

# Text, Reader and Metaphor: Exploring Links between ‘Disparate Domains’ in Some Novels of Charles Dickens

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## Abstract

One of the literary devices often used in a creative work is the metaphor. In my paper, I aim to analyze the reasons why a novel uses metaphors at all, the importance of the reader's response to the text and how the use of metaphorical language creates a specific world within the text, thereby imparting a special significance to the novel as an artistic whole. I have referred to a few novels of Charles Dickens, relating them to the phenomenological theory of art and the Reader – Response Theory. I have further attempted to explore linguistic views and theories by Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser, Jauss and Saussure among others, relating their views to the use of metaphor in literary works in general, and to some of Dickens's novels in particular. I have shown how Dickens relates the metaphor of the machine as signifying mechanical human responses in the 'disparate domains' of the school and the home. Indeed, the metaphor serves as a bridge between the text and the reader, linking hitherto unrelated facts and endowing a literary work with an evocative quality that enhances its artistic value.

**[Keywords:** Dickens, Metaphor, Reader-response theory, machine, art, language.]

Reading a text is a creative process that goes far beyond what is written by the author. The reader's imagination plays a very important role in this process and thus the text is not only the creative work of the author but is inevitably acted upon by the imagination of the reader. Thereby evolves a specific world of the text, constituted by what Roman Ingarden calls:

*'intentionale satzkorrelate* (intentional sentence correlatives)...The sentences are 'component parts' insofar as they make statements, claims, or observations, or convey information, and so establish various perspectives in the text. ...But...they are not the sum total of the text itself. ... [They mark] those points at which the reader is able to 'climb aboard' the text. ...This is true of all sentences in literary works.'<sup>1</sup>

One of the literary devices often used to present this specific world in a creative work is the metaphor. In my paper, I aim to analyze the reasons why a novel uses metaphors at all and how the use of metaphorical language creates a specific world within the text, thereby imparting a special significance to the novel as an artistic whole. In the course of my discussion I shall refer to a few novels of one of the greatest novelists of the

nineteenth century, Charles Dickens, whose works display a conscious use of metaphorical language which demands a remarkable interaction of the reader with the text.

The use of metaphorical language enriches a literary work, for it has the quality of implication that renders explicit comparison and explanation unnecessary. Most metaphors used in a literary work have an inner depth of meaning, which continue to add new dimensions to the central idea. Max Black in Metaphor and Thought states that a metaphor is an utterance with two subjects – a primary one, spoken about metaphorically in terms of a secondary one. The point of such utterance provides, by means of a secondary subject, not merely a set of comparisons or figurative expression, but a 'model' or 'filter' with whose help we can achieve new understanding of the primary subject :

The metaphorical utterance works by "projecting upon" the primary subject a set of "associated implications"..... comprised in the implicative complex... that are predictable of the secondary subject.<sup>2</sup>

In Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times*, for instance, the term 'machine' may be taken to be the secondary subject, and the mechanical aspects of life as presented in the novel, constitute the primary subject. The machine may be seen to be an all-pervading image, representing the mechanical education system, as well as the mechanical responses to life and human relationships in the novel. Mr. Gradgrind in *Hard Times* as well as Mr. Dombey in *Dombey and Son*, display a mechanical attitude to life in their instinctive denial and rejection of the finer emotions of love and sympathy for their immediate families. They represent, on a smaller scale, the dehumanised and mechanised industrial society of the times, thus providing a new dimension to the word 'machine'. This set of implications, attributed to the primary subject, forms the 'implicative complex' which is supported by the metaphor's secondary subject, thereby 'Every metaphor is the tip of a submerged model'<sup>3</sup>.

Metaphors used in a literary work display an inner depth of meaning that continue to add new dimensions to the primary subject. The term 'machine' as referred to in *Hard Times* and other novels by Charles Dickens, is the secondary subject, and it reveals hidden depths of meaning when used metaphorically, namely, mechanisation of industrial society, mechanical responses in educational, social and familial relationships and other 'submerged' facts that the reader was perhaps unaware of in association with the meaning of the term.

