

Hard Times Giving Voice to Vibrant Matter

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents a theoretical inquiry into the relations between the posthumanist philosophy of Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Economy of Things* and the portrayal of seemingly insignificant “things” and individuals who are treated as things in Charles Dickens’ Victorian novel *Hard Times*. Posthumanism challenges the traditional human-centered perspective on human and nonhuman relations. In the essay, I explore the implications of the posthumanist rethinking of things as “vibrant matter” both for the study of literature and for a more ecological and equitable approach to human and nonhuman connections. By examining the literary work of Dickens from Bennett’s contemporary standpoint, one can reveal underlying philosophical and ecological meanings and the relevance they hold for our present society.

INTRODUCTION

The perpetual clash between societal structures and personal autonomy has long been a subject of intense analysis and debate. It has called into question the very nature of human beings and the extent to which they are shaped by external factors. Humans are often susceptible to becoming buried within the constraints of their perspectives, unaware of the intricate web of influences produced by human relations. But humans are additionally shaped by nonhuman forces that play a pivotal role in the development and direction of society. Jane Bennett's philosophy, developed in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Economy of Things*, offers a unique perspective on debates over human agency through the concepts of “agency of assemblages,” “debris,” and “thing-power” which highlight nonhuman influences. Throughout her work, Bennett heightens readers’ awareness of the entanglement of nonhuman entities and materials as they alter the course of human events and produce effects far beyond their immediate impact.

This essay investigates the implications of Bennett’s theory of matter and things by interpreting the classic Victorian novel *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens through Bennett’s theoretical lens. It may seem strange to look for “things” rather than characters in a work of fiction, but Bennett opens new doors for literary analysis by drawing readers’ attention to the role of things (which are often treated as part of the background of literary works) and to the way in which human characters are treated as objects without value. *Hard Times* (published in 1854) is also a text that shares with Bennett a similar critical exploration of societal expectations and neglect of emotion and wonder. Dickens vividly depicts the harsh realities of the political and economic conditions of the fictional city of Coketown, where certain characters are marginalized and become deprived of value, individuality, and imagination. By exploring some of Bennett’s key concepts in relation to the novel, it is evident that both *Vibrant Matter* and *Hard Times* encourage a critical concern for the devaluation of human and nonhuman entities and suggest a reevaluation of societal morals to shift towards a more compassionate, ecological, and holistic society.

OVERVIEW OF BENNETT’S VIBRANT MATERIALISM

Jane Bennett presents a compelling argument in *Vibrant Matter* that challenges society’s traditional understanding of matter and the separation between human and nonhuman entities. The theoretical text introduces the concepts of “agency of assemblages,” “debris,” and “thing-power” to collectively oppose the dominant anthropocentric views and bring awareness to the vibrancy and interconnectedness of all matter. As Jonathan Padwe explains, “Anthropocentrism refers to a human-centered, or ‘anthropocentric,’ point of view. In philosophy, anthropocentrism can refer to the point of view that humans are the only, or primary, holders of moral standing. Anthropocentric value systems thus see nature in terms of value to humans” (“Anthropocentrism”). Bennett’s vibrant materialism builds upon these ideas by expanding the concept of anthropocentrism to include not just nature, but all “things” and “matter”, whether they are natural, or human made. She opposes the traditional humanist views that perceive nonhuman objects as “inert” or without “life” and that only humans have “life.” Her argument is that traditional perspectives on matter create a “binary” between things that possess life and those that do not; she

challenges this binary thinking by introducing the concept of “vibrant” matter and recognizing that all matter is “active” and has “agency” (Bennett vii-viii). In her framework, “actant” refers to any entity or object that has the capacity to act and exert influence. This concept draws inspiration from the theory developed by Bruno Latour who suggests that all actants possess agency in shaping social and material realities regardless of whether they are human or nonhuman. In other words, Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* offers a posthumanist perspective as she seeks to “present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common” (Bennett ix).

Bennett writes that her “hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies” (Bennett ix). This image fuels arrogance and the predisposition to perceive matter as lifeless and “without agency,” making individuals oblivious to the multitude of nonhuman influences that exist within and around them. Bennett argues that this limiting perception not only enables humans to exploit and destroy what they perceive as lifeless but prevents humans from fully experiencing and understanding the agency and vitality of the nonhuman world on which the human world depends. *Vibrant Matter* expands on material agency through the notion of assemblages. “Assemblages are...groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (Bennett 23-24). This key concept refers to the dynamic and interconnected networks of human and nonhuman forces that shape our economic, political, and social realities. As she suggests, it is crucial to note that these assemblages are not predetermined (especially not by one actant in the assemblage) but rather emerge through interactions and entanglements of various elements that influence our overall values, beliefs, and practices.

