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"THROUGH THE HEART OF THE TOWN A DEADLY SEWER EBBED AND FLOWED": THE IMAGERY OF THE RIVER THAMES IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS, OUR MUTUAL FRIEND, LITTLE DORRIT* AND *HARD TIMES*

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***Abstract**: The River Thames plays an essential role in the physical and imaginary geography of London. Depicted as a setting and a symbol, a locus for the underworld and a fluid metaphor, the Thames provides a picturesque river background in the novels of Charles Dickens. This paper examines the connotations ascribed to the water imagery in a selection of novels by Dickens, tracing their response to the river as a visible natural element in an industrialized London. In the context of the overpopulation and the doubling of the Thames as a dumping ground for sewage, by mid-nineteenth century the mutability of the river becomes associated with pollution, corruption and crime, harbouring prisoners, pickpockets and beggars as illustrated in* Little Dorrit *and* Hard Times*. For the passers-by who walk along the banks of the River Thames, this sepulchral space may designate an unstable divider or a link between legitimate and illegitimate spaces, social layers and human conditions. It is equally a site of death and renewal, of the picturesque and moral decline, revealed in* Great Expectations *and* Our Mutual Friend *as a symbol of transition. Thus, the novels of Charles Dickens revert to the imagery of the Thames as a constantly revisited organizing principle.*

***Keywords**: Thames, London, picturesque, liminality, industrialization, psychogeography*

1. The Imagery of the River Thames in Dickens' Time

The writings of Charles Dickens are closely associated with the River Thames. As part of a wider discourse concerning the menacing traits of the natural elements, the river engenders a particularly strong literary response. In order to trace the reasons behind the negative connotations assigned, one has to examine the state of the Thames at the time that Dickens began writing, namely mid-1830s. Not only was the problem of pollution at its worst, but in 1832, when his career was about to start, the old London bridge was demolished and replaced, causing a rise and fall of the tide which sent the city to primitive conditions. This change, together with the introduction of a draining system which discharged into the Thames, contributed to the problem by allowing the sludge from the more polluted downstream to be carried upstream, into the heart of London (Hibbert et al. 248). Hence, the Thames is portrayed by Dickens as a force beyond human control.

As the number of its inhabitants doubled between 1800 and 1850, transforming London into the largest capital in the world, the amount of waste became unmanageable. Diseases began to spread due to insanitary conditions. At the height of this phenomenon, it is attested that the curtains of the House of Commons had to be soaked in chloride of lime in order to permit the continuation of sessions. Even the death of prince Albert in 1861 is believed to have been caused by typhoid, a water-borne disease (Barczewski 130). Arguably the most forthright

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portrayal of the bleak living conditions in London is presented in *Hard Times* (1854) under the guise of the industrial Coketown:

> It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.
>
> (*Hard Times* 26-27)

Indeed, considering the grim surroundings, belching chimneys, mechanization and disruption of individuality, nature is in its turn not a source of vitality but a corrupted channel of residues. The readers of the novel would have probably made a direct connection between the Thames and the purple river since the press itself was quite concerned about the state of the water. For instance, as early as 1828, William Heath's "Monster Soup" cartoon draws attention to the unsanitary water extracted from the Thames which was equally used for domestic purposes. The popular *Punch* magazine also included cartoons entitled "Father Thames introducing his offspring (Diphtheria, Scrofula and Cholera) to the fair city of London" in 1858 – known as the year of the "Great Stink" – and "The London Bathing Season" from 1859 – a boy refusing the invitation of a personified Thames in the form of a sluggish man floating above the slimy waters – as signs of alarm. In his biography of Dickens, Peter Ackroyd remarks that "[i]f a late twentieth-century person were suddenly to find himself in a tavern or house of the period, he would be literally sick – sick with the smells, sick with the food, sick with the atmosphere around him" (76). This description reveals the misery and squalor accompanying the industrial revolution.

