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### SPACE AS MORAL TOPOGRAPHY IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

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#### Abstract

This article examines the function of space in the novels of Charles Dickens, arguing that place in his work is never morally neutral but always carries an ethical charge. One of the most stable principles of Dickensian poetics is the endowment of space with moral meaning: dwellings, towns, courts and prisons are organized into a coherent “moral topography” in which the description of a place becomes a form of ethical judgement. Drawing on *Hard Times* (1854), *Bleak House* (1852–1853), *Great Expectations* (1860–1861) and the wider corpus, the study distinguishes between the spaces of evil — the industrial town, the court, the prison, the slum — and the spaces of good, associated with the warm and living home, and it shows how, in the mature fiction, this stable topography begins to dissolve. The analysis employs close reading and structural-semantic methods. The findings indicate that moral topography is a constitutive element of Dickensian poetics, that it translates abstract social criticism into concrete sensory image, and that its gradual destabilization corresponds to the deepening complexity of the writer’s moral vision. The study contributes to an understanding of the chronotope as a bearer of ethical meaning in the Victorian novel.

**Keywords:** Charles Dickens, space, chronotope, moral topography, Coketown, Chancery, the home, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, Victorian novel.



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### 1. Introduction

One of the most stable principles of the artistic world of Charles Dickens is the endowment of space with moral meaning. In his novels places are never neutral: they always carry a moral charge, associated with good or with evil, or, in the later works, with their complex interweaving. To describe a house, a town, a court or a prison in Dickens is, almost invariably, to pronounce a moral judgement upon it. Space, in other words, functions as a moral topography.

This feature of Dickens's art has often been noticed in passing, but its systematic character has been less fully appreciated. The descriptions of place that fill his novels are not mere background or local colour; they are integral to the moral architecture of the works, organized into a coherent symbolic geography in which certain kinds of space are reliably associated with certain moral conditions. The industrial town, the court of law, the prison and the slum form one pole of this geography; the warm and living home forms the other.

Dickens's attentiveness to the moral meaning of place has deep roots in his method of characterization. He habitually reveals the inner life of a character through the social, cultural and geographical space in which that character lives; the childhood home or the habitual dwelling becomes one of the principal aesthetic means of illuminating a person's moral physiognomy. From this technique it is a short step to the larger principle by which whole towns, courts and institutions are invested with moral significance. The topography of the novels is thus continuous with the poetics of character: in both, space is made to speak of the moral condition of those who inhabit it.

The interest of this topography lies not only in its existence but in its function and in its history. Functionally, it allows Dickens to translate abstract social criticism into concrete, sensory image: a description rendered with sufficient physiological precision becomes, in itself, an ethical verdict. Historically, the topography is not



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static. In the mature fiction the stable opposition of good and evil places begins to dissolve, and this destabilization corresponds to the growing complexity of Dickens's moral vision.

This article examines the moral topography of Dickens's novels through three principal cases — the industrial town of Coketown in *Hard Times*, the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House*, and the contrasting domestic spaces of the corpus — and traces the gradual breakdown of the stable spatial order in the later work. The aim is to show that moral topography is a constitutive element of Dickensian poetics, and that its evolution participates in the development of his ethical thought.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The primary material consists of Dickens's novels *Hard Times* (1854), *Bleak House* (1852–1853) and *Great Expectations* (1860–1861), examined in relation to the broader corpus, in particular *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865), in which the symbolic treatment of space is especially developed. These additional texts function as comparative reference points rather than as objects of equal analysis.

The investigation is qualitative and text-analytical. It combines two complementary procedures. The first is close reading, applied to descriptions of place — the industrial town, the court, the slum, the domestic interior — at the level of imagery, diction and figurative organization. The second is a structural-semantic method, which analyses the system of spatial oppositions across the novels and the symbolic values attached to particular kinds of place, in order to show how moral meaning is distributed through the geography of the fictional world.



