extended phenotype further deconstructs the way "my" genes are really mine, rather than a collection of selfish genes that exist in a dialectical relationship with myriad other genes out in the world far beyond me. While Esther obviously does not use the language of genetics, her understanding of herself is one in which her "self" as a coherent entity cannot be understood except with respect to her relationship to other entities. If she is praised for sending a letter, she emphasizes the role of the post-office. If she is kind, she emphasizes the kindness of others and their influence. She holds her place "strangely" in this world, and is constantly self-effacing so that there is "less" of her. She tries to fade from the novel's

pages, displacing praise upon her onto others, even when it is her own narrative.

In this way, although we should be careful in viewing Esther as a model for how we should all see ourselves (and her self-effacement is partly a performance), she does provide a humbling alternative perspective, especially relative to the likes of Sir Leicester. Esther is willing to acknowledge the novel's law of interdependence, and also to acknowledge her own inability to comprehend it in its entirety. She's also willing to wade into the mud and the muck of London, to see and help the people whose existence Sir Leicester doesn't even want to acknowledge. As the alternate narrator, she provides a subjective, non-omniscient view of the novel's law of interdependence. In her first chapter, she says "I had always rather a noticing way—not a quick way, oh, no!—a silent way of noticing what passed before me and thinking I should like to understand it better. I have not by any means a quick understanding" (ch. 3). Partly, she is dissembling, just as she does when she is afraid to admit her love of Woodcourt. But she is also accurately describing her ability to read the signs of the city. She does not grasp things quickly, but she does notice things, and wants to understand them better, and when she "love[s] a person very tenderly indeed," it is her understanding that "seems to brighten." This is one difference between her and the third-person narrator. Her view of the world is limited, non-omniscient, and it is affected by her love of those around her. So unlike the third-person narrator, who views London from the grand, all-encompassing view, as though he could see the whole city at once, and be aware of

every connection and every event as it occurs, Esther has to go *through* the city, and see

and interpret what signs she can, from a limited perspective. So whereas the third-

person narrator sees thousands and thousands of foot passengers jostling in mire, as

though looking at them from on high, Esther actually wades through the mud and the

muck with those very foot passengers. When the third-person narrator talks about

Chancery's "dead in every churchyard," Esther sees (several!) corpses firsthand, and

she witnesses the way Chancery destroys the lives of the people she loves, like Richard.

It is true that Esther, like the third-person narrator, knows that signs point to

other signs, that we are intimately connected with other beings in complex and dynamic

ways we cannot always understand. But Esther's view is more personal and subjective,

and she reads the signs of individuals and of the city with empathy and humanism. For

example, Mrs. Jellyby's project in Africa makes her vision myopic. As Caddy says, "I

am only pen and ink to her." Mrs. Jellyby sees Caddy only metonymically, in terms of

how Caddy might serve her Bhorrioboola-Gha project. Esther actually notes almost

exactly the same thing about Caddy, thinking she had never seen anyone "in such a

state of ink." But for Esther, instead of pointing to Caddy's usefulness to the

Bhorrioboola-Gha project, the state of ink Caddy is in signifies how "unhealthy-

looking" she is, with her "tumbled hair" and her feet "disfigured with frayed and

broken satin slippers trodden down at heel," and that fact that "no article" of hers is "in

its proper condition or its right place" (ch. 4). Esther sees the same signs as Mrs. Jellyby,

but reads them completely differently.

Esther's personal and subjective view of the connections between people and their histories, known and unknown, and how these can change as she understands and discovers more about the urban world she inhabits, is exemplified towards the end of the novel, when Esther is with Inspector Bucket, attempting to find her mother through the dirty, wet streets of London. First, Bucket and Esther come across "something wet." It is a dead body, and upon seeing it better, Esther exclaims, "thank God it was not what I feared!" (ch. 57). She fears it is her mother, but thankfully this something wet, this corpse, is turned over and we find that it is not Lady Dedlock; it is just some *other* wet, decaying dead body. But whose? Someone *like* Lady Dedlock? Who was this person? What was *her* (or perhaps his) story? How did they die? Esther cannot possibly know. We only get this brief glimpse of their life, a small point of contact between Esther's narrative and another story. There is an entire history we are not being told, and as a non-omniscient narrator, Esther cannot possibly know this history, even if this other story does briefly touch upon the one we are reading. It is a moment of contact, and brief contiguity, but no more. It is just one of the "innumerable histories of this world" that has come across a great gulf to touch upon "Esther's Narrative," the one we are reading, but it does nothing more than briefly touch it. The same is true of the unnamed person for whom there is a posted bill that reads, "Found Drowned." Who was this person "found drowned"? These are narrative threads left untraced, signified

only metonymically, indexical signifiers of larger, untold histories.

Various state apparatuses in the novel are meant to prevent us from getting any glimpses at all of these things. The "something wet" is brought to Esther and Bucket's attention by "a man yet dark and muddy" who "whispered with Mr. Bucket, who went away with him down some slippery steps—as if to look at something secret he had to show" (ch. 57). Esther only gets a brief glimpse of this "something wet" because it is something she is not meant to see, a secret meant to be contained and kept out of public view. Esther only sees it because she is with Bucket at the time. Bucket consults with the constable, then returns to Esther, assuring her all the while not to be alarmed "on account of [their] coming down here." Shortly thereafter he tells her, "don't you worry yourself no more than you can help." All throughout the novel Bucket assures everyone that everything is okay, that he "has everything in train." Yet his job is never really to fix anything, as Hortense makes explicit when she asks, "But can you restore him back to life?" Bucket cannot restore Tulkinghorn to life, nor can he make an honourable lady of Lady Dedlock. All he can do is try to cover up and somehow contain the damage. The "stain" that Sir Leicester worries will be added to his name is linked to the "stain upon the floor" in Tulkinghorn's chambers, which is "so easy to be covered, so hard to be got out" (ch. 48). It is also linked to the "deadly stains contaminating" Lady Dedlock's dress when she goes to visit Nemo's grave with Jo. The stains are indexical signs of murder, death, filth, and the exact kinds of connections Sir Leicester does not

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want added to his name. The stain on Tulkinghorn's floor cannot be removed, but it can be covered—and what is a "Bucket" if not a tool to contain or tidy up these "stains" or "something wets"? Bucket is one part of a state apparatus designed to keep such things contained and enclosed, like the park fence Sir Leicester wants enclosing the natural world. When Jo points out Nemo's body to Lady Dedlock, Jo says, "They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you with my broom if the gate was open. That's why they locks it, I s'pose" (ch. 16). "They" keep trying to keep things enclosed, but the bodies and decaying corpses just will not stay contained, just as Jo himself escapes any attempt to contain him.

Esther, by going on the chase after her mother with Bucket, sees a side of London that others do not. In doing so, she comes face to face with that which we want to keep hidden from view, enclosed and away from us, "over there." This can be seen in a curious moment towards the end of Esther's chase, in which she ends up back at Chancery Lane, but does not even recognize it. After a series of very direct encounters with mud, mire, wet corpses and uncanny faces rising out of the water, and after she herself is soaked through with snow and mud, Esther and Bucket end up right back at Chancery:

> I looked about me confusedly and hurriedly as we crossed the street, I thought I knew the place. "Are we in Holborn?" I asked him.
>
> "Yes," said Mr. Bucket. "Do you know this turning?"

> "It looks like Chancery Lane."

> "And was christened so, my dear," said Mr. Bucket. (ch. 59)

This is one of the key moments in the novel, as it ties the chase back in to the novel's opening. After Esther goes right into the mud and the muck and the mire, she comes upon Chancery again, but sees it in a totally new light, so much so that she does not at first recognize it. It is a repetition of the opening image, but from a totally different perspective. The mud, the filth and the fog, all those things which have always been right there, but which we learn to look past or ignore, have suddenly been foregrounded to Esther's perception, since she is soaked through with the stuff. Esther tells us that she has seen the river "many times since then, by sunlight and by moonlight, but never free from the impressions of that journey" (ch. 57). Something permanent has happened to Esther's view of the city. The links between Chancery, the river, and the mud, mire, and filth have been permanently impressed upon her mind. In Langacker's terminology, they have all been co-activated in her mind—and in ours—so that the mud, mire, and muck are now absolutely central to her understanding of Chancery and London. She cannot think of one without thinking of the other, and she cannot un-see what she has seen.

This is actually not the only time in the novel Esther says her associations have been altered by her experiences. There are two occurrences similar to the above episode, both with respect to Esther's view of Mr. Jarndyce. The very first time she meets him

she does not know who he is. She is in a coach, they have an odd conversation (since he does not explain who he is), and Mr. Jarndyce eventually leaves. Esther says, "We left him at a milestone. I often walked past it afterwards, and never for a long time without thinking of him and half expecting to meet him. But I never did; and so, as time went on, he passed out of my mind" (ch. 3). The milestone and Mr. Jarndyce become temporarily linked in her mind, but since she never sees him there again, the association fades. However, at the very *end* of the novel, something more permanent occurs—an association that will not fade. In the last chapter, she says, "I never look at him but I hear our poor dear Richard calling him a good man" (ch. 67). Again, the two are linked, and this subtly hints towards a more complex chain of associations: Mr. Jarndyce's face links to Richard's calling him a good man, despite Richard at the time suspecting Mr. Jarndyce of working against him, which in turn links to Richard's changing attitude towards Mr. Jarndyce, which in turn links to the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and finally back to Chancery and its spreading ill-effects.

Although the opening description of London might reasonably make one "rather cheerful than otherwise," in Gissing's words, the opening description does not stand on its own; rather, the image is just the opening of an argument, and it is only complete when the metonymies proposed in the opening image have been unpacked, explicated and explored to their full depth. By itself, the opening description is largely impersonal. The third-person narrator skims over thousands of nameless foot passengers, horses,

and dogs all jostling together through the mud. Even when main characters like Richard

and Ada are mentioned, they are not named by the other characters or by the narrator.

There is a certain safe distance between us and the London that is described. A

metonymy between Chancery and the mud, fog and filth of London seems like a

stretch, and not altogether very troubling to contemplate. However, the mesh of

interconnectedness that Esther then discovers while navigating her way through her

narrative is much more troubling, and much more emotionally charged. She knows

what it feels like to wade through the filth and mud clogging up the streets, to be

emotionally invested in those whose lives have been ruined by Chancery's spreading

ill-effects.

Chancery and the filth of London are not just contiguous, but strangely and

frighteningly so, and in multiple ways. They are enmeshed and intertwined. They are

connected not just to each other, but to myriad other parts of urban life, right down to

life's most unpleasant natural processes, such as the spread of disease and the

movement of matter, including the death and decomposition of law writers, street

sweepers, lawyers, ladies, and newborn babies. This is a much less pleasant image, and

a rather less cheerful view of urban life. It is a view of London and urban life made

strange, defamiliarized until nearly unrecognizable, so much so that Esther herself

cannot recognize Chancery Lane when she comes upon it later on. The metonymies in

the opening description illustrate the depth of interdependence and interconnectedness,

the density of contiguities, and the problems of interpreting and reading the signs of the

city from within the mesh itself, but it is the work of the narrative itself that concretizes

these associations, and simultaneously strengthens and justifies the initial metonymy.

Chapter Two.

Figuring Dust in *Our Mutual Friend*

In the last chapter, I argued that metonymy in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

figures what Timothy Morton calls the mesh, or the interconnectedness of all living and

non-living beings. In *Bleak House,* Dickens's heavy — even excessive — use of

metonymy figures for the way that characters, entities, and myriad aspects of the city

are deeply interconnected in a dense mesh of interconnection and interdependence.

Nothing is wholly itself, but is instead always interdependent with other life forms and

other aspects of the environment. Chancery cannot be understood as separate from

London's fog and filth, or as separate from the misery it engenders throughout the city

and throughout England. When characters and readers learn to read and interpret their

urban Victorian world properly, they can see Chancery's "signs and tokens,"

everywhere; for example, athough the eponymous Bleak House was not technically

"in" Chancery, it is "stamped with the same seal" (ch. 8).

In *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), similarly, metonymy figures the unsettling

connections between characters and various aspects of their environment. More

specifically, dust figures the connection between elemental matter or material and

fundamental aspects of the characters' urban lives. Dust in *Our Mutual Friend* is one of

the novel's central metaphors, but it is also one of the novel's central metonyms. As the

novel unfolds, the figure of dust takes on more and more metonymic significance, and

as this occurs, the figure breaks down a variety of boundaries, including the ones

between here and over there, between self and environment, between the world of

economics and the world of death and organic decay.

Dickens eventually decided against it, but he listed the solitary word "Dust" as a

possible title for the novel (Dickens *Charles* 34-5). By the novel's end, dust is connected

to society's wealth and to the circulation of money, as well as to our very being. Dust

figures the connection between the human self and the non-human environment; dust is

the eventual fate of our material bodies after we cease to be living, animate subjects. The

dust contains our waste products, both biological and non-biological. The dust is a

heap, a miscellany of scattered organic and inorganic objects and intermixed materials.

As the novel unfolds and the figure takes on more metonymic significance, the figure in

turn becomes stranger and more uncanny than one might otherwise expect.

In this chapter, I will take the previous chapter's argument further, and suggest

that metonymy not only figures interconnectedness and interdependence; it also figures

the unsettling, often unpleasant, and stranger aspects of this interconnectedness. As

Morton writes, "Interconnectedness isn't snug and cozy. There is intimacy […] but not

predictable, warm fuzziness" (31). Or, being more blunt, he says, "Yes, everything is

interconnected. And it sucks" (33). Interconnectedness in *Our Mutual Friend* is strange

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and weirdly intimate. Interconnectedness in the novel deconstructs the boundary that separates the living from the dead, the valued from the detritus, and metonymy is the figure of speech that works to reveal the horrid yet fundamental nature of this intimacy. And, although it is unpleasant to realize how fundamental dust is, and how connected to it our daily lives are, that does not negate its importance.

Catherine Gallagher, in writing about the "bioeconomics" in *Our Mutual Friend*, very usefully points out that Victorians were well aware that there were very real connections between the economy and the natural world. She writes that many Victorians were engaged in the study of the "interconnections among populations, food supply, modes of production and exchange, and their impact on life forms generally." Victorians, influenced by the work of Thomas Malthus, understood that there was an important relationship between biology and economics, and that there was "a tendency of that [economic] activity to rearrange nature" (3). Dickens, says Gallagher, actually had an overt distaste for Victorian bioeconomics, but this is *why* bioeconomics continually found its way into his novels' plots, so that in *Our Mutual Friend,* we see the "transmission of life into inorganic matter and thence into money." However, as Gallagher usefully points out, this is "not consistently portrayed as life destroying" (93). I will build on this, arguing that the dust in *Our Mutual Friend* is the central metonym that figures these ongoing bioeconomic processes. It is also not just a figure of death, waste, or valueless matter, but a figure of elemental matter that is connected as well to

important life-creating processes.

Pamela K. Gilbert shows the ways in which the Thames in particular was a source of anxiety for Victorians thinking about the potential problems related to urban sanitation and various ongoing biological processes, especially after Dr. John Snow and his medical maps clearly linked cholera outbreaks to the water supply. Gilbert argues Dickens thematizes this anxiety in his novels. She writes, "Dickens's 1850s and 1860s novels appeal to an iconography of leakage versus containment in the service of a notion of liberal individualism" (112). *Our Mutual Friend* "narrativizes Snow's second map [of cholera outbreaks] and subsequent investigations inspired by it" (116). Importantly, while in *Bleak House* we "need not look to metaphor to understand that this moisture is filthy," in *Our Mutual Friend* "the connection between filth and literal disease is replaced by a more subtle portrayal of the body's vulnerabilities" (117). I would like to build on Gilbert's work, but while she focuses much more on the Thames, I will focus on the novel's dust, and while she argues for the novel's "more subtle" portrayal of the potential vulnerabilities of the social body, I would like to actually *avoid* reading the novel in this way; my focus will remain much more on the actual, "literal" dust and elemental matter in the novel. So whereas Gilbert reads a character such as Bradley Headstone as a bourgeois subject whose afflictions—his anger, his desire for Lizzie, even his nosebleeds—metaphorically stand for similar problems threatening the larger social body and body politic, I will focus less on character and more on the actual

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material environment and urban world. Finally, although Gilbert is entirely right in her

assessment about Victorian anxieties regarding disease and containment, the loss of

boundaries, and so forth, and I do want to acknowledge that fear, horror and anxiety, I

will also be focusing much more on the oddly fascinating, even vital and necessary

aspects of these things.

The dust in the novel is strange, a heap of miscellaneous parts. The term itself is a

metonym for various forms of matter and waste material that contain far more than just

"dust." Digging through a dust heap, you do not know what you will find. The dust

mixes the organic with the inorganic. It contains our actual biological waste, as well as

our household waste. It contains animal corpses and the bones that Mr. Venus uses for

his taxidermy. The dust contains worthless scraps, as well as the materials which

society and individual people rely upon, such as the ashes and cinders that were very

profitably sold by dustmen to London brick-makers. By emphasizing all the ways we –

both "we" as individual, physical human bodies, and "we" as a society and economy –

are connected to dust, *Our Mutual Friend* figures the strange, unsettling nature of

interconnectedness, and what interconnectedness entails.

Dust as Metaphor and as Metonym

Because of dust's importance in the novel, many critics have discussed the figure,

but it tends to be read as a metaphor or symbol rather than as a metonym. Critics

writing in the mid-twentieth century understood dust as the key symbol or metaphor

for the empty values of Victorian society. Edgar Johnson, in a chapter on the novel titled

"The Great Dust-Heap," argues that the dust in *Our Mutual Friend* is "magnified into an

all-embracing metaphor." For Johnson, Dickens's last completed novel is an especially

dark one, and in it, "the image of wealth as filth, the supreme goal of nineteenth-

century society as dust and ordure, gave a deep and savage irony to Dickens's hatred

for its governing values" (1030). Thus, the society that Victorians have built and take so

much pride in is really "just" a dust-heap. Johnson is not alone. Earle Davis, in *The Flint*

and the Flame, calls the novel "Dickens's bitterest attack upon his world" (264), and he

claims that "the symbol of the dust heap" was Dickens's "starting place" for this attack

(265). Davis writes, "Economically speaking, [Dickens's] world could see no difference

between unearned increment and diffused excrement . . . [I]n every part of London he

saw mankind straining and struggling over a dung heap" (266). Similarly, H. M.

Daleski sees two key metaphors in the novel: one figures London "as a dust-heap," and

the other figures London as "a city of death" (274). Daleski likewise sees the dust

metaphor as a commentary on Victorian London's governing values; he writes that the

metaphorical comparison between money and dust means that, "money is equated,

simply and directly, with rubbish, that is, with a false scale of values" (277). In these

examples, the dust in the novel is read as a metaphor for money which reveals that

what Victorian society thought was valuable, was in fact only so much worthless dung

and dust.

By contrast, other critics disagree with these claims about the significance of the dust. For example, John Carey argues confidently, "We can dismiss the notion that the dust heaps are charged with any moral message about the worthlessness of material wealth" (110). Indeed, Carey is pleased to go a step further: "Happily Mr. Dickens refrains from cumbering his other big central property in *Our Mutual Friend* — the dust heaps — with any elevated significance, indeed with any distinct significance at all" (109). Eve Sedgwick usefully sums up the history of criticism of the novel which views the dust or dust-as-excrement as a metaphor or simple symbol for money or wealth, saying, "Their point is most often [...] essentially moralistic: that money and excrement are alike because (more or less) they are worthless, *bad*" (163). Sedgwick herself reads dust (or more precisely, dust as excrement) as a symbol of anality: "Everyone *says* [it] is about excrement in order that they may *forget* that it is about anality" (164).

The other key critical twentieth-century discussion about dust in the novel concerned what was actually in the dust heaps. Indeed the debate as to whether it would have contained human excrement has now lasted at least three quarters of a century, since Humphry House first argued it would have in 1941. Harvey Sucksmith and Ellen Handy agree, but others argue against it, including Stephen Gill and John Carey. While these accounts are suggestive, I am less interested in pinpointing precisely what was or was not historically in the dust than I am in the fact that it was a heap of

miscellaneous materials and elemental matter. In its status as a heap of strange-yet-familiar material, objects, and organic and inorganic matter, it metonymically signifies the unsettling nature of interconnectedness.

Adrian Poole points out that the debate about whether the dust would have literally contained excrement stems partly from the distinctions Henry Mayhew tried to draw between dust, street sweepings, and night soil. Yet, as Poole notes, Mayhew's "distinctions keep collapsing," when it turns out that there were large overlaps between dustmen and night soil men and various other scavengers. Poole writes, "You cannot control what goes into the piles and heaps and pools of waste, nor can you predict what may be found in them." Poole also draws attention to the semantic or semiotic aspect of the entire debate: "In sum, the word 'dust' was as capacious then as the word 'waste' is now" (805, *n.* 20). Like our current word, *waste*, the word *dust* is a conventionalized metonym. Many words, in certain uses, are metonyms so conventionalized that the original metonymic link is now an etymological footnote.[12] That is, the term *dust* can signify for everything that constitutes a dust heap or everything that would go inside a dust bin, because presumably at least part of the dust would contain actual dust or dust-like substances (i.e. a pulverized powder of some sort).[13] Poole's summary is useful

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[12] For example, the word *casserole* can signify a casserole dish or pan, or it can signify the food itself that was cooked *in* the casserole pan ("casserole, n."). To take this further: you can even define a "casserole dish" as the food that was cooked in the casserole dish.

[13] We use similar conventionalized metonymies today. When I tell my partner I'm going to take out "the blue box," my partner and I know that I mean that I'm going to take out the blue plastic bin that *contains* our

for drawing attention to the miscellany of what would actually be in the dust: sometimes garbage, trash, waste, but also pulverized powders like cinders and ashes, as well as animal carcasses, and probably at times, yes, human waste. You cannot be sure what you'll find inside it, and this very ambiguity is partly, I would argue, what the novel draws on in its use of the figure.

Leslie Simon builds on Poole by focusing on dust's status a heap of miscellaneous materials and objects. He argues that the "dust works as a central image […] as a symbol of psychological fragmentation" (217-18). However, Simon notes that "dust" in Victorian England would not mean simply "any substance comminuted or pulverized; powder," as the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives for the term's most common usage; rather, to urban-dwellers in Victorian England, "dust conveyed something altogether more general: rubbish, refuse, trash." While previous critics have been concerned with what was *in* the dust, Simon importantly argues that a dust heap is not just a homogenized pile of one substance, pulverized into powder; it is instead a "heap" of individual, miscellaneous objects, and "in continuing to be different, furthermore, these things continue to *be*—that is, they are alive, though in new environs and potentially in

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recyclable waste from the past week, and leave it in the appropriate spot for the city's waste management services to pick it up. When I use the term "blue box" the metonymic substitution is CONTAINER-FOR-CONTAINED. However, even to say I'm going to "take it out" is a metonym, substituting one action for several actions (such as bringing the empty box back inside the next morning) for the sake of convenience. One can imagine future historians debating what I meant. What goes in the blue box and what goes in the compost, or down the drain, or in the garbage? It will be a difficult debate for them, since even my partner and I frequently don't know for sure!

a new form." Leslie goes on to show that the dust heaps allow Dickens to suggest that

modern urban life itself can be "reinterpreted through structures of fragmentation,

miscellany, and dynamic interrelation" (219). Simon's framing of dust as a heap, and as

a collection of materials and objects that continue to *be*, will be important in

understanding the figure's full metonymic significance.

