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**SOCIAL CRITICISM IN
CHARLES DICKENS' *BLEAK HOUSE***

*An extended essay submitted for the fulfillment of Master Degree in Anglo-Saxon
Literature and Civilization*

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DEDICATION



I would like to dedicate this humble work to:

My dear parents,

My lovely sister and brothers,

My husband,

My family-in-law.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The literary works published during the Victorian period are said to be the result of a social awareness. This was a writing that spoke of the needs of the age, of the specific state of mind which had grown up inside of a general public who kept waiting for solutions for a long time. Thus, the contributions of the Victorian writers were so relevant and interesting and nearly all the prominent Victorian writers expressed their unwillingness and conflicting views on the prevailing mores of their time. In this way, the researcher who goes to the Victorians without predisposition must be struck over and over by the fundamental tone of distress which infests so much that is for the most part taken as normal of the period.

Charles John Huffman Dickens (1812-1870) is a great Victorian novelist who left a deep artistic print in the world of literature as well as many other domains, since his works involved many aspects including the social and political ones.

Many critics (Ian Milligan, Forster, Nabokov and others) agreed on Dickens' genius in depicting society and different people's characters using a satiric tone and comic style mostly.

Dickens drew from the social conditions of England during the Victorian period (1837-1901) as well as the Romantic period to compose his masterpieces, since there is no sharp cut between one literary genre and the other; we may find aspects of Romanticism in works of Realism and so on, and the works of Dickens were not an exception.

His early life also reflected a shadow in his novels like the misery he endured when he was a kid and his dropping from school and the obligation to work after his father went to jail. All this and other elements are scattered throughout his works from *Oliver Twist* to *The Mysteries of Edwin Drood*.

In this extended essay, *Bleak House* represents the corpus of study and we shall investigate the writing style of Dickens from a social perspective; how did he reveal and criticize some social behaviours and attitudes in *Bleak House*?

For this sake, the work has been divided into two main chapters; the first one involves the background of Dickens as well as his novel; starting from the setting of the work and moving to his life and literary career. While the second chapter is devoted to analyze the social themes of *Bleak House* through plot, writing style, and symbols.

Moreover, we shall deal partly with the impact of Dickens' early childhood in his work, and the last, but not least, section was devoted to analyze Dickens' use of children as characters in his novel and to what extent they represent the English children during the Victorian era.

Many other aspects have been put aside for the purpose of narrowing the scope of research and they may be highlighted in further investigations.

CHAPTER ONE :
LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The Victorian literature reflected the numerous changes that occurred in England during the reign of Queen Victoria including the shift from one literary genre to another as well as the different social, political, and economic changes. Major works of the era criticized and brutalized the shortcomings of the Industrial Revolution as well as the negative impact that it left in the British society.

Next to other writers, Charles Dickens pioneered this genre and publicly denounced the social ills in his works, alternating back and forth to the harsh childhood he lived.

1.2. THE VICTORIAN ERA

Every literary period serves as a cursor that helps readers understand and classify different literary works according to their styles and the themes they conveyed in each era.

Victorian literature was written in England during the reign of Queen Victoria, (1837 -1901). It is largely characterized by the struggle of working people and the triumph of right over wrong. The writers of the Victorian era were driving from their preceding arts as well as the actual events of their time; for example, in *Bleak House*, aspects of Romanticism and gothic are

found throughout the novel, though it is set in the Victorian era but it does draw some characteristics from the preceding era.¹

The Victorian period saw an enormous change in the way people lived because of the Industrial Revolution which offered many technological advances and many scientific convictions like the Evolution Theory of Darwin which affected the English people's thoughts and their view of the world. As a result, many of them were separating themselves from the church. Additionally, there were the miserable conditions of the working class and class division generated by the Industrial Revolution that showed big differences between people.

By the same token, scholars and writers of the Victorian era considered these changes as a disease that would at some point or another reach a tipping point. According to Rahn (2011) many educated people saw it as their duty to revolt against the shameful acts of this new and startling world. Writers like Thomas Carlyle railed against the orderly misuse he saw happening surrounding him. He saw social apparatus and the Industrial Revolution as engines of obliteration, stripping individuals of their humanity.

The poem of Elizabeth Barret Browning "The Crying of Children" speaks to an assault on mining practices in England ;especially, those young children

¹ This whole section is based on : <http://www.onlineliterature.com/periods/victorian.php>

who used to work down in the mines in very harsh and severe conditions. Browning was not the only one as there was also Charles Dickens who reported social ills of the Industrialized England and called attention to real-world problems in his works namely *Hard Times*, and *Bleak House*.