It is interesting to note that Dickens does not criticize the corruption of the river in a very blunt manner in his public column of *Household Words*, nor does he openly condemn it in his literary works. In an essay written in 1850, for instance, he offers a witty description of a conversation with the proud Father Thames on the various flowing deadly substances as a result of the industrial progress (Flanders 223). It is his editor, Henry Morley, who is recorded to have written a column entitled "A Way to Clean Rivers." Nevertheless, Dickens does recount the terrible situation in letters, such as the one written in 1858 to his friend, William de Cerjat:

> You will have read in the papers that the Thames at London is most horrible. I have to cross Waterloo or London Bridge to get to the Railroad when I come down there, and I can certify that the offensive smells, even in that short whiff, have been of a most head-and-stomach distracting nature. Nobody knows what is to be done; at least, everybody knows a plan, and everybody else knows it won't do; in the meantime cart-loads of chloride of Lime are shot into the filthy stream, and do something – I hope.
>
> (*Letters* 451)

Instead of adopting the same grave tone, Dickens offers in his writings of fiction a comical turn to the actual tragic events happening in the capital. This last detail regarding the impressive amounts of bleach scattered around London is recalled in *Our Mutual Friend*, when Eugene

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and Mortimer pose as lime merchants for their expedition to the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters by the east end riverside (*Our Mutual Friend* 165-168). The sewage problem was solved shortly only after the death of Charles Dickens, with the construction of embankments under the auspices of Joseph Bazalgette. Thus, in Dickens's time, the Thames did indeed become literally a more menacing force than it had been before, mainly because of the increased power of the tide, its bleak exposed shores, and because of the fact that it was a recognized health hazard.

Paradoxically, the Thames remains a focus of the picturesque, which up to the nineteenth century was reserved to historical non-fictional writings. In the eighteenth century we have William Gilpin with *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty*, *On Picturesque Travel and On Sketching Landscape* (1792) – and Uvedale Price with *Essays on the Picturesque, as compared with the sublime and the beautiful, and on the use of studying Pictures for the purpose of improving real landscape* (1794) which explain the beauty and sublimity found in the disarray and destitution of landscapes: "[t]urn the lawn into a piece of broken ground: plant rugged oaks instead of flowering shrubs: break the edges of the walk: give it the rudeness of a road; mark it with wheel-tracks; and scatter around a few stones, and brushwood […] make it *rough*, and you make it also *picturesque*" (Gilpin 51,original emphasis). Relevant studies on the imagery of the Thames are Samuel Ireland's *Picturesque Views on the River Thames* (1792) or William Combe's *History of the River Thames* in two volumes (1794, 1796), published by John and Josiah Boydell. In the realist vein, Dickens adopts a new form of the picturesque visible in the river scenes. He is convinced that "the conventional idea of the picturesque is associated with such misery and degradation that a new picturesque will have to be established as the world goes onwards" (Dickens, qtd. in Andrews 286). Thus, his works contain portrayals of the dismal, eerie sometimes sinister Thames which fascinate, empower and inspire curiosity. The reader is drawn in and transformed into a spectator of carefully crafted visual images of the Thames:

> Eight o'clock had struck before I got into the air, that was scented, not disagreeably, by the chips and shavings of the long-shore boat-builders, and mast, oar, and block makers […] what stranded ships repairing in dry docks I lost myself among, what old hulls of ships in course of being knocked to pieces, what ooze and slime and other dregs of tide, what yards of ship-builders and ship-breakers, what rusty anchors blindly biting into the ground though for years off duty, what mountainous country of accumulated casks and timber, how many rope-walks that were not the Old Green Copper.
>
> (*Great Expectations* 354)

This dramatic description of Bill Barley's house at Mill Pond Bank below London bridge is transposed in terms of the picturesque. The chaos of the banks is described as quaint and the claustrophobic atmosphere of "accumulated casks" evokes a feeling of national pride. Despite the "ooze and slime and other dregs of tide," Pip considers that the miasma emanating from the river and the boat builders is not disagreeable. After finding Mill Pond Bank, he states that: "it was a fresh kind of place, all circumstances considered, where the wind from the river had room to turn itself round" (*Great Expectations* 354). The River Thames becomes in writing a flowing metaphor and is assigned multiple layers of connotations.

