

The Sins of the Fathers: Chancery, Familial Relationships, and Social Reform in *Bleak House*

The primary images of *Bleak House* are those of smoke, fog, dirt and rain that underlie the streets of London, Chancery, and the Lincolnshire home of the Dedlocks. These images are central to the conception of a world that is undergoing dissolution; a world full of corruption that is universal and inescapable. The corruption and dissolution apply not only to physical locations, but also to the very fabric of society, a society which is centered in Chancery and which spreads, like pestilence, to all human relationships.

The invasive nature of this corruption cannot be ameliorated by the traditional social agencies which would be expected to provide relief and protection against social ills. Within the universe of *Bleak House*, the courts, Parliament, the aristocracy, philanthropic agencies, and organized religion, are powerless against the unrelenting tide of dissolution represented by the smoke, fog, and dirt emanating from Chancery.

Against this backdrop of an ineffective social order, Dickens provisionally adopts a view that personal relationships and personal responsibility are methods which mitigate the social ills described in the novel. Yet even the well-intentioned actions of people acting in a responsible and charitable manner are ineffective in solving large-scale social ills, and can only provide assistance and relief to a limited number of people within the novel.

Bleak House, as one of Dickens' "mature" novels, views social reform, representative government, and the effectiveness of the courts in a more realistic light than his earlier works. These earlier novels recognize that evil occurs, but conceive of evil as particularized in individuals or in specific or isolated institutions. In *Bleak House*,

Dickens paints a picture of an evil that is not isolated in individual characters or institutions, but is universal.

We are introduced to the central images of *Bleak House* early in the work when we see the people of London making their way upon the muddy streets “when tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if the day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud” (Dickens Bleak House, 3). We are then presented with the second element of corrosion, the “fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city” (Dickens Bleak House, 3). Finally, we are taken to the center of the fog, dirt and corrosion:

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: ‘Temple Bar.’ And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln’s Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in His High Court of Chancery. (Dickens Bleak House, 4)

And within that “heart of darkness” that is Chancery, we are presented with “that scarecrow of a suit, [which] has in the course of time, become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means” (Dickens Bleak House, 6). The suit of course, is Jarndyce and Jarndyce, an action at law that has gone on for so long that no one remembers when it started, just as no one can comprehend that extent of the suit. In a very real way, Jarndyce and Jarndyce symbolize the corrosive effects of law and the courts on society in the novel.

Lest the reader think that corruption is limited to Chancery, Dickens includes the Lincolnshire estate of Lord and Lady Dedlock into his vision of a decaying world. “But

the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up too much in jeweler's cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air" (Dickens Bleak House, 9). It is not enough to point to the corruption of Chancery and Lincolnshire; London must be brought in as well. Dickens establishes a parallel with the Court of Chancery and the environs near the rag and bottle shop of Krook, when he notes that Krook "is called among the neighbors the 'Lord Chancellor.' His shop is called the Court of Chancery" (Dickens Bleak House, 52).

Finally, to make the connection complete, Dickens descends from the environs of the rag and bottle shop to the pestilential area of Tom-all-Alones where we meet the poor street-sweeper, Jo, and find that:

Jo lives – that is to say, Jo has not yet died – in a ruinous place known to the like of him by the name of Tom-all-Alone's. It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people. ...Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever. ...(Dickens Bleak House, 271)

Critics have remarked on Dickens' use of the images of smoke, fog, and dirt to portray a world in the process of disintegration. In his essay entitled *Bleak House*, J. Hillis Miller notes that: "perhaps the best example of this disintegration is the initial description of Tom-all-Alone's, which makes an elaborate use of present participles to express an active decomposition matching the forward movement of time" (Miller, 76).

