

Dombey and Son: A Reading of Nature*

Dombey and Son: Bir Doğa Okuması**

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Abstract

Charles Dickens is not only a writer of human suffering, but also of nonhuman nature. Written in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1846, *Dombey and Son* brings Dickens' keen observations on the human and nonhuman together. Dickens raises the question about nonhuman nature as he asks "how men work to change her" (737) and reminds us of London; "Breathe the polluted air, ... that is poisonous to health and life; ..offended, sickened and disgusted... by which misery and death came along" (737). Dickens transforms his concept of natural world with tranquillity and fresh air compared to darker London. He listens to nature and shapes his writings in terms of a relationship to nonhuman nature and eventually tries to raise consciousness towards pollution in London. My aim in this paper is to show how *Dombey and Son* is textualized to create nature writing. Taking from the critical theories of Raymond Williams, William Howarth and Christopher Manes I will attempt to find a common ground in Dickens' text between the human and the nonhuman and show how they can coexist since our environment becomes a pivotal part of our existence.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, nature writing, eco-criticism

Öz

Charles Dickens sadece insanın çektiği acıları değil, canlı olmayan doğanın da ıstıraplarını dile getiren bir yazardır. 1846'da, Lausanne, İsviçre'de yazılan *Dombey and Son* romanı Dickens'in insan ve doğayı anlatan keskin gözlemlerini bir araya getirir. Dickens "insanoğlunun onu nasıl değiştirmeye çalıştığını" (737) sorarak canlı olmayan doğa hakkında sorular sorar ve bize Londra'yı anımsatır; "Hayata ve sağlığa zararlı olan...kirli havayı içine çek; ıstırap ve ölümlü gelen kırgınlık, hastalık ve bıkkınlık" (737). Dickens karanlık bir Londra'ya kıyasla temiz havasını ve sükûnetini gördüğü İsviçre doğasından derinden etkilenerek doğal dünya kavramını değiştirir. Doğayı dinler ve yazdıklarını canlı olmayan doğa ile ilişkilendirerek şekillendirir ve sonunda Londra'nın hava kirliliğine karşı bir bilinç oluşturmaya çalışır. Bu makaledeki amacım *Dombey and Son* romanında doğanın nasıl metinleştirildiği göstermektir. Özellikle Raymond Williams, William Howarth ve Christopher Manes'in eleştiri kuramları çerçevesinde Dickens'in romanında insan ve doğa betimlemeleri arasında ortak bir zemin bulmaya ve çevremiz varlığımızın odak noktası olduğundan, bu ikisinin nasıl bir araya gelebildiklerini göstermeye çalışacağım.

Anahtar sözcükler: Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, doğa yazımı, ekoeleştiri

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Charles Dickens is one of the greatest writers of the Victorian novel especially famous for the Condition of England novels. However he is not generally associated with nature writing. Yet his attitude to human nature is well-known and widely discussed due to powerful depictions of human suffering and misery. *Hard Times* (1854), *Oliver Twist* (1838), and *David Copperfield* (1850) are among many other prominent novels in which Dickens critiqued social and economic conditions imposed on humans brought by industrialism. While human nature is frequently problematized in his novels, nonhuman nature is also suggested in connection with the human. Raymond Williams argues; "The physical world is never in Dickens unconnected with man. It is of his making, his manufacture, his interpretation" (Williams, 1970, p. 40). Hence, many of his novels depict the brutal face of urbanization and industrialism connected with the depictions of nature. For instance, Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* dies in a mine pit-called "Old Hell Shaft" (Dickens, 1995, p. 209) and becomes one of the victims of the system depicted as "savage", bursting "serpents of smoke" (Dickens, 1995, p. 18). The madness of industrial pace triggered with the steam-engine is further criticized in *Dombey and Son* with the powerful depiction of railway system as well.