The reason why two concepts are stretched and twisted in this way – 'Why [we] try to see A as metaphorically B, when it is literally not B', is because as Max Black states 'the available literal resources [are] insufficient to express our sense of the rich correspondences ... and analogies conventionally separated.'<sup>4</sup> In *Hard Times*, *Dombey*

and *Son*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit*, for instance, we do get such 'conventionally separated subjects' – the machine on the one hand, and educational, economic, familial, religious and industrial themes on the other hand; it is only through metaphorical analysis that the 'rich correspondences' between these contrasting subjects are revealed, thus enriching the novels artistically, for metaphorical language retains the quality of implication. Dickens's novels, then, cease to be merely stories reflecting segments of Victorian life and society. They have implications beyond the text that involve the participation of the reader as well.

In this context, we may refer to Lawrence Sterne's sensitive remark on the ability of the reader to establish such 'rich correspondences':

No author who understands the just boundaries of decorum...would presume to think all : the truest respect which you can pay to the readers' understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own.<sup>5</sup>

Sterne's conception of a literary text relates to the phenomenological theory of art which takes into account not only the literary text and its development, but also the responses of the reader to the text. Indeed, the fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written. The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of the text and imagination.<sup>6</sup>

The phenomenological theory influenced Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, who have both analysed the Reception Theory or the Reader – Response Theory in literature. Jauss believes that interpretation of a text is 'tripartite, consisting of understanding (*intelligere*), interpretation or explanation (*interpretare*) and application (*applicare*) .... These three activities are interconnected... Application includes both acts of understanding and interpretation [for it transports] the text out of its past or foreignness and into the interpreter's present'<sup>7</sup>. While German linguists, like Jauss, have worked on *Rezeption* (reception) and *Wirkung* (response or effect) in relation to literary history, Iser is primarily concerned with the individual text and how readers respond to it. According to Iser, a text acquires meaning as a result of an interaction between the text and the reader; thus, the literary work is 'neither completely text, nor completely reader, but a combination or merger of the two'.<sup>8</sup> The text thereby becomes common

territory, the meeting ground of textual images and the reader, which finally leads to individual interpretation of the text.

Furthermore, Iser places great importance on the 'implied reader' in the interpretation of a literary text. The 'implied reader' incorporates 'both the pre-structuring of the potential meaning by the text and the reader's actualisation of this potential through the reading process'.<sup>9</sup> David Lodge analyses this 'reading process' further, stating that when we read anything, our attention moves in two directions simultaneously, one 'outward or centrifugal', interpreting the words we read as the things they signify, and the other direction 'inward or centripetal in which we try to develop from the words a sense of the larger verbal patterns they make.... In all literary structures the final direction of meaning is inward.'<sup>10</sup>

The founder of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure and structuralists such as Claude Levi Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Michael Foucault added new dimensions to the significance of language. Saussure asserted that 'language is a storehouse of sound images, and writing is the tangible form of those images.'<sup>11</sup> The Saussurian sign unites a 'concept and a sound image' [and] establishes a relation between something physically present (the signifier) and something absent (meaning, the signified).<sup>12</sup> Todorov, another noted linguist, also asserts the importance of the sign or 'symbol', stating that 'a text or a discourse becomes symbolic at the point when through an effort of interpretation, we discover in it an indirect meaning.'<sup>13</sup>

The 'unwritten' part of the text, then, through implication and interpretation, plays a greater role in our appreciation of the text than merely the body of the text itself.<sup>14</sup> Virginia Woolf observes in her study of Jane Austen, that the latter :

stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is apparently a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life, scenes which are outwardly trivial. ... The turns and twists of the dialogue keep us on the tenterhooks of suspense.<sup>15</sup>

These 'turns and twists' activate the readers' imagination, influencing the implications of the written part of the text, so that 'trivial scenes' suddenly acquire 'an enduring form of life'. The text thereby acquires, as Iser says, two poles, the artistic, that is, that part of the text created by the writer, and the aesthetic – referring to the realization achieved by the reader.

One of the 'artistic' devices employed by the writer is the metaphoric process which stimulates the aesthetic realization of the reader. Paul Ricoeur suggests that through the use of metaphorical language one reaches 'the mythic level, where [the mind's] function of discovery is set free'.<sup>16</sup> This 'mythic level' achieved by the human mind is stimulated by the use of metaphor. Psychologists point out many possible roles

for the metaphor. Some mental processes 'can take immediate metaphoric forms' expressing 'a link between disparate domains.'<sup>17</sup>

