Summary of


In Dorothea Van Ghent’s imaginative and illuminating essay, she depicts ‘The Dickens World’, a novelistic universe where ordinary distinctions between people, objects and their environment break down. Van Ghent begins with the observation that, in the novels of Dickens, people are often characterised as objects, while inanimate objects frequently behave like people. ‘Things, like animal pets, have adopted the disposition and expression of their masters’, she writes. A “‘tight-clenched’ old bureau of a miser”, for example, ‘has a “bad and secret forehead”’. Meanwhile, humans metaphorically take on the qualities of related objects. In Bleak House we find ‘Grandfather Smallweed’, for example, who ‘has to be beaten up periodically like a cushion order to be restored to the shape of a man’.

The physical environment is itself imbued not only with humanlike attributes, but with quasi-ethical qualities: ‘the atoms of the physical world’, writes Ven Ghent, have been impregnated with moral aptitude, so that it is not inconsistent that at the crisis of plot, a giant beam should loosen itself and fall on the head of the villain.’ Thus, Dickens can be compared to Balzac: In Balzac, environment is literally natural; in Dickens, environment is literally unnatural’, because it ‘constantly exceeds its material limitations.’

In fact, individual characters themselves form ‘parts’ of wider nervous systems and ‘spiritual continuums’ that involves other characters, objects and materials. In Great Expectations, for example, ‘Pip carries Magwitch (his “father”) within him, and the apparition of the criminal is the apparition of Pip’s own guilt. Similarly Joe Gargery, saintly simpleton of the folk, and the journeyman Orlick, dark beast of the Teutonic marshes (who comes “from the ooze”), as the opposed extremes of spiritual possibility, form a spiritual continuum that frames and gives meaning to the others.’

The way in which characters and objects relate to one another in the novels of Dickens also impacts upon how the way that different places relate to one another in and across novels. ‘Todger’s’, for example, ‘is, in a sense, all of London, as London is the whole world; for it is impossible’, Van Ghent goes on, ‘for the reader to dissociate these mazes of a squalid metropolitan district’ from ‘Coketown’, or from the ‘semi-fashionable Park Lane’ where ‘Arthur Clennam goes looking for Miss Wade; or from the Maggoty Honeycomb of Tom All-Alone’s; or, for that matter, from the corridors of the Circumlocution Office’. In the ‘Dickens World’ the barriers that would normally keep different characters and objects separate break down, such that manifestations of morality, spirituality, and character traits exist in a process of interconnection, in a continuum.