J. Hillis Miller's analysis of the novel is useful here for beginning a productive

line of argument about dust in *Our Mutual Friend* that moves away from dust as

metaphor to dust as "elemental matter." Emphasizing the "false worship of money" in

the novel, Miller argues that Society participates in a "collective hallucination" that

causes a "detachment from solidity […] the unreality of money has spread out to define

the lives of most of the characters and to dissolve them in its emptiness" ("Money" 70,

72, 73). The "waking reality" that "lies behind the dream" is "the otherness of elemental

matter […] It is the substance which lies behind or beneath the hollowness of an

avaricious society" (75). However, although elemental matter is unusually present in

the novel, Miller warns, "These material elements are not 'symbols,' if that means

expressions of some reality which transcends them, and for which they stand. The river,

the dust, the wind, and the fire are what they are: mere matter." When characters like

Silas Wegg plunge into a garbage cart, or various characters nearly drown, such

moments "are also encounters with death, the dispersion into dust to which all shall

come at last" (76). After such encounters with the reality of elemental matter and this

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"dispersion into dust," characters must learn to reconcile this reality with the empty values and beliefs of Society. Miller's analysis is useful for its appreciation that the material elements in the novel are not symbols or substitutes for some other more important idea about Victorian society or its values; rather, they must also be understood on their own terms. By not reducing the elemental matter or the dust to "only" a metaphor, Miller opens the way for a reading of dust that moves towards a more subtle understanding of the figure's complex significance, one which borrows both from metaphor and from metonymy.

Building on Miller's claims about elemental matter and on Poole's and Simon's emphasis on the miscellaneous materials and objects that constitute the dust, I am arguing that the dust in the novel is more than just its central metaphor. Certainly the dust has important metaphorical significance, but money and wealth are not just conceptually "like" dust, and the significance of the dust is more complex than a moralistic equation between money and dust. Money and wealth are also connected to the dust in more literal, real-world or indexical terms. For example, Old Harmon's dust mounds are a very literal index of how rich he is, and his dust heaps in turn can be read indexically in this way if you have sorted and sifted them and know what to look for, as Mr. Boffin has. Mr. Boffin is the one who has "in years bygone […] vigilantly sifted the dust," before old Harmon "had coined every waif and stray into money" (bk. 4, ch. 14). Moreover, in the context created by the novel, the dust, in its role as a strange

miscellany of objects that *were* and which will continue to *be* (albeit in other forms), can also signify myriad other aspects of the city and of urban life. Thus, because of this indexical and contiguous link, the dust is more than the novel's "all-embracing metaphor"; the dust is the novel's all-embracing metonym. The dust does not just figure a conceptual similarity between dust, wealth and society, but the radical depth of interconnectedness between these things, as well as the strange, uncanny nature of this interconnection. Through its metonymic and indexical significance — established by and through the narrative — the dust becomes connected not just to money and wealth, but to almost every aspect of the human urban experience in Victorian London. The filthy material of the Thames and of old Harmon's dust heaps are more than just a "symbol" for understanding society's wealth in a new light; more disturbingly, they are literally an actual constituent part of that wealth, and even a disturbingly constituent part of the individual subject's material being. The truth and strangeness of this fact is established over time, as the dust figure recurs throughout the narrative, with both its metaphoric and metonymic weight being expanded and explicated throughout.

My reading of dust as metonym rests on several key aspects to how metonymy functions in the novel. First, it is a figure which is expanded upon and elaborated throughout the novel; it is a dynamic figure. Second, there is always a sense of play about the figure. Dust is not only a metaphor or only a metonym; it is a figure that playfully draws on both the axes of similarity and contiguity. And, related to this,

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Dickens draws on the actual, literal associations Victorian readers would have

regarding dust and its role in their own day-to-day lives, and he draws on the classical

associations dust has in the Bible. Dickens's use of metonymy plays off established

associations and contiguities, but also points out ones that were always there, yet

unnoticed or at least unappreciated. These claims build on the work of John. R. Reed

(who is explicitly building on Miller) and Elaine Freedgood.

 As I have mentioned earlier in this thesis, Reed points out that Dickens

"connect[s] patterns of metonymy over whole novels," and that this technique is

comparable to the leitmotif technique of Richard Wagner in music and Thomas Mann in

fiction (414). Dickens has a "tendency to take a small detail from early in the narrative

and elaborate it in an increasing network of allusions and similarities" (423). For Reed,

the allusions and similarities can leave the realms of the purely contiguous, and enter

"into a symbolic range of references operating against the realist agenda. Metonym

blends with metaphor" (419). Reed cites work by Miller in which Miller complicates

Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy.[14] According to Miller, "For

Dickens, metonymy is the foundation and support of metaphor" ("Fiction" 128). As an

example, Miller cites an instance in the *Sketches* when Boz, like Sherlock Holmes, reads

small external cues and indexical signs. Boz identifies the character of a man by his door

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[14] Miller argues against a pure opposition between the two. However, as Reed himself points out in a footnote, "Jakobson is not so hard and fast as Miller suggests" (115).

knocker, but says, "for we well know, that between the man and his knocker, there will inevitably be a greater or less degree of resemblance and sympathy" (qtd. in Miller "Fiction" 130). The similarity here underlies the contiguity, so that the "basis" for the metonymic link is a similarity. In such a formulation, similarity and contiguity are not opposed, but work together.

Reed's analysis of Dicken's use of metonymy is useful for pointing out the figure's work as a recurring leitmotif; after Miller, he also usefully complicates the relationship between metaphor and metonymy in Dickens. That is, the work that the figure of dust has to do in the novel borrows from both the axes of similarity and of contiguity, sometimes at the very same time. This is one reason why I do not break entirely from the earlier critics' view of the dust in the novel as a metaphor. Of course, yes, the dust is "still" a metaphor. It is not a question of it being one or the other, because even outside this novel, that's not how figures or signs work. Signs signify in a variety of directions, along different chains of association. Moreover, the figure's significance interacts with and plays upon what Reed calls a "symbolic range of references," such as, in this case, the classical and Biblical associations that the term "dust" would bring with it. Such associations will, again, borrow from both the axes of similarity and contiguity.

Reed contrasts Dickens's more playful and elaborate use of the figure with that of other Victorian novelists, who use metonymy solely as a simple index of character.

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He quotes an essay by Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in which she claims the Victorian and Edwardian novelists "laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there" (qtd. in Reed 59). Miller also notes the traditional "metonymic reciprocity between a person and his surroundings, his clothes, furniture, house, and so on" ("Fiction" 128). Similarly, in Roland Barthes' well-known essay, "The Reality Effect," Barthes describes small items, things, or details, whose only function is to "constitute some index of character or atmosphere" (141). However, according to Elaine Freedgood, Barthes' problem with this kind of reading is that "it does not allow for causal, material, and conceptual connections beyond the covers of the text, or outside the frame of the narrative" (11). This is what Elaine Freedgood labels a "weak" reading of metonymy.

Freedgood argues that metonymic significance always goes beyond the figural use of a thing or object in a novel to provide a clue about a given character. (Unlike Reed or Miller, Freedgood is not making a claim about how Dickens in particular uses metonymy; rather, she is making a claim about the possibilities of reading the figure more generally.) For Freedgood, a Victorian "thing" in a novel can be "an index of something culturally significant both within the novel and outside" (11). So, for example, reading metonymy in this way goes beyond seeing the mahogany in *Jane Eyre* as a simple indication of wealth and taste; more than this, mahogany carries with it a

whole history of imperial domination, slavery, deforestation, and violence (3). Likewise, the significance of dust in *Our Mutual Friend* would act not only as a metonym for filth and waste; in a strong reading, dust would also register what was "highly consequential in the world in which the text was produced" (2). Victorian readers would have firsthand experience with the removal of their own dust, and this was already a known topic of debate. Since collection was done privately, dustmen sometimes ignored neighbourhoods, or visited neighbourhoods less frequently if they were less likely to be tipped, or if visiting those neighbourhoods more frequently just was not profitable enough (Jackson 8-10). Beyond potential problems with their local dust man ignoring them, readers would also likely have some knowledge of the problems of sanitation and sanitation reform, especially since it was such an obvious and visceral problem. After all, if you were an actual Victorian living in London, you could always pause in your reading of the novel and have a sniff of the air.

I argue that, yes, the novel's use of the figure registers much of this, but it also builds on and plays with these associations *within* the bounds of the novel itself, as the figure is elaborated in what Reed calls an "increasing network" of contiguities, allusions, similarities and contexts. Moreover, it is this elaboration of the figure over the course of the narrative that makes it so unsettling, weird, and uncanny.

Questions of Materiality in the Novel

Although the theme will be unpacked and expanded, and linked in myriad ways to the dust figure, the very beginning of the novel draws the reader's attention to the link between waste, the urban environment and money, as well as the connection between these things and our basic needs as humans: food, meat, and drink. In the opening scene, Lizzie is horrified by what she has to do with her father, Gaffer Hexam, day in, day out. She and her father search the Thames for floating corpses, to take whatever money or valuables a given corpse might still have, in order to support themselves. In the opening scene, Lizzie and her father's boat is covered with "slime and ooze," and the "two figures in it obviously were doing something that they often did, and were seeking what they often sought." Gaffer himself "seem[s] to be made out of the mud that begrime[s] his boat," so that already there is a blurring between him and the elemental matter of his environment. Part of the horror of the scene stems from the fact that Gaffer is so comfortable with this reality. He is accustomed to it. But for his daughter, Lizzie, this is not the case. For Lizzie, "in the intensity of her look there [i]s a touch of dread or horror." When Gaffer asks Lizzie to sit nearer the corpse strapped to the boat, she says, "I cannot bear it," and asks to be relieved of this duty. Her father chides her for this, since the river and the floating filth and waste it contains have been her "living." He says,

'As if it wasn't your living! As if it wasn't meat and drink to you!'

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At these latter words the girl shivered again, and for a moment paused

in her rowing, seeming to turn deadly faint. It escaped his attention, for he

was glancing over the stern at something the boat had in tow.

'How can you be so thankless to your best friend, Lizzie? The very fire

that warmed you when you were a babby, was picked out of the river

alongside the coal barges. The very basket that you slept in, the tide

washed ashore. The very rockers that I put it upon to make a cradle of it, I

cut out of a piece of wood that drifted from some ship or another.'

Gaffer makes the novel's first few metonymic connections. Normally, and in the sense

Gaffer ostensibly means it, one's "living" is a metonym for one's occupation or job: your

job allows you to earn money, and you use the money to buy the things you need to

"live," such as food, shelter, and so on. In the next sentence, Gaffer continues, claiming

that the river "is" Lizzie's meat and drink, then he adds that the fire which warmed her

was pulled from the river, and so on. The connections here are metonymic, not

metaphoric. Already, in this scene, there is a series of playful metonymic connections:

the Thames is Lizzie's "meat and drink"; searching corpses is their "living"; the river is

the source of "the very fire that warmed [her]."

However, when Gaffer says that the river is Lizzie's meat and drink, he is only one

step removed from speaking very literally.[15] An 1824 public health scandal revealed that the Grand Junction Water Works Company drew the drinking water it supplied—to the fashionable West End, no less—only a few feet from a major sewer outlet in the Thames (Jackson 50-51). Indeed, the Broad Street pump in Soho that physician John Snow had shut down in 1854 in order to prevent cholera was later found to be contaminated with fecal matter, and more pumps were found to be pumping dirty, contaminated water from the Thames (Wohl 125). The cause of the cholera outbreaks was Victorians were drinking back their own excrement. If "dust" can include excrement, then the Thames itself is permeated with dust. It's everywhere. You did not have to be a river worker to be caught up in this, but as a river worker, Lizzie is exposed directly to this reality. She knows that the river provided all these things, except unlike Gaffer, this fact horrifies her and makes her feel faint. Pulling corpses from the river is disagreeable, but to contemplate the myriad ways her life is dependent on the detritus and filth of the river, or on the filthy river itself, makes her feel ill—another playful metonymic link, given that if the river is her "meat and drink," she's at risk of drinking excrement and getting sick.

As the scene goes on, Gaffer is confronted by his old partner, Rogue Riderhood, who, having been accused of stealing from a living man, justifies himself by pointing

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[15] As Freedgood points out, metonymy edges much more towards "the obvious, the literal, the material" than metaphor (12).

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out that Gaffer steals from the dead. Gaffer responds, "You *couldn't* [steal from a dead man]." He asks, "Has a dead man any use for money? Is it possible for a dead man to have money? What world does a dead man belong to? 'Tother world. What world does money belong to? This world. How can money be a corpse's? Can a corpse own it, want it, spend it, claim it, miss it?" (ch. 1). In this small series of questions, Gaffer gets to the heart of some of the unsettling questions of materialism posed by the novel. Gaffer proposes a thin, rigid and clear boundary between the world of a corpse ('tother world) and the world of money (this world). As more and more corpses are pulled from the river, the novel will blur and complicate the rigidity of this boundary, looking at the ways in which the two worlds are intrinsically bound together.

Ironically, later in the novel, when the inspector refers to Gaffer's own dead body when it has been pulled from the river, the inspector draws attention to exactly the same problem as Gaffer does in the opening. Upon being asked by Mortimer Lightwood what's to be done with "the remains"[16] the inspector responds, "I'll find the nearest of our men to come and take charge of him;—I still call it HIM, you see" (bk. I, ch. 14). For the inspector, the body is still a HIM. Not an "it," but a "HIM," and to be treated as such. Gaffer's corpse is still treated as a human subject, even though Gaffer treated the corpses he found as inanimate matter, as objects, and therefore incapable by definition of being robbed. Later still, the difference between an "it" (an object) and a

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[16] To refer to a corpse as "remains" is, of course, itself a metonymic indicator.

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"HIM" (a subject) is brought up when John Harmon recalls being a nearly lifeless body in the Thames. Referring to his own body after Radfoot drugs him, he notes that referring to his body with the pronoun "I" is the only way he can, and yet somehow it feels inaccurate. He says, "But it was not I. There was no such thing as I, within my knowledge" (bk. II, ch. 13). For a time, John Harmon was effectively a corpse—not a subject, not an "I," but an "it," an object—inanimate matter, belonging not to *this* world, but 'tother one. Later, while looking at a graveyard and thinking back on the incident, Harmon notes that, despite being recalled to life, he "no more hold[s] a place among the living than these dead do." The description below the image of Harmon crawling ashore, which accompanies this passage, reads, "MORE DEAD THAN ALIVE":

Figure 2. "More Dead Than Alive" by Marcus Stone. Note how Stone blends Harmon in with the mud and detritus of the shore by using the same density of cross-hatch shading.

When it is Rogue Riderhood's turn to take a dip in the Thames, and he temporarily

drowns, the narrator writes of the unconscious body that "it is Riderhood and no other,

or it is the outer husk and shell of Riderhood and no other," and "the spark of life

within him is curiously separable from himself now, and [the onlookers] have a deep

interest in it, probably because it *is* life, and they are living and must die." Towards the

close of the same scene, the narrator refers to the human body as, "this flabby lump of

mortality" (bk. 3, ch. 3). The questions of materialism that Gaffer raises in the opening

scene are unsettling because they point towards our own mortality, and to the material

basis of our own being—when you get right down to it, we are animate meat, flabby

lumps of mortality. We come from the dust and return to the dust.

The horror of realizing that the dust is an index of ourselves is also enacted in

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Dickens had previously alluded to Shelley's novel in *Great

Expectations* (1861). The narrator, Pip, describes his kinship with "The imaginary student

pursued by the misshapen creature he had impiously made" (ch. 40). However,

thematically, the kinship between *Frankenstein* and *Our Mutual Friend* runs even deeper.

In *Frankenstein,* the monster says to his creator, Victor, that "I ought to be thy Adam"

(ch. 10), in the sense that "the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground"

(Genesis 2:7), which, in Hebrew, juxtaposes "adam" (man) and "adamah" (earth, dust,

ground). In *Frankenstein,* when Victor collects the body parts he needs for his

experiments, he is not at first troubled by the gruesome business. He goes to charnel

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houses and slaughterhouses, robs gravesites, then keeps dissected body parts in his

"workshop of filthy creation" (ch. 4). In his hubris he boasts about the fact that he is

never swayed from completing his experiments, despite their grim nature. Yet he is

finally caught off guard and traumatized when the creation is given the breath of life,

and a "grin wrinkle[s] his cheeks." The creature tries to talk, and stretches out a hand

towards Victor, who flees, "fearing each sound as if it were to account the approach of

the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life" (ch. 5). Finally, the bridge

between the obviously dead material, the dust (adamah), and real human life (adam) is

made horrifyingly clear. In the instant of the creature's birth, the seemingly rigid

boundary between the two is collapsed as this corpse, this lifeless pile of meat and

stitched together body parts, opens its eyes, expresses subjectivity, and reaches towards

Victor, looking for human companionship and love. Victor "had gazed on him while

unfinished; he was ugly then, but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable

of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived" (ch. 5). The

horror is not just the existence of disgusting material and body parts—Victor can deal

with *that*, and has been doing so for months. The real horror comes when the *dust comes

alive*, and Victor must face not only what Ann Williams calls "the creature's loathsome

materiality" (178), but also his own materiality, and the fact that he too is dust, and is

based on the same elemental matter as his creature.[17] As the creature himself says, his

"form is a filthy type of [Victor's], more horrid even from the very resemblance" (ch.

15). It's not ugliness or strangeness that horrifies Victor, but the uncanny familiarity.

It is to this sense of our own materiality, and the mortality of our material bodies,

that *Our Mutual Friend* repeatedly draws our attention: Lady Tippins' use of cosmetic

powders to hide her aging body; Silas Wegg's wooden leg; Jenny Wren's disability; Mr.

Venus' taxidermy business. In the illustration of Mr. Venus and Wegg in Mr. Venus'

shop, Marcus Stone shows a human skeleton in the lower left corner, as a kind of

memento mori.

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[17] Williams sees this horrifying materiality as "abject in Kristeva's sense, and Victor abjects him" (178). Kristeva writes, "refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. […] There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border" (3). Victor, though, *isn't* shown this by the corpses and body parts he digs up; instead, the needs the point brought home by the corpse actually coming alive.
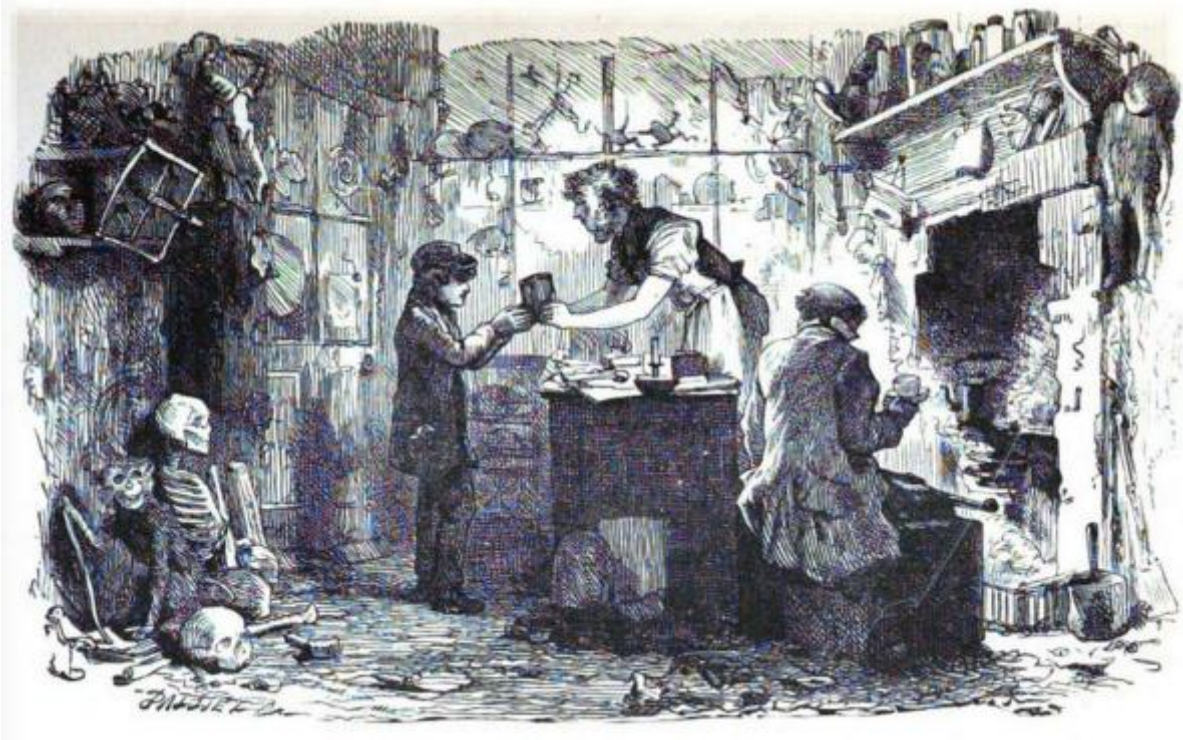
Figure 3. "Mr. Venus Surrounded by the Trophies of His Art" by Marcus Stone.

Mr. Venus tells Wegg that his "stock of human warious is large," and in his shop are "the Miscellanies of several human specimens" (bk. 3, ch. 7). Mr. Venus's business, his livelihood and his "art," is turning corpses, both human and animal, into products for sale. Inside Mr. Venus' shop, the world of death and the world of commerce are joined, and this is carried further to the body of Wegg himself.

The narrator describes Mr. Venus five times via his "dusty hair."[18] Ostensibly, this is because his hair is a dusty red colour, but it is as though some of the dust of his

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[18] Twice in chapter 7 of book 1, then once in book 2, chapter 7, and then twice in book 3, in chapters 6 and 14.

shop (perhaps the bone dust) has got into it. The metonymic signifier here serves as an index of his character, his occupation, and his relationship with death. Just as a man's doorknocker may share a visual sympathy with the man's face in *Sketches*, so may Venus's hair take on attributes related to his occupation, and his hair may share a visual sympathy with the various elements of his trade.[19]

Inside Venus' shop, we also encounter (again!) the problem of what pronoun to use when referring to a body or body part. Referring to his old leg, Wegg asks Venus, "Am I still at home?'" and Venus replies "You're somewhere in the back shop across the yard, sir" (bk. 1, ch. 7).[20] At this point, Wegg using the pronoun "I," and Venus the pronoun "you," to refer to Wegg's old leg is a morbid form of metonymy. In what sense can "Wegg" be said to be currently in the back shop, across the yard? Precisely where is the subject or being we call "Wegg"? (Similarly, if his old leg is still part of "Wegg," then is Wegg's current wooden leg also a part of the being we call "Wegg"?) Carey points out, "In a sense the wooden-legged men [in Dickens] are at an intermediate stage of turning into wood, and with Silas Wegg the process has gone further. He is described

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[19] The sympathy between Wegg's "dusty" hair and the dustiness of his shop is almost a semiotic or metonymic pun. On the one hand it is an icon (his shop is literally filled with dust and things related to dust and death, so his hair "looks" dusty because sometimes red hair has that appearance); on the other, it hints at an indexical relation—perhaps the hair is dusty because some dust actually got into it. This is the kind of metonymy that John Reed considers so unique to Dickens. Although metonymy is ostensibly the figure of realism, this instance of it draws attention to itself, to its status *as* figure. It is a play of language and the possibilities of figuration.