To demonstrate how this new approach reforms our perception of seemingly insignificant elements, Bennett explores the idea of “debris” through the observation of objects she finds within a street drain. Bennett writes,

Glove. pollen. rat. cap. stick. As I encountered these items. they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing—between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman's efforts, the litterer's toss, the rat-poisoner's success) and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. (Bennett 4)

Her use of the term “debris” carefully references the discarded material leftovers that are accumulated through human intervention and natural processes. These objects are frequently viewed as waste and are often dismissed as insignificant. However, Bennett argues that “debris” can never truly be discarded and instead “exceeds” its human-designated status through “thing-power,” meaning “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett 6). These materials do not simply vanish into thin air once they are outside of our immediate awareness. Instead, they have effects beyond what we might be conscious of or intend. These materials persist in landfills and oceans creating a detrimental cycle that harms our natural environment. By encountering the discarded items in the gutter, Bennett came to the realization that she needed to adopt a new perspective and be receptive to seeing these objects in a new light. She recognized the importance of attributing agency to these seemingly insignificant things stating, “For I came on the glove-pollen-rate-cap-stick with [writer and naturalist Henry David] Thoreau in my head, who had encouraged me to “practice the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen”” (Bennet 5). This concept challenges the assumptions of valuableness and recognizes the potential and interconnectedness of all matter. Bennett’s approach aligns significantly with the values of many other posthumanist theorists by recognizing the agency and vitality of non-human entities. *Vibrant Matter* offers a valuable framework for reimagining society’s relationship with the outside world by promoting the ideas of “agency of assemblages,” “debris,” and “thing-power” all of which are theatrically present within *Hard Times*.

ANALYSIS OF THE RELATION OF DICKENS’ *HARD TIMES* AND BENNETT’S PHILOSOPHY

Hard Times by Charles Dickens, as noted above, can be analyzed to explore the relation of the novel and Jane Bennett’s argument regarding material agency and assemblages. Through his vivid portrayal of the Victorian age, Dickens reveals the detrimental effects of industrialization and societal constructs that impose narrow-mindedness and restrictive identities. Throughout the first few chapters, he is particularly articulate in depicting the fictional setting of Coketown and does not alleviate the suffocating atmosphere and its ongoing influence.

It was a town of red brick, or brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black... It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.” (Dickens 15)

Here, Dickens masterfully creates vivid imagery and evokes a sense of life-like quality in the inanimate objects he describes. It is engraved within the reader’s mind that Coketown is perpetually covered in a haze of smoke and soot emitted by the countless businesses and industries that dominate the landscape. By comparing industrial machinery to animals, Dickens provides these items with a sense of vitality and agency. His technique of anthropomorphizing allows him to suggest a sense of movement and life, as if the factory components themselves are alive and continuously in motion. This additionally highlights the detrimental and never-ending effects of industrialization on both the natural world and human beings. The air and water systems of Coketown are densely polluted, making it particularly uninhabitable for its citizens who are suffocating both physically and mentally.

Dickens continues to emphasize the oppressive nature of industrialization by revealing how it objectifies workers and students and denies them their agency. *Hard Times* depict Coketown’s citizens as “equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next” (Dickens 15). Here, the harsh progression of industrialization has stripped workers of their individuality and reduced them to mere cogs in the machinery of production. The dominant ethos of “conquest and consumption” of resources within the novel promotes conformity and enforces control over those who submit to it. This is the ultimate “hunch” of Jane Bennet as stated previously. However, in this case, it is not just the nonhuman materials that are exploited and discredited. The large corporations of Coketown have come to view laborers as disposable resources rather than individuals with rights and dignity. Many citizens of Coketown are found trapped within this monotonous routine and denied any opportunity for potential personal growth and self-expression. By exploring the lives of characters such as Stephen Blackpool, a factory worker, and Louisa Gradgrind, whose father is a school master and who marries the factory owner, Dickens exposes the dehumanizing impact of the Industrial Revolution, emphasizing the loss of agency and the fragmentation of human connections.

Within *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens introduces Louisa Gradgrind, daughter of Mr. Gradgrind, in a distinct manner that isolates her character from the other women within the novel. As a prominent figure of Coketown’s educational system, Mr. Gradgrind prioritizes facts and forbids any form of imagination or individuality. His role as school master heavily influences Louisa’s upbringing by suppressing her inclinations and subsequently forcing her to conform to a rigid worldview. Louisa is described as, “struggling through the dissatisfaction” and being “a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow.” (Dickens 9). Despite this statement, Dickens is not implying that Louisa is cold and unfeeling, but rather that she is simply ill-educated in recognizing and expressing her true emotions. Unable to declare the complex feelings that lie beneath her uniformed and impassive exterior, Louisa can only state facts about her surroundings and what is expected of her, which is to marry the wealthy and much older factory owner, Mr. Bounderby. Early in the novel, while looking in the direction of the town, she states to her father, “There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out.” (Dickens 66). Unaware of the application of this remark, Mr. Gradgrind dismisses the implied analogy. Although it is a fact, Louisa’s statement suggests a more metaphorical meaning as well. Specifically, that although her emotions are repressed within her, she has not entirely succumbed to her father’s prohibition against curiosity and imagination. Concerning *Vibrant Matter*, Louisa’s reoccurring connection with fire serves as a powerful medium through which she gives voice to the theoretical concepts of agency and assemblages. Firstly, fire symbolizes agency within her narrative as she admires its power to transform and shape its surroundings. Her inner fire hopes to harness her strength and determination to break free of society’s expectations and advocate for herself. Furthermore, Louisa’s relation to fire additionally draws attention to Bennett’s concept of assemblages. Fire is not a solitary element as it requires various components to ignite and sustain a flame. Within the industrialized setting, fire is viewed by others as a mere resource for producing heat and providing power for machines all for the benefit of society. Throughout *Hard Times* this connection is reestablished to emphasize how instead of exploiting fire as a resource, Louisa has come to sympathize and appreciate it in all its splendor, to see the potential of her own agency in it.

