# References to the Victorian Novel in David Lodge's Post-modernist Novel “Nice Work”

**Introductory quotations:**

“Upon the midlands now the industrious muse doth fall,

The shires which we the heart of England well may call.”

DRAYTON: *Poly-0lbion* (Epigraph to *Felix Holt the Radical*, by George Eliot)

“Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, and fed by different food, and ordered by different manners ...”

“You speak of -” said Egremont hesitatingly.

BENJAMIN DISRAELI: *Sybil*; *or, the Two Nations*

**Quotation - 1st Chapter**

If you think ... that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you were never more mistaken. Do you anticipate sentiment, and poetry, and reverie? Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Calm your expectations, reduce them to a lowly standard. Something real, cool and solid lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning, when all who have work wake with the consciousness that they must rise and betake themselves thereto.

CHARLOTTE BRONTE: Prelude to *Shirley*

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“Now she rubs moisturizer into her facial skin as protection against the raw wintry air outside, coats her lips with lip- solve, and brushes some green eyeshadow on her eyelids, pondering shifts of point of view in Charles Dickens's Hard Times (1854).”

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“She lifts from the floor a leather Gladstone bag, and begins to load it with the things she will need for the day: well-thumbed, much underlined and annotated copies of Shirley, Mary Barton, North and South, Sybil, Alton Locke, Felix Holt, Hard Times; her lecture notes - a palimpsest of holograph revisions in different-coloured inks, beneath which the original typescript is scarcely legible; and a thick sheaf of student essays marked over the Christmas vacation.”

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`In the 184os and 1850s,' says Robyn, `a number of novels were published in England which have a certain family resemblance. Raymond Williams has called them "Industrial Novels" because they dealt with social and economic problems arising out of the Industrial Revolution, and in some cases described the nature of factory work. In their own time they were often called "Condition of England Novels", because they addressed themselves directly to the state of the nation. They are novels in which the main characters debate topical social and economic issues as fall in and out of love, marry and have children, pursue careers, make or lose their fortunes, and do all the other things that characters do in more conventional novels. The Industrial Novel contributed a distinctive strain to English fiction which persists into the modern period - it can be traced in the work of Lawrence and Forster, for instance. But it is not surprising that it first arose in what history has called "the Hungry Forties".

`By the fifth decade of the nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution had completely dislocated the traditional structure of English society, bringing riches to a few and misery to the many. The agricultural working class, deprived of a subsistence on the land by the enclosures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, thronged to the cities of the Midlands and the North where the economics of laissez-faire forced them to work long hours in wretched conditions for miserable wages, and threw them out of employment altogether as soon as there was a downturn in the market.

`The workers' attempt to defend their interests by forming trades unions was bitterly resisted by the employers. The working class met even stiffer resistance when they tried to secure political representation through the Chartist Movement.'

Robyn glances up from her notes and sweeps the audience with her eyes. Some are busily scribbling down every word she utters, others are watching her quizzically, chewing the ends of their ballpoints, and those who looked bored at the outset are now staring vacantly out of the window or diligently chiselling their initials into the lecture-room furniture.

`The People's Charter called for universal male suffrage. Not even those far-out radicals could apparently contemplate the possibility of universal female suffrage.'

All the students, even those who have been staring out of the window, react to this. They smile and nod or, in a friendly sort of way, groan and hiss. It is what they expect from Robyn Penrose, and even the rugby-playing boys in the back row would be mildly disappointed if she didn't produce this kind of observation from time to time.

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`There were two climactic moments in the history of the Chartist Movement. One was the submission of a petition, with millions of signatures, to Parliament in 1839. Its rejection led to a series of industrial strikes, demonstrations, and repressive measures by the Government. This is the back- 74 ground to Mrs Gaskell's novel Mary Barton and Disraeli's Sybil. The second was the submission of another monster petition in 1848, which forms the background to Charles Kingsley's Alton Locke. 1848 was a year of revolution throughout Europe, and many people in England feared that Chartism would bring revolution, and perhaps a Terror, to England. Any kind of working-class militancy tends to be presented in the fiction of the period as a threat to social order. This is also true of Charlotte Bronte's Shirley (1849). Though set at the time of the Napoleonic wars, its treatment of the Luddite riots is clearly an oblique comment on more topical events.'