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Methodologically, the study draws on the concept of the chronotope as a unit in which spatial and temporal relations are fused and charged with value, and it treats Dickensian space as a bearer of moral meaning rather than as a neutral container of action. Attention is directed not only to the association of particular places with good or evil but to the historical movement of that association — to the way the stable topography of the early fiction is complicated and finally destabilized in the mature work. The selection of passages was guided by their programmatic character.

### 3. Results

**3.1. The spaces of evil: the industrial town.** The analysis confirms that in Dickens the pole of evil is occupied, first of all, by the ruins of London, by prisons, offices and industrial towns. Coketown in *Hard Times* is among the most vivid instances of his moral topography. Here the space of evil is rendered through images of unnaturalness, mechanism, foul odour and dark, artificial colour. The narrator describes a town of red brick that the smoke and ashes have blackened, threaded by a black canal and a river running purple with ill-smelling dye, over which interminable serpents of smoke trail for ever<sup>1</sup>. The “interminable serpents of smoke” are a direct visual metaphor for an evil that is unending, encircling and suffocating; the “purple river” is the image of a nature poisoned by production, of life crippled by an inhuman system. Dickens renders the place with such physiological precision that the description itself becomes a moral verdict upon the industrial order that produced it.

The moral force of the description derives from its method. Dickens does not interrupt the narrative to denounce industrial utilitarianism; he allows the town itself to deliver the indictment. The monotony of the streets, where one day is

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<sup>1</sup>Dickens, Ch. (1854). *Hard Times*. London: Bradbury and Evans, Book I, Ch. 5.



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exactly like another and the inhabitants are as interchangeable as the bricks, embodies in spatial form the reduction of human life to mechanical repetition that the utilitarian philosophy demands. The town is the philosophy made visible: its uniformity is the uniformity of a system that recognizes only fact and excludes imagination, feeling and play. In this way the chronotope of Coketown becomes the concentrated image of an entire moral order.

**3.2. The spaces of evil: the court and the institution.** A second result concerns the institutional space of evil. In *Bleak House* the Court of Chancery is the metaphor of an evil that no longer resides in individuals but is lodged in a system, in the very structure of society. The interminable suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is an evil that lives not in people but in a mechanism created by people and now operating independently of their will. The famous opening, with its fog spreading over the whole of London, establishes the novel's central moral perspective: evil is not an exception or a deviation but the norm, the system itself<sup>2</sup>. The court is a space that consumes finances, patience and hope, that maddens and breaks all who enter it; and because it is a space rather than a person, the evil it embodies is anonymous, impersonal and therefore peculiarly difficult to resist. Comparable institutional spaces recur across the mature fiction — the Marshalsea prison and the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* — each a place in which evil has been institutionalized and built into an architectural form.

**3.3. The spaces of good: the warm home.** Against these spaces of evil Dickens sets the pole of good, associated above all with the snug, warm and living home. He creates a whole system of “good house” images — the singing kettle on the hearth, the humble domestic interiors in which human affection is nourished, the

<sup>2</sup>Dickens, Ch. (1853). *Bleak House*. London: Bradbury and Evans, Ch. 1.



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blacksmith's forge in *Great Expectations*, where Joe Gargery embodies an uncalculating moral goodness<sup>3</sup>. These spaces of good are opposed not only to ruins and prisons but to the “bad” houses of the rich, in which material abundance fails to generate the warmth of human relationship and indeed excludes it. The cold mansion of Mr Dombey and the deathly stillness of Miss Havisham's rooms are wealthy spaces in which life has been frozen out. The moral value of a Dickensian space is thus measured not by its prosperity but by its capacity to sustain living human connection.

The forge in *Great Expectations* is exemplary of this poetics. Modest, sooty and laborious, it is nonetheless a space of genuine moral warmth, presided over by a man whose goodness is inseparable from his lack of calculation. When Pip, dazzled by his expectations, comes to feel ashamed of the forge and of Joe, the novel measures his moral decline precisely by his estrangement from this space of good; and his eventual restoration is figured as a return to it. The home, in Dickens, is thus not merely a setting but a moral touchstone: the protagonist's relation to the warm domestic space registers the state of his soul.