Stephen Blackpool's death in *Hard Times* can additionally be analyzed through the theoretical lens of Jane Bennett, focusing primarily on the concepts of "debris" and "thing-power." Stephen's unfortunate fate of falling and becoming trapped within a mineshaft after being falsely accused of a crime serves as a poignant illustration of the destructive power of industrialization and the disregard for human life within a society driven by consumerist pursuits. Bennett uses the term "debris" as a reference to the remains and byproducts of human activity which come to be often overlooked and discarded. When Stephen is first introduced, the reader discovers that "Stephen looked older, but he had had a hard life," due to the work he engages in and the challenges he encounters as a member of the impoverished working class (Dickens 57). And yet, "He was a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity" (Dickens 57) proving that he is more than his unfortunate circumstances. However, the wealthy citizens of Coketown hold a different perspective towards workers like Stephen. Described as "ants or beetles", they perceive them as less than human. They are considered what Bennett defines as mere "objects," lacking any sense of life or agency. This belittling perspective is evident as the upper classes view workers as "Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there ended; something to be infallibly settled by laws of supply and demand; something that blundered against those laws, and floundered into difficulty; something that was a little pinched when wheat was dear, and over-ate itself when wheat was cheap" (Dickens 139). In other words, they were passive objects with the potential to be acted on by humans and other factors, but without the ability to act themselves. Workers like Stephen are utilized for profit but hold no inherent worth to their society.

Stephen's death is a manifestation of the concept "debris" as it represents the tragic consequences of the industrial system that reduces workers to mere disposable objects devoid of any agency or value. He becomes a casualty in the relentless chase for profit and efficiency, discarded and forgotten like scraps. This event is also related to the concept of "thing-power" as explored by Bennett defining how multiple forces possess influence in shaping human lives and societies. Before his passing, Stephen proclaimed, looking up at a star, "In my pain an' trouble, lookin up yonder,—wi' it shinin on me—I ha' seen more clear, and ha' made it my dyin prayer that aw th' world may on'y coom togetther more, an' get a better unnerstan'in o' one another, than when I were in 't my own weak seln'" (Dickens 179). It is through Stephen's identification with a star that he comes to acknowledge his interconnection with other beings. His observation of the misunderstanding among individuals suggests a lack of appreciation for the inherent value in others and "things". Despite this, Stephen advocates for a sense of unity and collaboration by implying the belief that events are not solely influenced by individual actions, but rather broader and more powerful force.

Based on his dying words, it can be concluded that his death was not result of his actions alone but influenced by much larger forces that play a part within the development of such a harsh society. Unfortunately, Stephen's grace and hopefulness for a brighter future was no match against the restraint society had placed on him and ultimately led to his demise. This highlights the idea that objects and systems have a profound impact on human lives, often beyond individual control. His tragic fate exemplifies the dehumanizing effects of industrialization in a society driven by materialistic pursuits and emphasizes the substantial role intricate forces come to obtain. By examining Stephen's death in relation to these concepts, we gain a deeper understanding of the social and philosophical themes explored in Dickens' novel.

CONCLUSION

At first glance, *Vibrant Matter* by Jane Bennett and *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens appear to be two vastly distinct works. However, upon closer examination and analysis, it is evident that both texts share a common thread within their exploration of intricate forces and how they impact society. Throughout her theoretical text, Bennett emphasizes the vitality of all matter and invites society to reconsider their relationship with the non-human world and recognize the vitality and agency in all things within and around us. At the same time, Dickens exposes the dark realities of a society driven by industrialization and the detrimental effects it has on human well-being. Keeping in mind the concepts addressed by Bennett, one can better interpret the complex causes of events and character upbringings in *Hard Times*. Ultimately, both writers challenge the dominant narratives of their time and offer alternative perspectives on the complex issues of their respective eras. By analyzing Charles Dickens' literary work through the modern eye, one can distinguish its underlying messages and relevance to today's society. *Vibrant Matter* and *Hard Times* serve as a prompt to foster more sustainable and harmonious relationships with the elements of the environment, which is necessary to help build a more equitable and interconnected society.

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