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`Mr Gradgrind in Hard Times embodies the spirit of industrial capitalism as Dickens saw it. His philosophy is utilitarian. He despises emotion and the imagination, and believes only in Facts. The novel shows, among other things, the disastrous effects of this philosophy on Mr Gradgrind's own children, Tom, who becomes a thief, and Louisa, who nearly becomes an adulteress, and on the lives of working people in the city of Coketown which is made in his image, a dreary place containing:

*several streets all very like one another, and many more streets still more like one another, inhabited by people 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 an d tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.*

`Opposed to this alienated, repetitive way of life, is the circus - a community of spontaneity, generosity and creative imagination. "You mutht have us, Thquire," says the lisping circus master, Mr Sleary, to Gradgrind. "People mutht be amuthed." It is Cissie, the despised horserider's daughter adopted by Gradgrind, who proves the redemptive force in his life. The message of the novel is clear: the alienation of work under industrial capitalism can be overcome by an infusion of loving kindness and imaginative play, represented by Cissie and the circus.'

Robyn pauses, to allow the racing pens to catch up with her discourse, and to give emphasis to her next sentence: `Of course, such a reading is totally inadequate. Dickens' own ideological position is riddled with contradiction.'

The students who have been writing everything down now look up and smile wryly at Robyn Penrose, like victims of a successful hoax. They lay down their pens and flex their fingers, as she pauses and shuffles her notes preparatory to the next stage of her exposition.

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`It is interesting how many of the industrial novels were written by women. In their work, the ideological contradictions of the middle-class liberal humanist attitude to the Industrial Revolution take on a specifically sexual character.'

At the mention of the word `sexual', a little ripple of interest stirs the rows of silent listeners. Those who have been daydreaming or carving their initials into the desktops sit up. Those who have been taking notes continue to do so with even greater assiduousness. People cease to cough or sniff or shuffle their feet. As Robyn continues, the only interference with the sound of her voice is the occasional ripping noise of a filled-up page of A4 being hurriedly detached from its parent pad.

`It hardly needs to be pointed out that industrial capitalism is phallocentric. The inventors, the engineers, the factory owners and bankers who fuelled it and maintained it, were all men. The most commonplace metonymic index of industry - the factory chimney - is also metaphorically a phallic symbol. The characteristic imagery of the industrial landscape or townscape in nineteenth-century literature - tall chimneys thrusting into the sky, spewing ribbons of black smoke, buildings shaking with the rhythmic pounding of mighty engines, the railway train rushing irresistibly through the passive countryside - all this is saturated with male sexuality of a dominating and destructive kind.

`For women novelists, therefore, industry had a complex fascination. On the conscious level it was the Other, the alien, the male world of work, in which they had no place. I am, of course, talking about middle-class women, for all 78 women novelists at this period were by definition middleclass. On the subconscious level it was what they desired to heal their own castration, their own sense of lack.'

Some of the students look up at the word `castration', admiring the cool poise with which Robyn pronounces it, as one might admire a barber's expert manipulation of a cut-throat razor.

`We see this illustrated very clearly in Mrs Gaskell's North and South. In this novel, the genteel young heroine from the south of England, Margaret, is compelled by her father's reduced circumstances to take up residence in a city called Milton, closely based on Manchester, and comes into social contact with a local mill-owner called Thornton. He is a very pure kind of capitalist who believes fanatically in the laws of supply and demand. He has no compassion for the workers when times are bad and wages low, and does not ask for pity when he himself faces ruin. Margaret is at first repelled by Thornton's harsh business ethic, but when a strike of workers turns violent, she acts impulsively to save his life, thus revealing her unconscious attraction to him, as well as her instinctive class allegiance. Margaret befriends some of the workers and shows compassion for their sufferings, but when the crunch comes she is on the side of the master. The interest Margaret takes in factory life and the processes of manufacturing - which her mother i f nds sordid and repellent - is a displaced manifestation of her unacknowledged erotic feelings for Thornton. This comes out very clearly in a conversation between Margaret and her mother, who complains that Margaret is beginning to use factory slang in her speech. She retorts:

*"And if I live in a factory town, I must speak factory language when I want it. Why, Mamma, I could astonish you with a great many words you never heard in your life. I don't believe you know what a knobstick is."*

*"Not I, child. I only know it has a very vulgar sound; and I don't want to hear you using it."*

' Robyn looks up from the copy of North and South from which she has been reading this passage, and surveys her audience with her cool, grey-green eyes. `I think we all know what a knobstick is, metaphorically.'