2. Crossing the River: The River Thames as a Liminal Space

The river is used as a liminal space dividing different states and conditions of human existence. *Little Dorrit* is arguably the novel with the most river crossings. The characters continuously

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use bridges which enable them to cross the boundaries of space and social position. The term liminality – derived from the Latin *limen*, "threshold" – refers to transitions, both physical and metaphorical, which enable protagonists such as Amy Dorrit to oscillate between legitimate and illegitimate spaces. Arnold Van Gennep, who coined the concept in his study *Rites de passage*, considers that any transition or movement implies three stages, namely separation, liminality and union (20-21). Or, as Greenstein states, "individuals undergoing a rite of passage pass through three stages – preliminary, liminal, and post-liminal – before emerging into society with a higher social status" (275). The period of transition in social position, when Amy works for Mrs. Clennam as a seamstress is the time when she regularly crosses the Iron Bridge, thus overcoming her condition for short periods of time and getting acquainted with her future lifestyle. The River Thames functions as a liminal space in Amy Dorrit's ascension from "the lower" social strata located south of the River Thames – specifically, Amy resides in Marshalsea prison – to the "upper" classes found north of the river – Mrs. Clennam's house is located on Thames Street – until she discovers with the help of Arthur Clennam her true status as the heiress of a grand fortune. Nevertheless, the Dorrits eventually go back to the state of penury and degradation, so this rite of passage results in Amy changing her status not because of the sum of money she inherited, but through marriage.

The Iron Bridge (or Southwark Bridge) also represents a heterotopic space in-between because at certain points in the novel it becomes a reflection of the hardships and psychological progress experienced by Amy. Although this foot bridge is used by the heroine as a refuge to clear her thoughts, the water below her reflects the turmoil with which Amy's life is surrounded:

> Thus they emerged upon the Iron Bridge, which was as quiet after the roaring streets, as though it had been open country. The wind blew roughly, the wet squalls came rattling past them, skimming the pools on the road and pavement, and raining them down into the river. The clouds raced on furiously in the lead-coloured sky, the smoke and mist raced after them, the dark tide ran fierce and strong in the same direction. Little Dorrit seemed the least, the quietest, and weakest of Heaven's creatures.
>
> (*Little Dorrit* 91)

Again, the water attains negative connotations at first sight. In light of the dangers which surround her, portrayed by symbolic juxtaposition of the unbridled river under a storm and human suffering, Amy is apparently presented as "the quietest," "the weakest" victim. However, when considering the bridge a liminal space of transgression, she is again placed above the hustle and bustle, overcoming all obstacles posed by a world of destitution, on her way to the upper-class residing in northern London. The residents of Marshalsea are also described in terms of "the turbid living river that flowed through it, and flowed on" (73), again suggesting a transitory, short-term threshold of lawless existence. The City and the Borough are hence presented in dichotomy. Amy and Arthur are liminal characters who move freely between the two sides of the river, often meeting on the bridge and accompanying one another. Ultimately, the liminal space of bridge brings them together and facilitates their rite of passage to a new marital and social status.

Other disrupting border situation which take place above the Thames are the internal crisis Amy faces when she rejects John Chivery's attempted proposal of marriage (207) and the equally tormenting kindling of feelings for Arthur Clennam (186). In *Our Mutual Friend*, the marriage between John Harmon's alter-ego John Rokesmith and Bella Wilfer happens in Greenwich. Consequently, the bride to be crosses the river by boat to attend her wedding, followed by a "marriage dinner" in a hotel with a view of the Thames. The river plays a prominent role in the adoption of a new marital status. The river and its crossing are symbolic

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of liminal stages towards a lawful existence. Altogether, the river witnesses and borrows the nature of the transient turbulences affecting those who pass it and functions as a space in-between, used physically and metaphorically as a threshold for a change in condition.

