

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

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

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