If we relate these functions of the metaphor to Dickens's use of this figure of speech in his work, we may note the multiple implications that a word can acquire and the 'rich correspondences' that the reader may become aware of in relation to it. We may consider, for instance, the many implications that the word 'machine' acquires in Dickens's novels. The first important novelist (though not the pioneer) in using literature for reformation of the educational and social situation of his time, Dickens relates the metaphor of the machine to signify mechanical human responses in the 'disparate domains' of the school and the home. Through his novels dealing with education, he attempts to expose the hollowness of the contemporary education system prevailing in many schools in England, as well as the ineffectuality of the so-called 'teachers' of the Victorian age who failed to inspire in their students any desire for true knowledge, arousing in them instead feelings of apathy and frustration. The very names of some of the 'teachers' and 'students' in his novels are metaphorical and self-explanatory. Mr. Gradgrind in *Hard Times* 'gradually grinds' facts and figures into the minds of his hapless students; Mr. Bounderby is 'bound' by the inflexible tenets of a misguided utilitarianism, Mr. M'choakamchild is determined to 'choak' the children with scientific facts, and the students are referred to as 'little vessels' into whom 'gallons of facts' are poured until they are 'filled to the brim'<sup>18</sup> – reminding us of molten metal that is poured into vessels before it becomes hardened. Bitzer, the 'ideal pupil' in *Hard Times* does indeed become 'hardened' by the 'education' he receives at Mr. Gradgrind's school, for he refuses to admit to any feeling of gratitude for his former teacher, saying that his schooling was paid for, that it was a 'bargain' which ended when he left school. Bitzer's attitude reflects the mechanical mercantile mentality that had pervaded even the education system of Victorian England. In this way, by portraying a wide variety of 'teachers' and students, and their individual eccentricities, enriched by his artistic use of metaphorical language, Dickens created a lasting impression on the mind of the reader. Thereby, he was successful in establishing a link between the 'disparate domain' of the school – one of the most important areas where effective education may be imparted – and the metaphor of the machine. Again, while W(h)ackford Squeers in *Nicholas Nickelby* imparts corporal punishment to his hapless students, Bitzer, the 'ideal' pupil in *Hard Times* seems to have matured into the cold and unfeeling Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*. With his 'head' filled with 'stony' facts, Headstone, the 'ideal' teacher ultimately degenerates into a vicious murderer. Dickens, through the depiction of Headstone's hatred of Eugene Wrayburn and his passion for Lizzie Hexam, shows the terrifying depths to which human nature may sink when subjected to an education system that dehumanizes rather than illumines and inspires. By imparting to these characters deliberate metaphoric connotations and portraying the dire consequences

that they suffer in the end, Dickens seems to be warning his readers about the latent danger awaiting the exponents of a misguided utilitarian system of education as practised in many of the schools of his time.

'Home', and all the qualities traditionally associated with the word, is the other 'disparate domain' which Dickens invests with metaphoric significance, by displaying a harsh, often monstrously mechanical atmosphere prevailing within the homes of many characters in his novels. In such homes dwell the materialistic Mr. Dombey, the rigid and inflexible Mr. Gradgrind and the unfeeling Mrs. Clennam, all of whom initially reject the finer qualities of love, kindness and sympathetic acceptance of human failings. Governed by their cold, mechanical instincts, not only do they cause untold misery to members of their family, but almost bring about their own destruction as well. For instance, Mr. Dombey inhabits a coldly materialistic world and has no room, either in his house or in his heart, for the human emotions of love and kindness. What is more, the 'House' of Mr. Dombey takes on a new significance, quite different from the symmetrical house of Mr. Gradgrind. It represents a business house, the centre of business transactions and trade ventures at the helm of which is the dominating figure of Mr. Dombey himself, intensely male, an empire – builder, conquering and controlling the land and the seas with astute business acumen and ruthlessness. Mr. Dombey's house and that of Mrs. Clennam's, represent the business- houses or huge trading companies that emerged in the Victorian age, on which depended the country's economy.