[20] John Carey also points this out. Carey writes, "The problem of what pronoun to use when referring to his separated member is a delicate one for Wegg, and he settles on the first person" (93).

as 'knotty' and 'close-grained', altogether so wooden that he seems to have grown his wooden leg naturally" (102). Where does Wegg end and the external world begin? "Wegg" is over here and he is over there, at the same time. The boundary is not so thin and rigid as it at first appears.

The centrality of dust in the novel can be understood in terms of another passage in *Genesis*: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return" (3:19).[21] The dust is the eventual fate of our bodies. The passage highlights the interrelation between work, toil, and the material nature of our bodies, and our need for food and the basic necessities of life to maintain our bodies. It also draws attention to the inevitability of death, the moment when our body ceases to be a person and a subject, and it is reduced to sheer elemental matter, a flabby lump of mortality that resolves back into dust. In the introduction to the Oxford edition of the novel, Michael Cotsell writes, "Dust heaps and the river represent the elements into which we finally descend [...] That all men come to dust was a classical as well as biblical idea" (xx). Cotsell writes that, "the physical world, the world of things, is more present in [*Our Mutual Friend*] than in any of Dickens's other novels" (xiv). I would agree that the

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[21] I quote the King James version, which refers to the "sweat of thy *face*," because this is the version Dickens would most likely have had read. However, the New International Version refers to the "sweat of your brow." Recall that Rogue Riderhood claims, "I am a man as gets my living [...] by the sweat of my brow."

external environment and the world of things are especially present in the novel, but more than this, the figure of dust serves to blur the boundary between the human subject and the external environment. The unsettling interconnectedness Morton speaks of is emphasized time and again as the novel draws attention to the connections between ourselves and our environment. As the novel unfolds, more and more bodies actually do descend into dust or descend into the river, and again and again characters and the reader are confronted with the question of just how much of a difference there is between an IT and a HIM (or, more disturbingly, between an IT and themselves). This is a topic Dickens had explored before in his novels, his letters and non-fiction articles, but in *Our Mutual Friend*, the dust brings it to the absolute foreground.

Tyson Stolte points out that materialist accounts of the mind, and mind-body duality, were an important concern of Dickens in his letters and in various articles in *Household Words*, and that it is also a central concern in *Bleak House.* Stolte writes, "The novel is constantly reminding us in subtler terms of what will happen to our bodies when we die. It calls the dust that comes in at Tulkinghorn's windows 'the universal article into which his papers and himself, and all his clients, and all things of earth, animate and inanimate, are resolving'" (412). Dickens obviously returns to this theme in *Our Mutual Friend*. At one point the narrator mentions the "dust into which they were all resolving," with the pronoun "they" referring to all the objects in Boffin's Bower (183). Like people, objects too must return to some form of dust. Everything does.

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Indeed, in some cases—as with Wegg's leg, or the pensioner with *two* wooden legs who makes an appearance in order to witness Bella and John's marriage—the boundary between "person" and "object" or between an IT and a HIM has already blurred. Nothing escapes this fate. The dust is all encompassing. We are made out of elemental matter.

Characters in the novel with the means to do so try to forget about the reality of dust and elemental matter. They try to ignore the underlying materiality that is the basis of wealth and of their very existence. The Veneerings prey on this willful ignorance, for there is no material basis for their supposed wealth. As Miller notes, "The Veneering dinner parties are an elaborate theatrical ceremony resting on nothing" (71). The Veneerings are a veneer applied over a void. There is no material foundation to them. There's no *stuff* underlying the veneer. This is true even of their social relations. Veneering uses a man at Twemlow's club to meet Twemlow, and then to meet various other people at another party, and then immediately invites Twemlow over to meet those same people. Veneering is a thin "veneer" applied over an "abyss to which [Mr. Twemlow can] find no bottom" (bk. 1, ch 2). Money, and especially Shares, is used more generally in this way. As Miller writes, "money is detached both from its material basis and from its human origin." Money and Shares take on a "power of infinite self-replication," and they have the "inexhaustible power to duplicate themselves and make everything of nothing." Of course, this really only offers an "infinity of nothingness"

(70). The appearance of money, the performance of wealth and social status—these all

serve to paper over an abyss, because the characters in question refuse to wake from

their collective hallucination and face the reality of matter and the material basis for

their lives.

In contrast to the Veneerings, the biggest fortune in the novel, and the one that the

main characters end up inheriting, is literally based on mounds of elemental matter—

dust. There is nothing *but* solidity behind this fortune! As we are told in that first

Society dinner, old Harmon's mounds are made up of "Coal-dust, vegetable-dust, bone-

dust, crockery dust, rough dust and sifted dust,—all manner of Dust" (bk I, ch. 2). The

dust mounds are the source of old Harmon's money, then of Boffin's fortune, and

finally of John Harmon's inheritance. Earlier critics may see the dust as a metaphor for

the vacuity of money, yet when it is read metonymically, its meaning shifts: the dust is

the source of the protagonist's inheritance, and the only one that is not based on Shares,

speculation, or nothing. The idea that wealth is detached from material, elemental

matter is an illusion; a society cannot get by on "Shares" alone, yet characters forget this

again and again. Silas Wegg hates his "dusty corner," and thinks he can escape it by

acquiring money. Wegg repeatedly looks for some secret to wealth inside Boffin's dust

mounds, as though the dust and elemental matter were just a cover for something more.

But the basis for Boffin's money and wealth is the dust, so that in attempting to escape

his dusty corner, Wegg spends most of the novel digging through dust, and in

attempting to acquire wealth, he misses it when it is right in front of him. He thinks there is some secret above and beyond the elemental matter. There isn't.

Dust and Interconnectedness

Dust is the figural bridge between money, people, and the material environment. By the end of the novel, the dust can be read as an index of these things because it has actual, real connections to each of them. At the beginning of the novel, Gaffer asks whether a dead man has any use for money, and comes to the conclusion that no, corpses belong to one world and money and commerce to another. But as the novel unfolds, the dust figure, and its connection to the theme of materiality, collapses the distance between these worlds, and shows that the world of the dead and the world of commerce are physically and intimately connected and intertwined.

Moreover, the interconnectedness signified by the dust is troubling precisely because of its metonymic and indexical weight. The connections it signifies are physical, real, and environmental. They're literal and visceral. Dust *really is* what you are made of. You are not just "like" dust in such and such a way. Instead, you must come face to face with the idea that *one day that will be you*. Your body will decay and turn back into elemental matter. This aspect of the dust's significance in the novel is not metaphorical; it does not indicate a conceptual similarity. It is a metonym signifying something that will really happen—to *you*. The relationship does not exist only in our heads. As a

metonym, the dust is figuring something that is ontologically true about our bodies.

The interconnectedness goes deep, and in this case, it is dark, horrifying, and oddly fascinating. Recall the onlookers who crowd around Rogue Riderhood, who have a "deep interest" in the lack of life in his seemingly lifeless corpse "probably because it *is* life, and they are living and must die" (bk. 3, ch. 3). This is the fascination of Mr. Venus' taxidermy business—you, too, will eventually be a corpse, a pile of bones, a collection of "human warious." Maybe someone will buy your leg, or perhaps it will end up in a dust heap somewhere. Or you might end up as part of the "bone dust" that partly constitutes old Harmon's dust mounds. Your own waste matter might end up in the Thames, and find its way back to your drinking water and eventually back into your own stomach, or the stomach of people whom you have never met.[22] The "remains" of both people and objects find their way back into the economy and, on a deep level, back into Victorian day-to-day life, and back into the lives of other organisms, separate from you.

So, to return briefly to one of the ongoing debates about the dust: is there

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[22] In 1827 John Wright, editor of Hansard, circulated a long pamphlet which showed, essentially, that "the Grand Junction Water Works Company was drawing water from the Thames, pumping it out by steam engine — and that the company's pipe lay within yards of the outfall of a major sewer. […] The company's water was neither allowed to settle in a reservoir […] nor filtered, before being distributed to about seven thousand customers, many of them in the fashionable, aristocratic West End" (Jackson 51). Similarly, Anthony Wohl's epigraph for his chapter on river pollution includes a quotation from an 1867 report by the Royal Commission on the pollution of rivers: "…the growth of manufactures, the accumulation of wealth, and the increase of population . . . are intimately connected with the abuse and pollution of rivers" (qtd. in Wohl 233).

excrement in the dust heaps? Maybe. Almost certainly, at some point, some night soil

found its way in there, and from an historical standpoint it is possible to debate

endlessly just how much. From the stand point of literary analysis, when looking at the

significance of the "dust" (as word, as sign, as referent) what is more important here is

that you do not know, and cannot know, for sure what is in there. It is a heap. It

contains odd objects and familiar ones. It is strange, yet familiar. It contains familiar

objects in unfamiliar contexts. It contains familiar objects made unfamiliar by the

natural processes of organic decay. The dust heaps might contain bone dust, vegetable

dust, the corpse of a cat,[23] or maybe a leg (a real one or a wooden one; who knows?) or a

perfectly good household object that you can turn around and sell. And if what you

find is not an easily discernible object, because it actually *is* some kind of dust or

pulverized powder, such as ashes or cinders, you can sell it to brick makers to be used

in the construction of new buildings; historically, this was actually the greatest source of

profit for dustmen (Johnson 11). The ever-expanding capital was literally being built

with elements of its own dust. The dust heaps can metonymically figure myriad aspects

of the city not just because the heaps contain waste *from* the city, and that is the end of

it, but also because the dust then *continues* to participate in the economy and in

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[23] Dead cats seem to show up rather frequently. *The Times* noted that backstreets in London might contain "cinders, bones, oyster-shells, broken bottles and rag, flavoured by a sprinkling of decaying vegetable matter, or a remnant of putrefying fish, or a dead and decomposing kitten" (qtd. in Jackson 3).

Victorian day-to-day life. One of the key aspects of Morton's mesh is the second axiom

of his interdependence theorem, which "states that things derive from other things. […]

Axiom 2 talks about origins (diachrony)" ("Thinking" 266). The dust in *Our Mutual*

Friend registers this diachronic reality, and the disturbing, strange nature of it. The dust

signifies the eventual fate of our bodies after we die, but part of what makes this so

strange is that this is not the end of their existence.[24] Even after our death, our bodies

have the potential to continue to participate in a complex yet urban ecology.

The urban world in Dickens is not a realm cut off from nature or the natural, but

one where the disturbing aspects of the natural become intensified and are made

strange. Writing specifically about the Ancient Mariner's encounters with "the

proximity of the strange stranger, who emerges from, and is, and constitutes, the

environment," Morton claims that for Coleridge, "'supernatural' meant super natural

[…] extra Nature, more nature than you bargained for" (*Ecological* 45). If anything, what

one finds in the Dickensian city is this kind of super nature. It is not less nature, but

extra Nature, and more of it than you bargained for. It is Nature as "monstrous and

mutating, strangely strange all the way down," to use Morton's phrase (61). The

boundary between life and non-life is strange and oddly fascinating, and this is what

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[24] Indeed, to further complicate a too-simple metaphoric equation between dust and death, in a story in *Household Words* which Frank Gibbon identifies as a source for *Our Mutual Friend*, dust is apparently commonly used to *revive* dead cats, kittens, and men. It is a "fact well known to those who work in the vicinity of these great Dust-heaps" that all you need to do is bury them a few inches below the surface of the ashes, and let the ashes be warmed by the sun (Horne 383).

the novel's dust metonym plays on. The biological, the organic, the "natural"—these

things are not excluded from the world of the urban; they become intensified by it. In

this urban world, we are confronted by disturbing questions of our own materiality,

and by the increasingly blurred boundary between self and environment, and between

self and the cycles of interdependence that constitute any ecology. Morton writes that at

the dead center of Coleridge's poem is the "sheer 'thereness'" of, first, the albatross, but

also the Mariner, and the "thousand thousand slimy things" which "Lived on; and so

did [he]" (46). This is, likewise, what the dust is in *Our Mutual Friend*. It is there

precisely in its *sheer thereness*; it is elemental matter *as such*, already stranger than you at

first supposed. It refuses to be easily swept from the earth by Mr. Podsnap's favourite

right-arm flourish, and it refuses to be reduced to "only" a symbol or metaphor; it is full

of significance precisely in its raw thereness. It signifies as an index of ourselves and of

our bodies.[25] It signifies (and confronts us with) the sheer thereness of

interconnectedness, of an external environment composed of other beings and elements

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[25] This idea of "thereness" is inherent to what indices are, and how they signify. Indices are elements of what Charles Sanders Peirce calls Secondness. Indices in their pure form deal in actuality, in the thereness of the world as such. A pure index draws attention not to a specific thing, but to the existence as such of another being—it doesn't tell you what that other being is, just that it is *there*. The closest thing to an index, in a grammatical sentence, says Peirce, would be an imperative, or an exclamatory, such as, "See there!" or "Look out!" (II 291). Peirce writes, "Actuality is something brute. There is no reason in it. I instance putting your shoulder against a door and trying to force it open against an unseen, silent, and unknown resistance. […] I call that Secondness" (I 24). He says, "In the idea of reality, Secondness is predominant; for the real is that which insists upon forcing its way to recognition as something other than the mind's creation" (I 325). Secondness and indices signify the sheer, raw thereness of being, and the existence of other beings. Just as metonymy is a fundamentally ecological trope, so too are indices fundamentally ecological signs. They signify the sheer existence and thereness of an environment.

with whom and with which we are intimately—disturbingly—connected.

Chapter Three.

A "Power of Picturesque Suggestiveness": Gissing on Realism and Charles Dickens

In chapter one I argued that in his novel, *Bleak House,* Dickens uses metonymy to suggest a vast, dense mesh of interdependence and interconnection in the Victorian urban world. His excessive use of the figure does not reveal an inner core of character; instead, the constant metonymic deferral, as sign after sign indicates contiguity after contiguity, reveals that nothing is fully itself, but is instead always-already bound up in myriad connections with other beings and with other elements of the interconnected urban world. In chapter two I argued that the dust figure in *Our Mutual Friend* reveals the more unsettling, horrifying aspects of this interconnectedness: dust is woven into the fabric of urban life on an extremely deep level. The dust and the dust heaps are not just metaphors for society's wealth; they are metonymically linked to that wealth, as well as to the more general economic and bioeconomic processes of the Victorian urban world, such as the development of new Victorian buildings (whose bricks use ash and cinders made from dust), and to the organic and inorganic waste products of society (some of which are recycled, so that they find their way back into the aforementioned economic processes). The dust is even linked to the fate of our own bodies. These elements of Victorian urban life do not just borrow certain conceptual qualities of dust;

these things are really, actually linked to dust on a deep level. Metonymy and the indexical connections emphasized by the novel provide a more concrete and more visceral understanding than does metaphor, because these connections are not abstract, but based on the physical, material world.

In looking at both of these novels, I am arguing that metonymy is being used to confer some sort of new knowledge or cognitive change. The figure is being used to tell the reader something new about the interconnected and interdependent nature of the urban world, allowing them to see the world in a new light, and to bring new associations to bear on commonly-held concepts related to the city. Dickens shows the reader a new way of seeing this world, a new way of understanding the myriad and complex interconnections that constitute Victorian London. This world was already there, but it lay waiting to be discovered, to be seen for what it always was. As in a good detective story, the clues were there, right in front of the reader, but it took the final explanation of the detective to show how they can be understood as linked together.

To accomplish this work of detection and disclosure, Dickens must be selective in which metonymic details to emphasize, and which ones to omit, as well as how and when they appear in the narrative. He must be careful how he frames a given metonymic detail, and he must be careful how it fits into the larger networks of connections. Dickens is not the only realist author to use metonymy, so what makes the

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Dickensian world (what Humphrey House would come to call the "Dickens World") he

reveals so unique? Is the singularity of this version of the urban world based on *which*

metonymic details Dickens stresses, or *how* he uses metonymy, or some combination

thereof?

In this chapter I address these questions by shifting towards George Gissing, and

more specifically, to some of his extensive works of criticism on Dickens, with some

reference to his other works of criticism on realism more generally, his letters, his

journal and his commonplace book. This shift to Gissing's criticism offers several

benefits. First, it allows us to understand and address the above questions about

Dickens's style from a very different perspective. That is, Gissing does not use the

vocabulary of cognitive linguistics or semiotics, but despite this, he picks up on

Dickens's use of suggestive external details, details which, to Gissing, indicate larger,

more complex wholes, and which create a unique way of seeing the urban world. In this

way, he makes arguments similar to my own in his view of Dickens's realism and what

it accomplishes. He even refers to the London of *Bleak House* as a city "webbed and

meshed" (I 174).[26] We are not in total agreement, however. Indeed, the second

advantage he provides is a kind of *refutatio* to my second chapter, because Gissing

believes Dickens consciously omits certain metonymic details, and therefore refuses to

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[26] Unless otherwise noted, all references to Gissing's criticism of Dickens use the three-volume Grayswood Press edition of the *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*, edited by Pierre Coustillas.

leave his readers with the kind of visceral impression that the subjects of his fiction should leave them with. For Gissing, Dickens presents unpleasant subjects, but doesn't confer upon his readers the true impression of that unpleasantness. In Dickens's novels, Gissing argues, we might approach something akin to the harshness of life, but Dickens cannot go all the way, and something very important to Gissing is left out. Finally, this detour through Gissing's criticism of Dickens will provide useful context and insight into Gissing's *own* style, and his own use of metonymy in figuring an increasingly interconnected Victorian urban world, which I will address directly in my fourth chapter.

Gissing's version of realism was always defined against Dickens's. Jerome Meckier argues that Victorian realism, as it came to be known, was defined by a group of Victorian novelists including Elizabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, and Wilkie Collins, who each defined themselves against Dickens and claimed to have created "the more credible historical document" (2). Meckier calls this the "realism wars," and he sees "Victorian fiction as a series of revaluative responses and replies" (2). Gissing wrote his novels in the 1880s and after, so he is slightly outside the scope of Meckier's focus on the 1850s and 1860s, yet Gissing was extremely engaged with the still ongoing discussions about realism, and along with his direct critical writings on Dickens, Gissing's letters, his diary and his commonplace book are all filled with allusions and evaluations of his predecessor's version of it. According to Pierre

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Coustillas, "While admiring Dickens's works, [Gissing] was anxious, right from the outset of his career, to define clearly the differences between his own books and those of his illustrious predecessor" (3). Gissing's writings on Dickens, says Aaron Matz, "are as much concerned with Gissing as they are with Dickens. Indeed it often appears that Gissing's motive in studying the earlier novelist is to formulate theories about his own writing" (235). Matz argues Gissing "wrestled with the idea of realism throughout the entire second half of his career" (214).

During the first half of his career, Gissing mostly wrestled with making enough money to make ends meet. After winning a number of distinctions and prizes at Owens College in Manchester, Gissing was dismissed when it was discovered he was responsible for the thefts of books, money, and coats in the common rooms and locker rooms at the college. Gissing had met and fallen in love with a young working-class woman named Marianne Helen Harrison, and was stealing in order to help her. After leaving Owens College, Gissing spent a month's hard labour in Manchester, and then spent several years in America, where he began trying to earn his living as a tutor and as a writer, producing short stories for newspapers for paltry sums. These stories "paid very little" but they were enough to "ke[ep] the author from actually starving for a few weeks." At one point around this time Gissing "lived on peanuts bought by the handful from a street vendor" (Korg 18-9). Gissing returned to England in 1877. He married Harrison in 1878, and published his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, in 1880. Over the

next two decades he produced twenty-three novels and dozens of short stories; but his fiction was not particularly successful, especially in purely financial terms, though it, combined with his critical work, did allow for a modest living.[27]

It was during the final few years of Gissing's career that he was professionally writing extensive criticism of Dickens. He began re-reading Dickens's novels in 1897, in preparation for the completion of *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898). The study was a success, and "where seventeen novels of modern life had not quite won the day […] his critical study earned him straightaway the reputation of a Dickens specialist" (Coustillas 20). G.K. Chesterton's own work, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, published just a few years later in 1906, cites Gissing as "the soundest of the Dickens critics, a man of genius" (5). The financial and critical success of Gissing's critical study resulted in a further proposal from the publishers Methuen and Co. for Gissing to produce introductions for the new Rochester edition of Dickens's novels. In 1902, Gissing also produced an abridged version of Forster's *Life of Dickens*, just a year before he passed away in 1903. The Rochester introductions were later collected together into *The Immortal Dickens* (1925). Along with the introduction, the work contains an additional essay, "Dickens in Memory," in which Gissing reminisces about his first experiences of

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[27] In the largely autobiographical, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), Ryecroft writes of his current modest living: "There was a time in my life when, if I had suddenly been set in the position I now enjoy, conscience would have lain in ambush for me. What! An income sufficient to support three or four working-class families—a house all to myself—things beautiful wherever I turn—and absolutely nothing to do for it all! I should have been hard put to it to defend myself. In those days I was feelingly reminded, hour by hour, with what a struggle the obscure multitudes manage to keep alive" (9-10).

Dickens, when Gissing was himself just a young boy. The essay actually begins

metonymically, with a description of "a thin book in a green-paper cover" sitting on a

table in a "familiar room"; this thin book in a green-paper cover, it turns out, is a

number from *Our Mutual Friend*, but Gissing at the time is too young to read.

Nonetheless, he flips through the pages, and he "knew it had been received with

smiling welcome," and that "with it was associated a name which from the very

beginning of things I had heard spoken respectfully, admiringly" (I 47). Indeed,

Gissing's critical work, as well as his letters, journals and commonplace book show he

read and re-read Dickens's novels throughout his life.

John Goode, in speaking about Gissing's critical work emphasizes "just how

central Dickens is to Gissing" (19). Goode focuses especially on a few lines from

"Dickens in Memory" in which Gissing compares the "empty chair" he sees in a

woodcut image of Dickens's home office to the empty chair left by his father, who died

six months after the famous author. Goode notes the sense of historical distance Gissing

felt between himself and Dickens, which created a "double sense of centrality and

distance" in terms of Dickens's relationship to Gissing (21). That is, Dickens might be

Gissing's "major point of reference" (15), but Gissing is also aware of the historical

distance that separates them, and, more than this, he is aware of the mediating effects of

history and of the artist's material conditions; this in turn influences Gissing's

understanding of realism. "Realism," for Gissing, is not a way to offer a transparent

window to what's really there, nor is it an attempt to produce—to borrow Meckier's phrasing—the "more credible historical document." Gissing understands that realism is ultimately a literary style, just like any other. Goode writes that in order to understand Gissing, one must "recognize that 'realism' is not something that 'transcends' the ideological function of the text but is the very product of it. And more than this, Gissing knows this" (31). I would like to build on this to show how for Gissing, successful forms of realism are not about transcending one's ideological or subjective position, but about acknowledging the limited nature of our subjective view of the world and moving forward from there. This is reflected both in his critical work on Dickens, and in his own style. Different subjects will see and interpret the urban world around them differently, and this affects how an author may deploy a given metonymic detail.