But Dickens is not content to limit his depiction of corruption to mere places; ultimately, the corruption extends to the lives of the characters in the novel. This process of decomposition works on and through people, causing them to become worn away,

much like their surroundings. This process of corruption can be a source of pathos when it operates on initially good people, such as Miss Flite, who are reduced to mere shadows of what they once were: “I had youth and hope. I believe, beauty. It means very little now. Neither of the three served, or saved me” (Dickens Bleak House, 34). In a similar vein, the “Shropshire man,” Gridley, who started as an innocent young man engaged in a simple lawsuit has been worn down by the incessant wearing pace of Chancery, so that he cries out in frustration “if I took my wrongs in any other way, I should be driven mad! It is only by resenting them, and by revenging them in my mind, and by angrily demanding the justice I never get, that I am able to keep my wits together. It is only that!” (Dickens Bleak House, 212). In the end, Chancery through its never-ending process, reduces people to a state of desolation where the end can come in “one of two ways, I should rather say. Either the suit must be ended, Esther, or the suitor” (Dickens Bleak House, 681).

Jacob Korg, in his Introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Bleak House* notes the unrelenting nature of the workings of Chancery on the characters in the novel:

The great Cause is a metaphor for the hopelessness of sorting out right from wrong in a world that lacks a living moral sense. Tom-all-Alone’s is not merely an example of the need for slum clearance, not merely an apparatus for distilling the evils of society into concentrated form, but also a mysterious focus of retribution, a ‘secular inferno’ that punishes the innocent as well as the guilty in accordance with some covert and terrible system of justice. (Korg, 11)

Robert A. Donovan, in his essay *Structure and Idea in Bleak House* echoes this sense of corruption, which infects everyone in the novel, and leads to a sense of hopelessness when he states: “the bleakness of Bleak House is the sense of hopelessness inspired by the knowledge that men and women, subjected to the common shocks of

mortality, will nevertheless consistently repudiate the claims which other people have on them” (Donovan, 37).

Just as Dickens made the corruption of physical locations universal, so too does he look to make the theme of corruption in his characters universal. His choice of Chancery as the symbol of this radiating pestilence, a presence that captures so many people in its grasp, is therefore apt, as John Marshall Gest, points out: “Again, the rules of the court (of Chancery) required *that every person having any interest, no matter how theoretical or contingent, must be made a party*, and this added enormously to the expense, and also to the vexation of the suitors” (italics mine) (Gest, 420).

We have seen that Dickens made the connection between the physical location of Tom-all-Alones and pestilence explicit, through the use of the images of filth and parasitism. We see him employing the same methods when talking about people. Just as filth and disease are spread by parasites in the physical world, so are the numbing effects of moral pestilence spread by a cadre of human parasites. Jacob Korg makes the connection between parasitism and moral depravity explicit when he states; “Old Turveydrop, Skimpole and Vholes are not merely annoying minor characters, but also instances of the parasitism that infects society, like the institution of law, whose first principle is to make business for itself” (Korg, 11- 12).

While Dickens views these social parasites as morally reprehensible, he reserves his most stinging invective for the lawyers, and law-courts. Both the profession of lawyer, and the institution of the law-court, are seen as self-serving and ineffective by Dickens: neither can bridge the moral abyss at the heart of *Bleak House*. Early in the novel, he gives a prophetic warning to would-be suitors in Chancery, noting that “there is

not an honorable man among its practitioners who would not give – who does not often give – the warning ‘suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!’”

(Dickens Bleak House, 5). In the law and law-courts, Dickens finds a class of people who are reprehensible, but who hide behind a façade of professional anonymity. We can feel Gridley’s anger and helplessness as he rails against this smug anonymity:

The system! I am told, on all hands, it’s the system, I mustn’t look to individuals. It’s the system. I mustn’t go into Court, and say ‘My Lord I beg to know this from you – is this right or wrong? Have you the face to tell me that I have received justice, and therefore am dismissed?’ My Lord knows nothing of it. He sits there to administer the system. (Dickens Bleak House, 213)

