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## **Urban Theme Embodiment in the Novels of Charles Dickens**

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### **Abstract**

The article analyzes the features of London image and the representation of urban theme in Charles Dickens' novels "The Adventures of Oliver Twist", "Dombey and Son", "Bleak House". As anthropomorphic characters of novels, the city acts as a full-fledged artistic image. It is established that London is a center of plot nodes contraction and appears to be versatile and multifaceted. On the one hand, it is a city in which all provincial residents rush. They dream of finding themselves here and occupying a worthy position in life. On the other hand, the writer portrays London as the personification of cold, deceitful relationships, alienation of people in high society. It combines contrasting pictures of luxury and poverty, grandeur and squalor; it lives by a separate independent life and affects the feelings and actions of heroes. The article notes that London is always accompanied by landscape sketches in Dickens' novels. Most often, these are stable and multifunctional images of fog and cold. In the novel "The Adventures of Oliver Twist," fog and cold become symbols of the concealment of the dirty deeds of the cruel and criminal world of London, in which the protagonist is originally immersed. In the novel "Bleak House", they are the personification of the Supreme Court, and in "Dombey and Son", the descriptions of cold, foggy, and gray London represent the cold of human relations that reigns in the family of financial magnate Mr. Dombey.

**Keywords:** Charles Dickens, 19th century fiction, London, The image of the city, Hero, Motive, Novel.

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## **Introduction**

We have already noted that “in the second half of the XIX century, cities flourished. Their population increases, they become the centers of industrial, political and socio-cultural life. The outstanding European and Russian prose writers – V. Hugo, O. de Balzac, G. Flaubert, F. Dostoevsky, E. Zola, M. Proust, B. Pasternak, M. Bulgakov, and others – addressed in their works to urban themes. Later it develops into the mythology of the city” (Osmukhina, Tanaseichuk, Kazeeva, & Sharonova 2018). This phenomenon is also indicated by other urban theme researchers on the basis of Western and Russian prose (Lipchanskaya 2004; Vasilyeva 2005; Ivanova 2014; Marinina 2007; Nabilkina 2014; Ruban 2004). In this sense, London has a very special place. As V.V. Boriskin rightly notes, London “demonstrated <...> both the light and dark sides of its appearance and everyday life, creating a mass of conflicting, but at the same time vivid impressions. In a whole, positive impressions prevailed: feelings of “lasting greatness”, admiration for the achievements of modern civilization, respect for the “mighty”, freedom-loving spirit of London, worship of the strong family traditions of Londoners <...>. At the same time, the “spiritual desert” sensations and the picture of social disunity brought an alarming flavor to the image of the British capital” (Boriskin 2015, p. 28). Often, on the one hand, the reader sees the diversity, color, and beauty of London, and, on the other hand, the individual specific transformation of the image of the city becomes obvious. This reflects the vision of the writer and his plan to introduce the London narrative into the canvas to create a fascinating story that is not without credibility. The uniqueness of London as a city-organism, city-body, and city-labyrinth was noted by P. Ackroyd: “The notion of London as a human body is both unusual and amazing. It can be associated with the symbolic images of the City of God – a mystical body, the limbs of which are people, the head is Jesus Christ. London was also clothed in the form of a young man who freely spread his arms; although the Roman bronze ware served as a model for the figure, it embodied the energy and glee of a city that tirelessly spreads in breadth with great waves of progress and self-confidence. That’s where it beats – “Hot Heart of London.” The alleys of the city are like capillaries, its parks are lungs. In the rain and fog of city autumn, the old streets shiny stones and cobblestones seem to bleed. <...> No matter how you perceive London – a fresh young man awakened from sleep or an ugly giant – in any case, we should see in it an organism similar to a human, with its own laws of life and growth. <...> London is a maze half of stone, half of flesh. It can't be imagined in its entirety, it can only be experienced through the wilderness, consisting of many lanes, driveways, courtyards, and highways, where even the most sophisticated Londoner is able to get lost. <...> London is so large and uncontrollable that it contains almost everything in the world” (Ackroyd 2009).