Furthermore, the word 'Dombey' signifies a monstrous presence, for Mr. Dombey represents a wholly mercantile mentality of an affluent capitalist society which precludes all finer human feelings and sentiments. Mr. Dombey, ironically, lives in a metaphorical prison as he rejects the love of Florence in his desire to live up to the exacting standards that he has set for himself. He is described as a tree whose 'root is broad and deep,'<sup>19</sup> symbolising the deep-rooted evil he has helped to spread in an increasingly materialistic and dehumanised society. He disrupts his home and cruelly destroys familial relationships in his single-minded pursuit of money and power. Similarly, Mr. Murdstone in *David Copperfield* cruelly flogs David and imprisons him in his room for five days. His name reflects his nature – implying the ruthlessness of a murderer and the unfeeling coldness of a stone. The thoughtless cruelty of Mr. Dombey and the deliberate brutality of Mr. Murdstone culminate in the severity and authoritarianism of Mr. Gradgrind at his school and at home. His cold rationality in dealing with his own children, Louisa and Tom, appears chillingly inhuman. He 'embodies what Dickens sees as a pernicious theory of education, one that concentrates entirely upon facts and figures, on developing the intellect at the expense of all other faculties.'<sup>20</sup>

The talk given by the 'Government Officer' on the 'Principles of Taste' in *Hard Times*, vividly expresses the basis of the distorted system of education practised by the 'teachers' in Mr. Gradgrind's school in particular and also reflects the misguided system of education prevalent in many schools across Victorian England :

'You are not to see anywhere, what you don't see in fact; you are not to have anywhere what you don't have in fact. What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact. ...You are to be in all things regulated and governed,' said the gentleman, 'by fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact...This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is Taste.'(H.T . pp 6-7.)

Proudly regarding himself to be eminently practical, Mr. Gradgrind has drilled his children from infancy with the misguided utilitarianism that he himself blindly follows, aiming to make each little Gradgrind a 'model' child trained in the new system of education. Consequently:

No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon, ... had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, Twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are! No little Gradgrind had ever known wonder on the subject.(H.T. p.9)

Instead of toys, the 'metallurgical Louisa' and the 'mathematical Thomas' were provided with 'a little conchological cabinet, and a little metallurgical cabinet, and a little mineralogical cabinet; and the specimens were all arranged and labelled. (H.T. p. 20)

Tom reacts violently to this system, referring to his home, (appropriately termed Stone Lodge as a 'Jaundiced Jail', wishing that he 'could collect all the Facts...and all the figures, and all the people who found them and blow them all up together'. (H.T. p.59) He grows up to be a bank robber, disillusioned and embittered with life, defiantly justifying his crime:

'So many people are employed in a situation of trust; so many out of so many will be dishonest. I have heard you talk... of its being a law. How can I help laws? You have comforted others with such things, Father. Comfort yourself.'(H.T. p.284.)

Again, Mr. Gradgrind encourages the marriage of Louisa to Mr. Bounderby, a man many years her senior and with whom she has nothing in common, basing his decision on the statistical facts regarding the success of such marriages. Stifled by her father's 'education' at school and at home, she bitterly accuses him:

'...you have been so careful of me that I never had a child's heart...[or] dreamed a child's dream...I never had a child's belief or a child's fear.'(H.T.pp.106-07.)

Later, fleeing from a broken marriage, she asks her father in an agony of grief:

'Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O father, what have you done with the *garden* that should have *bloomed* once in this great *wilderness* here? If you had only neglected me, what a much better and much happier creature I should have been this day!' (H.T. p 216, emphasis mine.)

The metaphorical implication of the garden image used here is self-evident. Furthermore, in the novel, Time itself is referred to as a 'great manufacturer', that 'with his innumerable horse power, worked away ...and presently turned out young Thomas a foot taller than when his father had taken particular notice of him.' (H.T. p.96.) Here, the very process of growth is referred to in metaphorical terms, and Dickens alludes to machines working inexorably in factories to churn out the finished product. Mr. Gradgrind is only conscious of his children's physical growth and overlooks their emotional development. The metaphor of the 'Mill' where the finished product is churned out and 'Time' working away on Tom making him taller, establishes 'rich correspondences 'between 'disparate domains', connecting the manufacturing process in a factory with the growth of the human body in the hands of Time. By referring to Time itself in mechanical terms, Dickens reinforces the pervasive effect of the machine on human thought in Victorian England, that he aimed to expose and criticise in his work.

The essence of creativity in a literary work depends, then, largely on the form as well as on the content. For instance, in *Dombey and Son* the symbol represented by 'Dombey' imparts to the novel a 'magic suggestiveness' that is a result of 'the perfect blending of form and substance',<sup>21</sup> that is, the metaphorical language and its implications merge with the central theme of the novel. Flaubert emphasizes the importance of this delicate balance.