Furthermore, depictions of nonhuman nature in *Dombey and Son* suggest a profound interaction between man and the surrounding environment. This interpretation is reflected on the language of *Dombey and Son* as it involves a deeper response to the physical world. Dickens listens to the nature and inlays images of nature in the text such as restless and whispering waves, stormy winds, dark rivers, golden waters, steam, tide, shadows, night and day, dawn, wilderness and etc. He personifies nature while questioning the relationship of man with nature. Actually Dickens uses "Green Language" in Williams's definition which stands for a "closer description of nature-of birds, trees, effects of weather and light" (Williams, 1973, p. 133). In this way, the carefully inscribed nature images into the scenes and personifications create an eco-critical discourse. As argued by William Howarth eco-criticism "seeks to examine how metaphors of nature and land are used and abused" (Howarth, 1996, p. 81). In this respect, "green language" of Dickens in *Dombey and Son* becomes a tool for eco-criticism as he tries to create awareness towards man-made miseries.

Dickens was deeply concerned with the rapid shifts Victorian society went through and put a keen observant eye on the society as he excelled in the depictions of city life. The range of his novels are wide but Rosemarie Bodenheimer argues that Dickens "is rightly recognized as the first great urban novelist in English" (2007, p. 171). Yet, his powerful depictions of urban life involve a critique of the transformation from a pastoral life into an urban one. In his novels, Dickens portrays human suffering, dislikes selfish masters exploiting the hands (Dickens, 1995, p. 50) and expresses an intimate nostalgic yearning for the pastoral landscape undermined by urbanization. Barbara Hardy argues that;

...he was an earnest social reformer who used his brilliance as novelist, journalist, editor and public speaker, to show the motive and need for progress, to lay a tender hand, as he said, on his hard times...He began and ended as someone who cared about suffering and wanted to raise public consciousness and change society, at least the part of it he knew and could touch (2008, p.17)

As the Industrial Revolution transformed the country, Dickens wrote how technological advances such as steam-power changed the face of the country into an ugly one. The piston of the steam-engine is resembled to “the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness” in *Hard Times* (Dickens, 1995, p.18) while the innovative train of the age is called a “monster” in *Dombey and Son* (Dickens, 1970, p. 840). Thus, Dickens’ language becomes a tool for his criticism towards the ills of his time. Depicting human misery at the core, Dickens points to the destruction of nature as well.

Dombey and Son is a novel on human nature at the outset as recent criticism suggests¹. It is the story of father and son with a neglected daughter on the side. For instance Hardy reads it as a “novel turning on a ruling passion –Pride” (2008, p. 8). However, focusing on human nature, power relationships, class, gender and psychological readings ignore the interaction between human nature and non-human. It is clearly seen in *Dombey and Son* that Dickens shapes his writings by transferring nonhuman nature consciously into his fictional narrative. Mostly pessimism is extended from nonhuman nature to human, rarely seen is optimism since the environmental argument of *Dombey and Son* is centred around industrialism, its harsh effects on nature and human beings. Julia Prewitt Brown argues that the novel signals “the end of the first phase of the Industrial Revolution in showing the shift from cotton to steel in the occupations of working class characters” (2004, p. 86). In this respect, if eco-criticism “shares the hope that flawed social conditions may be improved” (Howarth, 1996, p. 79) then it is possible to say that Dickens is trying to raise consciousness towards environmental issues. Taking from Dickens’s critique of nonhuman nature this paper attempts to show how *Dombey and Son* is textualized to enable a nature reading especially in the context of Williams’ term “green language” and eco-critical discourse with further references to William Howarth and Christopher Manes. Such a reading will unearth the relationship between the human and the nonhuman and help us interpret the environmental concerns of Dickens and show how they can coexist since our environment becomes a pivotal part of our existence.

Dickens’s response to nature is poetic in the text. Personifications of nature reveal a level of meaning in which human beings are personified with nonhuman qualities and nonhuman with human. Characters are depicted in terms of green language. To give a few examples from the text, Captain Cuttle has “bushy black eyebrows...like clouds settling on a mountain” (Dickens, 1970, pp. 142-143). Dickens juxtaposes the depiction of human nature in connection with the nonhuman as Doctor Blimber’s hot-house is in which many different produces are cultivated is depicted as follows;

Mental green-peas were produced at Christmas, and intellectual asparagus all the year round. Mathematical gooseberries (very sour ones too) were common at untimely seasons, and from mere sprouts of bushes, under Doctor Blimber’s cultivation. ...Nature was of no consequence at all. (Dickens, 1970, p. 162)