The most remarkable image of London is embodied in the work of C. Dickens – the most popular English writer of the XIX century. London in his essays and novels is a variant of the metropolis image. The aim of our article is to study the image of London and, more broadly, the urban theme in the most representative C. Dickens novels in this sense, especially since the theme of urbanism, the image of a metropolis in literature, attracts today the increased attention.

## **Materials and methods**

The general methodological basis of the research is the systemic unity of the approaches developed by literary scholars to the consideration and analysis of both the historical and literary process as a whole, and individual phenomena in fiction. The methodology is based on the principles of Russian comparative historical literary criticism, implemented in the works of M. Bakhtin (1979, 2000, 2002) and Y. Lotman (1992, 2000). In our work, we used comparative-historical, typological,

and socio-cultural methods, as well as the method of holistic analysis of a work of art. Monographs and articles concerning the Dickens's prose poetic features were particularly important for our analysis also.

### **Literature Review**

The literary heritage of C. Dickens has been thoroughly studied already. But it continues to attract scholars' attention who examine the great Victorian legacy in various aspects and from different perspectives. Already in the middle of the twentieth-century literary scholars perceived the writer as the creator of large social paintings. He reflected the social conflict of the era, showed the inhumanity of the money power, the humiliation of the destitute (Ivasheva 1974; Qatari 1950; Silman 1958; Nersesova 1971). These works have not lost their value due to the formulated problems importance, the factual material richness, and the careful elaboration of certain questions of the life and work of the great English writer.

Modern literary science offers a new understanding of Dickens' prose, taking into account previous studies. Scientists study the moral and aesthetic ideal and the role of biblical imagery and symbolism in Dickens novels (Naumova 1990; Potanin 1998, 2001; Tkacheva 2002; Shuvalova 2003; Honninghausen 1988; Larson 1979), the problems of artistic conventions as a reflection of the psychological states of writer's hero, comprehending the genre and thematic features of his novels (Somova 1998; Urns 1986; Yakimenko 1994, etc). However, the theme of the city, embodied in most of Dickens' novels, remains poorly understood.

### **Discussion and Results**

During the second half of the 19th century, English prose writers turned to London for their novels and short stories, as continuers of the Victorian tradition. Within this framework, the capital of England was considered, on the one hand, from a realistic point of view, as a center of social contradictions, a city of opportunity and loss, an urban narrative topos. On the other hand, it was a place that possessed multifaceted symbolism, was saturated with metaphors and philosophical meanings. London of Conan Doyle, Thackeray, Dickens and others is, above all, a city of signs and symbols requiring decryption, that typical for fascinated novels. The city formed its type of personality, had a significant impact on the formation of character, value orientations of this or that hero, and at the same time was an independent living being – a social, cultural, political “organism” with its own special topography.

The theme of London and the theme of the big city in general was one of the central for C. Dickens (from “The Adventures of Oliver Twist” and “Dombey and Son” to “Bleak House” and others). As L. Davies noted “London is to Charles Dickens what Paris is to Balzac and Dublin to Joyce. The slums and narrow rookeries may long-since have been torn down, but his descriptions have colonised our imagination to such a degree that the city remains as strident a character as Bill Sykes or Mr. Micawber. He routinely walked the streets, in 10 or 20-mile stretches, applying his inimitable powers of observation to its blustery rush, its incoherence and inconsistencies. In sight and sound and smell and touch, he conjured the perfect tapestry to weave his stories of love and loss, regret and reward into. It leapt from the realm of the workaday to the wonderful” (Davies 2011).

