



## Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

---

### THE POETICS OF HUMANISM AND MORAL AWAKENING IN CHARLES DICKENS'S DOMBEY AND SON

Nodira N. Jalalova

Is'hoqxon Ibrat Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages,  
Namangan, Uzbekistan

e-mail: [jalalovanodira3@gmail.com](mailto:jalalovanodira3@gmail.com)

#### Abstract

This article examines the artistic embodiment of the humanist idea in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848), a novel that marks the beginning of the writer's mature period. It argues that, in contrast to the early fiction, where humanist values are conveyed through the direct opposition of virtue and vice, *Dombey and Son* realizes those values through a complex artistic system in which the architectonics of the characters, the symbolic richness of space, and the psychological transformation of the protagonist work together. The study focuses on three structural carriers of the humanist idea: the critique of commercial values embodied in Mr Dombey and in the marriage of Edith Granger; the symbolic opposition of the cold house and the sea; and the poetics of moral awakening in the novel's resolution. The analysis employs close reading and structural-semantic methods. The findings indicate that Dickens affirms human dignity against the background of a triumphant bourgeois mercantilism, and that the protagonist's much-debated final transformation is artistically coherent when read not as psychological evolution but as moral awakening. The study contributes to an understanding of how the Victorian social novel asserted the value of the person in an age dominated by the logic of the market.

**Keywords:** Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, humanism, moral awakening, bourgeois marriage, mercantilism, symbolism of space, the sea, human dignity, Victorian novel.



## Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

### 1. Introduction

*Dombey and Son* occupies a distinctive place in the creative evolution of Charles Dickens. It is with this novel that the writer's mature period begins, the period in which humanist ideas are developed with markedly greater depth and systematic coherence. In the early novels — *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* — the humanist spirit is most often expressed through the direct confrontation of virtue and vice. In *Dombey and Son*, by contrast, Dickens no longer states humanist values declaratively but creates a complex artistic system in which those values are conveyed through the whole structure of the work.

This shift has an importance that extends beyond the biography of the writer. *Dombey and Son* is a novel about the collision between two value systems: an older ethic of human feeling and relationship, and a new commercial morality for which persons are instruments and worth is measured in money. The novel therefore allows us to study how nineteenth-century English realism affirmed the dignity of the person precisely in those historical conditions in which bourgeois mercantilism had become dominant.

The historical moment is essential to the novel's design. Dickens wrote during a period of intense industrialization, social stratification and the crisis of traditional values, and his fiction registers the instant at which the ethic of an older Christian society came into conflict with the morality of the new commercial order. His own biography sharpened this sensitivity: the poverty of his childhood and his forced labour as a boy left an indelible mark on his imagination and fostered a lasting alertness to the manifestations of social wrong. *Dombey and Son* transposes this biographical and historical experience into a sustained meditation on what is lost when the relations between human beings are subordinated to the calculus of profit. Critical discussion of the novel has long been preoccupied with a single question: the artistic plausibility of Mr Dombey's final transformation. In a celebrated



## Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

objection, F. R. Leavis and others have argued that the proud merchant's late conversion to tenderness is unprepared, too sudden and too complete to be psychologically convincing. This objection deserves serious consideration, and it provides a useful point of entry into the novel's humanist poetics, for the answer to it depends on understanding what kind of change Dickens is actually depicting. This article argues that the humanist idea in *Dombey and Son* is carried by three structural means: the critique of commercial values embodied in Mr Dombey and in the institution of bourgeois marriage; the symbolic ordering of space, in which the cold house and the open sea are opposed; and the poetics of moral awakening in the resolution. Read in this way, the protagonist's transformation is not a lapse of realism but the culmination of a consistently developed humanist logic.

### 2. Materials and Methods

The primary material of the study is Dickens's novel *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848), examined in relation to the broader corpus of his mature fiction, in particular *Bleak House* (1852–1853) and *Hard Times* (1854), which are introduced as comparative reference points rather than as objects of equal analysis. This framing allows the position of *Dombey and Son* at the threshold of Dickens's mature period to be established.

The investigation is qualitative and text-analytical. It combines two complementary procedures. The first is close reading, applied to programmatic passages — the opening declaration of the firm's cosmic centrality, the descriptions of the Dombey house, the sea imagery surrounding little Paul, and the final reconciliation — at the level of diction, imagery and moral framing. The second is a structural-semantic method, which analyses the architectonics of the character system and the symbolic value of space, in order to show how the humanist idea is



## Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

---

distributed across the whole structure of the work rather than stated in any single passage.

Methodologically, the study treats the humanist idea not as a paraphrasable message but as a principle realized through artistic form. Following the premise that a moral content acquires artistic value through the degree of its creative reworking, the analysis attends to the way human dignity is asserted indirectly — through the irony of the opening chapter, the symbolism of the house and the sea, and the structure of the protagonist’s final awakening. The selection of passages was guided by their programmatic character.