Women during the Victorian period were, according to Rahn, so underestimated that they had to work hard and fight to make good changes in their lives. They were willing to write and possessed the artistic and literary spirit were socially obliged to publish their works under male pseudonyms; Mary Ann Evans published *Adam Bede* and *Scenes of Clerical Life* under the name of George Eliot. Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* joins early feminist symbolism with many other concepts in a children's story. Moreover, Letitia Elizabeth Landon was an expert and prominent female artist. Charlotte and Emily Brontë wrote books that have taken their spot as artistic classics.

In the Victorian period also, the novel started replacing the poem as the fashion of the time. Serial productions in magazines and diaries got to be more read and they were ultimately collected as complete structures. Rahn (2011) claimed that Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens were considerably pushing the novel to its limits by creating psychologically complicated characterization and plot that would influence a whole generation of writers.

Charles Dickens is undoubtedly the most famous Victorian writer. His novels deal with the sufferings and struggles of the poor people as well as the

battle between right and wrong, and so his characters were easily distinguished by readers (Rahn, 2011)²

It is not surprising that the protagonists of Dickens; as in *David Copperfield*, were good people who find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time and in bad circumstances since he endured those sufferings himself when he was a kid.

1.3. CHARLES DICKENS

Charles John Huffman Dickens was the most popular English novelist of the Victorian era and he composed a great deal of interesting literary works which were and still are considered as masterpieces and major literary cursors. These works are going to be dealt with in the following section after having a look at his biography.

1.3.1. DICKENS' BIOGRAPHY (1812 – 1870)

Dickens was born on February 07th, 1812 in Portsmouth, England and died on June 09th, 1870 of a stroke in Kent, England. He was the second of eight youngsters. His father, John Dickens, was a maritime agent who longed for wealth. Charles Dickens' mother, Elizabeth Barrow, tried to be an educator. The family remained poor in spite of all their efforts. In 1816, they moved to Chatham, Kent, where he could visit and explore the old castle of Rochester. (Forster, 2008, p. 22)

² <http://www.online-literature.com/periods/victorian.php>

In 1822, the Dickens family moved again to Camden Town, a poor neighborhood in London and it is at that time that the family's budgetary circumstance had turned better but John Dickens ultimately was sent to jail for debt in 1824, thus Charles Dickens was compelled to leave school and worked at a boot blacking factory and barely earned enough to help his family. (Forster, 2008, p. 51)

When his father was released, Dickens went back to school but dropped out in 1827 and worked as an office boy to keep helping his father. This occupation was in fact a starting point for his future writing career. In 1833, Dickens started submitting portrayals to different magazines and daily newspapers under the penname 'boz'. Those clippings were published in 1836 in his first book *Sketches by Boz*. (Idem. p. 74)

Charles Dickens married Catherine Hogarth and the couple had 10 children but got separated in 1858. (Ibid. p. 108)

1.3.2. DICKENS MAJOR WORKS

Charles Dickens has left an enormous Victorian cultural and artistic heritage, and many following authors drew from his style and tried to imitate the way he composed those works. His works were described by many critics (e.g. Forster) as charming and delighting as he has quoted in The Life of Charles Dickens: "I can remember when Mr. Dickens was a very young man, and had commenced delighting the world with some charming humorous

works in covers which were coloured light green and came out once a month” (Thackeray in Forster, 2008, p. 116)

After his *Sketches*, Dickens started *The Posthumous Papers* in 1833 which won a lot of fame. He also started publishing *Bentley's Miscellany* magazine in which he began his novel *Oliver Twist*. The story turned around a poor boy living in the streets and it could be said that it reflects the miserable childhood of Dickens. *Oliver Twist* was amazingly generally welcomed in both England and America.³

From 1838 to 1841, Dickens published *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*.

When he travelled to America in 1842, he wrote *American Notes for General Circulation* in which he criticizes American culture and materialism in a sarcastic style. He then published in 1844 *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* which tells the story of an American man struggling to survive on the ruthless American borders.