Dickens draws on his knowledge of the new advancements in science which change the farming practices, turn agricultural England into an industrial one. The humorous and ironical green language is a critique of new farming practices disregarding nature. It also indicates how agricultural lands

¹ For further reading on a range of topics on *Dombey and Son* see S. Pratt-Smith, R. S. Edgecombe, L. Geriguis, A. Schwan and S. Kikendall.

were lost or wasted for urbanization. Furthermore, "cultivation" metaphorically stands for man's relationship with nature; how human comes to capture the land, owns, manipulates and shapes the fate of it according to his/her own desires. As new techniques in agriculture enable "untimely" products in Victorian society, Dickens questions man's power over nature as well.

While Dr. Blimber experiments in his hot-house, Mrs. Pipchin's cultivation of plants are limited with a peculiar collection of pots kept in her window parlour:

There were half a dozen specimens of the cactus, writhing round bits of lath, like *hairy serpents*; another specimen shooting out *broad claws*, like a green *lobster*, several *creeping vegetables*, possessed of sticky and adhesive leaves; and one uncomfortable flower-pot hanging to the ceiling, which appeared to have boiled over, and tickling people underneath with its long green ends... (Dickens, 1970, p. 118)

Dickens attributes animal and human characteristics to Mrs. Pipchin's plants by showing that human cultivation is at odds with nature's own. Unhappy with this alternative way of cultivation instead of natural ways, Dickens uses green language in a poetic way so that he could remind readers the limited power human beings have over nature.

Florence lives alone in the decaying house after her mother's death which turns into a wilderness;

Mildew and mould began to lurk in closets. Fungus trees grow in corners of the cellars. Dust accumulated, nobody knew whence nor how;..The grass began to grow upon the roof and in the crevices of the basement paving. A scaly crumbling vegetation sprouted round the window-sills. (Dickens, 1970, pp. 351-352)

Here, Dickens celebrates nature's abundance and power as grass, fungus, mildew and dust overtake the man-made house despite vain human efforts to keep it in order. Although the house turns into a wilderness, Florence remains unharmed because of her innocence (Dickens, 1970, p 352). A reciprocal relationship between human and nonhuman is evoked in Dickens's text with vivid personifications embedded in nature.

In addition to the vivid rhythm Dickens's poetic green language reaches, it brings in light and sometimes darkness to the home. Florence and Paul are responsive to nature and listen to the waves to get a hopeful message. In Brighton Paul is "watching the waves and clouds at twilight" from his solitary room, (which Dickens calls a cage) looking at the birds and imagining if he could fly one day (Dickens, 1970, p 192). Paul's thoughts are like "rolling waves" following one upon another (Dickens, 1970, p 218). Even in his death bed, Paul just watched and listened to outside.

When the sunbeams struck into his room through the rustling blinds, and quivered on the opposite wall like *golden water*, he knew that evening was coming on, and that the *sky was red and beautiful*. ...His fancy had a strange tendency to wander to the rivers, which he knew was flowing through the great city; and now he thought how black

it was, and how deep it would look, reflecting the hosts of stars...
(Dickens, 1970, p 248)

Although Paul cannot physically watch the nature he is able to imagine. He has spent so much time in bed that he cannot count the days and does not want to know: "How many times the *golden water* danced upon the wall; how many nights *the dark river* rolled towards the sea in spite of him" (Dickens, 1970, p 250). His compulsory detachment from nature, as a life-giver, is a sign of his approaching death. Just before he dies he tells Florence that he hears the waves, telling him to rest;

Sister and brother wound their arms around each other, and the golden light came streaming in, and fell upon them, locked together. 'How fast the river runs, between its green banks and the rushes, Floy! But it's very near the sea. I hear the waves! They always said so!' Presently he told her that the motion of the boat upon the stream was lulling him to rest. How green the banks were now, how bright the flowers growing on them and how tall the rushes! Now the boat was out at sea, but gliding smoothly on. And now there was a shore before him. Who stood on the bank—(Dickens, 1970, p. 253)

Paul sees his mother sitting on the bank waiting for him and dies in Florence's arms. Here, Dickens's power of imagination is at work. As Paul lay dying peaceful thoughts of fancy are formed in his mind. Waves are associated with tranquillity and nostalgia for the lost mother. Nature is portrayed as a tranquiliser for the ones who are attentive to it.