London is presented in all Dickens works – from the first “Bose” sketches to the late novels of the 1860's. It can be asserted with confidence that it becomes not just a background for the development of plot conflicts, but appears as a kind of living organism, which is caused, as is known, by the author's own impressions and experiences. It was in London, with its debt prisons and schools,

terrifying its poverty, with judicial offices and parliamentary elections, with vivid contrasts of wealth and poverty, the childhood and youth of the prose writer passed. Already in the “Essays of Bose” an important place is given to the image of the City and the West-End – areas where money is ruled and extremely wealthy people live idly. Dickens’ East-End is a stark contrast to this luxury. This is a place where the destitute and the poor live, where the accumulation of buildings and crowdedness are combined with the incredible height of houses, where the streets, alleys and dead ends turn into a maze too difficult for poor to get out.

In “The Adventures of Oliver Twist”, the influence of Dickens’s experience as an essayist is obvious. It is evident in the near-protocol description of the terrible slums of London. They are represented by the eyes of a child who came to a big city for the first time. “London! — that great place! — nobody ... could ever find him there! He had often heard the old men in the workhouse, too, say that no lad of spirit need want in London; and that there were ways of living in that vast city, which those who had been bred up in country parts had no idea of. It was the very place for a homeless boy, who must die in the streets unless some one helped him” (Dickens 1987, p. 46). The author analyzes the feelings of his little hero, he describes the disappointment experienced by him: “A dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. There were a good many small shops; but the only stock in trade appeared to be heaps of children, who, even at that time of night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from the inside... The sole places that seemed to prosper amid the general blight of the place were the public-houses; and in them, the lowest orders of Irish were wrangling with might and main. Covered ways and yards, which here and there diverged from the main street, disclosed little knots of houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in filth...” (Dickens 1987, p. 55). Mud, poor, congestion, sickening smell, cold that penetrating through, become the symbolic “signs” of the British capital; they appear in “Oliver Twist” periodically: “It was a chill, damp, windy night... The mud lay thick upon the stones, and a black mist hung over the streets; the rain fell sluggishly down, and everything felt cold and clammy to the touch” (Dickens 1987, p. 116).

It is noteworthy that Dickens depicts Folly Ditch – the most dirty and scary area of London. It causes horror and despair in a child hero: “Crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half a dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows, broken and patched, with poles thrust out, on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud, and threatening to fall into it — as some have done; 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 Folly Ditch!” (Dickens 1987, p. 317). The topography of London according to Dickens is dirty slums, empty and abandoned, a kind of “anti-house” (V. Propp), becoming a grave for their owners: “The houses have no owners; they are broken open, and entered upon by those who have the courage; and there they live, and there they die. They must have powerful motives for a secret residence, or be reduced to a destitute condition indeed, who seek a refuge in Jacob's Island” (Dickens 1987, pp. 317-318). Curved and narrow streets, dilapidated houses, dubious personalities, most often wrapped in dark clothes and noiselessly scurrying along rickety stairs and dark passages, create a complete and quite distinct idea of thieves' stashes and their inhabitants, about the life that criminal London exists.

It is very significant that in almost all C. Dickens’ novels, the “big city” refers to nature, but is not opposed to it; it serves as its kind of “substitution”. It is identical to it in the sense of fulfilling the

functions assigned to it: to be not just a place where the narrative unfolds, not only to reflect the thoughts and actions of the heroes, but also act as a source of Londoners' temper. Thus, the severe reality of London engenders in people a gloomy attitude not only to life, but also to themselves. In this context, there is a significant quick change in Oliver and his friends' mood when they find themselves in a village. Here, even warm, clear weather favors the formation of joyful spirits, a bright vision of life that is impossible in rainy and foggy London.