### 3. Results

**3.1. The critique of commercial values: Mr Dombey.** The analysis confirms that the humanist idea is conveyed first of all through the critique of a value system in which persons are reduced to instruments. Mr Dombey is among Dickens’s most complex “negative” characters, if the term may be applied to him at all. He is not a villain in the conventional sense: he commits no crime and hatches no wicked plot; he acts, in his own estimation, from the best of motives. His evil lies in the value system to which he is devoted — in the worship of money and social position, in his incapacity for genuine human affection, and in his habit of turning people, including his own children, into means to an end. The novel’s opening pronouncement, in which the earth is imagined as created for Dombey and Son to trade in and the heavenly bodies as existing to preserve their commercial system, establishes through sustained irony the central moral perspective of the book<sup>1</sup>: the world Dombey has constructed in his imagination is a world with no place for authentic humanity.

---

<sup>1</sup>Dickens, Ch. (1848). *Dombey and Son*. London: Bradbury and Evans, Ch. 1.



## Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

**3.2. The institution of bourgeois marriage: Edith Granger.** A second result concerns the critique of bourgeois marriage, embodied in the figure of Edith Granger. Through this character a theme enters the novel that is treated with unexpected severity for a writer often regarded as merely sentimental: the sale of human dignity within the institutionally sanctioned form of marriage. Edith is beautiful and intelligent, but inwardly exhausted, brought to the marriage market by her mother and fully conscious of having become an object of trade. Her marriage to Dombey is in effect an open commercial transaction, in which she sells her beauty and social standing for wealth and a distinguished name, and both parties understand this completely. Dickens does not condemn Edith; he condemns the system that has reduced such a woman to the status of a commodity before she has even come to understand her own position. In the words that concentrate the novel's humanist critique, she declares that she has been taught from childhood to sell herself. In this single statement is gathered Dickens's indictment of the bourgeois institution of marriage as a species of commercial bargain.

The logic of the transaction is carried further in the figure of Carker, Dombey's manager, whose calculated intimacy with Edith exposes the moral consequences of a world in which human relations have become forms of commerce. Edith's eventual revolt — her refusal to remain the property of either man — is not presented as conventional transgression but as the reassertion of a human dignity that the marriage market had denied her. Through this triangle Dickens demonstrates that where persons are treated as commodities, the bonds between them decay into manipulation and contempt, and that the recovery of dignity may require the rupture of the very institution that purports to sanctify them.



## Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

**3.3. The symbolism of the cold house.** A third finding concerns the symbolic organization of space. The Dombey house in Portland Place is among the most fully realized spatial images in Dickens's work — a place where life has been sacrificed to outward display. Rich, cold and stately, everything in it is designed to exhibit social position, yet there is almost nothing in it for a human being to live by. The house is dark, not warm and living; each room appears cold and proud; there is in it neither warmth, nor colour, nor life<sup>2</sup>. Here architectural space becomes the metaphor of its owner's inner world: Dombey lives in the material embodiment of his own moral condition — outwardly splendid, inwardly empty and unfit for habitation. The humanist idea concealed behind this image is that a human dwelling should not be a decoration displaying social status but a space of living human relationship; where the house becomes a shop-window, some essential part of humanity has been sacrificed.

**3.4. The symbolism of the sea.** Against the cold house Dickens sets the sea, one of the subtlest means by which the humanist idea is expressed. The sea is presented as a space that commerce cannot appropriate: it cannot be bought, sold or entered into the ledgers of Dombey and Son. To little Paul, whose childlike sensibility remains open to what his father cannot understand, the sea appears as a source of mysterious attraction, and in the sound of the waves he hears questions to which the business world can give no answer. His celebrated question — what the waves are always saying — serves as an artistic key to one of the novel's central ideas: that there exist forms of human experience and knowledge that are in principle closed to the mercantile mind. Paul's death is figured as a passing out to sea, a merging with an element nearer to him than his father's world of trade, and the sea

---

<sup>2</sup>Dickens, Ch. (1848). *Dombey and Son*. London: Bradbury and Evans, Ch. 16.



## Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

---

thus becomes the metaphor of a dimension of human existence — death, eternity, deep feeling — that cannot be measured by commerce.