Similarly Florence has a deep connection to the waves as "the voices in the waves are always whispering to Florence, in their ceaseless murmuring,..., not bounded by the confines of this world, or by the end of time, but ranging still, beyond the sea, beyond the sky, to the *invisible country far away!*" (Dickens, 1970, p. 876). The last person responsive to the waves is Edith, Mr. Dombey's second wife. Dickens writes that at her mother's death bed, Edith is restless and listens to what the waves say in the stillness of the night (Dickens, 1970, p 633):

...restless waves are calling to them both the whole night long. Night after night the *waves are hoarse* with repetition of their mystery; the dust lies piled upon the shore; the sea-birds soar and hover; the winds and clouds are on their trackless flight; the white arms beckon, in the moonlight, to the *invisible country far away.* (Dickens, 1970, p 634)

Dickens repeats the same passage at the end of the chapter to stress the importance on listening to the waves. There is a striking similarity between Florence's and Edith's perception of waves. Dickens uses the same metaphor to recall life-after death as the "invisible country far away" is used twice in the novel, first for Paul's death and now for Edith's mother. In Dickens's narration waves signify a peaceful utopian space compared to a deformed nature. Listening to the waves is vital in the text because Dickens believes in sustaining the sincere relationship between the human and nonhuman. As Manes argues in "Nature and Silence," in order to reanimate nature "we must have the courage to learn that new language, even if it puts at risk the privileged discourse of reason" (1996, p. 24). In

Dickens's argument, communication with nature is a must, as he had done himself in Switzerland. In the 1869 edition of the novel, Dickens writes how his stay in Geneva influenced him;

I began this book by the Lake Geneva, and went on with it for some months in France, before pursuing it in England. The association between the writing and the place of writing is so curiously strong in my mind, that at this day, although I know, in my fancy, every stair in the midshipman's house, and could swear to every pew in the church in which Florence was married, or to every young gentleman's bedstead in Doctor Blimber's establishment, I yet confusedly imagine Captain Cuttle as secluding himself from Mrs. Mac Stinger among the mountains of Switzerland. Similarly, when I am reminded by any chance of what it was that the waves were always saying, my remembrance wanders for a whole winter night about the streets of Paris- as I restlessly did with a heavy heart, on the night when I had written the chapter in which my little friend and I parted company.²

It is clearly seen from the Preface that Dickens reflected his real life experience with waves. As Lake Geneva inspired him, he imagined his characters listening to the waves to establish an intimate relationship with nature.

Dickens started writing *Dombey and Son* in Lausanne in 1846 during his five-month stay at Rosemont, situated above Lake Geneva. Darren Bevin studies the interest of Dickens on Switzerland and records that Dickens wrote *The Battle of Life* (1846) and the first three chapters of *Dombey and Son* (2012, p.152) there. As Bevin writes;

Charles Dickens's interest, exploration, and treatment of Switzerland and the Alps from the 1846 through to the late 1860s coincided with a period of rapid change in the region...An increasing number came to occupy the stylish alpine resorts and walk, climb, paint, conduct research or simply take in the air. The mountains were held to have cleaner and purer air appropriate for various health treatments, especially respiratory conditions, including tuberculosis. Sanatoria were opened in resorts like Davos that received patients including Elisabeth Gaskell and later, Robert Louis Stevenson. In the Alps, the sick, the healthy and the fashionable converged. Dickens's fascination with the region stemmed from a personal attraction to the beauty and sublimity of the environment...(2012, p. 151)

In this context Dickens's absorption with nature images could be better understood. The influence of Alps is clearly seen in Chapter 47, titled 'Thunderbolt'. Actually thunderbolt is Dickens's metaphor for Mr. Dombey. Throughout the novel Mr. Dombey is depicted with the furious and strong

2 Charles Dickens, "Preface" *Dombey and Son*, Printed from the Edition corrected by the Author in 1869.

winds, the shade, autumn, hard and cold weather (Dickens, 1970, p. 67), always blowing and furious. After questioning what nature is and “how men work to change her...” (Dickens, 1970, p. 700). Dickens starts his inquiry in the same page as;