The callousness of the system is made more apparent when delivered in the simple narrative of a character like Esther, who unlike Gridley, is not explicitly a party to a suit in Chancery, and reports what she sees in a straight-forward manner:

To see everything going on so smoothly, and to think of the roughness of the suitor’s lives and deaths; to see all that full dress and ceremony, and to think of the waste, and want, and beggared misery it represented; to consider that, while the sickness of hope deferred was raging in so many hearts, this polite show went calmly on from day to day, and year to year. In such good order and composure; to behold the Lord Chancellor, and the whole array of practitioners under him, looking at one another and at the spectators, as if nobody had ever heard that all over England the name in which they were assembled was a bitter jest; was held in universal horror, contempt and indignation; was known for something so flagrant and so bad, that little short of a miracle could bring any good out of it to anyone: this was so curious and self-contradictory to me, who had no experience of it, that it was at first incredible; and I could not comprehend it. (Dickens Bleak House, 340)

Over and over again, Dickens refers to lawyers as “preying” on their clients, and describes them as birds of prey, snakes, and vermin, and notes that the one great principle of English law “is to make business for itself. There is no other principle distinctly, certainly, and consistently maintained through all its narrow turnings” (Dickens Bleak House, 537). Finally, towards the end of the novel, when some explanation of this great

principle is required, Wholes provides his great apologia: “and that when a client of mine laid down a principle which was not of an immoral (that is to say unlawful) nature, it devolved upon me to carry it out” (Dickens Bleak House, 805). In dripping sarcasm, Dickens points out the solipsism of this argument whereby the law is declared to be of itself, by itself, and for itself in contravention to those principles of justice and impartiality on which it was founded.

If lawyers and the Courts would not act as agents of change, what of the aristocracy and Parliament? Where Dickens believed in his earlier novels that social ills might be eliminated by an enlightened aristocracy or Parliament, by the time of the writing of *Bleak House*, these beliefs were sadly dashed. A sarcastic tone is evident in our first introduction to the aristocrats encamped at Sir Dedlock’s Lincolnshire demesne: “then there is my Lord Boodle, of considerable reputation with his party, who has known what office is...that he really does see to what the present age is tending...He perceives with astonishment, that supposing the present Government to be overthrown, the limited choice of the Crown...would lie between Lord Coodle and Sir Thomas Doodle...” (Dickens Bleak House, 158).

Behind the sarcasm, however, was a man in deadly earnest declaring that the social ills were beyond the powers of the aristocracy or Parliament to solve. In a letter written to his friend and biographer, John Forster, two years after the publication of *Bleak House*, Dickens says that he is

...hourly strengthened in my old belief that our political aristocracy and our tuft-hunting are the death of England. In all this business I don’t see a gleam of hope. As to the popular spirit, it has come to be entirely separated from the Parliament and Government, and so perfectly apathetic about them both, that I seriously think it a most portentous sign... (Dickens Selected Letters of Charles Dickens, 264)

Philip Hobsbaum, in his book *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens*, notes that the author "saw no hope of social justice arising through political methods of amelioration, and had only contempt for the house of Commons, based, largely, on his own experience of it as a young reporter" (Hobsbaum, 157). This same belief in the inadequacy of Parliament to solve the social ills facing England in the 1850's is echoed by Monroe Engel in his essay *The Politics of Dickens' Novels*, when he says that "by 1857 he declared the House of Commons 'to be getting worse every day' and 'representative government...a miserable failure among us... with the people at Westminster engaged in party squabbles while the real troubles of the country were visible within a few yards'" (Engel, 950).