Dickens' London is cold and gloomy. For example, the writer portrays a gray, dank night when Fagin goes to White Chapel to Sikes to discuss the "important matter": "It seemed just the night when it befitted such a being as the Jew to be abroad. As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal" (Dickens 1987, p. 120). Dickens follows a romantic tradition: in his novels, nature reflects the experiences, mental state of a character. Accordingly, telling about the world of London thieves, where Oliver finds himself, Dickens uses dark, dirty shades to mark the external and "internal" appearance of Fagin or Sikes: "It was within an hour of midnight. The weather being dark and piercing cold, he had no great temptation to loiter. The sharp wind that scoured the streets seemed to have cleared them of passengers, as of dust and mud... (Dickens 1987, p. 230). Or: The night was very dark. A damp mist rose from the river and the marshy ground about; and spread itself over the dreary fields. It was piercing cold, too; all was gloomy and black. Not a word was spoken; for the driver had grown sleepy; and Sikes was in no mood to lead him into conversation" (Dickens 1987, p. 200).

On the contrary, compassion and pain reinforce the description of the wounded Oliver when he lies unconscious where Sikes left him. This feeling intensifies, aggravated by the description of the dawn: "The air grew colder, as day came slowly on; and the mist rolled along the ground like a dense cloud of smoke. The grass was wet; the pathways, and low places, were all mire and water; the damp breath of an unwholesome wind went languidly by, with a hollow moaning. Still, Oliver lay motionless and insensible on the spot..." (Dickens 1987, p. 250).

Most often, as landscape sketches, Dickens describes fog and cold. It accompanies this criminal city. The motives of fog and cold are constant in the novel; they are symbols of concealing the dirty deeds of the cruel and criminal world of London, in which Oliver immersed firstly. Thus, the description of fogs is an invariable feature of Dickens' landscape, while the image of fog is stable and multifunctional. In "The Adventures of Oliver Twist", fog is the harbinger of the criminal, thieves' world; in "Bleak House" it is the personification of the Supreme Court. The fog appears black, thick, enveloping everything, there are many examples in the text: "fog", "mist, the heavy mist which thickened every moment and shrouded", "a black mist hung over the streets", "mist and darkness", "a mist hung over the river" etc.

The novel opens by a picture of a cold foggy day and it sets the tone for the whole story. The description of the fog that enveloped the whole city becomes the beginning of a story about an endless, confused lawsuit. Quarters, the life and work of people, even the people themselves – are all immersed by the process. Kruk's shop appears before the reader overgrown with cobwebs and filled with all kinds of junk, symbolizing the routine of the court of justice. The image of the court of the Lord Chancellor is akin to creeping fog and sticky, viscous mud: "Implacable November weather. ... Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.

Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers". (Dickens 1955, p. 11). London is described as a dirty and cold city and this is repeatedly emphasized in the text: "the mud lay upon the stones", "cold and clammy", "the weather being dark and piercing cold, he had no great temptation to loiter", "slime and darkness", "mud and mire", "rust and rot", "filth".

Fog, dirt, and damp personify the English Supreme Court in Dickens' novel. The description of the November day at the same time presents a picture of the gloomy, as if shrouded in rotten fog, obsolete judicial institute. "The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation, Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery" (Dickens 1955, p. 12). Or: "Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog is drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners ... fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds" (Dickens 1955, p. 11).

In fact, this is the writer's attitude to the activities of the court of justice - it is revealed in the form of fog-wrapped London that drowning in the mud. The fates of the heroes are closely intertwined with the image of a cold, alien city. After Crook's death, the "ghost stone face", where he lived, "looks worn out and haggard" (Dickens 1955, p. 283). A lone shot breaks the silence of a sleeping city on the night of the murder of Tulkinghorn. He woke everyone around: both passers-by and dogs. "While the dogs are yet barking and howling—there is one dog howling like a demon—the church-clocks, as if they were startled too, begin to strike. The hum from the streets, likewise, seems to swell into a shout". [Dickens 1955: 162]. The house where Lady Dedlock lives is a callous and ruthless witness to her mother's torment for Esther. As if anticipating the tragic death of his mistress, this house resembles a body abandoned by life (and this is a kind of London's personifications). The cold house that Jarndyce inherited after the suicide "was so ruined and neglected" that the new owner "felt as if the house also put a bullet in his forehead ..." (Dickens 1955, p. 210).