Michael Cronin, in looking at Gissing's criticism of Dickens, likewise notes that Gissing's perspective "is consistently historical," and that for Gissing "the literature of a given period necessarily reflects the conditions which produced it or allowed for its production" (25). Gissing wants to distance himself from "the romantic and idealistic realism which he views as typical of Dickens," but this produces a certain irony, given that Gissing is himself often attracted to humanist idealism, yet unable to embrace it fully. Cronin mentions John Sloan, who had previously identified the same problem in Gissing's fiction; that is, one finds in it a "disturbing indeterminacy in its simultaneous appeal to, and subversion of, humanist idealism" (150).

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The kind of idealism Gissing identifies in Dickens, but which he cannot embrace in his own fiction, is related to Dickens's relationship with his reading public, according to Gissing. Gissing understands the material conditions of Dickens the author, and this includes the relationship between Dickens and the people who bought his books. And this explains why, for Gissing, in Dickens's novels good must be rewarded, and evil punished; good ends happily, the bad, unhappily. In Simon James' summary, "The characters' display of the values shared by narrator and implied reader is rewarded with a legacy, a reunited family, or both" (11). The difference in Gissing's realism, says James, is that "Gissing's model of *Bildung* always contains a structural gap between potential and fulfilment" (13). Characters might seem to embody some of the values of the implied reader, but the typical Dickensian solutions just never seem to work out very well for them. Their philanthropic projects fail, that promised legacy is snatched away by ill luck at the last minute, or an ill-timed disaster or fit of sickness ruins all. The sort of narrative closure you would find at the end of a Dickens novel is subverted and happy endings are denied. James writes, "Gissing is committed to a more 'sincere' form of representation, in which the totality of social forces excluded by the Dickensian ending might be negatively incorporated or represented" (13). This hints towards Fredric Jameson's account of *The Nether World,* whose plot, Jameson says, functions as a critique of earlier "Dickensian 'solutions'" to narrative problems (173).

Jacob Korg shows that Gissing was probably influenced by George Henry Lewes'

Principles of Success in Literature, in which "truth" in fiction is equated not necessarily with verisimilitude, but with sincerity (*Critical* 265). Korg also writes that Gissing set out "to achieve the most exact and literal realism" (*Critical* 100). However, as I hope to show, Gissing's realism is not necessarily about slavishly precise or accurate representations of objective life, but a rendering of the artist's own subjective view of the world. In an 1895 essay titled, "The Place of Realism in Fiction," Gissing writes that "every novelist beholds a world of his own, and the supreme endeavour of his art must be to body forth that world as it exists for him" (219). Goode sums up Gissing's views on this: "it is not a question of being true or false, but of teaching a way of looking which exposes the previously unknown. It insists on relativity" (33). For Gissing, Dickens has this ability to "expose the previously unknown" not because he is writing about a subject no one has tackled before, but because of how Dickens sees the world; his realism exposes a new way of seeing what was already there, though this way of seeing is absolutely relative to Dickens's subjective point of view.

For example, Gissing describes the London of Dickens's *Bleak House* as "a marvellous rendering of the impression received by any imaginative person who in low spirits has had occasion to wander about London's streets" (I 179). Gissing emphasizes, first, the *impression* received, and, secondly, that it is one received not just by anyone, but by *a specific person*—not just "Dickens," but the imaginative person in low spirits. Realism is not objective; it is subjective. Gissing writes, "a demand for objectivity in

fiction is worse than meaningless, for apart from the personality of the workman no

literary art can exist" ("The Place" 219). For Gissing, it is Dickens's unique and powerful

imagination, his personality, and his sincerity that allow him to reveal the unique world

as he, Dickens, has always seen it.

In "Dickens in Memory" Gissing says that as a child he saw London through

Dickens's eyes (I 50). However, the experience was not unique to Gissing; indeed, in an

earlier introduction to *Oliver Twist*, Gissing writes that Dickens "taught people a certain

way of regarding the huge city, and to this day how common it is to see London with

Dickens's eyes" (I 93). Dickens has a unique way of seeing the world, and he is a

successful artist because he makes us see the world just as he does. We are impressed

with the same thoughts, the same emotions. We learn to see what he has always seen. In

this, Gissing partly anticipates Umberto Eco's work on semiotics. In his 1979 *Theory of

Semiotics*, Eco views the creation of radically new semiotic coordinates for seeing the

world as an "aesthetic activity." As an example of this, Eco gives "the Impressionists

whose addressees absolutely refused to 'recognize' the subjects represented, and said

that they 'did not understand', that the painting 'did not mean anything', that real life

was not like that, etc." (254). Eco here is giving a semiotic explanation of Oscar Wilde's

assertion in "The Decay of Lying" that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates

Life." In that playful Socratic dialogue, Vivian rhetorically asks Cyril, "Where, if not

from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping

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down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows?" (41). What is "real" is defined retroactively, after it has been rendered visible (or intelligible) by the act of aesthetic creation.

For Gissing, the best realist writers, and especially Dickens, accomplished the same thing as the Impressionists. They "bodied forth" the world as they saw it, and created new semiotic coordinates which allowed us to see and understand the world anew. Gissing writes,

> To this day, [the streets of London] would bear for me something of that old association but four and twenty years ago, when I had no London memories of my own, they were simply the scenes of Dickens's novels, with all remoter history enriching their effect on the great writer's page. The very atmosphere declared him; if I gasped in a fog, was it not Mr. Guppy's 'London particular'? […] In time I came to see London with my own eyes, but how much better when I saw it with those of Dickens! (I 50)

Indeed, for Gissing, it was Dickens's unique urban vision which helped him to see those wonderful brown fogs—that "London particular," in Mr. Guppy's metonymic phrasing. Recall Gissing's description above of Dickens's London as "a marvellous rendering of the impression received by any imaginative person who in low spirits has had occasion to wander about London's streets." The focus is on the creation of new ways of seeing, ways which do justice to the viewer's personality, or even to his or her mood. Someone

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in low spirits will see the city differently than someone in high spirits. Subjectivity

matters for Gissing; it mediates access to the world, and which details one does or does

not notice, or how one interprets those details.

What the first two chapters of this thesis have examined in detail is *how* Dickens

showed us this new way of seeing the urban world—that is, with metonymy. For

obvious reasons, Gissing does not employ the vocabulary I do, but for him, the answer

to this "how" lies in Dickens's careful use of external suggestive metonymic detail. In

writing about the *Sketches*, Gissing writes, "the details selected are always just the right

ones, the essential, the effective" (I 71). In the *Sketches*, he says, this power was not fully

developed, but in Dickens's later books, this more developed "power of picturesque

suggestiveness […] enabled Dickens to create a London previously unknown, and to

make it part of the mind of his readers"; Gissing later calls this "Dickens's descriptive

magic" (I 69). That is, a single precise detail suggests a much larger whole. In his

investigation into Dickens's "method," describing different uses of metonymy and

synecdoche, Gissing writes:

> Let us turn to his literary method. It is that of all the great novelists. To set
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> before his reader the image so vivid in his own mind, he simply describes
>
> and reports. We have, in general, a very precise and complete picture of
>
> externals—the face, the gesture, the habit. In this Dickens excels; he
>
> proves to us by sheer force of visible detail how distinct was the mental

shape from which he drew. (II 81-2)

The externals tend to point to a larger, more complex world, and to yet more externals. The details are suggestive; they indicate, or point to other details and to larger wholes. Gissing refers to Dickens's "power of picturesque suggestiveness" (I 69). Elsewhere he describes Dickens's "power of suggesting a country atmosphere […] He hardly ever mentions a tree or a flower by its name […] yet we see and feel the open-air surroundings." This is all due to Dickens's "infinite power of suggestion in seemingly unconsidered words" (II 151). In this ways, small details can suggest larger wholes without relying wholly on convention or cliché. That is, in order for a detail to suggest what the author means it to suggest, a certain amount of pre-existing knowledge is required on the part of the reader. However, at the same time, Gissing shows that a degree of originality is possible; an author, by identifying "seemingly unconsidered words" can make the reader understand that, oh, yes, this detail *does* suggest a specific sort of scene, a specific kind of character, a specific upbringing. It is a careful balancing act between what knowledge the reader brings to the text, and how the author can play with that knowledge to suggest something new, or reveal something that was already there.

Dickens's "infinite power of suggestion" allows him to take a small or single external detail, and suggest or indicate the larger whole of which it is a part. In the case of Mr. Vholes, for example, character is "exhibited so briefly yet so completely, with

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such rightness in every touch, [and] such impressiveness of total effect" (II 84-5). In the case of Jarndyce, "we are told nothing of his intellectual acquirements, it is plain that he had a liberal education, and that his tastes are studied" (II 86). The journey by Esther and Bucket is only possible because Dickens "saw the gleam of the lamps, the faces they illumined but for a moment […] Such writing is no mere question of selecting and collocating words; there must first be vision" (II 151). A simple detail can point to, indicate or suggest a larger, more complex structure, so that simple fiction can do representational justice to a complex, increasingly connected world—but Dickens must first have some vision of those connections, before he can select and collocate the details which will efficiently render them to the minds of his readers.

Though Gissing says the details selected are always "just the right ones," this is not to say he is claiming Dickens is in any way frugal with the use of external details— just the opposite. There is a profusion of external details; they are just well-chosen. (This will be important later, when we get to Gissing's own, more reserved use of detail.) For example, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Gissing claims the external descriptions are "if possible, more vivid than ever as regards external feature, and adding thereto a richer suggestiveness of things within" (I 144). Sometimes a simple external feature can indicate a complex interiority;[28] sometimes a typical (yet individual) character can

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[28] Gissing might be said here to disagree with Benjamin Bishop's assessment of Dickens quoted in my first chapter. Bishop argues that Dickens's "dense contiguity of referents" prevents him from reaching an inner core (809).

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signify a whole class of similar characters, each utterly individual yet also members of the type.

In a discussion of two of *Martin Chuzzlewit'*s less savoury characters, Mr. Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp, Gissing calls their speech "perfectly indicative of character […] Each speaker is at once an individual and a type; manifestly akin, yet so various of feature, they reveal the multitude behind them, the obscure swarming of a vast city" (I 138). Here external voice indicates inner character, and the whole character in turn indicates a larger class of similar (yet unique) characters, each holding their own place within a vast, swarming city. Mr. Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp are unique and individual, yet they are also each representatives of their type; they stand synecdochically for myriad other characters who would each, themselves, be unique and individual, yet still (again) be of the same respective type. In this way, Dickens "suggests, as few writers are able to do, the complexity of modern life" (I 138). Dickens includes specific parts, and in so doing he suggests their place within a larger tapestry: "Seeing *them*, he saw the house in which they lived, the table at which they ate, and all the little habits of their day-to-day life" (II 89).

Gissing is emphasizing the metonymic nature of realism. He says that an author must "into a page […] concentrate what in nature is boundless; his business is not to report life *in extenso*, but to convey to another mind some impression which it has made upon is own" (I 139). This is what Dickens does so well. To quote John Muir again:

"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it is hitched to everything else in the universe." The difficulty for the realist writer is in picking out just the right element, and *letting* it be hitched—perhaps not to everything else in the universe—but to certain larger, more complex structures than could be concentrated into the pages of a single narrative.

One of the problems for a novelist such as Dickens, according to Gissing, is that, in any given description or portrayal, he "can give only one aspect of a thing" (I 139-40). Choosing the right or most accurate aspect is the difficulty. Which detail will most properly or truthfully signify the larger whole? Dickens gives us a marvellous rendering of the impression received by anyone who *in low spirits* wandered London's streets, and this one is (at least for Gissing) the one most appropriate to the subject. But why *that* one?

Interestingly, when comparing descriptions of London, Gissing prefers the opening of *Little Dorrit* to that of *Bleak House*. The opening of *Bleak House* "makes one rather cheerful than otherwise," while the opening of *Little Dorrit*

> is very curious reading. For once we have Dickens quite divested of his humour, and beholding the city in something like a splenetic mood. As conveying an impression, the passage could not be better; it makes us feel precisely what one has felt times innumerable amid the black lifeless houses, under a sky that crushes the spirit. (II 153)

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Gissing simply appears to prefer it when Dickens is willing to divest himself of his humour. Gissing does not dislike *Bleak House* as a whole; indeed, he calls it Dickens's "greatest book" (II 84). But that marvelous rendering of the impression received by anyone in low spirits is not conveyed by that opening. The proper impression of this "murky, swarming, rotting London" only emerges as the narrative unfolds, and the myriad aspects and elements of the city are linked to real human suffering, to Chancery, as well as to other aspects of urban life. In Gissing's summary of the novel, "In *Bleak House* London is seen as a mere dependence of the Court of Chancery, a great gloomy city, webbed and meshed, as it were, by the spinnings of a huge poisonous spider sitting in the region of Chancery Lane" (I 174). This impression does not come through in the opening by itself, but the relentless presence of suffering, of the general atmosphere, and so on, "from the fog at the opening of the story to Lady Dedlock's miserable death at the end" (I 179) does properly render it. Metonymy and suggestive detail work hand in hand with the unfolding of the plot. There is a difference between thousands of nameless foot passengers jostling in mire, and actually meeting one of these nameless individuals (e.g. "Nemo"), empathizing with them, witnessing their suffering, and getting a glimpse of their connection to Chancery, to other characters, and understanding their place in this great gloomy webbed and meshed city.

Gissing admires Dickens's accomplishment in rendering visible this murky, swarming, rotten, "webbed and meshed" version of London, but Gissing objects to his

unwillingness to include certain specific details that (in Gissing's reading) Dickens thought would upset his audience. There is an aspect of urban life that Dickens will not convey. Goode notes a moment in Gissing's *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* in which Gissing quotes a passage from John Forster's *Life of Dickens*. In the passage, Dickens writes to Forster wondering what he should do with Walter Gay, a character in *Dombey and Son*, and whether he ought to "show him gradually and naturally trailing away from that love of adventure and boyish light-heartedness, into negligence, idleness, dissipation, dishonesty, and ruin" (qtd. in Gissing II 69). Goode does not discuss the fact that Gissing's next point (which he returns to later on) is about *Bleak House*'s Richard Carstone, "in whom the tragic idea was, with modification, carried through" (88).[29] For Gissing, Dickens still does not go far enough with Richard, for Richard is a "passive victim of fate," and we are not "allowed to see more of his human weakness" (88). In Gissing's analysis, Dickens's version of realism depends upon an ideological identification with the audience, and making people angry would violate Dickens's principles about the role of art. It would be too much a shock, too combative, relative to their subjective view of the world. This results in key omissions. Gissing writes that in Dickens's "avoidance of the disagreeable […] There results, necessarily a rather serious omission from his picture of life" (II 70). In his commonplace book, Gissing privately wrote, "The details which would to me be most precious, he [Dickens] left aside as

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[29] As Gissing notes, Forster himself first pointed out the similarity between Walter and Richard.

unsuitable, because unattractive to the multitude of novel-readers" (33). Gissing delves

into this topic in more detail in his discussion of Mrs. Gamp. Here Dickens again leaves

details out, because he refuses to engage with the truly disagreeable. Gissing asks

> Is not the fact in itself very remarkable, that by dint (it seems) of *omitting*
>
> those very features which in life most strongly impress us, an artist in
>
> fiction can produce something which we applaud as an inimitable
>
> portrait? That for disgust he can give us delight, and leave us glorying in
>
> his very verisimilitude? (II 78; emphasis in original)

Mrs. Gamp is often intoxicated; her work preparing corpses for funerals is not very

sanitary, given her principal occupation as a nurse and midwife; she has little

consideration for her employers and often tries to eat at their expense so that she can

afford more liquor; at one point, she looks at a sick man whom she is supposed to nurse

and imagines he would make a lovely corpse. "In plain words, then," writes Gissing,

"we are speaking of a very loathsome creature; a sluttish, drunken, avaricious,

dishonest woman. Meeting her in the flesh, we should shrink disgusted. […] Yet, when

we encounter her in the pages of Dickens, we cannot have too much of Mrs. Gamp's

company" (II 78). In this case, Gissing specifies exactly what is included, and what is

not: "Vulgarity he leaves; that is of the essence of the matter; vulgarity unsurpassable is

the note of Mrs. Gamp. Vileness, on the other hand, becomes grotesquerie, wonderfully

converted into a subject of laughter" (II 79). This allows us to take delight in Mrs. Gamp,

even though the effect of meeting such a person outside of a Dickens novel would be far

from delightful. With Mrs. Gamp, Dickens has pulled the same trick as he will later pull

with the opening of *Bleak House*: he has presented an unpleasant, disgusting subject,

given us precisely the opposite impression one would expect from this subject (delight

in the case of Mrs. Gamp, cheerfulness in the case of the opening of *Bleak House*), and at

the end of the day he has left us "glorying in his verisimilitude."

I argued in chapter two in my discussion of *Our Mutual Friend* that Dickens

presents the weird, unsettling aspects of our connection to dust, and also that

metonymy provides a more concrete, visceral connection than does metaphor, since

metonymy depends upon real-world relations (what Peirce would call Secondness),

while metaphor can be totally conceptual. Gissing would argue that Dickens does not

go far enough. Certain details are missing, and thus something of the true *impression* of

this horror is held back. Metonymy is not used to its full potential. If we came to fully

appreciate the fact that the buildings and economy of Victorian urban life was built

upon waste, filth, dust, and all sorts of organic matter, we should feel real disgust.

Instead, we enjoy and even delight in those aspects of the book. When we put the book

down, there is a sense of loss, as though we would enjoy spending more time in

Dickens's version of world (i.e. the so-called "Dickens World"). Given the subject

matter, this delight is not a realistic impression, and "the outcome of it is called

Idealism" (II 68). Gissing explains, "Avoidance of the disagreeable, as a topic

uncongenial to art – this is Dickens's principle. There results, necessarily, a rather serious omission from his picture of life" (II 70). It is an idealized version of a disgusting world. Mrs. Gamp is just one such example of Dickens's "delicate idealism" (II 79). The characters, events and elements of the urban world that Dickens depicts should not leave the impression upon the reader that they do.

Gissing compares the experience of a Dickens novel to the experience of the art of William Hogarth. Hogarth, he says, "smiles, it is true, but how grimly!" (II 34). Elsewhere, Gissing notes the contrast in "the impressions they severally leave upon us" (I 94). Gissing suggests "look[ing] at the several figures of women which present a fair correspondence with that of Mrs. Gamp" (II 78). When we look at the figures in a volume of Hogarth, we admire the artist's observation and skill, but "we close the book with a feeling of relief" (II 78-9). The impression upon the reader (or viewer) is very different. The most well-known print by Hogarth featuring a figure akin to Mrs. Gamp is likely the intoxicated woman in a St. Giles slum letting a toddler fall to its death in "Gin Lane." Gissing does not mention which figures in Hogarth he is referring to when he says Mrs. Gamp corresponds to several of them.[30] I will use the woman in "Gin Lane" as an example (see. fig. 4).

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[30] Another possibility is the woman singing "The Ladies' Fall" while holding a child in the lower-left corner of Hogarth's, "The Enraged Musician" (Appendix 1). The effect of this print is certainly one to make one turn away with a feeling of relief, but that is hardly on account of the supposed Gamp-figure; it's due to the effect of the unpleasant noises one can imagine: the aforementioned woman singing, a parrot squawking, a dog barking, a dustman ringing a bell, children urinating and banging drums, and so on and so forth.

Figure 4. "Gin Lane" by William Hogarth.

In "Gin Lane," aside from the main subject's obvious though surface-level similarity to

Mrs. Gamp (she is supposed to take care of a child, but neglects it because she is drunk),

the painting shares other similarities to the world of Dickens, but it produces a very

different effect. Near the foreground, a man and a dog fight over the same bone. In the

background, a naked woman is being lowered into the coffin, in front of a large pile of

dust, while a naked infant cries next to the coffin. There is a brawl. In the upper right corner, a man has evidently hanged himself. A baby is impaled upon a spike by a dancing mad man; the only person in the image who seems to have noticed this is a single woman (presumably the baby's mother) who chases the mad man and screams in desperation. Although there are individual comic elements (the man and dog fighting over a bone, for example) the overall impression is rather less pleasant than what one finds in Dickens, and one finally turns away from the image with a feeling of relief. As Gissing puts it, Hogarth's "basely grinning and leering women must not hang upon the wall […] Hogarth has copied – in the strict sense of the word. He gives us life – and we cannot bear it" (II 79).

We would never need to turn away with a feeling of relief from the world of Dickens, because he "obscures the unpleasing, emphasizes all we are glad to remember" (II 81); the details that are included avoid the truly unpleasant, and chosen so that they portray their subject in a comic light. For example, at the "same moment" as Mrs. Gamp enters a doorway, "a peculiar fragrance [is] borne upon the breeze, as if a passing fairy had hiccoughed, and had previously been to a wine-vaults" (ch. 25). This is an example of a metonymic detail. The fragrance indicates Mrs. Gamp's breath, and by extension Mrs. Gamp herself and her love of liquor. But this detail is metaphorically framed so that the final effect is comic.

Gissing, in his fiction, wants to include the very details Dickens has omitted – the

ones which are true to life, and which to Gissing would be "most precious." More than

this, Gissing wants to make a certain impression upon his readers, one determined by

his realist project and his subject matter. As mentioned, James and Jameson have each

pointed out some of the ways in which Gissing's plots introduce a gap between a

classically Dickensian solution and its potential for fulfillment. This gap problematizes

realism as a genre. Jameson writes that Gissing ironizes the "ideologemes" and

"narrative paradigms" he has inherited from writers like Dickens (173); James agrees,

and writes that the result is an "awkward negotiation between desire, realism and

ideology" (17). I agree with this line of argument; that is how a Gissing plot usually

unfolds. It makes his endings distinctive, if not entirely pleasant. However, in the rest of

this chapter and in the next, I want to focus not just on the plot, but on the interplay

between plot and Gissing's descriptive techniques and his use of metonymic details.

Examining these elements of his fiction will help to illustrate how Gissing attempted to

define himself against his more popular predecessor, as well as show the different ways

metonymy may be used to figure ecological connection and interdependence.

As stated, Gissing's objection with Dickens's rendering of the urban world is its

omission of certain unpleasant details. However, when it comes to his own use of detail,

Gissing's method is not simply to attempt to include all the details Dickens would have,

plus a few more Dickens chose to omit. Instead, Gissing prefers the subtle and the

indirect. In an 1883 letter to his brother, Gissing writes that "the secret of art in fiction is

the *indirect*" (*George Gissing On Fiction* 27). In another letter, he says

> Thackeray and Dickens wrote at enormous length, and with profusion of
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> detail […] Far more artistic, I think, is the later method of merely
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> suggesting […] The old novelist is omniscient; I think it is better to tell a
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> story precisely as one does in real life, hinting, surmising, telling in detail
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> what *can* be told and no more. (*Letters* 166).