Ultimately, this failure of the aristocracy and Parliament was viewed by Dickens to be as bad as the hypocrisy of the lawyers, as evidenced in this piece of biting satire appearing in the July 31, 1852 edition of *Household Words* under the title "Our Honorable Friend:"

When he says Yes, it is just as likely as not – or rather more so, that he means No. This is the statesmanship of our honorable friend... *You* may not know what he meant then, or what he means now; but our honorable friend knows, and did from the first know, both what he meant then, and what he means now, and when he said he didn't mean it then, he did in fact say, that he means it now... (Slater, 70)

Having exhausted the courts, aristocracy and Parliament as potential aides in righting social wrongs, Dickens adds philanthropy and organized religion to the list of institutions which failed in providing a bulwark against the breakdown of Victorian society represented in the novel. Two of the most famous philanthropic characters in the novel, Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, are possessed of "telescopic philanthropy," a

condition which enables them to see far-off problems but renders them unable to care for their near-at-hand families and households. Indeed, when Dickens gathers all the principals who adopt philanthropic causes in one place at Mrs. Jellyby's house, we learn "...that nobody with a mission...cared at all for anybody's mission" (Dickens Bleak House, 416). The failure of organized philanthropic institutions in alleviating social ills has been noted by several critics when commenting on *Bleak House*. Monroe Engel notes that: "Dickens found in fact no social cure-alls in either philanthropy or government" (Engel, 945).

Organized religion fares no better than philanthropy at Dickens' hands; in fact, in some respects, organized religion actually contributes to the dissolution of society that we witness in *Bleak House*. Consider, for example, the mis-guided Puritanical religious fervor attributed to Miss Barbary, and the effects that this fervor has on her niece, Esther. Convinced that Esther is somehow guilty of the circumstances of her birth, Miss Barbary chastises Esther by telling her "it would have been far better, little Esther, that you had no birthday; that you had never been born!" (Dickens Bleak House, 18). This is certainly not encouraging advice for a child, and indeed leaves a mark on the little girl that would last through to her adult life. In almost prophetic voice, but a voice twisted by hatred, fear, and loathing, we hear Miss Barbary tell Esther "pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head, according to what is written" (Engel, 18). This line of course, is an echo of Deuteronomy, 5:9, "For I am the Lord thy God, a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon their children..." (The Holy Bible, Translated from the Latin Vulgate, 190). In her anger and bitterness, Miss Barbary neglects to quote the next verse from Deuteronomy, which offers hope to the children of Israel, and by

implication, to Esther, as well “And shewing mercy unto many thousands, to them that love me, and keep my commandments” (The Holy Bible, Translated from the Latin Vulgate, 190). It is this use of organized religion for denunciation, and not for redemption, that Dickens scorns in *Bleak House*. The character that represents organized religion in the novel, Mr. Chadband, is more interested in feeding his enormous appetite than in providing succor for the poor, a fact which is dramatically demonstrated in his meeting with Jo.

The portrayal of a corrupt society and the inability of organized religion to deal with the social ills presented in the novel are suggestive of a state of a movement back in time to an earlier period. Indeed, many critics have noted that the characters of *Bleak House* are enmeshed in a state of original sin; an almost Old Testament state before redemption. The conflation of Chancery and its corruptions with the resulting social ills that occur is noted by Mark Spilka in his essay *Religious Folly*: “so the three orphans (Ada, Richard, and Esther) and their guardian are involved in a legal muddle which suggest Original Sin” (Spilka, 69). J. Hillis Miller echoes this notion of original sin, and implies that Dickens is concerned with the nature of evil itself, when he states: “such characters seem to be involved in a kind of original sin for which they must innocently suffer: ‘How mankind ever came to be afflicted with Wiggglomeration, or for whose sins these young people fell into a pit of it, I don’t know, so it is’” (Miller, 80). It is as though the characters of *Bleak House* live in a time before Christ’s redemption, as Mark Spilka suggests: “Lady Dedlock’s secret is treated ‘as if it were the sin of Adam, remote, mysterious, inexpiable” (Spilka, 70).