In "Dombey and Son" (1848), foggy and gray London is the embodiment of the "cold of human relations." The buckram streets where the luxurious mansions of the rich stand, the busy City, where England's business life goes on, are described in detail here. It is significant that, representing the main character, Mr. Dombey, the author shows him inextricably linked with the environment. There are no images of an indifferent nature or an impassive background. The character traits of Dombey – heartless, harsh, coldly proud and selfish – are transferred to the house in which he lives and the street on which this house stands. Dickens focuses on the cold emanating from Dombey, on the atmosphere of freezing cold that reigns in his house. Dombey's home bears the imprint of his personality, tastes, and inclinations. His house is "huge and empty" outside and inside. This is a "sad house", where the sun is rarely: "The summer sun was never on the street, but in the morning about breakfast-time, when it came with the water-carts and the old clothes men..." (Dickens 1988, p. 30). Only two stunted trees grow in the courtyard of the house, their leaves are smoked so much that they do not rustle when the wind blows, but knock one on the other." Odors, as from vaults and

damp places, came out of the chimneys. ... Bell-handles, window-blinds, and looking-glasses, being papered up in journals, daily and weekly, obtruded fragmentary accounts of deaths and dreadful murders. Every chandelier or lustre, muffled in holland, looked like a monstrous tear depending from the ceiling's eye". (Dickens 1988, p. 31). The house is "magnificent", like his owner. To reinforce the impression of Dombey, the author, in addition, resorts to landscape sketches: "It happened to be an iron-grey autumnal day, with a shrewd east wind blowing – a day in keeping with the proceedings" (Dickens 1988, p. 55).

The attitude to objects and buildings in the novel is subjective; it can change in accordance with the hero's feelings. A similar change in the world outside, impressed by his misfortune, is felt by young Walter when he hurries through the London streets to save his uncle from a possible trial, arrest and prison. "Everything seemed altered as he ran along the streets. ... Houses and shops were different from what they used to be... Even the sky itself was changed, and had an execution in it plainly". (Dickens 1988, p. 150). The contrast of joyless impressions and the internal psychological context is obvious: "Dawn with its passionless blank face, steals shivering to the church beneath which lies the dust of little Paul and his mother, and looks in at the windows. It is cold and dark. Night crouches yet, upon the pavement, and broods, sombre and heavy, in nooks and corners of the building" (Dickens 1988, p. 294).

Cold, fog, and dampness as indispensable attributes of London life in the novel "Dombey and Son" as a whole are the personification of the protagonist character and lifestyle, who belongs to the class of powerful business people, for whom the prosperity of the company comes first to be the only reason for existence: "The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre" (Dickens 1988, p. 10). The whole world should live only for them and for their sake. Dombey usually treats other characters arrogantly and coldly, and to emphasize this, the writer turns to the image of raw and dank fog again.

### **Conclusion**

London, that is cold and arrogant, drowning in mud and luxury simultaneously, appears in Dickens' novels as multifaceted and multifaceted. On the one hand, it is a financial and industrial capital, a city of great opportunities, where the provincials rush to, dreaming of finding themselves and gaining a decent social status. On the other hand, the British capital also appears as a center of criminal world, the personification of cold, lies, hypocrisy, and people alienation. It combines contrasting pictures of luxury and poverty, grandeur and squalor, lives a separate independent life and affects the feelings and actions of the characters. Charles Dickens' London is an enigmatic, mysterious city. The key to creating the image of the city is the reception of contrast (for example, in "The Adventures of Oliver Twist", author opposes the East End criminal world to the high society of the West End; thieves, crooks, murderers Fagin, Sikes, etc. contrast with the kind and sympathetic Mr. Brownlow, Maylies, Oliver Twist); the motive of fog and cold also plays an important role in "Bleak House" and "Dombey and Son".

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