Gissing's own method avoids this profusion of detail, and his narrators do not act

entirely omnisciently. In his descriptions, he often uses a kind of apophatic metonymy;

he notes details and suggests chains of associations in one moment, and in the next he

claims to have no need to mention such details. He offers details only to claim that

offering such details is totally needless, since we all know they are *there*, or that these

details are so omnipresent that they go unseen by the very characters through which the

passage is otherwise focalized.[31] In the next chapter I will show how this is done in

order to render an appropriate impression upon the reader — the kind of unpleasant

impression he feels Dickens was unwilling to offer, given Dickens's idealism and his

relationship with his reading public.

Several of Gissing's letters elaborate on what he was attempting to do in his

fiction, and how he was defining himself against Dickens. In a letter to his brother,

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[31] Compare this to the passage in *Sketches by Boz* I quoted in my introduction. Boz says, "We needn't tell
you all this, however, for if you have an atom of observation, one glance" will tell you exactly what Boz
then proceeds to tell you anyway (*Sketches* ch. 18).

Algernon, Gissing writes,

> Certainly I have struck out a path for myself in fiction, for one cannot of
> course compare my method & aims with those of Dickens. I mean to bring
> home to people the ghastly condition (material, mental & moral,) of our
> poor classes, to show the hideous injustice of our whole system of society
> […] I shall never write a book which does not keep all these things in
> view. (3 Nov 1880, *Letters* 307)

Gissing says one cannot compare his method and aims to those of Dickens, before

implicitly comparing himself to Dickens, since a comparison includes both similarity

and dissimilarity, and everything Gissing means to do, such as "bring[ing] home to

people the ghastly condition […] of our poor classes" and "never writ[ing] a book

which does not keep all these things in view" – is implicitly what he is claiming Dickens

does not do; or, at least, not to the extent to which Gissing is aiming.

One more letter provides insight into why and how he represents such ghastly

conditions, and how he does so in such a way as to keep all these unpleasant things

always in view. In another letter to Algernon, Gissing writes, "to depict utter brutality

as something quite to be expected under certain conditions is, you will admit, the most

forcible way of condemning those conditions" (7 Sep 1884, *George Gissing On Fiction* 35).

This is how and why he uses an apophatic form of metonymy, emphasizing what we

would seemingly not need to be emphasized, or indicating the precise details that

characters *do not* notice. The utter brutality is such a given, so utterly to be expected

given the circumstances, that he need not constantly remark upon it — well, except to

jump in now and again to remark upon how he need not constantly remark upon it. He

does this only to remind the reader that it was always there, and was always in view,

and will continue to remain in view, even if he has not remarked upon it each and every

time because, after all, at this point it is really needless; one can assume that it is always

there.

Once the fact of these conditions, as well as their effects, are established, other

details can indirectly (suggestively, metonymically) reference those ghastly, filthy

conditions. If these conditions are always to be expected given the circumstances, then

the mention of the circumstances alone should, by the end of a Gissing novel,

metonymically point back to those ghastly conditions. If you notice these circumstances,

you must surely expect these conditions, these characters, this form of filth, this kind of

suffering, and so on. Gissing presents utter brutality, the ghastly condition of the poor

classes and the hideous injustices of society using a form of metonymy which assumes

that even the filthiest, most disgusting and depressing subjects are "something quite to

be expected," given the circumstances and conditions he describes.

Moreover, Gissing's form of metonymy is always subjective and relative, because

the mediating effects of history are important to him. His version of metonymy is

relative both to the implied reader, and to Gissing's characters. That is, his narrators are

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aware of the implied reader and the fact that they may not be truly familiar—at least at first—with the filthy details of London slums. This affects how he can use metonymic details. For example, there is a difference between saying to one person, who is already familiar with a topic, "I don't even need to mention X, do I?" and saying to someone else, who might be less familiar with that same topic, "I don't even need to mention this aspect of X, or *this* aspect of X, or *this other* aspect of X, or…" and so on and so forth. The narrator is always aware that his readers may not be familiar with slum life, and this affects the details he uses.

Beyond this, the subjectivity of the characters themselves also affects how metonymic details may be deployed, or even what a detail may signify, since any given detail might be interpreted in any number of ways, and the subject doing the interpreting will affect this. This means Gissing's descriptions and his use of metonymic detail are sometimes determined by focalization. As he says, the old novelist may be omniscient, but Gissing's narrator does not always act completely omnisciently. That is, sometimes he will only notice those details which individual characters do. At other times, though, the narrator will act omnisciently, and subtly draw attention to those unpleasant details individual characters have learned to ignore. What a lifelong London slum dweller will notice is not necessarily what the (middle-class, "respectable") implied reader might notice. The working classes are so used to filth and degradation that they do not even see such things any longer, and that is part of the horror. The filth

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and degradation is so unutterably *omnipresent* that for the most part those in the midst

of it have learned to unsee it, or are so caught within it that they cannot conceive of any

other ways of life. And, more than this, the progress of the plot will change and affect

what details individual characters will or can notice, so that, just as we saw with Esther

in *Bleak House*, a character at the beginning of a novel will interpret the signs of the city

differently than they do at the end. That is the subject of my next chapter, in my

discussion of Gissing's *The Nether World.*

Chapter Four.

Mediated Access to Metonymy in *The Nether World*

In the first two chapters of this dissertation, I focused on interconnection and

interdependence in the novels of Charles Dickens. The third chapter served as a pivot

point, and I turned to George Gissing's nonfiction critical work on Dickens. I showed

that Gissing defends Dickens's realism on the basis that realism as such was never

about an attempt to present an objective reporting of historical facts; rather, Gissing

argues for a subjective, even impressionistic realism that does not privilege

documentary information, but privileges instead a rendering of the world that is

genuine to the subject's necessarily mediated access to that world. One of the ways

Dickens's accomplishes this, for Gissing, is through the use of suggestive metonymic

details. Gissing calls this Dickens's "infinite power of suggestion in seemingly

unconsidered words" (II 151). With characters, external details offer a "suggestiveness

of things within" (I 144), and more generally, Dickens, through his descriptions,

"suggests, as few writers are able to do, the complexity of modern life" (I 138). By

focusing on seemingly insignificant details, Dickens can suggest or indicate the larger

whole of which individual details each constitute just one small part, and thus "into a

page […] concentrate what in nature is boundless" (I 139). A detail is never about the

detail per se, but about its place within, and connection to, the larger whole, and to

what I am calling the mesh – the very deep, very material levels of interconnection

between living and nonliving beings. Moreover, by deploying these details in the

service of a narrative, an author such as Dickens may frame that larger whole in new

and different ways, and create new knowledge.

For Gissing, Dickens's "power of picturesque suggestiveness […] enabled

Dickens to create a London previously unknown" (I 69). As readers, we learn to see the

world just as Dickens saw it; we see the streets and byways of London exactly as he

did.[32] Again, this is not the most objective, most precise version of London, but one that

is faithful to the mind and subjective viewpoint of the author. However, in Gissing's

account, Dickens stops short with his descriptions, and leaves something out. For

Gissing, Dickens consciously does not include those unpleasant details he felt would

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[32] This formulation of the how representation functions dances around one of the underlying research problems in this dissertation. That is, to what degree are such metonymic details reliant on what Hugh Bredin calls those "relations that are habitually and conventionally known and accepted" (57)? As Elaine Freedgood writes, "Metonymy is ham-fisted: it tells us what we already know" (12). If Dickens suggests something about a character or place with an "unconsidered word" – that is, with the addition of a metonymic detail of the type Gissing so admires – there is already a kind of dance or interplay between the knowledge the reader brings to the novel and the new knowledge that is created when Dickens forces the reader to consider this detail or word in this heretofore unconsidered manner. Reading such a detail, our thought process might be something like this: "*Oh yes, I see that now. Such-and-such a detail* does *rather suggest [whatever it may be]. I hadn't thought of it that way before.*" An action such as this requires some pre-existing knowledge on the reader's part, but though the relationship between a detail and what it suggests is *presupposed* – another term Bredin uses to describe metonymy (57) – I don't think it always accurate to say the relationship is necessarily habitual or conventional. (And even this is looking at metonymy on the micro scale, rather than the macro, before one gets into the larger role of narrative, and the deployment and *re*-deployment of details throughout a narrative, in various new contexts and situations.)

upset his readers. The result is that the version of the world Dickens presents is always

"idealized" (II 69). And, in order to always present this idealized version of the world,

Dickens ends up omitting the very details which to Gissing are the "most precious"

(*Commonplace* 33).

In this chapter, I want to turn to Gissing's own use of metonymy and his use of

metonymic details in his fiction, and how this relates to his own version of realism. I

will focus on his 1889 novel, *The Nether World*, as it is a novel that is fundamentally

structured by an environment, the titular "nether world." I will show that in the novel

subjective experience mediates access to those same metonymic details, especially those

less pleasant ones Gissing believes Dickens consciously omitted because they did not fit

with Dickens's "delicate idealism" (II 79). Moreover, in the novel, Gissing explores not

just his *own* mediated access to the world, but also the ways in which access is mediated

differently for each person, including the reader, the narrator, and individual

characters. The impression offered by a detail, and what that detail even signifies in the

first place, will change, depending on the subjective viewpoint of the person viewing

it.[33] In the novel, there is a careful balancing of, and negotiation between, these various

subjectivities. For example, a nether world character, who is used to slum life, and

whose education and life experience have been profoundly influenced and affected by

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[33] How these elements of the narrative add up to and create an implied author, and how that implied author relates to the actual historical author, George Gissing, would be its own study and chapter. I note this only because I do want to avoid suggesting a conflation between these things.

that environment, will read, interpret and relate to the signs of that environment far differently than will the implied middle-class reader. Of course, this extends past one's vision and to that character's behavior, their habits, and how they relate to the various elements of the world around them.[34] This means that although characters interpret the environment, that interpretation has already been influenced and affected by that self-same environment. Characters try to interpret the environment and understand its effects, and some of them even try to understand the distant economic, political and material forces that are implicated by these things—but again, these interpretations have already been influenced by that which the character is, at that moment, interpreting. We try to understand the mesh, only to discover we were always-already enmeshed within it, and our ability to understand it, or come to grips with our place within it, relate to it, and so on, is (and has been) determined *by* our place within it.

Let me relate the argument here to the rest of this dissertation. In my first chapter, on Dickens's use of metonymy in *Bleak House*, I argued that Dickens is able to change the cultural associations we have with the concept *Chancery*, and reveal a dense mesh of interconnection and interdependence in the Victorian urban world. I used

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[34] I am describing an aspect of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the habitus. John B. Thompson writes, "The habitus is a set of *dispositions* which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. […] Dispositions are acquired through a gradual process of *inculcation* in which early childhood experiences are particularly important" (12; emphasis in original). Gissing, however, might disagree with the degree to which the habitus "'orients' [individuals'] actions and inclinations without strictly determining them" (13). The only thing I would add here is that my argument takes it as given that the concept of the habitus extends very naturally beyond the realm of the social, the political and the economic, to the material, the ecological, and so on. This is probably less true of many of Bourdieu's other concepts.

Ronald Langacker's discussion of how the co-activation of units can adjust the degree of "centrality" between an object and its association. For example, if you have the concept, [A], then the repeated co-activation of [A]-[B], then [B]- [C], then [C]-[D] can serve to create more complex chains of associations, such that in these chains "the status of a unit, and all of its substructures then figure directly in the meaning of an expression with access node [A]" (166). I argued that Dickens doesn't trace a clear, linear and simple chain from [A] to [B] to [C] to [D], but suggests instead a dense mesh of contiguities connecting them, so that [A] all the way to [D], or [Chancery] all the way to [filth], or all the way to various instances of suffering Esther witnesses, *are* connected through a complex chain of contiguous links, but clearly tracing out or delineating those links is nearly impossible; the dense mesh of connections is not so easy to interpret and trace, but these connections are there, and they figure more directly in the meaning of [Chancery] .

I argue in this chapter that Gissing accomplishes something similar, but with a twist: the repeated co-activation of the nether world environment with the effects produced *by* that nether world environment adjusts the degree of centrality between the environment and its effects, so that [the nether world], like Chancery, becomes more concretely associated with the horrific and specific effects it produces, and with the filthy elements it contains. However, more than this, Gissing also explores the way in which individual subjects interpret these chains in slightly different ways, as well as the

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ways in which the chain itself — that is, the environment — affects and determines a

subject's ability to read and interpret it. In other words, Gissing explores the ways in

which access to that mesh or chain is mediated by the subject's place within it. For

example, the middle-class implied reader sees [a slum] and is horrified; they

understand it is probably a container for [filth], [rottenness], and [evil odours], and that

these things are, in some vague way, connected to the misery of the poor and to their

day-to-day lives. They might also dimly perceive that there are larger economic forces

at work in the production of such urban slums, and that even their own comfortable

middle-class lives are in some very distant way connected to these slums. Obviously,

however, such a reader has not been affected by that environment in the same way as a

character who has lived their entire life in that very slum. That person would relate and

interpret their slum environment very differently. For example, the young and

benighted Pennyloaf Candy has been brought up in just such a slum, and in the novel

she runs through various filthy environment with indifference, ignoring filthy smells

and distant screams because she is used to these things, and more often than not just

has other things occupying her mind, such as earning a penny to put a loaf of bread on

the table. This is a real and "material" need (in several sense of the word) that tends to

affect one's priorities when it comes to selective attention and interpretation. It is also a

need that is partly a product of Pennyloaf's immediate environment, upbringing, and

social position, or, her "world," in other words. The narrator, meanwhile, has to

negotiate this balance between what the reader is likely to notice, or how the reader will interpret a given environment, and what a focalized character does or does not notice, and how they interpret the environment.

In this chapter, then, I want to discuss the ways in which Gissing explores this complex relationship between subject and environment, and between the subject and his or her interpretation of that environment. I will also show the way in which the nether world environment does not just *affect* characters, but determines character, and characters' lives. Various forces at work in the environment, dimly-perceived and understood by some of the characters, nonetheless affect them, and prevent them from overcoming their limitations, from achieving any kind of social mobility, and from positively influencing the world around them. This is an important way in which Gissing's use of metonymy and his understanding of the mesh differs from that of Dickens's. Whereas Dickens very often reads the environment as an indicator of character because of that character's effect upon his or her environment, Gissing reads this relationship in reverse, by looking at characters and reading the effects of the environment upon them.

For example, in Dickens's *Bleak House*, Mrs. Jellyby's household is the way it is because it indicates Mrs. Jellyby's character and her total neglect of her family. The chaotic, dirty, and messy household indicates Mrs. Jellyby's character for the simple reason that her character is the principal cause of the household's chaos, dirt, and

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messiness. The link is indexical, and the relationship between cause and effect is clear.

Mrs. Jellyby is the causal agent, so she bears responsibility. Mrs. Jellyby's daughter,

Caddy, is brought up in this messy environment, and it affects her to some degree, but

she is not totally determined by it, even if the environment does leave traces of itself

upon her: the mess and profusion of letter-writing in the household often puts Caddy in

an "inky condition" and "a state of ink" (ch. 5). However, due largely to Esther's

positive influence, Caddy escapes this environment, as well as her inky condition.

Caddy marries, has a child, and becomes a dancing teacher; she runs a very different

sort of household than did her mother, one that is instead modeled after Esther's.

Caddy will not have an easy life, and the "dark veins" and "dark marks" that, very late

in the novel, Esther notices in Caddy's new baby are "like faint remembrances of poor

Caddy's inky days" (ch. 50). The environment affects character, but it is only in a very

faint way. The inky sign is watered down. By using that word, "like," Esther

emphasizes that the indexical link is not really there; those dark veins are not

themselves true indices pointing back to Caddy's inky days; instead, they're just *like* a

remembrance of those days.[35] Ultimately, then, Caddy escapes, chooses a different path,

and she does not have the same fate as her mother. Partly this is her own agency,

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[35] The marks have a *quality* which makes them like a remembrance. In this sense they are, in Peirce's terms, a qualisign, an element of firstness and iconicity, almost – but not quite – making the transition from firstness to secondness, from iconicity to indexicality. Perhaps, then, it is a *Rheme*. Peirce writes, "A *Rheme* is a Sign which, for its Interpretant, is a Sign of qualitative Possibility, that is, is understood as representing such and such a kind of possible Object" (2.250).

though partly it is Esther's positive influence and help. Esther has also been a causative

agent, so that she has influenced the environment, and her positive influence has

radiated outwards.

By contrast, in the closed world of Gissing's novel, focused entirely on London

slums, the environment is far more relentless in its determination of characters and

those characters' potential for effecting change, either in themselves, others, or the

world around them. There are no Caddy Jellybys who escape this environment, partly

because, with the novel's sole focus being its nether world environment, there are no

Esther Summersons. As Stephen Gill notes, the novel presents "a closed world from

which there is no escape" (xiii). Raymond Williams points out that Gissing may have

called the London of *Bleak House* a "great gloomy city, webbed and meshed," but such a

description is "more accurately" descriptive of Gissing's version of the metropolis

(235).[36] Characters are caught and ensnared within the mesh of forces and circumstances

within which they live, and they are unable to rise above these things. Michael

Snowdon has a grand vision of turning his granddaughter Jane into a kind of

philanthropic angel for the poor who could exert the same type of positive influence as

Esther does, but, as I will show, because Jane is *of* that self-same environment Michael

wants Jane to influence – and this is actually a key aspect of his plan – Jane's ability to

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[36] Compare this to G.K. Chesterton, who notes that Gissing opens his critical study of Dickens by noting that Dickens grew up in a hard and cruel world, but then Chesterton adds, "To me this old English world seems infinitely less hard and cruel than the world described in Gissing's own novels" (5).

effect change and let her influence radiate outwards has already been determined and influenced by the very environment she herself is supposed to influence. Michael's solution was doomed from the outset. Moving beyond descriptions, then, even the plot of the novel itself is determined by the novel's environment-focused structure.

Michael Snowdon's proposed solution to urban suffering is Dickensian in multiple ways, but Gissing's novel repudiates it. As Gill says, the novel "continually invokes Dickens only to subvert the Dickensian" (xix). Gill compares the novel's inheritance plot to that of *Great Expectations*, but whereas Magwitch wants to make Pip a gentleman, Michael specifically wants to *avoid* turning Jane into a lady (xxi). Fredric Jameson similarly notes that Gissing has inherited several narrative paradigms from Dickens, but in Gissing's novels, earlier "Dickensian 'solutions' turn out to produce fresh problems and contradictions in their turn" (173). Jameson also notes that the contrast between the striving and ambitious Clara Hewett and "the modest and Dickensian Jane" is just one of several "ideologemes" or narrative paradigms Gissing inherited from his predecessor. For Jameson, a novel like *The Nether World* should be read less for its historical information about Victorian slum life, and more for its "testimony about the narrative paradigms that organize middle-class fantasies about those slums and about 'solutions' that might resolve, manage, or repress the evident class anxieties aroused by the existence of an industrial working class and an urban lumpenproletariat" (173). Jameson also points out instances of Gissing's anti-democratic

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and extremely cynical snobbery.[37] *Demos*, for example, in which a working-class

character is given control of a factory (and botches it), "set[s] out systematically to show

how irredeemable a working-class character is" (185); *Thyrza* spends most of its

narrative demonstrating just how unsuitable its titular working-class heroine is to

marry above her station (185-6); and in *The Nether World*, the plot and failure of

Michael's scheme ends up offering a similar "message to the lower classes: Stay in your

place!" (176). Jameson's focus isn't Jane or her inability to step into Esther's shoes;

rather, he is focused on those alienated, over-educated male protagonists that populate

almost all of Gissing's novels: Sidney Kirkwood in *The Nether World*, Richard Mutimer

in *Demos*, Gilbert Grail in *Thyrza*, or Edwin Reardon and Jaspar Milvain in *New Grub

Street*. Although Jane is not his focus (Jameson thinks Gissing's paradigmatic alienated

characters are those intellectuals who are, like Gissing, male writers in need of money),

Jane is also a character who becomes alienated and isolated because of an education at

odds with her class position. She is not a typical Gissing over-educated male

protagonist, but, because of Michael's grand vision, she does receive some degree of

education above and beyond her initial station in life; this has consequences for her

ability to read the environment, or even to read the traces of the environment's effects

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[37] Jameson does not quote the letter, but Gissing wrote to his brother, Algernon: "Without wishing to be harsh to these people, you must recognize how utterly impossible close relations with them become. […] I fear they put me down for a prig, an upstart, an abominable aristocrat, but *que voulez-vous?*" (21 Dec 1880, qtd. in Korg *Critical* 90). In his commonplace book, he writes, "*Prig.* A word used by the vulgar to stigmatize a man who thinks" (41).

upon herself. The same is also true (in a slightly different way) of Clara Hewett, whose vibrant imagination and ambition to rise above her station in life lets her read the environment differently than other nether world characters, such as the far less imaginative Pennyloaf, who never imagines any kind of alternative to her present circumstances, so that she can ignore or unsee the details that so negatively affect the nerves of the more imaginative and ambitious Clara.

Like Jameson, Simon James picks up on the way Gissing refuses traditional Dickensian solutions, and James also picks up on the role of education and imagination in alienating and frustrating working-class characters. James asserts that in Gissing's understanding of conventional narrative plots, and "especially" in his understanding of the plots of Dickens, the "characters' display of the values shared by narrator and implied reader is rewarded with a legacy, a reunited family, or both" (11). So, for example, in *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* respectively, "Pip and David are brought to the class to which their moral nature best suits them" (12). But for Gissing, the plot cannot simply reward its characters in this way. In Gissing's "model of *buildung*," there is always "a structural gap between potential and fulfilment, the former suggested by the discourse and in the characters' own aspirations, the latter denied by the plot" (13). Gissing, says James, wants to include the "totality of social forces excluded by the Dickensian ending," and give a "true representation of the nature of 'circumstances'" (13). I agree with James here, though I want to stress the ways in which

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Gissing explores how any one character's understanding of those "social forces" is mediated. Some characters, such as Pennyloaf, are too focused on immediate material concerns to care; others, such as Clara, are dimly aware of these forces and can read various elements of the city as indexical signs of those forces. This difference is again at least partially determined by the characters' upbringing and the experiences they have had in the nether world. Some characters have been given access to educations, circumstances or experiences which change how they view the world.

Echoing Jameson, James writes that the classic Gissing protagonists "possess through freak of upbringing — a scholarship, or a culturally minded parent-figure […] — a developed imagination that is materially at odds with the *economic* status given them by that upbringing" (12). The paradigmatic examples of such alienated characters, for James, as we saw with Jameson, come from the over-educated male writers in *New Grub Street*. Both Jaspar Milvain and Edwin Reardon, as writers, possess minds and educations that are at odds with their economic status. They are both aware of the forces at work affecting the literary marketplace, and they are also both fully aware of the consequences of their actions. But while Jaspar is able to adapt to the tastes of the reading public, Edwin is not, even though he knows full well what those tastes are, and how his own work is incongruent with them. James points out that like Gissing, these characters are self-aware and introspective, and they are aware that their social conditions and their circumstances have affected their desires, their values, and their

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view of the urban world and the forces at work in their lives. My reading of *The Nether World* builds on James' observation and focuses on the degree to which characters such as this can understand or see the effects of their environment upon themselves. They even dimly perceive the forces and sets of relationships that, in this dissertation, I have been calling the mesh. This is true of those traditional Gissing male characters like Sidney Kirkwood, whose "sad clearness of vision affected his judgment of the world around him" (ch. 6), but it is also true of female characters like Jane and Clara. Both of them, each in her own way, possess an education or imagination slightly at odds with her circumstances. Finally, the *in*ability of some characters to read the environment, or to engage in any kind of introspection or self-awareness, is likewise highlighted by Gissing through those characters who haven't had any kind of extra education, or who haven't been gifted with an unusually developed imagination. I will focus here on Clem Peckover and Pennyloaf Candy as examples of this, because both of them are (at least for Gissing) more traditional products of their nether world environment.