We next turn to the prospect of industrialization as a means of alleviating the lot of the poor, and society in general, within the novel. Mr. Rouncewell is seen as a successful industrialist, possessed of a happy family, and opposed to the hidebound (dead locked) politics of Sir Leicester Dedlock and his cronies. Surely, such a man can help; surely there is hope in the well-intentioned industrialist? While Dickens portrays Rouncewell as well-meaning and personally isolated from the devastation wrought by the corruption of London and Chancery, we are struck with the dichotomy between his household and the countryside around his iron works. Dickens presents us with a countryside that is reminiscent of a vision of hell where “coal-pits and ashes, high chimneys and red bricks, blighted verdure, scorching fires, and a heavy never-lightening cloud of smoke, become the features of the scenery” (Dickens *Bleak House*, 828). Dickens does not accept the fact that industry, unchecked, can act as an agent for good. F.R. and Q.T. Leavis remark in their book titled *Dickens the Novelist*, that Dickens like Carlyle, does not believe in the power of a cut-throat, competitive society to act as a positive force for enacting social reform. Rather, Dickens’ intent in *Bleak House* was to explore the possibilities for goodness in a culture that increasingly adopted a mechanistic outlook.

What has seized Dickens’ imagination is Carlyle’s exposure of his culture as laissez-faire, Devil-take-the-hindmost, cut-throat competitive society and the sense that they were part of it, willy-nilly: the novel is to demonstrate its heartlessness, its tragedies, its moral repulsiveness, its self-defeating wastefulness, its absurdities and contradictions, to enquire into the possibilities of goodness in such an environment, and whether anything in the nature of free-will is possible for those born into it. (Leavis, 125)

Instead of viewing industrialists as opposed to the aristocracy, Dickens saw industrialization as a kind of substitute for aristocracy: a substitute guided by the principles of money rather than the principles of maintaining the status-quo and position.

In either case, the result was the same: positive change did not occur. As early as the late eighteen-thirties, Dickens recognized that the potential for abuse was present in the industrialization that was sweeping rural England. Patrick Brantlinger notes Dickens' early distrust of sweeping industrialization: "and at the end of his first industrial tour, he wrote to E.M. Fitzgerald 'So far as seeing goes, I have seen enough for my purpose, and what I have seen has disgusted and astonished me beyond all measure. I mean to strike the heaviest blow in my power for these unfortunate creatures. [i.e. workers in the factories]'"(Brantlinger, 274). Brantlinger later goes on to say that "Dickens believes that the factory owners, their allies, and also their opponents, all use political economy and 'tabular statements' to excuse their moral and legal failures, and he also believes that such scientific mumbo-jumbo glosses over suffering and blunts love and generosity" (Brantlinger, 282).

Having given the lie to the forces of the law, the aristocracy, Parliament, organized philanthropy and religion, and industrialists as agents to effect changes in a crumbling social system, where can people turn for help? Dickens does not have a sanguine view of the ability of organized social institutions to help cure society's ills. As we have seen, he carefully removes any doubt that the traditional approaches to reform will work. He is left, then, with a message of personal assistance and responsibility, as a partial solution, at best, to these seemingly intractable problems. Michael Goldberg notes that Dickens' view of society changed over his life and that "what he gained from Carlyle was a vision of Victorian society far more radical and pessimistic than anything he had entertained as a young novelist attacking the hydra of social abuses. He came to recognize the evil in the social system and to know that it was far more intractable than he had previously

thought” (Goldberg, 76). F.R. and Q.T. Leavis pick up this theme of the intractability of the social problems during the Victorian Era, and offer insight into the solution that

Dickens had worked-out to the problem of evil:

His hope for mankind is intimated in the novel, and is his faith in the human spirit which can show such other traits pitifully struggling for survival in those as battered by existence as Miss Flite, Jenny and Liz, and Jo of Tom-all-Alones who though he don't know nothink can feel gratitude and so is 'not quite in outer darkness.' (Leavis, 130)

When viewed in the light of Dickens' limited solution to the nature of evil, Esther Summerson's goodness in the face of adversity seems less like the inability of a novelist to deal realistically with a feminine heroine (as some critics have argued) and more a form of benevolence that counteracts the corruption present elsewhere in the novel.

