

Sophia C. Jochem, “Fungi and the City: Charles Dickens’s Urban Poetics of Decay” *Dickens Quarterly* 39. 1 (2022): 42-61.

In “Fungi and the City: Charles Dickens’s Urban Poetics of Decay”, Sophia C. Jochem provides a commentary on Charles Dickens’s perception of London through the prism of fungal rot and decay, tying this to advances in knowledge on the nature of fungi and suggesting how the use of such language highlights the moral frameworks contained within Dickens’s work. By superimposing decolonial theory onto close readings of Dickens’s *Great Expectations* and *Little Dorritt* and core nineteenth-century mycological texts, Jochem has generated a novel analysis of Dickens’s work that situates itself across multiple schools of thought. Here, we the authors, with respective backgrounds in Victorian literature and the history of mycology, seek to review the article in terms of its engagement with the Dickensian narration and its surrounding social and scientific cultures.

For Jochem, *Great Expectations* is a text heavily engaged in dialogue with the ethics of empire and imperialism. It is an interesting analysis, which follows in a rich tradition of post-colonial/decolonial readings of Victorian literature. However, in viewing Dickens’s work as allegorical of the imperial guilt he presumably felt, the article skirts by the decidedly complex views Dickens had towards empire, race, and the imperial project. Similarly, Jochem’s claim that “the moral corruption of British imperial projects overseas, backed by ‘the city’ manifests itself in the material of London” (43) is one that lacks substantiation. In “[l]iteralizing rot” Dickens may have been “implicating London in Empire” (43), but rot also implicates other corruptions and sins closer to home that are unaddressed. It is also worth noting that, despite the article’s framing of Dickens within an imperial context, there is a lack of engagement with previous scholars, such as Edward Said and Grace Moore, who have approached Dickens from similar perspectives.

In contrast, Jochem’s article shines in its analysis of *Little Dorritt*, when it summons Berkeley and draws compelling parallels between the key role of fungi in the ‘economy of Nature’ (fungi being the major participant in the process of decomposition, and thus the perpetuation of life) and the abolishment of archaic systems in the hope of a new society at in the age of progress, echoing the work of Anna Tsing in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015).

In particular, Jochem highlights how the collapse of Mrs Clennam’s house occurs as a result of the subtle, rampant action of dry rot, which has decomposed the crutches, that is, the literal supports of the house and thus metaphorically the moral principles (notably religious) of the family, allowing new beginnings. In doing so, Jochem provides thought-provoking consideration of nature as the agent of what could be otherwise seen as divine justice. Biblical references are traditionally considered intrinsic to the narration, whether it be through the presentation of Marshalsea as an alternative Eden or Mrs Clenman’s decomposed wine, the latter identified by Jochem as allusions to her “old-fashioned religious doctrines” (55). Instead, the collapse of Clenman’s house in *Little Dorrit* is seen by Jochem, in the light of the “ecology of memory”, not as the punitive justice of an Old Testament God who chastises the parents for their transgression and puts the offspring in peril, but rather as the “unfamiliar kind of justice” of dry rot which instead forces the offspring to “dismantle” that transgression (58). It prompts interesting considerations of fungi’s potential role as a driven agent that eats away the corrupt and promotes moral progress both home and away.

However, in the attempt to highlight how “mycological knowledge played a critical role in the consolidation of imperial domination and white supremacy”, Jochem achieves mixed success (47). Her example of *Serpula lacrymans* and of the increasing vulnerability of monoculture cash crops to pathogens does much to support the claim that “the threat fungi were perceived to pose was [...] a threat to empire” (48). In contrast, her initial evidence of Berkeley’s defence of mycology’s “strong focus on taxonomic classification by emphasizing that ‘a correct estimation of species’ constituted ‘the only way in which we can arrive at anything like the accurate views of geographic botany, or the distribution of plants over the globe’” is substantially weaker, and, more importantly, unsubstantiated (47). Whilst links between taxonomy and imperialism have previously been made, none are cited by Jochem, and the article ignores other, more benign, motives for such pursuits. Furthermore, the strong focus of mycology on taxonomic classification can perhaps be better understood through the lack of knowledge of domestic fungi, with the number of species known in Great Britain almost doubling between the period of 1836 and 1860. Though recognising the study of fungi as distinct from the study of botany, Jochem does not account for the distinct culture of mycology that historically distinguish the two practices and which would substantially enrich her analysis.

In highlighting the mycological presence creeping throughout Dickens’s work, Jochem provides a compelling step forward in bringing the background to the foreground. Discussions of landscape and nature, endemic throughout his collected works, serve to enrich our understanding of Dickens’s writing. Similarly, in attempting to assess Dickens’s understandings and position on contemporary scientific debates, Jochem has once more made a substantial contribution. However, it is in its determination to frame Dickens and the history of mycology (both of which are prominently concerned with events at the local and regional level) in relatively unnuanced dialogue with imperialism that the article falls short. Its absolutist tone does much to weaken points that, when reflected upon, point towards exciting scholarly avenues.

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