Jacob Korg's critical biography of Gissing emphasizes the way the author often wrestled with the "radical doctrine of environment and the conservative one of heredity." Korg says, "Throughout his novels Gissing lays great stress upon the effects of both heredity and environment" (*Critical* 88). I claim that a reading of *The Nether World* focused on Gissing's use of metonymy and metonymic details, and the metonymic links between the nether world environment and its effects upon characters,

provides insight into this tension. For Korg, this particular novel has a "new reserve and authenticity in [Gissing's] presentation of small physical details. [...] Numerous instances of the corruption of character by environment occur" (114). Korg mentions in particular the story of Clara's brother, Bob Hewett. Bob is smart, gifted, and skilled at his craft, and yet despite these gifts, Bob is corrupted by the various circumstances of his environment, including the influence of his upbringing, his immediate and pressing material needs, the tempting, yet criminal opportunities offered by his acquaintances, Clem's constant influence upon him, and so on. Bob turns to counterfeiting money, and in Bob's story, says Korg, there is an "incisive linking of cause and effect" (114). I will return to the case of Bob, though my focus will be on the degree to which the nether world environment is inherently wrapped up in those causes, so that the linking of cause and effect is not just incisive (though it is), but, more importantly for my purposes, it is part of the larger metonymic work of the novel.

The Nether World is an ideal novel for this kind of metonymic reading because the novel is structured, first and foremost, by its emphasis on a specific environment. Michael Collie writes that Gissing was "fascinated intellectually and imaginatively with place, habitat, environment" (68). *The Nether World* delves into this theme more than any of Gissing's novels; indeed, the novel is unique in its total, absolute focus on life in London slums. It is a *closed* environment. In a letter to his sister-in-law while he was still writing it, Gissing mentioned the novel, telling her, "it deals exclusively with the lower

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classes" (15 April 1888, *Collected Letters* 201). George Scott Christian writes that "In *The Nether World,* the narrative loses contact with the upper classes entirely" (6). Gill writes that Gissing's deployment of the "nether world" metaphor is unique, because "other writers who exploit the motif of the 'nether world' or 'the abyss' lead the reader on an exploration *from* the upper world *to* the lower" (xiii). *The Nether World*, by contrast, doesn't do this; it tells its story *from* the lower world, and it is set exclusively *in* the nether world. The prison-like atmosphere, this closed world, is not just thematic, but formal and structural. The upper world is very subtly and distantly alluded to, but it is seen only from the perspective of the nether one, through the eyes of the various nether world characters: they might snub charity workers from the upper world at the local soup kitchen, or sit with upper world characters on a busy train headed towards the Crystal Palace, or see the effects of the upper world in the tearing down of their homes for new model housing units.

I want, then, to look at how various characters in the nether world view and read their nether world environment, and how this interpretation has already been affected *by* that environment. Then, I want to look at how this is wrapped up with the novel's inheritance plot and Michael's plans for Jane to become a positive influence upon the nether world around her. Finally, I'd like to tie these things together, and explore how they contribute to the novel's larger metonymic work regarding the significance of the titular "nether world," since the term, in this novel, is *not* just a metaphor.

Characters Reading the Environment

I want to look at several of the novel's characters, how they read the nether

world metonymically, and how their ability to read this world is determined *by* that

world, as it leaves its mark upon them. Because of the different subjective positions of

the various characters and the implied reader, and how differences in one's subjective

position affects one's view of the urban environment, Gissing's narrator will at times

present details to the reader while noting that characters do not see these details. The

narrator is constantly aware of who his implied reader is, and the potential differences

in education and experience between this implied middle-class reader and the

characters in the novel. As Gill notes, the narrator does not hold the reader's hand and

lead him or her "down" into the nether world "from" the upper world. However, this

of course does not mean the reader is simply thrown in to this world, with no

acknowledgment that what the reader considers normal and what characters consider

normal are obviously different,[38] and that this difference is due, in large part, to their

respective environments.

Gissing himself wrote, after walking through a slum,

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[38] Science fiction uses the strategy all the time (as do other genres where "world building" is a key formal element). Jo Walton, a Welsh-Canadian SF author, writes, "In exactly the same way as Trollope didn't explain that a hansom cab was a horse-drawn vehicle for hire on the streets of London […], and Byatt doesn't explain that the Northern Line is an underground railroad running north south through […], SF characters casually hail pedicabs and ornithopters and tip when they get out" (Walton).

I have involuntarily stood still and asked myself - what then is the

meaning of those strange words, Morality, Decency, Intelligence, which I

have somewhere heard? . . . here they mean nothing, nay, their presence

would be the intrusion of an utterly incongruous element. - And I have

undergone a strange interval of feeling, in which the absence of all that

mankind esteems good and lofty seemed to me quite normal and natural.

(qtd. in Korg *Critical* 44)

This normalization of brutality and vulgarity comes up as a theme again and again in

the novel. Characters witness instances of baseness and scheming and are so hardened

to these things that they barely notice them. Things which should instill disgust become

normalized. Here is the narrator's description of Shooter's Gardens, shortly before

Pennyloaf arrives home:

Needless to burden description with further detail; the slum was like any

other slum; filth, rottenness, evil odours, possessed these dens of

superfluous mankind and made them gruesome to the peering

imagination. The inhabitants of course felt nothing of the sort; a room in

Shooter's Gardens was the only kind of home that most of them knew or

desired. (ch. 8)

The slum in question is a single instance of a larger species of London slum, so you

know what you will find: a slum that is utterly vile and totally repulsive. The narrator

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claims adding in details beyond what he has given here is unnecessary. This is true, but

it is true partly because those details have already been suggested metonymically: what

has produced the "filth" and "rottenness"? What exact substances are giving off those

"evil odours"? The "peering imagination" which finds such dens gruesome has likely

filled in the blanks with vague possibilities of its own. The effect is actually to make the

slum seem more gruesome. Think of it like a good, suspenseful monster movie, such as

the original *Jaws*. Consider the fin of the shark as a visual form of metonymy.[39] What's

scarier, a detailed view of the shark, or the view of the fin, slicing through the water,

with the shark's monstrous size a mere suggestion, one left to the imagination of the

viewer to fill in? The full effect of the passage about Shooter's Gardens requires a

certain lack of detail, and even a lack of knowledge. Indeed, in contrast to the peering

imagination that finds Shooter's Gardens totally gruesome, the actual inhabitants of this

rotten slum – the ones who have to live in it, day in and day out, and who likely know

exactly what's producing those evil odours – feel "nothing of the sort."

Shortly after this passage, Pennyloaf, who lives in Shooter's Gardens herself,

runs "into the jaws of this black horror with the indifference of habit" because "it had

never occurred to her" that Shooter's Gardens might be considered fearful, or vile, or

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[39] Jakobson discusses the effect of metonymy in film: "Ever since the productions of D. W. Giffith, the art of the cinema, with its highly developed capacity for changing the angle, perspective and focus of 'shots', has broken with the tradition of the theater and ranged an unprecedented variety of synecdochic 'close-ups' and metonymic 'set-ups' in general" (*Fundamental* 78). In my introduction I also quote Carita Paradis, who notes that metonymy need not be contained to the purely verbal realm (67).

disgusting. In his 1883 pamphlet, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, Rev. Andrew Mearns

described exactly such a slum: "To get into them you have to penetrate courts reeking

with poisonous and malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage and refuse

scattered in all directions and often flowing beneath your feet" (7). This is what

Pennyloaf runs through with the "indifference of habit." And if, on top of all this, she is

awoken by screaming outside, she doesn't think much of it, because whatever it might

indicate, such an incident is of "too common occurrence to cause her more than a brief

curiosity; she could wait till the morning to hear who had half-killed whom. Four days

ago it was her own mother's turn to be pounded into insensibility" (ch. 8). For the

inhabitants, such places are home, such experiences mundane.[40] The "peering

imagination" that finds such dens of superfluous mankind "gruesome," and that

winces at the fact of domestic violence being so baldly stated (and as a kind of mundane

routine), is that of the narrator or implied reader. That peering imagination has not

grown accustomed to such sights, scents, or incidents, for if it had, the experience

would be very different. An "accurate" depiction of such a slum is for Gissing

necessarily subjective, but the narrator must tailor his description for what he assumes

is the subjective viewpoint of his readers, while at the same time noting what details

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[40] They have grown used to such experiences, or – a more snobbish explanation – their upbringing in such an environment, with its concomitant lack of education, has totally dulled their senses more generally. In his commonplace book, Gissing writes, "The untaught vulgar are very defective in the senses; they hear, feel, see, taste, smell, very imperfectly" (52).

individual characters notice or fail to notice.

Later in the novel, the narrator describes "volumes of dense smoke" in Shooter's Gardens, and he notes that "the air had a stifling smell and a bitter taste." And yet, still, "Pennyloaf found nothing remarkable in this phenomenon; it is hard to say what would have struck her as worthy of indignant comment in her world of little ease" (ch. 37). Again, the narrator points out these unpleasant details only to *also* point out that the only character present, Pennyloaf, doesn't notice them! Pennyloaf's experiences in the nether world, and her very real, ongoing material concerns (she is apparently named for the money she needs to put bread on the table), influence what she does and does not notice in the world around her. The environment has influenced her ability to read the environment.

In another passage about Shooter's Gardens, the narrator introduces the reader to Pennyloaf's mother. The narrator begins, again, by describing Shooter's Gardens itself: "the walls stood in a perpetual black sweat; a mouldy reek came from the open doorways." Pennyloaf's mother is one of the "beings that passed in and out" of Shooter's Gardens who "seemed soaked with grimy moisture, puffed into distortions, hung about with rotting garments" (ch. 28). Her clothing consists of "a single gown and a shawl made out of the fragments of an old counterpane," and aside from her shoes, these "articles were literally all that covered her bare body." The narrator then describes why this woman is so poorly attired; it's because, "Rage for drink was with her

reaching the final mania. Useless to bestow anything upon her; straightway it or its

value passed over the counter of the beershop in Rosoman Street" (ch. 28). It's worth

noting here that Gissing had very personal experience with this. His first wife was an

alcoholic, and the two were separated for years; Gissing had her set up in rooms

elsewhere in the city, and sent her an allowance. Very shortly after she died, Gissing

visited her rooms at 16 Lucretia Street, Lower Marsh, to see her, and to make

arrangements for her burial. (He actually stood outside and had a friend visit first,

because he "felt an uncertainty" about the veracity of the initial telegram informing him

of her death.) According to the dates in his journals, this occurred only eighteen days

before Gissing started the main draft of *The Nether World*. In his journal entry on 1

March 1887, he described the experience:

> On the door hung a poor miserable dress and a worn out ulster; under the
>
> bed was a pair of boots. Linen she had none; the very covering of the bed
>
> had gone save one sheet and one blanket. I found a number of pawn
>
> tickets, showing that she had pledged these things during last summer, -
>
> when it was warm, poor creature! All the money she received went in
>
> drink; she used to spend my weekly 15/ - the first day or two that she had
>
> it. (*London* 23)

The description of Pennyloaf's mother is eerily reminiscent of the full passage in which

Gissing describes the lodgings of his wife. Pennyloaf's mother is not supported by her

abusive husband, but by her son, and Pennyloaf's brother, Stephen. Stephen ensures there is always "a loaf of bread" in the room he and his mother share. The narrator says, "Stephen took things with much philosophy; his mother would, of course, drink herself to death—what was there astonishing in that?" (ch. 28) Again and again, characters become accustomed to the depressing circumstances one routinely finds in London slums. They grow accustomed to being "soaked with grimy moisture," to selling their clothing for drink, to being beaten or hearing the sounds of neighbours and even family members being beaten. These things are normal, even mundane. They are not worth remarking upon.

To make matters worse, it is an endless cycle: Pennyloaf is accustomed to hearing the sounds of women being beaten, including her mother. Later in the novel, it is her turn to be beaten by her husband, Bob Hewett. When this happens, Mrs. Griffin, their landlord, bursts into the room to put a stop to it. But Mrs. Griffin is not surprised with what she finds, so she can't bring herself to chide Bob with all that much anger, and this is "partly due to Mrs. Griffin's very large experience of such scenes as this. Indignant she might be, but the situation could not move her to any unwonted force of utterance." Mrs. Griffin tells Bob, "I thought it 'ud be comin' to this before long" (ch. 36). This is because Bob's descent into brutality is both common and predictable to anyone who is familiar with the nether world.

The police know to read character in this way as well. When John Hewett is beset

by restlessness after the death of his wife and the absence of his daughter, Clara, he

goes out for night walks, and "at times he would shrink into a shadowed corner," away

from the gaslights under which most pedestrians walk. The narrator tells us, "it

happened now and then that he was regarded suspiciously. A rough-looking man, with

grizzled beard, with eyes generally bloodshot, his shoulders stooping—naturally the

miserable are always suspected where law is conscious of its injustice" (ch. 24). There

are several metonymic shifts taking place here. When the narrator refers to "the law" he

indicates the men who enforce the law. When the narrator says "the miserable" he

means the actual people who are miserable. When the narrator describes the "grizzled

beard" and "eyes generally bloodshot" and "shoulders stooping" he implies these are

readily legible signs of misery. Finally, the law itself knows to read "the miserable" as

an indicator that men in such a state are often driven to do something criminal. Most

depressing of all, however, is that the law—however unjust it may be—is (in this novel)

for the most part correct in this interpretation. John Hewett may not be up to any

criminal activities during his night walks, but his son, Bob, is.

The narrator describes Bob's fall into crime as a "foregone result" (ch. 24).

Relative to his social station, Bob is unusually intelligent, and his visage is "by no

means commonplace" and it "had the peculiar vividness which indicates ability—so

impressive, because so rarely seen, in men of his level" (ch. 24). And yet still, he is

tempted into crime; it is a "foregone result." Partly, it is misery, combined with the

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responsibility of caring for a family he didn't want in the first place. The narrator

describes Bob's circumstances, and rhetorically asks what will happen to a man with

"no moral convictions" and "with no conscious relations to society save those that are

hostile," when that man is given a suggestion "that there is a very easy way of

improving his circumstances"? The answer is obvious. Bob is smarter than most men in

his circumstances, and he knows very well that men get caught all the time forging

money. Ah, but those are *normal* men; Bob considers himself "altogether an exceptional

being." Ironically, this line of thinking is entirely common, and "Every novice in

impassioned crime has that thought." This is what makes Bob's fall a "foregone result,"

and this is what Korg refers to when he describes Bob's story as an "incisive linking of

cause and effect" (114). Bob may be slightly more intelligent than average, but his story

is entirely unremarkable. It is even *inevitable*, given his circumstances. Put such-and-

such a man in such-and-such a set of circumstances, and the result is entirely to be

expected. As Gissing wrote in a letter to his brother, quoted earlier in my third chapter,

"to depict utter brutality as something quite to be expected under certain conditions is,

you will admit, the most forcible way of condemning those conditions" (7 Sep 1884,

George Gissing On Fiction 35).

The narrator also explicitly links Bob's fall into crime and brutality to the

influence of Clem Peckover. When Clem is desperate to get a share of Michael

Snowdon's money before her husband, Joseph, can flee and keep it all to himself, she

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tries to enlist Bob's aid in killing Joseph. Bob finds himself without honest employment, and, we are told, "Corruption was eating to his heart; from every interview with Clem he came away a feebler and a baser being. And upon the unresisting creature who shared his home [Pennyloaf] he had begun to expend the fury of his self-condemnation" (ch. 36). Bob's upbringing, his domestic circumstances, and the influence of his acquaintances — Clem, as well as Bob's partner-in-crime, Jack Bartley, "whose first instinct" upon being apprehended is "to betray his associate" (ch. 36) — all serve to make Bob's fall into crime and brutality something "quite to be expected" under the circumstances. Jameson compares Gissing's technique to that of a very literal "experimental novel" that results in each narrative being "something like a laboratory space, where a given set of characters can be submitted to experiments in a controlled environment" (184). This is effectively what happens with Bob Hewett. And the result, argues the unfolding of Bob's narrative is, like any good experiment, replicable.

The novel alludes to the replicability of Bob's narrative in a metonymic fashion. Mrs. Griffin has encountered Bob's story before, so she sees it (and him) as just one example of an entire class of men like him. Mrs. Griffin is unsurprised by Bob beating Pennyloaf because she has witnessed such things many times before. Moreover, the screams that Pennyloaf hears (and easily ignores without a second thought) in Shooter's Gardens likewise attest to the common nature of these things, with an additional note from the narrator that Pennyloaf's own mother had been the victim several nights ago.

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These things happen, again and again, and they emphasis that these things, in an environment such as this, are a foregone conclusion, and entirely to be expected.

In the case of Bob, we see some of the various overlapping chains of circumstances that lead him to his fall into crime. However, when it is not made clear by the events of the plot, the narrator will also very directly explicate the link between environment and the environment's effects upon character. With the cruel and brutish Clem Peckover, the narrator explains that she, too, is a product of her environment, but this is done not through the unfolding of plot (though certainly the plot gives evidence of the environment's effects upon her character), but through explicit description. Describing Clem's outer appearance, and explaining that it hides the rottenness of her inner character, as well as actual signs of ill-health, the narrator first notes Clem's beauty:

> There was no denying that Clem was handsome; at sixteen she had all her charms in apparent maturity, and they were of the coarsely magnificent order. Her forehead was low and of great width; her nose was well shapen, and had large sensual apertures; her cruel lips may be seen on certain fine antique busts; the neck that supported her heavy head was splendidly rounded. In laughing, she became a model for an artist, an embodiment of fierce life independent of morality.

At this point, the narrator makes a turn in his description:

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Her health was probably less sound than it seemed to be; one would have

compared her, not to some piece of exuberant normal vegetation, but

rather to a rank, evilly-fostered growth. The putrid soil of that nether

world yields other forms besides the obviously blighted and sapless. (ch.

1)

You can't *see* that she is rotten, but she is—and, more than this, that rottenness is

connected to the rottenness of her environment. Gissing highlights at least two sets of

indexical signs here. First, on a surface-level, Clem's outer physiognomy doesn't

indicate her true character or her true health; Clara is beautiful, so those particular

outward signs can be misleading. Second, the truth of her character, her inner

rottenness, is indexically connected to her environment, to the nether world and its

"putrid soil." Her rottenness is explicitly a product of the environment, a growth

"evilly-fostered" in the "putrid soil of that nether world." Framed as it is here, this

second indexical relationship is not legible or interpretable without the help of the

narrator. Without context, there is no way to know Clara's inner rottenness is

attributable to her environment. There is no link until the narrator points it out, but

when he does, he makes it very explicit. He has given us, the readers, new knowledge;

he has elaborated upon the central nether world metonym; and he has even alluded to

the fact that Clem is just one example of the kinds of forms the nether world yields,

even as he warns that the effects of the nether world's putrid soil are not always easy to

see.

After the description of Clem in the novel's opening chapter, the significance of

the nether world metonym is different from what it was before the description. For

example, to say something is a "product" of the nether world means something

different after the passage than it would before the passage. Also, whereas before the

nether world signified simply for the actual physical environment, and the sense of that

environment as a totally "other" place, an abyss, unknown and unexplored by most of

respectable society, the term can now also metonymically signify for that environment's

influence upon character, as well as for the specific kind of influence it tends to have: it

fosters its growths "evilly." The description argues, however, that even though this is

the case, we should be careful in our attempts at reading and interpretation, for the

"putrid soil of that nether world yields other forms besides the obviously blighted and

sapless." The link between character and environment is made explicit by the

description; it may be hard to see, or to notice, and it may even be figured in metaphor

(the narrator is not literally describing vegetative growth), but it is always there. Clem is

a product of the environment, and she is, in turn, a part of the environment that

influences other characters, such as Bob, and even Jane. The plot reveals links between

environment and character, cause and effect, as in the story of Bob (and, as we'll see,

with Jane), and on top of this, the narrator provides explicit descriptions that link

environment to its effect upon character. Plot and description reinforce one another.

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As part of this evidence for the effects of environment upon character, the plot also reveals the impossibility of any attempt to overcome the effects of the environment upon character. I will focus on two instances of this: Clara, who notices the unpleasant details Pennyloaf has grown accustomed to, and Jane, the potential modest Dickensian angel-of-the-hearth who, for Gissing, cannot achieve what Esther does, for the simple reason that Jane does not share Esther's class origins. Neither Clara's native intelligence nor Jane's limited education are enough to overcome the effects of the nether world. Indeed, the effects of the nether world upon Jane in particular make the limited education she receives almost more damaging in the emotional turmoil it causes. Jane's case is especially important because her plot thread, and the effects of the nether world on the unfolding of that thread, ties directly into the novel's repudiation of earlier Dickensian solutions.

Unlike the passages focalized on and around Pennyloaf, the passages describing Clara's environment do not suggest that Clara has grown used to it, or that she has learned not to notice it with the indifference of habit. Indeed, with Clara, it is just the opposite. Early in the novel, we are told, "she lived amid conditions so repugnant, that her nerves were ceaselessly strung almost beyond endurance" (ch. 9). Later on, when Clara leaves home and then finds work as an actress, she continues to notice gruesome details, such as the "odours of oil and shoddy, and all such things as characterised the town," and which "grew more pungent under the heavy shower" (ch. 23). Clara finds

the environment as gruesome as the "peering imagination" of the reader does, and this is because she is a "child of the nether world whom fate had endowed with intellect" (ch. 23). James and Jameson both focus on Gissing's over-educated and alienated male protagonists, but Clara is a perfect example of a character who by some trick of chance or fate has an intellect, imagination or education at odds with their economic position. Her ambition and imagination make her exceptional, given her circumstances. Unfortunately, this doesn't save her, for the novel does not argue absolutely that exceptions are impossible, or that tricks of chance or fate are always unfavourable. Instead, the novel argues that the putrid soil of the nether world is such that, taken together, the nether world's negative influences upon character, its collection of evil growths and negative circumstances, and all the instances of ill-luck and ill-chance that end up being produced by these things, will always far outnumber and outweigh any positive tricks of chance or fate. This makes it difficult for any individual, no matter how gifted, to escape such an abyss; there are just too many forces at work against them. Characters might come close to some form of escape, but circumstances in this world are much more likely than not to step in and crush them.