**3.4. Sanctity amid squalor.** A fourth finding qualifies the simple opposition of good and evil places. Dickens repeatedly locates moral good in the most degraded of spaces, thereby producing a distinctive semantic tension. In *Our Mutual Friend* the child seamstress Jenny Wren inhabits one of the most notorious districts of London — a place the writer describes as a source of “moral plague” spreading its influence across the kingdom — yet she preserves an incorruptible moral sense. The presence of a morally pure person in a centre of crime and destitution embodies the idea of sanctity within degradation, a semantic opposition that is among the distinctive philosophical features of Dickensian poetics. Space here

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<sup>3</sup>Dickens, Ch. (1861). *Great Expectations*. London: Chapman and Hall, Ch. 8.



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does not simply determine character; it provides the ground against which moral integrity is thrown into sharper relief.

**3.5. The destabilization of moral topography.** The final result concerns the historical movement of the topography. In the mature fiction the stable opposition of good and evil places begins to break down. Bleak House is a “good” space that nonetheless carries an ominous irony in its very name, suggesting bleakness, cold and gloom. Miss Havisham’s Satis House — its name signifying “enough,” and so properly an image of sufficiency and contentment — has become a frozen mausoleum. Space ceases to be a reliable moral signpost, and this loss of reliability corresponds precisely to the deepening complexity of moral vision in Dickens’s mature work. Where the early novels offered a legible spatial geography of good and evil, the later novels present a world in which the moral meaning of place has itself become uncertain.

This destabilization is not a failure of the topographical method but its most sophisticated development. By allowing the names and appearances of places to diverge from their moral realities, Dickens makes the very unreliability of space carry meaning: the reader who has learned to read the early geography of good and evil is deliberately disoriented, and that disorientation mirrors the moral difficulty of a world in which good and evil are no longer cleanly separable. The ironic gap between the name “Satis” and the deathly reality of the house, or between the promise of shelter in the word “house” and the bleakness named beside it, becomes a precise instrument for representing a moral order that has lost its earlier transparency. In the late fiction, accordingly, moral topography survives not as a fixed map but as a field of ironic tensions.





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sites at which aesthetic organization and ethical judgement coincide in Dickens's poetics, and the history of his moral topography is, in effect, a history of his moral thought.

It is worth observing, finally, that the moral topography operates simultaneously with the other levels of Dickens's art. The conflict of good and evil that organizes his fiction is realized at once at the level of character, of plot, of language and of space; the spatial dimension does not stand apart from these but reinforces them. The opposition of the warm home and the cold institution runs parallel to the opposition of the good and the evil character and to the opposition of the leitmotifs and metaphors associated with each moral pole. Moral topography is thus one component of a fully integrated artistic system, in which every structural level carries the same ethical charge. It is this integration that gives Dickens's moral geography its peculiar power: the reader is brought to a moral judgement not by argument but by the convergence of character, action, language and place upon a single evaluative meaning.

### **5. Conclusion**

This article has argued that space in the novels of Charles Dickens functions as a moral topography in which place is never neutral but always charged with ethical meaning. The industrial town, the court, the prison and the slum constitute a pole of evil, while the warm and living home constitutes a pole of good; and the description of a place becomes, in itself, a form of moral judgement.

The study has also shown that this topography has a history. In the mature fiction the stable opposition of good and evil places begins to dissolve: the ironic naming of Bleak House and the transformation of Satis House into a mausoleum reveal a world in which the moral meaning of space has become uncertain. This destabilization corresponds to the deepening complexity of Dickens's moral



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vision, so that the evolution of his spatial poetics participates fully in the development of his ethical thought.

The principal contribution of the study is to demonstrate that moral topography is a constitutive element of Dickensian poetics and that the chronotope serves as a bearer of ethical meaning in the Victorian novel. Further research might extend the analysis to the late fiction in order to specify more precisely how the breakdown of the stable spatial order contributes to the darker and more ambiguous moral world of Dickens's final period.

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