

Module 01: Can Humans Control the Natural World? Urban Landscapes and Perceptions of Nature

Evidence 4: Control of Nature: Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 1848

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Introduction

The following excerpt from Dickens's novel illustrates how industrialization presumed and perpetuated a view of nature as something to be controlled for the purposes of production and profit. As Dickens vividly describes, those at the center of such economic processes could easily believe they were, in fact, at the center of all human activity, and that the world, including the natural world, was made to serve their interests.

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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. . . .

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. The very houses seemed disposed to pack up and take trips. Wonderful Members of Parliament, who, little more than twenty years before, had made themselves merry with the wild railroad theories of engineers, and given them the liveliest rubs in cross-examination, went down into the north with their watches in their hands, and sent on messages before by the electric telegraph, to say that they were coming. Night and day the conquering engines rumbled at their distant work, or, advancing smoothly to their journey's end, and gliding like tame dragons into the allotted corners grooved out to the inch for their reception, stood bubbling and trembling there, making the walls quake, as if they were dilating with the secret knowledge of great powers yet

unsuspected in them, and strong purposes not yet achieved.

Source:

Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848), 2, 86.