This is why Clara comes close to escaping, but cannot quite make it. The only time she doesn't notice the gruesomeness of her environment is on her "eve of triumph," when she is given the leading role in the theatre company. In this instance, we are told that despite the fact that the "rain drenched her […] she did not think of

putting up an umbrella; she thought indeed of nothing; there was fire and tumult in her brain" (ch. 23). For once, Clara has been given real, concrete hope, so she can ignore the putrid conditions of her surroundings. She has worked hard, and now she is close to fulfilling her dream and experiencing at least some small measure of social mobility. Unfortunately, although she is smart, imaginative and ambitious, she lacks the sympathy necessary to be kind to Grace Danvers, whom Clara has just replaced in the leading role in the company. Grace, in her desperation and due to her sense of betrayal (which Clara, caught up in her triumph, initially scoffs at), hides and throws acid on Clara's face. Grace flees and commits suicide. Her body is found the next morning. Aside from the immediate pain, terror and physical disfigurement, Clara's hopes of a career in the theatre are instantly dashed, and this again, in turn, affects the details she notices, and how she interprets them.

With her hopes dashed, Clara goes *back* to noticing the gruesome details of her environment, and they go back to affecting her nerves. More than this, the environment itself comes to signify the hopelessness of her circumstances, and the vast forces arrayed against her. A good example of this comes shortly after Clara returns home after her ordeal and disfigurement. The "yells of children at play in the courtyard tortured her nerves," and she understands the "regular sounds on the staircase" just as the "incidents of the life of poverty," which "irritated her sick brain and filled her with despair to think that as long as she lived she could never help to rise again above this

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world to which she was born" (ch. 30). When she looks around, now, "The meanness of her surroundings became in comparison more mean" (ch. 30). Here is a description of the city, focalized through Clara when she has returned home:

> Presently she was standing at her window, the blind partly raised. On a clear day the view from this room was of wide extent, embracing a great part of the City; seen under a low, blurred, dripping sky, through the ragged patches of smoke from chimneys innumerable, it had a gloomy impressiveness well in keeping with the mind of her who brooded over it. […] Somewhat nearer, amid many spires and steeples, lay the surly bulk of Newgate, the lines of its construction shown plan-wise; its little windows multiplied for points of torment to the vision. Nearer again, the markets of Smithfield, Bartholomew's Hospital, the tract of modern deformity, cleft by a gulf of railway, which spreads between Clerkenwell Road and Charterhouse Street. Down in Farringdon Street the carts, waggons, vans, cabs, omnibuses, crossed and intermingled in a steaming splash-bath of mud; human beings, reduced to their due paltriness, seemed to toil in exasperation along the strips of pavement, bound on errands, which were a mockery, driven automaton-like by forces they neither understood nor could resist. (ch. 31)

Clara may not understand the full complexities of the city and the economy, but she can

understand that there are vast forces at work in what she sees in the hustle and bustle of Farringdon Street. They are some of the same forces that seem to have conspired against her. When she looks out her window, far from seeing workers spiritually fulfilled by their daily work, she sees instead workers who have been "reduced to their due paltriness" and who "toil in exasperation […] driven automaton-like by forces they neither understood nor could resist." She understands that the workers, as mere individuals, are entangled, enmeshed in a vast web of economic, social and material forces and networks. Whether or not Clara fully understands those forces any better than the workers, in her view the muddy intermingling of "carts, waggons, vans, cabs, omnibuses" now points indexically *to* them. In a passage such as this, Gissing isn't interested in tracing out the variety of overlapping networks (social, economic, ecological) which combine to determine the lives of those workers; rather, he is showing the subjective impression of realizing that such forces exist, and that things like the intermingling of cabs and carts and omnibuses, or the smoke produced by chimneys "innumerable," are connected to those forces and networks, but the individual subject cannot grasp or understand all of them, except insofar as that subject may grasp just how useless it is to fight against them. Clara's reading of the city is limited. She sees workers toiling as indices of the forces driving them, but she does not understand those forces. Her dreary view is also affected by her depression and sense of hopelessness. As well, her ability to read, to continue to notice just how rotten her environment really is,

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is partly a quirk of fate: she had been "endowed" by "fate" with an intellect that most others in the nether world don't possess. This alters her view of the environment, but it certainly doesn't provide her a way out of her environment.

Jane experiences similar problems. Although Jane is not as imaginative or ambitious as Clara, she is given some education beyond her social station, and is therefore to some degree aware of the environment's influence upon her; however, her intellect and potential for change is totally thwarted by the effects of the environment upon her. When her grandfather enters Jane's world at the very beginning of the novel, Jane has already been shaped by her upbringing as a poor girl left, by her father, to the cruel and abusive Peckovers. She has been raised as the lowest of the low, as a thrall among thralls. This upbringing has had a profound effect not just on her character, but on the potential for her intellectual growth, her acquisition of new knowledge and skills, and even new unconscious habits and manners. As with Clara, this affects her vision and view of the world (the education she does receive allows her to see the influence of the nether world upon herself). However, beyond this, the nether world's influence upon her and the unfolding of her plot thread directly ties into the novel's repudiation of earlier Dickensian solutions.

Jane, the Environment, and Dickensian Solutions

Michael's grand philanthropic vision, as he explains it to Sidney, is to turn his

granddaughter, Jane, into a kind of angel for the poor, whose example and influence will radiate outwards. He explicitly does not want her turned into a lady, but instead wants to raise up an angel for the poor who is also *of* the poor. Michael says,

> I might have had Jane schooled and fashioned into a lady, and still have hoped that she would use the money well; but my idea went beyond *that*. There's plenty of ladies nowadays taking an interest in the miserable, and spending their means unselfishly. What I hoped was to raise up for the poor and the untaught a friend out of their own midst, some one who had gone through all that they *suffer*, who was accustomed to earn her own living by the work of her hands as *they* do, who had never thought herself their better, who saw the world as they see it and knew all their wants. A lady may do good, we know that; but she can't be the friend of the poor as I understand it; there's too great a distance between her world and theirs. (ch. 20; emphasis in original)

As Jameson points out, Michael's philanthropic plan mirrors the underlying organization of Gissing's novel (179). That is, just as the novel is structured by its emphasis on the closed nether world environment, and it is unique for being told from the perspective *of* that nether world (as opposed to a descent down into it), so Michael wants for Jane to be educated, but *not* for her to become a lady who must always in some sense condescend in order to help the working class. This is why, despite having

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access to a large sum of money, Michael keeps the same lodgings, and continues to let Jane work.

An example of the nuances of Michael's educational plan takes place when they take a train out of the city. The narrator notes that as they travel "over the pest-stricken regions of East London," the sunshine they see "served only to reveal the intimacies of abomination." However, as these desolate tracts finally give way to "a land of level meadows, of hedges and trees, of crops and cattle," the narrator points out that "Michael Snowdon was anxious that Jane should not regard with the carelessness of familiarity those desolate tracts from which they were escaping" (ch. 19). In other words, Michael does not want Jane to become so familiar with such scenes that she can ignore them with the same indifference of habit as someone such as Pennyloaf does. He wants her to note just how vile and desolate this view of the city is. John Halperin points out that Gissing "cannot resist putting some characters on a train travelling from the city to the country in order to underline once again the contrast between urban slums and what lies beyond them" (184). However, what is also being emphasized in the passage is Jane's ability to even notice this stark contrast. Michael is anxious that Jane should notice such things, because he knows, at least to some degree, the kinds of effects an upbringing in the nether world can produce. (Michael obviously does not appreciate this *fully*; he underestimates the full effects of Jane's upbringing, given that this is partly why his plan fails.) Jane gets a brief holiday and gets to see this contrast for

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herself, but partly this is only because Michael points the contrast out, and because he can afford to take her on a holiday. In other words, this is an exception. How many other young women in the nether world are shown the contrast between the country and the city so clearly? How many other working women are given leisure time to even think about such things?

Part of Michael's vision is that Jane will have the experiences of the nether world, but will, through these experiences and access to education, overcome the influence of that world, and then let her own influence spread positively to others. In the passage in which Michael outlines his grand vision, quoted above, Michael mentions "plenty of ladies" who are "taking an interest" in the poor. One such middle-class lady is Mrs. Lant; she is not unlike Mrs. Pardiggle in *Bleak House*. Mrs. Lant is self-important and meddling. She decides that "soup and refinement must be disseminated at one and the same time, over the same counter" (ch. 28). Michael thinks that allowing Jane to accompany Mrs. Lant is "a good means […] of enabling the girl to form acquaintances among the very poorest, those whom she hoped to serve effectively—not with aid of money alone, but by her personal influence" (ch. 28). Unfortunately, in the instance of her visit to the soup kitchen, things go poorly, because Jane acts so modestly and timidly that she is ill-treated by the men there, who look down upon her. This is because one of the most important facts about Jane isn't just that she is from the nether world, but that she is (or was) the lowest of the low; she is, as the title of the novel's first

chapter refers to her, a "thrall of thralls." This is why Bob doesn't want his wife, Pennyloaf, associating with the "girl as used to be the Peckovers' dirty little servant" (ch. 24). Jane is looked down upon, even by other members of the nether world. Even when she has risen in station, subtle signs in her manner and demeanor continue to indicate this to other characters, so that they know she is subject to their condescension.

As Jane gets some limited access to lessons and education from her grandfather, things change, but only very slightly. The limited education she receives, mostly in the form of lectures and conversations with her grandfather, "do[es] much to refine her modes of thought," and she "learn[s] to think on matters which are wholly strange to girls of her station" (ch. 25). For example, she learns to "regard the life of the world and the individual in a light of idealism and with a freedom from ignoble association rare enough in any class" (ch. 25). However, this new consciousness also instills a sense of self-consciousness, so that, "the one thing affecting herself over which she mused frequently was her suffering as a little thrall in Clerkenwell close […] She had been an ill-used, ragged, work-worn child, and something of that degradation seemed, in her feeling, still to cling to her" (ch. 25). The degree to which change is possible for Jane is brought up repeatedly—and even Jane worries about it. She thinks that "something" of that degradation still clings to her. The narrator says that she "had no spot of uncleanness in her being," but,

Two effects of the time of her bondage were, however, clearly to be

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distinguished. Though nature had endowed her with a good intelligence,

she could only with extreme labour acquire that elementary book-

knowledge which vulgar children get easily enough; it seemed as if the

bodily overstrain at a critical period of life had affected her memory, and

her power of mental application generally. In spite of ceaseless endeavour,

she could not yet spell words of the least difficulty; she could not do the

easiest sums with accuracy; geographical names were her despair. The

second point in which she had suffered harm was of more serious nature.

She was subject to fits of hysteria, preceded and followed by the most

painful collapse of that buoyant courage which was her supreme charm

and the source of her influence. (ch. 15)

The narrator explicitly links Jane's inability to live up to her full potential to her

upbringing in the nether world and its influence upon her. Somehow, the changes

wrought by Jane's upbringing in the nether world are "clearly to be distinguished"; if

you know how to look for them, the signs are there. Nature has "endowed" Jane with

"good intelligence," and yet her upbringing in the nether world at a "critical period" of

her life has interfered with this natural development; she now struggles with things

such as basic sums, memorization and literacy, when even "vulgar" children are able to

pick up these skills, if they are taught early enough.[41] On top of this, Jane is at times

prone to fits. This is not surprising, given what we see of Clem Peckover's horrific

treatment of her. That "buoyant courage" which is "the source of her influence" is

"collapse[d]" by these fits. This means Jane's ability to positively exert her influence

upon others in the nether world has been hindered or hampered *by* her upbringing in

the nether world. This is why Jane cannot fulfill Michael's vision, and pleads with him

to spare her the responsibility. The workings of the plot reveal the impact of the

environment upon Jane, and they curb the potential for the suggested solution.

Towards the end of the novel, Jane finally rebels against her grandfather's

philanthropic vision for her, and she pleads with him to give his money to someone else

when he dies, saying, "I can't! Grandfather, don't ask it of me! Give it all to someone

else—to someone else!" (ch. 33). After this outburst, she falls into one of those fits

brought about by her traumatic upbringing in the nether world. She cannot overcome

this. The failure of Michael's vision for Jane was, just like the fall of Bob Hewett, a

foregone result. The influence of the environment was too substantial. The influence of

the nether world upon her cannot so easily be overcome this late in the game; indeed,

the nether world's lasting effects make the extra education she receives from Michael all

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[41] Korg notes "vulgar" is a "favourite word of Gissing's" (104). The term's metonymic weight is interesting. In the usage above, vulgarity does not seem to be associated with being working class, as Gissing appears to be implying upper world children can be vulgar. The term, in Gissing, appears to be more synonymous with philistine.

the more painful for her.

After her plea to her grandfather and the resulting fit, Jane feels conflicted about what has happened; the narrator describes her mind as "overwrought by resolute contemplation of ideas beyond its scope," and, claims the narrator, this is "the natural result of the influences to which she had been subjected" (ch. 34). The additional education Michael has tried to bestow upon her results in nothing but emotional turmoil; these are more of the "effects of the time of her bondage," I quoted earlier. The unraveling of Michael's failed philanthropic vision for Jane, due in large part to the influence of the environment upon Jane before Michael entered into her life, serves to expand, unpack and explore the ways in which the environment of the nether world affects character, and affects a character's ability, in turn, to effect change upon that same world. The failure of Michael's plan, once you factor in Jane's upbringing, was, as it turns out, only "natural." It is in this way that Gissing balances the novel's various plot threads – for we see similar themes in the "foregone conclusion" of Bob's fall into crime, despite his gifts, and in the failure of Clara's escape, despite her own – alongside various specific descriptions and metonymic details here and there. This serves to explore and unpack the full metonymic weight of the nether world.

The Nether World Metonym

The unfolding of the narrative expands and unpacks the metonymic weight of

the "nether world"; or, more precisely, it unpacks what the term itself metaphorically

signifies: London slums. By the end of the novel, the full metonymic meaning of the

nether world is different than it was at the beginning. The term and the concept have

been explored, expanded, and complicated. The term is no longer just a metaphor for a

vaguely disgusting abyss that is "other" or "over there"; it is no longer just a term for a

world figured as always-already cut off and separate from the implicitly more

"normal," everyday world. Instead, the term is also a metonym for the specific effects

that this environment engenders, for the real-world filth and degradation it contains,

and even for the subjective experience of these things. This larger metonymic motif,

which fundamentally structures the novel, is not a metonym in the sense of a single,

simple figural switch, but a larger, ongoing process more akin to the metonymic work I

argued *Bleak House* accomplishes with and through the Chancery metonym. An

example of the former would be what Elaine Freedgood calls "weak" metonymy, one in

which some physical object figures very simply as an index of character or atmosphere

(11). This might be a character's fancy collar serving as a metonym for wealth and taste.

The novel does contain smaller, "weak" metonyms such as this, but taken together they

add up, over time and through the unfolding of the novel's plot, to something stronger;

they serve to expand and unpack the larger, overarching metonymic figure.

 An example of one of these smaller, simpler metonyms occurs at the opening to

Chapter 8, which begins with the narrator's claim that one can distinguish "broadly"

between "those who do, and those who do not, wear collars," but that even within the

category of those who do wear collars, a careful reading of what various *kinds* of collars

indicate "offer[s] much scope to an analyst delighting in subtle gradation." For

example, he says, a simple "collar attached to a flannel shirt, and just visible along the

top of a black tie" is usually worn by mechanics, whereas on a shopman you are likely

to find "the very ugliest neck-encloser put in vogue by aristocratic sanction." The

narrator points these things out, and says he was drawn to do so because Bob Hewett

wears a collar that is "white and stiff." This is because Bob works upstairs in a die-

sinking establishment; the only workers in the establishment who don't wear collars are

those who work "down in the basement of the building."[42] The people who work

upstairs, with their stiff white collars, are "every bit as respectable as Sidney Kirkwood,

and such as he, who bent over a jeweller's table." Bob's father, John, takes "no slight

gratification that he had been able to apprentice his son to a craft which permitted him

always to wear a collar" (ch. 8). John Hewett lives in the nether world, and he can read

these gradations of class and profession visible in a man's collar; more than this, he

takes pride in his son's ability to adorn himself with such a sign. Korg writes,

> Up to the middle of the century, class status was usually perfectly clear by
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> outward signs; it would normally have been quite impossible to mistake a

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[42] Something of these metonyms persist today. We distinguish between "white collar" and "blue collar" forms of employment, and the upstairs/downstairs metonym was rather explicitly deployed in the title of the television show *Upstairs/Downstairs* (1970-1975).

workingman for a member of the middle class. Later in the century,

however, it became easier for people of low social origin to overcome

inferiorities of dress, manners, speech, and education. Nevertheless,

Gissing, with characteristic conservatism, continued to look for small signs

of everyday behaviour as a guide to the vital distinction between the

lower classes and the rest of the society. (89)

In the passage, Gissing doesn't distinguish simply between those who do, and those

who do not, wear collars, but drills down further to the various types of collars, and the

"subtle gradation[s]" of class that are thereby indicated. These smaller distinctions help

expand the larger metonymic work of the novel, because the importance doesn't lie

only in the distinction itself, but in the ways in which the characters themselves are

aware of such signs, interpret them and relate to them.

A basic metonymic switch between a man's profession and his collar is

interesting, but Gissing is more interested in the larger forces at work, and how even

the ways in which characters read these signs are themselves metonymic signifiers

pointing back to the nether world and its effects. That is, John's pride in the collar his

son wears is influenced by the nether world in which he lives, because it is a world in

which such signifiers have any meaning at all, and it is a world in which the display of

belonging to one profession or another has its own contextual meanings, so that one

profession or another is considered more or less desirable, and a father may take pride

in the type of collar his son wears because of the types of professions it can indicate, and

how various professions are judged relative to one other from within the nether world.

In the nether world, these subtle gradations are extremely important, especially

to characters like John. When his son, Bob, marries Pennyloaf, who is "below" Bob in

station, John holds an "aristocratic prejudice" against her (just as later on, Bob doesn't

want Pennyloaf associating with Jane, who is considered even lower in station, a thrall

of thralls). The narrator notes, "Odd thing, was it not, that this embittered leveller

should himself practise the very intolerance which he reviled in people of the upper

world. For his refusal to recognize Pennyloaf he had absolutely no grounds." In the

passage, the narrator even addresses the implied reader directly, noting, "Of course you

recognise the item in John Hewett's personality which serves to explain this singular

attitude" (ch. 14). That item is his fierce pride (and indeed a certain amount of what

Jameson would call *ressentiment*), and the various avenues afforded to a man like John

in which he might take pride. From the perspective of the upper world – that is, the

perspective of the implied reader, the "you" addressed by the narrator – the question

might be, *What difference does it make? The nether world is the nether world.* This is the irony

loaded into the term, "aristocratic prejudice." John is not an aristocrat. But inside the

nether world itself, these subtle gradations and distinctions organize everyday life.

John Sloan writes, "The real significance of *The Nether World* lies then in the revelation

of the defensive, sometimes self-lacerating strategies of autonomy and identity which

are the historical reality and lived experience of lower-class life in a stratified and

refusing social order" (79). Pat Colling writes, "Not only are poor dwelling-places

differentiated from one another, there is a clear class structure *within* working-class

districts" (15; my emphasis). These subtle gradations are extremely important to

someone like John, who must take pride in whatever he can. This is why it is not

enough to distinguish broadly between the nether world and the upper one, or between

those who do and those who don't wear collars, but to explore the ways in which the

nether world itself is implicated in its own interpretation.

Throughout the novel, Gissing constantly explores how the interpretation of the

nether world is affected by that nether world, in subtle and often totally unconscious

ways. Pennyloaf does not notice the disgusting world around her, but she is

nonetheless an experienced reader of it. Without thinking, she knows the sounds she

hears in Shooter's Gardens likely indicate a woman is being beaten. In fact, that is why

these sounds elicit no real interest from her; they are an everyday occurrence. (There

isn't an indication by the narrator that Pennyloaf purposely shuts them out or ignores

them because they are so horrid; they genuinely don't seem to elicit any interest.)

Likewise, people read signs of a man's profession based on the collar he wears without

having to think about it; the police know to read men's misery as an indicator of what

that misery will tempt men to do; Mrs. Griffith reads Bob's behaviour and knew he was

heading towards domestic abuse; the men at the soup kitchen read something subtle in

Jane's manner that indicates she, quite unlike Mrs. Lant or the other people who have volunteered there in the past, is a serving girl who is below even them, a thrall of thralls, and therefore subject to being mistreated in a way the other charity workers are not (they *do* mistreat the other charity workers, of course; it's just that this mistreatment takes a slightly different form).

Characters are always reading and interpreting the city, consciously and unconsciously. The degree to which they might indulge in interpretation of what this or that sign is *really* an indicator of is partly dictated by their immediate concerns. For example, when Clara looks out her window and sees men toiling in the streets, she has an abstract understanding of the forces that drive them. Her point of view from within this dense mesh of forces is limited, she cannot clearly delineate whence those forces come, or why, or what constitutes such forces. But she *is* aware of them, and she does notice them, so that she reads those men toiling as indexical signifiers of the forces that drive them. This is because she has experienced their effects for herself. She has been crushed by them. She has had "skin in the game," indeed had had that skin brutally scarred. By contrast, most other characters don't care to think about these things. They have other, very material concerns.

A fairly in-depth example of this occurs at the opening of the novel's second chapter, in which the narrator describes the manufacturing and trade that goes on in Clerkenwell. The narrator says, "Go where you may in Clerkenwell" and you will find,

"Workers in metal, workers in glass and in enamel, workers in weed, workers in every substance on earth […] Wealth inestimable is ever flowing through these workshops, and the hands that have been stained with gold-dust may, as likely as not, some day extend themselves in petition for a crust" (ch. 2). In the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, a large portion of London's manufacturing was involved in the finishing industries (Stedman-Jones 22-7). The nether world was involved directly in the production and finishing of luxury goods such as, "clothes, shoes, jewellery, riding gear, and […] superior handmade, and often new or experimental precision instruments" (27). As we see in the novel, Bob Hewett is skilled enough to fabricate false coinage. The fine and luxury items that the upper world take for granted as everyday aspects of their day-to-day upper-world lives are, it turns out, produced right in Clerkenwell. Moreover, the workers in Clerkenwell spend all their time crafting such items because they are desperate to earn enough so that they can put food on the table, and this means that, in the workshops of Clerkenwell, "sunshine and free air are forgotten things" (ch. 2), and things like "the sunlight on the Surrey hills" and the smell of "the first breath of spring" are things of which "Clerkenwell takes no count" (ch. 2). Workers in the nether world are so busy producing luxury items for an upper world they will never get to see that this intense focus and need to put money on the table has affected their ability to read their own immediate environment, let alone understand, appreciate or *care* about the complex connections between the two worlds. The upper world and the nether world are

interdependent, and this very interdependency is partly responsible for the ways in which subjects in the nether world have their ability to read, understand, or appreciate their environment affected by that environment, and, as a corollary, by that environment's connection to that other, seemingly distant, "upper world" environment.