3. "Water Thieves" on the Banks of the River

The Thames is widely portrayed as the whereabouts of the criminal underworld, with the southern banks of the river arguably at the threshold between civilization and wilderness. It is interesting to note that not only Dickens regards Victorian Thames as a harbor for criminals. One can think of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes pursuing villains through the maze of streets spreading along the river in various cases or actually chasing them on the river, as in *The Sign of Four*. Thomas de Quincey's seminal essay *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts* (1827) also focuses on the appetite of the Victorian public for gore, murder and the sensational. The essay relies on the public reception of the sudden murders happening in 1811 on Ratcliff Highway, which runs parallel to the Thames. Another eloquent real-life example is the unresolved "Thames murders" which may be linked to Jack the Ripper. That being said, Dickens complies with the tastes of his audience which preserves a steadfast trend-line well after his death.

Still, the novels of Charles Dickens present the foul area surrounding the Thames as a stage for the demise of lawbreakers who operate alongside the banks of the river – what he calls "water thieves" in his *Household Words* article "Down with the Tide" (qtd. in Allen, *Cleansing the City* 96). In *Oliver Twist*, Sykes uses a house on Jacob's Island as a hiding place. Instead of the cleanliness that the proximity to water should entail, the slums are filled with foul substances carried by the tide. The neighbourhood has "dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations, every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage: all these ornament the banks of Jacob's Island" (*Oliver Twist* 402). Again, the description of the decadent state of the south bank of the Thames takes a lighter comedic, or even sarcastic tone since filth does not smear, but ornate the houses by the river in a picturesque manner. If Sykes murders Nancy and ultimately falls prey to remorse and commits suicide, the duplicitous Rigaud/ Blandois from *Little Dorrit* is a more vicious character who crosses the channel in order to get from Marseilles to London and then the Thames in order to gather information and blackmail Mrs. Clennam. The descent into the Thames is a descent into the criminal underworld with no hope for redemption.

The foul matter of the river is transfigured into moral squalor. Michelle Allen observes in the study *Cleansing the City* that "Dickens uses miasmic theory to its full metaphorical potential, imagining fetid matter and foul air not only as sources of disease but also as sources of the moral and social disorder of the city" (8). In *Our Mutual Friend*, the notorious criminal area of Ratcliff Highway is inhabited by dredgermen Gaffer Hexam and his former partner, Rogue Riderhood. Their gruesome enterprise involves searching the Thames for corpses. Nevertheless, when Gaffer accuses Riderhood of robbing a man, the latter charges Hexam with the murder of John Harmon. The hostility of the cityscape reflects the predatory instincts of its inhabitants:

> The wheels rolled on, and rolled down by the Monument and by the Tower, and by the Docks; down by Ratcliffe, and by Rotherhithe; down by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river. In and out among vessels that seemed to have got ashore, and houses that seemed to have got

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> afloat—among bow-splits staring into windows, and windows staring into ships—the wheels rolled on, until they stopped at a dark corner, river-washed and otherwise not washed at all, where the boy alighted and opened the door.
>
> (*Our Mutual Friend* 21)

Overall, the general appetence for hidden, forbidden and mysterious areas of London which the protagonists roam evokes the characteristics of psychogeography. According to Guy Debord, psychogeography represents "the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of the individual" (Debord, qtd. in Coverley 10). The wonderings of the characters through the labyrinthine streets polluted by the waters of the Thames and threatened by prisoners, pickpockets and beggars shape a particular mind frame. Considering the precise topography of the streets surrounding the Thames – among other areas – several mind maps may be sketched by the *flâneurs*, some more bleak than the others. As Dickens himself recounts, "I knew well enough where to find Vice and Misfortune of all kinds, if I had chosen; but they were put out of sight, and my houselessness had many miles upon miles of streets in which it could, and did, have its own solitary way" ("Night Walks" 185). The following example illustrates the attention paid to obscure places and spaces:

> Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam duly got to the Surrey side of Westminster Bridge, and crossed the bridge, and made along the Middlesex shore towards Millbank. In this region are a certain little street called Church Street, and a certain little blind square, called Smith Square, in the centre of which last retreat is a very hideous church with four towers at the four corners, generally resembling some petrified monster, frightful and gigantic, on its back with its legs in the air. They found a tree nearby in a corner, and a blacksmith's forge, and a timber yard, and a dealer's in old iron. What a rusty portion of a boiler and a great iron wheel or so meant by lying half-buried in the dealer's fore-court, nobody seemed to know or to want to know. Like the Miller of questionable jollity in the song, they cared for Nobody, no not they, and Nobody cared for them.
>
> (*Our Mutual Friend* 427)

The conflict between Bradley Headstone and Eugene Wrayburn over the hand of Charlie Hexam's sister Lizzie alludes to the psychological weight of the surroundings. The crumbling state of the buildings encourages self-destruction. Wrayburn idles away his life while Headstone, violently in love with Lizzie, attacks and drops his competitor into the Thames. Although Wrayburn does not drown, Headstone, an educated man of great prospects, is so remorseful that he commits suicide. Eventually, fate and the providential plan take control over the narrative. Thus, the Thames provides a liminal site of examining the underworld and acts as an agent of the divine resolution.

4. The Thames as a Symbol of Death and Rebirth

The river constitutes a central motif dominating the spaces in between, including the liminal areas between life and death. Peter Ackroyd considers that "Dickens had an obsession [with death] which went beyond the conventional morbidity of his time" (518). *Our Mutual Friend* provides a relevant example of the centrality of death symbolized in the shape of the River Thames. The novel begins, ends and is driven by real or hoax deaths. A body is collected from

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the waters at the beginning of the novel. Conversely, two characters – Headstone and Riderhood – drown at the end of it. *Great Expectations* begins with an almost magical rebirth of Magwitch ascending from the murky waters and ends with his death. The river acquires almost mythical proportions as a Victorian Styx carrying the bodies of the dead.

As critics have noted, Dickens exhibits a "profound attraction of repulsion" (John Forster, qtd. in Allen, *The Moving Pageant* 5). Lizzie Hexam displays this fascination with the river, a provider for her family but also a threatening force which ultimately claims her father. She clearly associates the Thames with death and fears it in spite of rowing her father's boat most of her life:

> She had heard of people suffering Death for bloodshed of which they were afterwards proved pure, and those ill-fated persons were not, first, in that dangerous wrong in which her father stood. Then at the best, the beginning of his being set apart, whispered against, and avoided, was a certain fact. It dated from that very night. And as the great black river with its dreary shores was soon lost to her view in the gloom, so, she stood on the river's brink unable to see into the vast blank misery of a life suspected, and fallen away from by good and bad, but knowing that it lay there dim before her, stretching away to the great ocean, Death.
>
> (*Our Mutual Friend* 72)

The Thames acquires a hyperbolical dimension of a site able to physically harbor and transport all dead bodies of London. Lizzie and her father borrow the role of Charon, the ferryman who carries the souls of the dead across the river and into the underworld. It is interesting to acknowledge that Hexam does not actually consider stealing from the dead an illegal or immoral task, hence does so regularly. The ferry toll money that Charon allegedly demands is thus collected. He argues "[w]hat world does a dead man belong to? 'Tother world. What world does money belong to? This world. How can money be a corpse's?" (*Our Mutual Friend* 5). It is a vengeful river as well, for after being disturbed by Hexam, Father Thames receives retribution. Hexam Gaffer commits suicide by drowning. Bradley Headstone and Rogue Riderhood both suffer the same fate and thus pay for their actions.