The audience chuckles gleefully, and the ballpoints speed across the pages of A4 faster than ever.

**Quotation - 2nd Chapter**

Mrs Thornton went on after a moment's pause: `Do you know anything of Milton, Miss Hale? Have you seen any of our factories? our magnificent warehouses?'

`No,' said Margaret. `I have not seen anything of that description as yet.'

Then she felt that, by concealing her utter indifference to all such places, she was hardly speaking the truth; so she went on: `I dare say, papa would have taken me before now if I had cared. But I really do not find much pleasure in going over manufactories.'

ELIZABETH GASKELL: *North and South*

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Prison is just a word to Robyn, a word in a book or a newspaper, a symbol of something - the law, hegemony, repression ('The prison motif in Little Dorrit is a metaphorical articulation of Dickens's critique of Victorian culture and society' – Discuss). Seeing it there, foursquare in soot-streaked stone, with its barred windows, great studded iron door, and high walls trimmed with barbed wire, makes her think with a shudder of the men cooped up inside in cramped cells smelling of sweat and urine, rapists and pimps and wife-beaters and childmolesters among them, and her heart sinks under the thought that crime and punishment are equally horrible, equally inevitable - unless men should change, all become like Charles, which seems unlikely.

The convoy crawls on. More shops, offices, garages, takeaways. Robyn passes a cinema converted into a bingo hall, a church converted into a community centre, a Co-op converted into a Freezer Centre.

This part of the city lacks the individual character of Robyn's own suburb, where healthfood stores and sportswear boutiques and alternative bookshops have sprung up to cater for the students and liberal-minded yuppies who live there; and still more does it lack the green amenities of the residential streets around the University. There are few trees and no parks to be seen. There are occasional strips of terraced houses, whose occupants seem to have given up the unequal struggle against the noise and pollution of the Ring Road, and retreated to their back rooms, for the frontages are peeling and dilapidated and the curtains sag in the windows with a permanently drawn look. Here and there an effort has been made at renovation, but always in deplorable taste, `Georgian' bay windows or Scandinavian-style pine porches clapped on to the Victorian and Edwardian facades. The shops are either flashy or dingy. The windows of the former are piled with cheap mass-produced goods, banks of conjunctival TVs twitching and blinking in unison, blinding white fridges and washing-machines, ugly shoes, ugly clothes, and unbelievably ugly furniture, all plastic veneers and synthetic fabrics. The windows of the dingy shops are like cemeteries for unloved and unwanted goods - limp floral print dresses, yellowing underwear, flyblown chocolate boxes and dusty plastic toys. The people slipping and sliding on the pavements, spattered with slush by the passing traffic, look stoically wretched, as if they expect no better from life. A line from D.H. Lawrence - was it *Women in Love* or *Lady Chatterley*? - comes into Robyn's head. `*She felt in a wave of terror the grey, gritty hopelessness of it all.'* How she wishes she were back in her snug little house, tapping away on her word-processor, dissecting the lexemes of some classic Victorian novel, delicately detaching the hermeneutic code from the proairetic code, the cultural from the symbolic, surrounded by books and files, the gas fire hissing and a cup of coffee steaming at her elbow. She passes launderettes, hairdressers, betting shops, Sketchleys, Motaparts, Currys, a Post Office, a DIY Centre, a Denture Centre, an Exhaust Centre. An exhaustion centre is what she will soon be in need of. The city seems to stretch on and on - or is she going round and round the ring road in an endless loop? No, she is not. She is off the ring road. She is lost.