Look round upon the world of odious sights-millions of immortal creatures have no other world on earth...Breathe the polluted air, foul with every impurity that is poisonous to health and life; and have every sense, conferred upon our race for its delight and happiness, offended, sickened and disgusted and made a channel by which misery and death alone can enter. (Dickens, 1970, pp. 700-701)

In this passage Mr. Dombey compares darker London to a brighter city. He details in the following passage the harm Man gives to Nature, calls it a crime spreading the contagions among the pure. As a self-critic Dickens puts the blame on human beings generating “disease to strike our children down and entail itself on unborn generations” (Dickens, 1970, p. 701). As an eco-critic Dickens connects the rage of nature to the future miseries, not only physical ones but also moral diseases. Mr. Dombey has himself lost his only son to a disease and it is his cry to create a consciousness towards such a contemporary matter. The yearning for a brighter landscape is also implied and the contrast is put effectively recalling the memories of Geneva and Lausanne where Dickens experienced the tranquillity and fresh air.

Dombey and Son, in this respect, carries Dickens’s keen observations on Alps and the nature of Switzerland into his writing. Although, there is not any direct reference to Alps in the novel, it becomes the inspiration on which Dickens gathers his discussion and criticism of human relationship with nature. In the first chapter of *Dombey and Son*, proud Mr. Dombey believes;

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, 1970, p.12)

Here, Mr. Dombey sees himself as the mere possessor of nature. His God-like claim upon the earth, sun and the moon transcends the modest relationship between man and nature. Dickens is critical of the general attitude of modern capitalist man which came into being after Industrial Revolution. In *Culture and Materialism* Williams reads such hegemonies as “worrying” since “in his dealings with nature man might see himself as Lord and Commander of these elements” (Dickens, 1970, p.74). This modern aspiration of man leading to the historical fall foreshadows Mr. Dombey’s failure.

Dickens is critical of Mr Dombey’s relationship with nature which suggests nothing but hegemony. Throughout the novel he never ceases to leave this power. Even after his bankruptcy and disgrace due to his wife’s elopement with Mr. Carker, he is shaken but not humbled. Dickens portrays him as a tree: “The root is broad and deep, and in the course of years its fibres have spread out and gathered nourishment from everything around it. The tree is struck, but not down” (Dickens, 1970, p.773). Mr. Dombey owns everything in his material world so he wants to dominate over the nature as well. Upon Mr. Dombey’s marriage to Edith, Dickens asks an ironical question;

Do steam, tide, wind, and horses, all abate their speed, to linger on such happiness? Does the swarm of loves and graces hovering about them retard their progress by its numbers? Are there so many flowers in their happy path, that they can scarcely move along, without entanglement in thornless roses, and sweetest briar? (Dickens, 1970, p. 542)

If the earth was made for Dombey and Son, it is equally possible that steam, tide, wind and flowers should celebrate Dombey and his wife. Ironically, in spite of all his power Mr. Dombey cannot be happy and do nothing to prolong his only son's life.

Dickens furthers his criticism of man's conscious manipulation of nature. Nonhuman nature is destroyed for the sake of modernization, and human nature suffers the consequences. Once a peaceful habitation, Stagg's Gardens exist no more:

There was no such thing as Stagg's Gardens. It had vanished from the earth. Where the old rotten summer-houses once had stood, palaces now reared their heads, and granite columns of gigantic girth opened a vista to the railway beyond. The miserable waste ground, where the refuse-matter had been heaped of yore, was swallowed up and gone; and its frowsy stead were tiers of warehouses, crammed with rich goods and costly merchandise (Dickens, 1970, p.244).