It is like body and soul: form and content to me are one ; I don't know what either is without the other... The exactness of the thought makes for... that of the word.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the author, while presenting the creative work, responds to 'three main interrelating sub-systems : knowledge, purpose and affect.'<sup>23</sup> If we consider *Dombey and Son* from this point, we may perceive how the three sub-systems of *knowledge* – regarding contemporary economic issues and social problems, *purpose* of exposing them and consequently *affecting* social change through Mr. Dombey's recognition of his errors and consequent repentance and reformation – together were at work during the creation of the novel.

David E. Cooper's observations on the use of metaphorical language seem most relevant in examining the novels of Dickens. Cooper expands and develops a modern critic's suggestion that metaphorical talk presupposes and reinforces an 'intimacy'



between speaker and listener and that such cultivation of intimacy is crucial in metaphorical language.<sup>24</sup> Cooper pursues this suggestion, referring to a 'special intimacy' that must exist between author and reader for the successful communication of metaphorical truth. Such intimacy:

does not dissolve when the metaphor is put aside, and which goes deeper than the shared ability to interpret metaphors..... the utterance of a metaphor may be viewed as a signal that the speaker takes his hearers to belong to a subset distinguished by a bond of intimacy.<sup>25</sup>

It is this 'bond of intimacy' that Dickens perhaps relied on when, for example, he offered the metaphor of the machine to signify the social and educational systems of Victorian England. The machine and all that it signified, had pervaded deep into the lives of the Victorians, and the machine as a metaphor would, he hoped, leave a lasting impression on people's minds. So far had industrialism affected human life that even schools, students and teachers are described in Hard Times in terms connected with industrial and technological equipment. Dickens confidently anticipates that his readers would be able to interpret his metaphors, relating them to contemporary social problems. Here is what Cooper calls 'a full metaphorical exchange' – the utterance of a metaphor, and its appropriate interpretation by the readers.<sup>26</sup>

This metaphorical exchange is possible through the establishment of a relationship between the literary work and the text:

...the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, but [is]... more than the text. ... The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence... This convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader.... Thus, reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character.<sup>27</sup>

This 'dynamic character' of the work gradually unfolds as a novel progresses, the reader interpreting the action of the characters and incidents individually. In Hard Times, the movement of the machine in Coketown has been likened to the head of an elephant, moving up and down in a state of 'melancholy madness'. We are also told of Mr. Gradgrind's school, where the 'teachers' rigidly prescribed their views on 'Fact', 'Taste' and 'modern' values.<sup>28</sup> The implication that the 'education' offered by the 'teachers' and their inherently inflexible principles are bordering on 'madness' vividly reinforces by contrast the more attractive world of imagination and fancy, represented by Sissy Jupe and Mr. Sleary's circus athletes, that Dickens portrays in the novel:

The antithesis between fact and fancy (or wonder) is...the dominant keynote of *Hard Times*. It relates the public world of the novel to the private world, the 'malaise' of the Gradgrind - Bounderby circle to the 'malaise' of Coketown as a

social community, and it draws together the two different stages of the central argument of the book; the relationship between education in the broad sense and social health.<sup>29</sup>

This opposition of fact and fancy includes on the one hand the mechanical prison-like world of Mr Gradgrind, Mr. Dombey, and Mrs. Clennam, and the gentler world of wonder, imagination and fancy as represented by Florence Dombey, Kate Nickelby, Little Dorrit and Sissy Jupe, on the other hand. This latter group of characters individually assert their victory over the first group with humane and loving care. Dickens, in this way, seems to appeal to the sensibility of his readers through the very process of 'convergence of the text and the reader' by reinforcing an 'intimacy' between the two poles that Iser refers to. The use of the metaphor also provides a filter, exposing the 'tip of a submerged model' – which in turn reminds one of an iceberg, whose tip is revealed, while the larger part of it is submerged and not immediately apparent. Similarly, metaphorical language used by Dickens gradually reveals hidden depths of meaning and implication. In this way, by using metaphorical language, Dickens strikes at the very roots of evil and corruption prevailing in contemporary society. His novels, while exposing this harsher side of life, yet direct towards a hopeful future through eventual social reformation and regeneration.

The metaphor, then, is an essential part of poetic language. In his *De Poetica*, Aristotle had observed:

The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt by others, it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, the metaphor as used by Charles Dickens serves as a bridge, linking hitherto unrelated facts that endow his novels with an evocative quality, thereby enhancing their artistic value.

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12. Ibid, p. 135. Also see Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play' in *The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man : The Structuralist Controversy,* ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore : John Hopkins Press, 1970) pp. 250, 271-72.
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