Robyn thinks she must be in Angleside, because the faces of the people slithering on the pavements or huddled miserably at bus-stops are mostly swarthy and dark-eyed, and the bright silks of saris, splashed with mud, gleam beneath the hems of the women's drab topcoats. The names on the shopfronts are all Asian. Nanda General Stores. Sabar Sweet Centre. Rajit Brothers Import Export. Punjabi Printers Ltd. Usha Saree Centre. Halted at a red light, Robyn consults her A to Z, but before she has found the place on the map, the lights have changed and cars are hooting impatiently behind her. She takes a left turn at random and finds herself in an area of derelict buildings, burned out and boarded up, the site, she realizes, of the previous year's rioting. Caribbean faces now preponderate on the pavements. Youths in outsize hats, lounging in the doorways of shops and cafes, with hands thrust deep into their pockets, gossip and smoke, jog on the spot to keep warm, or lob snowballs at each other across the road, over the roofs of passing cars. How strange it is, strange and sad, to see all these tropical faces amid the slush and dirty snow, the grey gritty hopelessness of an English industrial city in the middle of winter.

**Quotation – 3rd Chapter**

`People mutht be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working. They an't made for it.'

CHARLES DICKENS: *Hard Times*

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As a piece of action in a Victorian novel she might have judged it harshly as a case of one bourgeois supporting another when the chips were down, but she had persuaded herself that it was for the greater good of the factory workers - not to save Wilcox's skin - that she had lied; and the conditions she had imposed on Wilcox were a guarantee of her good faith.

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'But isn't he making a distinction there between "truth" and "meaning"? Truth is to meaning as metonymy is to metaphor.' `How?' It was Charles's turn to frown. `Well, take Pringle's, for example.' `Pringle's?' `The factory.' `Oh, that. You seem quite obsessed with that place.' `Well, it's uppermost in my mind. You could represent the factory realistically by a set of metonymies - dirt, noise, heat and so on. But you can only grasp the meaning of the factory by metaphor. The place is like hell. The trouble with Wilcox is that he can't see that. He has no metaphorical vision.' `And what about Danny Ram?' said Charles. `Oh, poor old Danny Ram, I don't suppose he has any metaphorical vision either, otherwise he couldn't stick it. The factory to him is just another set of metonymies and synecdoches: a lever he pulls, a pair of greasy overalls he wears, a weekly pay packet. That's the truth of his existence, but not the meaning of it.' `Which is ...?F 'I just told you: hell. Alienation, if you want to put it in Marxist terms.' `But - ' said Charles. But he was interrupted by a long peal on the doorbell.

**Quotation - 4th Chapter**

`I know so little about strikes, and rates of wages, and capital, and labour, that I had better not talk to a political economist like you.'

`Nay, the more reason,' said he eagerly. `I shall be only too glad to explain to you all that may seem anomalous or mysterious to a stranger; especially at a time like this, when our doings are sure to be canvassed by every scribbler who can hold a pen.'

ELIZABETH GASKELL: *North and South*

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The offices of the Foundrax factory had, like Pringle's, an air of being embalmed in an earlier era, the late fifties or early sixties. There was the same dull reception foyer done out in light oak veneer and worn-looking splay-legged furniture, the same trade magazines spread on the low tables, the same (it seemed to Robyn's inexpert eye) bits of polished machinery in dusty display cases, the same permanent waves on the heads of the secretaries, including the one who, casting curious glances at Robyn, escorted them to Norman Cole's office. Like Wilcox's, this was a large, colourless room, with an executive desk on one side, and on the other a long board table at which he invited them to sit.

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The drive over the still snow-covered wastes of the Pennines on the rolling M62 was spectacular. `Oh look, that's the way to Haworth!' Robyn exclaimed, reading a roadsign. `The Brontes!l

'What are they?' Wilcox asked.

`Novelists. Charlotte and Emily Bronte. Have you never read Jane Eyre an d Wuthering Heights?'

`I've heard of them,' said Wilcox guardedly. `Women's books, aren't they?'

`They're about women,' said Robyn. `But they're not women's books in the narrow sense. They're classics - two of the greatest novels of the nineteenth century, actually.' There must, she reflected, be millions of literate, intelligent people like Victor Wilcox walking about England who had never read Jane Eyre or Wuthering Heights, though it was difficult to imagine such a state of cultural deprivation. What difference did it make, never to have shivered with Jane Eyre at Lowood school, or throbbed in the arms of Heathcliff with Cathy? Then it occurred to Robyn that this was a suspiciously humanist train of thought and that the very word classic was an instrument of bourgeois hegemony. `Of course,' she added, `they're often read simply as wishfulfilment romances, Jane Eyre especially. You have to 202 deconstruct the texts to bring out the political and psychological contradictions inscribed in them.'