Esther must win her way to redemption and overcome her aunt's mis-guided Puritanical admonitions, as well as a disease which disfigures her permanently. It is only through her personal suffering and acquisition of self-knowledge through this suffering, that Esther achieves a degree of peace in the novel. We are witnesses to Esther's epiphanic moment as she visits the Ghost's Walk at the Lincolnshire estate of the Dedlocks:

...and that if the sins of the fathers were sometimes visited upon the children, the phrase did not mean what I had in the morning feared it meant. I knew I was innocent of my birth, as a queen is of hers, and that before my heavenly Father I should not be punished for birth, nor a queen rewarded for it.” (Dickens Bleak House, 507)

The idea that Esther acts as a moral counterbalance or touchstone in *Bleak House* is echoed by Robert Donovan, when he states: “If Esther occasionally strikes us as a little goody-goody, we must recall her function to provide a sane and wholesome standard of morality in a topsy-turvy world” (Donovan, 44).

And yet, for all her goodness, Esther can only help a few people achieve a kind of equilibrium in the novel. Her ministrations are limited: she cannot, by herself effect change on a large scale in *Bleak House*. Leonard Deen believes that Dickens “like E.M. Forster, suggests that we are saved one by one, in our personal relations, not in our generalized and abstract organizations. He seems to deny that good can come from groups and organizations. It flows only from the individuals of superior sympathy and responsibility to other individuals” (Deen, 53). Monroe Engel, citing the *Report of 1834 to Parliament*, states that: “where real cases of hardship occur, the remedy must be applied by individual charity, a virtue for which no system of compulsory relief can be or ought to be, a substitute” (Engel, 962). This one line from *The Report of 1834* seems to be a distillation of Dickens’ thoughts on the subject of charity, and hence individual responsibility in the novel. Later in the same paper, Engel notes, in a fitting summation of the relation of law (and other social institutions) in dealing with social issues “he [Dickens] recognized no alternative to individual responsibility, not even in law” (Engel, 972).

Ultimately, for Dickens, each person must struggle to balance the needs of those less fortunate than them against their conscience, to determine an appropriate mode of action. Each person must, Like Esther Summerson, fight through personal loss and adversity to achieve a sort of redemption, or as Patrick Brantlinger says “we are all blind men, all fumbling at ‘the tangled skein’ of our lives, all imprisoned by forces which we cannot perceive and do not understand. This is Dickens’ final assessment of the Victorian social mess, his way of resolving his own deeply rooted and ambivalent feelings towards industrialism” (Brantlinger, 283-4). Although explicitly concerned with

industrialism, this quote can be applied to all the mis-guided “isms” and social institutions discussed in this paper.

It is by evoking mankind’s sympathies for the less fortunate that Dickens reveals his power as an artist and his belief in a somewhat better future for those touched by the blight of Chancery and public institutions. In his article *To Working Men*, which ostensibly addresses housing reform, we catch glimpses of the thought, intent, and feeling that Dickens devoted to those less fortunate than he:

We may venture to remark that this momentous of all earthly questions is one we are not now urging for the first time. Long before this Journal came into existence, we systematically tried to turn Fiction to the good account of showing the preventable wretchedness and misery in which the mass of people dwell, and of expressing again and again the conviction, founded upon observation, that the reform of their habitations must precede all other reforms, and that, without it, all other reforms must fail. (Slater, 227)

In all ages, and at all times, great artists have called attention to the plight of the less fortunate: in *Bleak House*, Dickens writes with a passion and conviction that people acting responsibility and charitably, can help assuage the social ills that plague society. The call to action is never more clear than in his words to those who favor position, status, and self-interest over the needs of their fellow man:

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day. (Dickens *Bleak House*, 636)

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