**3.5. The poetics of moral awakening.** The final result concerns the resolution. Mr Dombey's transformation, the most contested of the novel's artistic solutions, occurs rapidly, at the moment when his entire value system has collapsed: his firm is ruined, his wife has left him, his daughter has disappeared. The objection that this change is psychologically unprepared mistakes its nature. Dickens is depicting here not a gradual psychological evolution but a moral awakening — the moment in which a human being, having lost everything that constituted his false life, comes face to face with the truth of the human attachment he had fled. When Florence takes his hand, the whole life he has lived appears to him as a dream<sup>3</sup>. The awakening is presented not as a psychological trait but as a moral metaphor: the life lived in service of a false ideal is a dream, and real life begins with the restoration of human connection. Read in this way, the transformation is artistically coherent, the logical completion of the humanist argument the novel has pursued throughout.

## 4. Discussion

The findings indicate that *Dombey and Son* achieves its humanist effect not by stating values but by embodying them in structure. The architectonics of the character system, the symbolic value of the house and the sea, and the psychology of the protagonist's awakening together constitute a single artistic system in which the dignity of the person is affirmed against the logic of the market. This marks a

---

<sup>3</sup>Dickens, Ch. (1848). *Dombey and Son*. London: Bradbury and Evans, Ch. 59.



## **Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation**

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

---

decisive advance on the early fiction, in which the humanist idea was carried chiefly by the direct opposition of good and bad characters.

The novel's treatment of evil is correspondingly more complex than that of the early work. In *Dombey and Son* evil is no longer confined to the criminal underworld; it penetrates the respectable bourgeois household and inheres in the very value system that official morality regards as virtuous. Mr Dombey commits no crime, yet his devotion to money and status devastates everyone around him — driving his son towards death, humiliating his daughter, reducing his wife to despair. Dickens shows how a “respectable” system of values can destroy everything human in its vicinity, and in doing so he relocates evil from the margins of society to its centre.

The contested ending must be understood in the light of this analysis. The objection that Dombey's conversion is unconvincing assumes that Dickens is offering a study in gradual psychological change; but the novel is offering something else — a moral awakening in which the collapse of a false life clears the way for the recognition of a truth that was always present. The rapidity of the change is not a defect but a feature of the kind of event being represented. The humanist proposition that even the hardest heart may awaken, provided it has not wholly surrendered to evil, is here given its artistic form.

A further implication concerns the unity of ethics and aesthetics in the mature Dickens. The analysis suggests that the moral meaning of the novel is not separable from its symbolic organization: the cold house, the open sea and the final awakening are at once aesthetic images and ethical arguments. To interpret the symbolism of the house or the sea is already to read a statement about human worth. In this respect *Dombey and Son* exemplifies the organic unity of moral content and aesthetic form that characterizes Dickens's mature poetics.



## Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

It is instructive, finally, to situate the novel within Dickens's wider development. The opposition of warm and cold dwellings that organizes the symbolism of *Dombey and Son* recurs throughout his mature work, from the homely hearths of the Christmas books to Joe Gargery's forge in *Great Expectations*, and it is always set not only against the slums and prisons of the poor but against the "bad" houses of the rich, where material abundance excludes rather than fosters human warmth. *Dombey's* cold mansion belongs to the same imaginative family as the frozen rooms of Miss Havisham. In tracing the humanist idea through the symbolism of space, *Dombey and Son* thus inaugurates a poetic strategy that Dickens would deploy, with increasing complexity, for the rest of his career.

### 5. Conclusion

This article has argued that the humanist idea in *Dombey and Son* is realized through a complex artistic system rather than through direct moral statement. The critique of commercial values embodied in Mr Dombey and in the marriage of Edith Granger, the symbolic opposition of the cold house and the open sea, and the poetics of moral awakening in the resolution together affirm the dignity of the person against the background of a triumphant bourgeois mercantilism.

The analysis has also addressed the long-standing objection to the novel's ending. Mr Dombey's final transformation, when read not as gradual psychological evolution but as moral awakening, proves to be artistically coherent — the logical culmination of the humanist argument the novel develops throughout. The collapse of his false life is the condition of his recognition of a human truth that was always available to him.

The principal contribution of the study is to show how the Victorian social novel asserted the value of the person in an age governed by the logic of the market, and to demonstrate the organic unity of ethics and aesthetics in Dickens's mature work.



## **Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation**

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

---

Further research might extend the analysis to the later novels in order to trace how the humanist affirmation of *Dombey and Son* is qualified and darkened in Dickens's final period.

### **References**

1. Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
2. Dickens, Ch. (1848). *Dombey and Son*. London: Bradbury and Evans.
3. Dickens, Ch. (1853). *Bleak House*. London: Bradbury and Evans.
4. Dickens, Ch. (1854). *Hard Times*. London: Bradbury and Evans.
5. Leavis, F. R. (1948). *The Great Tradition*. London: Chatto and Windus.
6. Likhachev, D. S. (1989). *Notes on the Russian*. Moscow: Logos.
7. Forster, J. (1872–1874). *The Life of Charles Dickens*. London: Chapman and Hall.