`Eh?' said Wilcox.

`It's hard to explain if you haven't read them,' said Robyn, closing her eyes. The lunch, the wine, and the cushioned warmth of the car had made her drowsy, and disinclined to demonstrate an elementary deconstructive reading of the Brontes. Soon she dropped off to sleep. When she awoke, they were in the car park of Rawlinson and Co.

**Quotation - 5th Chapter**

`Some persons hold,' he pursued, still hesitating, `that there is a wisdom of the Head, and that there is a wisdom of the Heart. I have not supposed it so; but, as I have said, I mistrust myself now. I have supposed the head to be all-sufficient. It may not be all-sufficient; how can I venture this morning to say it is!'

CHARLES DICKENS: *Hard Times*

**Quotation - 6th Chapter**

The story is told. I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral. It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer directions. I only say, God speed him in the quest!

CHARLOTTE BRONTE: *Shirley*

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Marion began reading her paper in a low monotone. All went well until she observed that the line from `Locksley Hall', `*Let the great world spin for ever, down the ringing grooves of change'*, reflected the confidence of the Victorian Railway Age. Vic raised his hand. S

`Yes, Mr Wilcox?' Robyn's tone and regard were as discouraging as she could make them.

`He must have been thinking of trams, not trains,' said Vic. `Train wheels don't run in grooves.'

Simon Bradford gave an abrupt, high-pitched laugh; then, on meeting Robyn's eye, looked as if he wished he hadn't.

`D'you find that suggestion amusing, Simon?' she said.

`Well,' he said, `trams. They're not very poetic, are they?' they?'

`It said the Railway Age in this book I read,' said Marion.

`What book, Marion?' asked Robyn.

`Some critical book. I can't remember which one, now,' said Marion, riffling randomly through a sheaf of notes.

`Always acknowledge secondary sources,' said Robyn. `Actually, it's quite an interesting, if trivial, point. When he wrote the poem, Tennyson was under the impression that railway trains ran in grooves.' She read out the footnote from her Longman's Annotated edition: "`*When I went by the first train from Liverpool to Manchester in 1830 I thought that the wheels ran in a groove. It was a black night, and there was such a vast crowd round the train at the station that we could not see the wheels. Then I made this line.*”

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`Do you want to borrow Daniel Deronda for next week?' `What did he write?' `He's not a he, he's a book. By George Eliot.' `Good writer, is he, this Eliot bloke?' `He was a she, actually. You see how slippery language is. But, yes, very good. D'you want to swap Daniel Deronda for the Tennyson?' `I'll take them both,' he said. `There's some good stuff in here.' He opened the Tennyson, and read aloud, tracing the lines with his blunt forefinger: +

*`Woman is the lesser man, and all thy passions, matched with mine, Are as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine.'*

`I might have guessed you would lap up "Locksley Hall",' said Robyn. `It strikes a chord,' he said, turning the pages.

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`I've read more in the last few weeks than in all the years since I left school,' he said. ` Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights and Daniel Deronda. Well, half of Daniel Deronda. This bloke' - he took a paperback edition of Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy, assigned for a tutorial that afternoon, from his pocket, and waved it in the air - `and Tennyson. Funnily enough, I like Tennyson best. I never thought I'd like reading poetry, but I do. I like to learn bits off by heart and recite them to myself in the car.'

`Instead of Jennifer Rush?' she said, mischievously.

`I've got a bit tired of Jennifer Rush.'

'Good!”

'Her words don't rhyme properly. Tennyson's a good rhymer.'

`He is. What bits have you memorized, then?'

Looking into her eyes, he recited:

*`In my life there was a picture, she that clasped my neck had flown. I was left within the shadow, sitting on the wreck alone.”*

`That's rather beautiful,' said Robyn, after a pause.

`I thought it was rather appropriate.'

`Never mind that,' said Robyn briskly. `Where's it from?'

`Don't you know? A poem called "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After".'

`I don't think I've ever read that one.'

`You mean, I've read something you haven't read? Amazing.' He looked childishly pleased with himself.

`Well,' she said, `if you've acquired a taste for poetry, the Shadow Scheme hasn't been in vain.'