The disappearance of Stagg's Gardens signals the shift from pastoral England into an urban one. Here, Dickens is deeply concerned with the effects of industrialism as the landscape starts to change. His unrest is felt in his language as gardens disappear and the pastoral spaces are transformed into urban spaces. Nature is gradually replaced by railways, monster trains, railway hotels, coffee-houses, lodging-houses, and boarding-houses. Life is shaped according to train time tables; "There was even railway time observed in clocks, as if the sun itself had given in" (Dickens, 1970, p. 245). The transformation is sudden and it signals man's alienation to the rapid changes as well as loss of Victorian values. Dickens portrays the inevitable change and the reader shares the discomfort Dickens feels:

To and from the heart of this great change, all day and night, throbbing currents rushed and returned incessantly like its life's blood. Crowds of people and mountains of goods, departing and arriving scores upon scores of times in every four-and-twenty hours, produced a fermentation in the place that was always in action. (Dickens, 1970, p. 245)

Replacing gardens with railways, modern man turns the landscape into a hell since Dickens calls trains as monsters "gliding like tame dragons" (Dickens, 1970, p. 245). After the change all you can hear is the disturbing noise of the engines and the crowds rather than nature. Williams argues in

“Green Language” that “man, actually altering the landscape in the service and for the gain of others” end up with loneliness (1973, p.140). It is an abuse to nature and industrialism is exploitation of the once peaceful lands. Dickens’s green language responds to this disturbance where man is alienated and left alone. According to Mr. Dombey the train is an “indomitable monster moving with a shriek, a roar, and a rattle, plunging down into the earth again...tearing on, spurning everything with its dark breath” (Dickens, 1970, p. 312). Dickens powerfully writes how trains demolish life:

Louder and louder yet, it *shrieks* and *cries* as it comes tearing on resistless to the goal: and now its way, still like the way of *Death*, is strewn with ashes thickly. Everything around is blackened. There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below. (Dickens, 1970, p. 312).

Severing human life from nature, industrialization brings Death eventually. Paul suffers and dies from an illness brought by the “dark pools of water, muddy lanes and black air”. Paul is ordered sea-air of Brighton rather than staying in the poisonous city (Dickens, 1970, p.115). But he cannot recover. The second victim is Mr. Carker, the former manager of Dombey and Son, who is “irresistibly attracted” to watching “these approaching monsters...thinking what a cruel power and might it had” (Dickens, 1970, p. 840). This interest of Mr. Carker to his surroundings was discussed earlier in the novel by Dickens. Mr. Carker was responsive and attentive to nature as he “rose with the lark” and followed the lark (Dickens, 1970, p.416). Unfortunately the interest of Mr. Carker to his environment is transformed into the trains as he describes the train as a fiery devil and a curse, and explains the movement and noise just like an earthquake (Dickens, 1970, p.839). He even imagines being run down and crushed by one of them as it comes true. Mr. Carker

felt the earth tremble-knew in a moment that the rush was come-uttered a shriek-looked round –saw the red eyes, bleared and dim, in the daylight, close upon him- was beaten down, caught up, and whirled away upon a jagged mill, that spun him round, and struck him limb from limb, and licked his stream of life up with its fiery heat, and cast his mutilated fragments in the air. (Dickens, 1970, p. 842)

Dickens is successful in depicting the rage of nature and hellish qualities of industrialism in this horrible scene. The personification of the train is so powerful that Dickens portrays train as the mere adversary of man. The moment Mr. Carker is run down is the unexpected and unconsidered outcome of the conflict between man and man-made miseries. The death of Paul is also unexpected and unwanted but inevitable as pollution and disease kill the innocent children in Victorian age.

In conclusion, Dickens opposes to Industrial Revolution and the scientific view of a universe shaped by it. Alienation from nature is sickness and human intervention is dangerous. Dickens was well aware that Victorian England was moving towards a modern age when he was writing the novel. Yet, he hoped that future generations might live peacefully with their natural environment. In this respect, the novel shows that Dickens is not only concerned with past and present but also with future. As change is inevitable, Dickens proposes readers to establish an intimate relationship with nature and

show affection to nonhuman nature. With his green language, he suggests in *Dombey and Son* that a careful and an attentive ear is a must to establish a healthy relationship with nature. Dickens believes in the power of a sincere relationship with nature-in terms of listening and hearing- and *Dombey and Son* becomes a political text in its stance. Although his green language is a harsh criticism of the evils of industrialism which brutally severs human life from nature, it becomes his tool for promoting the problem of human depredation. In his nature writing, Dickens raises fundamental environmental issues and shows that he is a careful observant of nature, able to make a profound and intimate analysis of human relationship to nonhuman world. Poetically put and socially conscious interpretations of nonhuman nature reveal Dickens's ecological consciousness. Despite recognizing human error his green language proves his optimism.

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