In the psychogeographic vein, another relevant character displaying the psychological influence of the river is Betty Higden. Betty is a representative of the poor of London, constantly walking instead of taking a carriage, wandering the streets like a pilgrim, always on her way to see a friend or relative. Despite her financial situation, she nurtures children who have been discarded by society. She is portrayed as a strong and proud woman who abhors charity. Eventually, she prefers to die rather than end up in a poorhouse. The murky waters of the Thames call those who considers themselves beyond salvation, offering relief:

> In those pleasant little towns on Thames, you may hear the fall of the water over the weirs or even, in still weather, the rustle of the rushes; and from the bridge you may see the young river, dimpled like a young child, playfully gliding away among the trees, unpolluted by the defilements that lie in wait for it on its course, and as yet out of hearing of the deep summons of the sea. It were too much to pretend that Betty Higden made out such thoughts; no; but she heard the tender river whispering to many like herself, "Come to me, come to me! When the cruel shame and terror you have so long fled from, most beset you, come me! I am the Relieving Officer appointed by eternal ordinance to do my work; I am not held in estimation according as I shirk it. My breast is softer than the pauper-nurse's; death in my arms is peacefuller than among the pauper-wards. Come to me!"

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(*Our Mutual Friend* 525-526)

The Thames exudes an eerie atmosphere. The previous passage offers a nightmarish vision, shifting the tone from a bucolic landscape of bliss envisaged outside of London to the bleak cityscape found in the heart of the city. The focus of the narrative rests on the roads less travelled – except by the impoverished – and on the spectacle of destitution. London, in its turn, is seen as wasteland. Nevertheless, the Thames is personified first as a child who offers comfort to the uncorrupted, and then as a nurturing mother set by the providence to receive the pauper who find no other refuge. In this respect, fallen figures such as Nancy in Oliver Twist equally identifies with the murky waters of the Thames and considers herself beyond salvation: "Look at that dark water. How many times do you read of such as I who spring into the tide" (*Oliver Twist* 373). In the end, dying becomes the ultimate gesture of independence and the river assures a safe passage to freedom.

The Thames is repeatedly evoked not only as an agent of death, but also of rebirth. In the denouement of *Great Expectations*, when Magwitch fights Compeyson, falls into the river but comes to the surface alone, he experiences a form of baptism. The customs officer acknowledges his new identity and status: "His name is Abel Magwitch, otherwise Provis. I apprehend that man, and call upon him to surrender, and you to assist" (*Great Expectations* 481). The circularity of the novel is assured by this gesture, since Magwitch comes to Pip literally out of the Thames, "soaked in water" (*Great Expectations* 20) at the beginning of the novel, only to finally attempt to use the Thames as a means of escape. A series of river scenes depict Pip, Herbert and Magwitch rowing up and down the dark waters to no avail. The baptism eventually becomes a rite of passage inasmuch as Magwitch/Provis dies after the contact with the cold, infested waters of the Thames. The dual identity acquired as a result of emerging in the Thames is also visible in *Our Mutual Friend.* Bradley Headstone ditches his schoolmaster uniform in a hiding place and dresses as a bargeman in pursuit of Eugene Wrayburn. Upon his return to London, he undresses, bathes in the Thames and then returns to his schoolmaster clothes and identity. The feigned murder of John Harmon allows him to escape the burden of being forced into a marriage for financial reasons. He descends into the river as himself, but emerges as Julius Handford and later as John Rokesmith. In order to regain his first identity, he searches for Mr. Kibble at the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters near the Thames who confirms his origins. The river constitutes a site of death and renewal, a site where identities are bestowed and disposed of.

5. Conclusions

The industrialization and overpopulation of London together with the underdeveloped infrastructure, unable to accommodate the flow of people and the flux of waste at the time Dickens was writing, transformed the river Thames into a sepulchral space. Dickens uses the whereabouts of the Thames to create an underworld of London, a site of pollution, death and criminality. Nevertheless, the discourse of death is aligned to that of rebirth, expressed through recurrent picturesque scenes and images of baptism. Despite the menacing nature of the river, the Thames remains a liminal space of potential renewal. It might as well be perceived as a representative of both the external nature trying to reclaim the city and the human nature, corrupting the environment. The mind frames of the peripatetic protagonists who wonder the banks, bridges and labyrinthine streets spreading along the river borrow the nature of the turbulent river. The river Thames, in its turn, reflects the versatility of human troubles and emotions and therefore continues to trigger powerfully imaginative responses in Dickens's writing.

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