The nether world is not the same as what I am calling the mesh; rather, the nether world is just one aspect of the mesh; it is this aspect Gissing just happens to be exploring in this novel. The connections between the nether world, the upper world, and their places within the mesh may seem conceptually distant, but the connections are nonetheless there, and on a deep level, these connections affect our ability to read, interpret and relate to the mesh and the world around us. Gissing teaches the reader to read the very material signifiers of the urban environment, and then, as a second step, to be aware of the ways in which that reading is to some degree mediated and affected by the environment itself, in a complex interplay of hard-to-disentangle relationships (economic, material, social, and so on). Those "forces" that Clara identifies, driving the workers to ceaselessly toil in an intolerable nightmare, forces which she cannot fully know or comprehend, are visible to her only through the material effects she can see right outside her window. Or, as Jameson puts it, "History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis […]. But this History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force" (88). Gissing's focus is precisely on those very effects, and on that

which hurts: the very "material" desire of the workers to earn a "penny" for the actual

"loaf" of bread they need to put on the table in order to feed themselves and their

family and last another week without dying (or without growing too sick to work and

earn their daily bread *next* week). Living amongst London's worst filth, such workers

are little disposed to postulate about the complexities of the interplay of forces that have

produced their immediate material environment and their immediate material needs,

even if that environment, and those needs, are in some odd, hard to grasp way,

products of those forces. For example, the narrator describes a young girl in

Clerkenwell who works in a factory that produces artificial flowers; this girl is likely

one of those Clerkenwell workers who takes "no count" of things such as the smells of

actual spring, because, as the narrator says, she has "newly left school, and was now

invited to consider the question of how to keep herself alive" (ch. 15). The characters in

the novel are little disposed to consider instead the question of what complex interplay

of forces produced the vile, disgusting filth in which they live, or the economic

complexities of their own material needs, even if these things are connected (who or

what are the artificial flowers for?). All these material effects or elements can be read as

signifiers of the complex relationships and sets of forces that constitute the "mesh" or

"History" (depending on what sets of relationships and forces you want to fall within

your scope) but an understanding of these things is always mediated *by those very effects*

or elements. This is true of characters in the novel, and it is true of the implied middle-

class reader, as well as the past and present historical readers; and it is true, finally, of

both the implied author as well as the actual historical author. And, as Goode points

out, what's interesting is that, "more than this, Gissing knows this" (31).

Conclusion.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to provide a vocabulary and a method for examining metonymy as an inherently ecological figure, and a figure which is – contrary to traditional formulations – capable of producing new knowledge, and providing readers with new semiotic coordinates with which to interpret and understand the world around them. By tracing the repetitions of a given metonym throughout the course of a narrative, as a kind of leitmotif, a reader or critic may see the meaning of that metonym change and expand, so that new meanings become more firmly, and often more materially, associated with it, where previously no tradition had bound them together. Ronald Langacker says, "metonymy is basically a reference-point phenomenon" (30). One mental concept or metonym, such as Chancery, or dust, or the Nether World, provides "a cognitive reference point for purposes of establishing mental contact with another" (1). By the end of *Bleak House*, the concept "Chancery" is, in the minds of readers, a reference point capable of establishing mental contact with new targets such as urban suffering, and the dense, hard to trace mesh of interconnection pervading the urban world. (In a sense, the Chancery metonym is meta-metonymic, insofar as it does not only figure specific elements of the city that are connected to Chancery, but figures the vast, dense mesh of connection itself.) Similarly, by the end of

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Our Mutual Friend, dust is a reference point capable of establishing, very directly,

mental contact with the ways in which we are connected to dust, waste, and the various

filthy material upon which the modern economy is based. Dust, as a signifier of

elemental matter, is a reference point capable of establishing contact with the ongoing

processes of organic decay and transformation, and the ongoing participation of waste

materials in everyday urban life. By the end of *The Nether World,* the nether world itself

is a reference point capable of establishing mental contact with the effects of that

environment upon the human beings who live within it, as well as the dialectical ways

in which one's interpretation of this environment is determined by that self-same

environment. This is a view of the mesh that attempts to acknowledge the fact that it is

a view from *within* the mesh, and one that is affected *by* that mesh.

In all these examples, my argument is that, through its use of metonymy, a novel

can provide the context whereby new targets become added to a cognitive domain,

dominion, or Idealized Cognitive Model, so that these new targets become increasingly

salient in the mind of the reader (see fig. 5). Although they are revealed through

C = conceptualizer
R = reference point
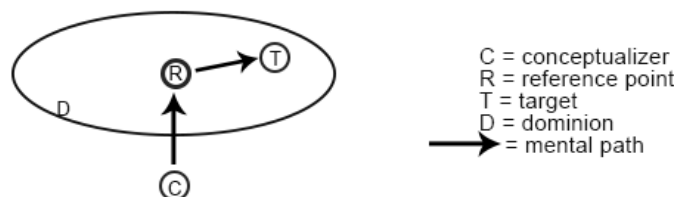T = target
D = dominion
= mental path

*Figure 5. Langacker's diagram of reference-point construction. I argue that novels add
new targets, or increase the "strength" of the connection between a reference point and
its target(s), or play with which contexts are or are not accessible.*

figuration, these are associations based on literal, real-world relationships, connections and contiguities. This is one of the ways in which metonymy figures the world differently than does metaphor, but the term "metaphor" is often used to describe a figuration that is actually metonymic. On top of this, when metonyms are examined *as* metonyms, they tend to be examined only on the level of the words on the page. Focusing solely on "the words on the page" is often an advantage, especially in literary criticism, and it generally leads to better, more precise close readings, because "the story" only comes to us in and through those words. Yet the story is still significant, as is the play of discourse upon story – that is, the plot. Literary critics are trained to examine these elements of a narrative in terms of metaphors, symbols and motifs, but we rarely do this with metonymy. With metonymy, the focus remains at the level of the sentence.

Imagine what would happen to our understanding of novels if metaphors were treated in this way, and only considered relevant in those sentence-level, explicit figurations in which one thing very directly stands for another. In such a scenario, you would not be able to argue that the dust in *Our Mutual Friend* has any symbolic or metaphoric weight at all, except in those instances where the narrator or a character references money or wealth using the actual word dust. The ongoing presence of dust in the novel's plot would be without any metaphoric weight at all. The arguments of Edgar Johnson, Earle Davis, and H.M. Daleski would be considered nonsensical. The

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classical and Biblical associations would be a meaningless coincidence. We realize this is

absurd, and yet although we are quick to acknowledge the dust metaphor, and look at

the role of the dust in the novel's plot when unpacking the full meaning of this

metaphor, we are not trained to do the same thing with metonymy. We only look at

metonymy as an actual figure when we examine it at the level of the sentence. This is a

mistake, and I believe this is an important factor in the figure's neglect.[43]

This neglect of the figure provides literary researchers with opportunities for

fresh insights, since metonymy forces the reader think in different ways than its

rhetorical cousin does. Indeed, according to Jakobson's vertical axis of similarity and

horizontal axis of contiguity, the two figures make us think in two different

"directions." More than this, metonymy is not just more "literal," but more material. In

this thesis, I have associated metonymy with indexicality, and more generally, with

what Charles Sanders Peirce calls Secondness.[44] Metonymy is concerned with the

physical, material world, and the actual physical, spatial, contiguous connections

between the elements of the world around us.

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[43] As I note in my introduction, Elaine Freedgood also points out this neglect. She posits that it "may be the result of a certain discomfort with the potential vagrancy of this figure—its inability to stop wandering" (13). This is partly what makes it a figure that, by definition, explores interconnections, levels of interdependence, networked relationships, and so on.

[44] Metaphor seems to borrow *mostly* from Firstness and iconicity, but it also borrows from Thirdness and symbolism. Metaphor figures similarity, especially a similarity between *qualities*. Peirce says that hypoicons "which represent the representative character of the representamen by representing a parallelism in something else, are *metaphors*" (III 277; emphasis in original). This is a firstness in its thirdness aspect, a kind of first thirdness.

Likewise, the novels and the criticism I have looked at in this dissertation use metonymy to bring us back to the material and the physical, to figure our connection to the "mesh" in very physical, material, and visceral ways. In my first chapter, I argued that in *Bleak House*, "Chancery" began as, simply, a referential term for the actual, real-world Court of Chancery. But as that narrative unfolded, the metonymic meaning of "Chancery" changed. To metonymically say one is "in Chancery" means something very different at the beginning of the novel than it would at the end. Richard found himself caught up "in" Chancery, and it killed him. Miss Flite, who was in Chancery for decades, was driven mad. By the novel's end, the suffering caused by Chancery is more concrete and more specific; individual characters like Nemo synecdochically stand for all the other "nameless" individuals whose stories don't fit within the bounds of this particular narrative. The institution that sits "in the midst of the mud and at the heart of the fog" seems very different when you actually have to physically wade through all that muck and fog.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, the dust of Harmon's mounds is a metaphor for England's wealth and pursuit of money. But, I claimed, it is also a metonym, and this fundamentally changes the meaning of the figure: if dust is understood as just a metaphor for money, then, in this novel at least, the implicit meaning behind such a figure is that money is really "just" dust. Thus, most of England's supposed wealth is all just so much worthless dust and waste, and the pursuit of money leaves one empty,

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vacuous. However, a metonymic reading of that same figure reveals that the material

value of dust is, though certainly horrific and extremely disturbing, nonetheless very

real. Like it or not, we need it. It is an element in our buildings. It is a part of us. It is the

food we eat. It is, all else aside, a necessary fact of life. Through the bio-economics of the

dust trade, and the use of ash and cinders by brick makers, the urban environment is

not just figuratively built upon dust, but very literally so. Metonymy figures this

literality. We are not conceptually "like" dust. We are actually, physically connected to

it. We imbibe it. We produce it. Just as the Thames is to Lizzie, dust is our "meat and

drink." It is not that just that waste is something that can sometimes be artistically

recycled in a few specific cases (as with Mr. Venus's skeletons or Jenny Wren's dolls);

rather, this recycling, this ongoing economic and biological process, is a fundamental

part of Victorian urban life.

In chapter three, I showed that although Gissing uses a totally different

vocabulary than I do, in his criticism of Dickens, Gissing identifies how small

metonymic details can be used to re-shape and re-figure how we see the world, and

indeed to suggest a vast complexity to our world. Dickens's use of these suggestive

details allows him to frame the world differently, and allows us, as readers, to see the

world just as he has seen it, and as we have never seen it before. These details suggest

"the complexity of modern life" (I 138) and Dickens is able to, "into a page […]

concentrate what in nature is boundless" (I 139). Metonymy may have an inability to

stop wandering, but (to borrow more vocabulary Gissing would never use) that's not a bug, it's a feature. Dickens's use of these details produces new knowledge, new ways of seeing and figuring the complexity of the world. However, in contrast to my own argument about the visceral aspect of a novel such as *Our Mutual Friend*, Gissing feels Dickens omits certain important details, and thereby avoids giving readers a sincere and truly visceral impression of the truly unpleasant and horrid aspects of the modern urban environment. Dickens consciously omits the details Gissing feels would be "most precious," and it is those details Gissing highlights in his own novels—and the resulting impression is exactly as visceral and unpleasant as one would expect.

In chapter four, I turned to Gissing's own use of metonymic details in his novel, *The Nether World*, and I examined how these smaller details explicated and unpacked the larger, overarching "nether world" metaphor and metonym. I showed that Gissing's novel realizes his beliefs about realism, art, and how a subject's access to the world is mediated, which necessarily affects how they view or interpret those individual metonymic details (or if they even notice them at all). How different people interpret a given detail in their immediate environment will be based on their knowledge of the world, their desires and priorities, their upbringing, their habits, and their subtly ingrained ways of being and interacting with the world around them. Importantly, the environment itself is one of the factors that affects one's interpretation and understanding of the environment, so that the environment is implicated in its own

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interpretation. If you try to understand the mesh, you discover your understanding was always-already affected *by* that mesh, and you were always-already enmeshed within it. In Gissing's novel, and his general outlook of the world, this relationship is heavily deterministic, and this affects the outcome of the plot, and it affects the full meaning of the nether world figure: it is a horrible, rancid environment, responsible for rotten growths, both those figuratively rotten growths, such as Clem and the effects she produces, and the literal, such as the actual biological filth piled up in the streets and slum dwellings of London.

This reading of the relationship between subject and environment puts Gissing and Dickens at odds. Dickens shows, in *Bleak House*, how Esther discovers a dense, murky mesh of contiguities and connections, but at least she can positively affect it, and let her influence reverberate outwards in a kind of butterfly effect that can, over the course of time and distance, hopefully produce larger positive changes. Even though *Bleak House* is one of Dickens's darker novels, and not every subplot ends happily, there is still hope. By contrast, in Gissing's nether world environment, such change is virtually impossible. His modest Dickensian heroine, Jane, has already been so influenced by her upbringing in her nether world environment that her ability to turn around and influence it for the better has been stilted. Tragically, Jane is even aware of this. As in Dickens, characters can identify the existence of a dense mesh of influences without being able to fully trace or understand them; but in Gissing's pessimistic novel,

that mesh is too powerful to overcome, too much of an ensnaring net, and it leaves the subject with little hope of renewal or positive change.

Focusing this thesis solely on Dickens and Gissing offered advantages and disadvantages. First, it allowed me to spend more time with each one than a four- or five-author study would have allowed. This is was especially valuable in the case of Dickens and Gissing because Gissing defined himself and his art over and against Dickens, so that the chapters on Gissing also provided insight into Dickens, and vice versa. Also, focusing on the specific novels I did allowed me to isolate my research to two authors whose work is invariably wrapped up with London and the Victorian city, so that I could limit my discussion to the specifically urban environment, and the country was, with few exceptions (a brief train ride here, a visit to a country estate there), signified metonymically and distantly, and any engagement with "the natural" had to come in a specifically urban environment. Beyond this, Dickens's excessive use of metonymy has been noted by other critics (Freedgood 17; Bishop 794; Reed 413), so he provided an excellent case study for an analysis of metonymy in the Victorian novel. On the other end of the spectrum, the relative lack of critical work on Gissing's use of the figure, and the lack of work related to his criticism of Dickens, made him an extremely useful subject, especially given his insight into Dickens and Dickens's use of suggestive external details, combined with Gissing's own unique framing and use of the figure.

However, this research was by no means exhaustive, and its focus on Dickens

and Gissing means that it was certainly not fully representative of the nineteenth-

century novel, or even novels of the 1850s and 1880s. This means that one obvious

potential avenue for further research would be to look at other novelists during the

period who dealt with the same themes, or those novelists who did focus more on the

country rather than the city. George Eliot, for example, especially with her recurring

metaphor of the spider's web in *Middlemarch* strikes me as an obvious starting point.

The narrator says, "all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular

web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe" (ch.

15). The narrator describes her narrative technique. She is not describing metonymy,

exactly, but she is thinking in terms of a vast web of connections, contiguities and

relevancies. Moreover, in the final lines of the novel's epilogue, she writes of Dorothea

Brooke's modest yet remarkable contribution to the world, and she claims, "the

growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts" (Finale). Eliot's

narrator comments directly on the potential for the unhistoric acts of her heroine to

reverberate outwards. The potential for change through small, modest acts which

reverberate outwards is something the nineteenth-century realist novel was clearly

thinking about, and the research in this dissertation suggests that the theme relates

directly to the novel's form and its use of metonymy. To paraphrase Eliot and Gissing

together: the question is how the artist can condense into a page that tempting and

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boundless range of relevancies called the universe, and, while doing so, suggest

narrative solutions to problems that are far more wide-ranging. The Victorian idea that

charity begins at home, in order that it may cause positive social changes that extend

well beyond the immediate domestic sphere, is in some ways embedded into the very

form of the nineteenth-century novel.[45]

Another opportunity for further research is to focus more directly on how

narratives use metonymy to organize actual, physical space and geography. An

ongoing theme throughout this thesis was the way metonymy brings us away from the

abstract or conceptual, and back to the physical, the literal and the material; a corollary

to this is that metonymy also thinks about the spatial. I mentioned Pamela K. Gilbert's

work on *Our Mutual Friend* in chapter two, but her wider work on medical mapping,

and how Victorians thought about and framed different forms of connection, combined

with some of my claims about metonymy and narrative, would provide a rich field of

study. Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900* already engages in some

of this work. He is concerned with "making the connection between geography and

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[45] Elizabeth Langland's book, *Nobody's Angels*: *Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology* (1995) does an excellent job of uncovering unconscious forms of interdependence in separate spheres ideology, as it was realized in the novel. Langland argues that Dickens's use of his "angels of competence" reveals the ways in which the middle-class husband was dependent upon a properly middle-class wife to manage his social status. A working-class woman would not have the social skills to properly manage a household, and this is one of the reasons why inter-class marriages virtually disappear in nineteenth-century fiction. I would argue that the narrative solution of the respectable middle-class marriage is also an attempt to think through how an artist can condense into a page a solution with effects that are far more wide-ranging.

literature explicit – mapping it: because a map is precisely that, a connection made visible – will allow us to see some significant relationships that have so far escaped us" (3). Michelle Allen and Richard Dennis note two moments involving forms of narrative mapping and the organization of space and place in *The Nether World*. In one, the narrator says, "Look at a map of Greater London," then, later, "Let us follow her" (ch. 39, ch. 40, qtd. in Allen 140, and Dennis 1-2). These are two very different ways of conceptualizing space. In a sense, I argued that in *The Nether World* Gissing was more focused on the latter form: he emphasizes the subjective, the *lack* of an understanding or conception that most characters have of a whole or complete "map": Clara looks out her window and sees workers toiling as indices of much larger, more complex forces – the same forces somehow indirectly responsible for her scarring and her failed ambitions – but this is not a complete understanding of those forces; Pennyloaf runs through her slum without any thought as to how her world relates to the rest of London. I grant, however, that this does not fully answer the question of how that narrative conceptualized or "mapped" space and place. It is a question I have thought about many times in the course of this research, most especially in my analysis of *The Nether World*, but also in my research into the other novels here.

I say it came up especially in the case of *The Nether World*, but that is only because that novel, relative to the others, made the question nearly explicit: what is it that constitutes the "world" of the nether world, or the various other interconnected,

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overlapping "worlds" that constitute the Victorian city? In the case of the nether world, we are often talking about an actual, physical or spatial distinction between neighbourhoods, but that is not *all* we are talking about. Sometimes that difference is psychological and subjective. In one of Gissing's other novels, *New Grub Street* (1891), Edwin Reardon, an unsuccessful novelist struggling financially, tells his wife, indicating two girls who pass them in the street, "They pass so close to us; they see us, and we see them; but the distance between is infinity. They don't belong to the same world as we poor wretches. They see everything in a different light" (ch. 15). Gissing is obviously not the only writer to make use of the metaphor of the city as a collection of overlapping worlds. Writing about the repulsive crowd in England's growing cities, Friedrich Engels spoke of "the brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest," which becomes "more repellant and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together" (24). In *Outcast London* (1971, 1984), Gareth Stedman Jones writes of the "unknown cities within the capital" (14). In *Master Humphrey's Clock,* Dickens writes of a "thousand worlds" co-existing within London, and, "each is distinct from, and almost unconscious of the existence of any other" (227). Tanya Agathocleous borrows from Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) in describing the urban metropolis as "a city visible but unseen," but whereas the nether world in Gissing's novel indicates what is primarily a class distinction, Agathocleous shows how Rushdie's novel "uses the phrase to draw attention to London's non-white communities" (205). Different forms of

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division and identity can create multiple overlapping worlds, similar to the multiple

overlapping networks discussed in *Bleak House*. China Miéville's much more recent

novel, *The City and the City* (2010), turns this general idea into its central conceit. The

premise of the novel is that there are two separate, distinct cities overlapping the same

geographic space, but kept legally "separate" by semiotic cues and codes; although

some neighbourhoods are given over entirely to one city or another, sometimes the two

cities are "cross-hatched" in the same geographic space. In such places, if you see a

certain style of dress, a certain color, a certain way of walking, you know it indicates

you are looking at someone from the "other" city, so you must quickly look away. To

"breach" the separation by interacting with the other city, in even a minor way, is a

crime.

I cite these examples to make the point that such examples are rife in fiction and

non-fiction narratives of the city, and, though I am fascinated by it, how metonymy

navigates this tension between different forms of "space" or "place" (physical, spatial,

cognitive, conceptual) would be its own separate study, albeit one closely aligned with

the present one. I still believe the vocabulary and the tools of cognitive linguistics

would be immensely valuable here; the field is already thinking about the ways in

which language appropriates space, sometimes doing so precisely in order to

conceptualize space. This is true in Lakoff and Johnson's *The Metaphors We Live By*, in

which the authors argue that our conceptual system is fundamentally grounded by

those most basic UP-DOWN, FRONT-BACK, IN-OUT and similar distinctions which

are relevant to our everyday human bodily functioning and navigating the world

around us.[46]

Finally, in terms of opportunities for further literary research based on the work

in this thesis, but leaving behind the Victorian period, the city, or the history of sanitary

reform, I believe the approach I have used here for analyzing metonymy is applicable to

virtually any narrative, and this is probably one of the strengths of this research. Here,

obviously, the options for further work and research are endless. Different narratives

and different narrative forms will use metonymy in unique and interesting ways. The

Victorian novels I examined here are traditional and linear, and they used metonymy to

suggest an increasingly dense mesh of interconnection and interdependence in an

increasingly large and populated urban world; they attempted to read and navigate a

vast web of connection that was variously fascinating, strange, and horrifying. This

"mesh," or what Ashton Nichols calls "a complex web of interdependent

interrelatedness" was to some extent legible, but that legibility was always

problematized, and a source of anxiety.

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[46] See Lakoff and Johnson 56. However, note that Langacker considers such spatial thinking as something that is "innate," and something which precedes that the experience of moving through space, not something solely based on it. However, he still concedes that most of our conceptual archetypes have a "strong experiential basis" ("Reference-point" 3). I would side with Langacker here.

Other stories, other forms of storytelling, will, through their deployment of

metonymy, suggest alternate ways of understanding this complex web, as well as our

relationship to it. Indeed, beyond our own relationship to the world and environment,

novels will explore – or attempt to explore – relationships that exist entirely outside the

human sphere, or they will attempt to explore the human sphere from the nonhuman.[47]

After all, Pavlov's dogs understood metonymy in at least one of its nonverbal forms.

This is also true of every dog who lifts their leg next to a tree to mark their presence—a

kind of zoosemiotic canine metonymy.[48]

Metonymy and metonymization, far from being just figures of convention, habit

or cliché, allow us to rethink some of the fundamental relationships that structure the

world. Narratives, in their deployment of metonymy, have a privileged access to this

process, this refiguring and reshaping of how we understand the world and the myriad

overlapping, often hidden, complex relationships and connections that constitute it. I

believe that continuing to study different narrative deployments of this powerful figure

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[47] The play of urban metonymies in André Alexis's recent Giller Prize-winning novel, *Fifteen Dogs* (2015), wherein the story is told largely from the perspective of fifteen dogs in Toronto who are given human intelligence, comes to mind.

[48] Another example of zoosemiotic canine metonymy: clicker training, in which you mark a specific behavior as good, and as deserving of a treat (you only click if you are prepared to give a treat), is training via metonymic signals. The *click* serves as a metonymic bridge between the behavior and the reward, creating a more complex chain of associations in precisely the way Langacker describes. The simple chain [[behavior]-[click]] and the simple chain [[click]-[reward]] lead to the more complex chain, [[[behavior]-[click]]-[[click]-[reward]]].

will give literature scholars a much deeper understanding not just of what novels are,

but of what they do, and what they reveal.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. William Hogarth, "The Enraged Musician."