David Copperfield was published between 1849 and 1850 in which Dickens used many incidents of his childhood to create that fictional literary work; “The story bore him irresistibly along; certainly with less trouble to himself in the composition; ... and he was probably never less harassed by interruptions and breaks in his narrative” (Forster in Lang, 2001, p. 5)

³ The whole section is based on : (Charles Dickens. (2015). *The Biography.com website*. Retrieved 07:59, Jan 25, 2015, from <http://www.biography.com/people/charles-dickens-9274087>.)

His novels started to express darkness after the suffering he went through; the death of his daughter and father as well as his divorce with Katherine Hogarth dragged him into the gothic style. In *Bleak House* (1852-1853), Dickens dealt with the hypocrisy of the British society and *Hard Times* (1854) focused on the Industrialized England and the shortcomings of the working class.

After that, he published *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1859 which events took place during the French Revolution and *Great Expectation* (1860-1861) that tells the protagonist's long journey of moral development. A few years later, he published a novel which deals with the psychological impact of money in the British society; *Our Mutual Friend*.

On June 09th, 1870, Charles Dickens died leaving behind the unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. (Smith in Jordan, 2001, p. 2-14)

1.3.3. DICKENS; THE SOCIAL CRITIC

Dickens was very successful in uncovering the ills of the industrialized society such as class division, poverty, and exploitation. So he uses the novel as a vault of social consciousness. In this respect, Louis James states (1990):

*His novels are centrally about social relationships... Even his explicit working-out of class and industrial issues in *Hard Times* (1854), based on a hasty visit to a factory strike in Preston, identified the factory problem not with economics but with the Utilitarian denial of human imagination, and juxtaposed the factories of Coketown against the bizarre world of Sleary's travelling circus (Louis, 1990, p. 548).*

Dickens made an idealistic vision in the *Pickwick Papers*; a vision of pre-Victorian and pre-Industrial England despite the fact that the novel is supposedly comic. It did not escape Dickens' print of social analysis. Moreover, one may notice trenchant bits of social discourse in his later novels as *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House*, *Hard times* and *The Chimes*. Throughout these productions, Dickens expresses his ethical sympathy toward the social prosperity of the country. For example, *Oliver Twist* may be seen as a social Victorian archive on child abuse and slum life. When Oliver goes with Sowerberry to fetch the body of a woman who starved to death, he could see a shocking view on abandoned slum houses (Diniejko, 2012), for instance:

Some houses which had become insecure from age and decay, were prevented from falling into the street, by huge beams of wood reared against the walls, and firmly planted in the road; but even these crazy dens seemed to have been selected as the nightly haunts of some houseless wretches, for many of the rough boards which supplied the place of door and window, were wrenched from their position, to afford an aperture wide enough for the passage of a human body. The kennel was stagnant and filthy. The very rats, which here and there lay putrefying in its rottenness, were hideous with famine...

(Oliver Twist, Ch. 5, 44 cited in Diniejko, 2012).

During the 1850s, Dickens' advantage moved slowly from the examination of individual social misfortunes to the examination of the condition of society, especially its laws, education, modern relations, and the horrible states of poor people. Progressively, aside from anecdotal plots, his books contained a lot of social discourse. *Bleak House* prosecutes the disparities in Victorian culture uncovering the ill-uses of the court of Chancery and regulatory ineptitude. For Dickens, the Court of Chancery got to be synonymous with the defective law framework, costly court charges, bureaucratic practices, detail, deferral and uncertainty of judgments. Additionally, Dickens condemns slum lodging, stuffed urban memorial parks, and disregard of infectious illnesses, discretionary debasement, ministers; class divisions, and marginalization of the instructive needs of poor people (Diniejko, 2012).

1.4. BLEAK HOUSE PLOT SUMMARY

Bleak House is the ninth novel of Charles Dickens which was published between 1852 and 1853 in the form of monthly publications. The novel is considered as one of Dickens' finest novels because of its complex plot. The story is told from two points of view; the one of the protagonist Esther Summerson and the other by an omniscient narrator.

The main story of the novel is about Lady Dedlock's secret; back in her youth she had a girl whom she ignored she was alive, and when Tulkinghorn discovered her secret threatened to reveal it to everybody. This lawyer was found dead later and Mrs. Dedlock was the first suspect but it has been discovered that the killer was her maid Mlle. Hortense. The story of Lady Dedlock does not stop here, for she left the house and was eventually found dead near the grave of her lover from the past; Mr. Hawdon.

Esther Summerson; the protagonist, is actually the illegitimate daughter of Mrs. Dedlock, and she moves to Mr. Jarndyce's home; her court-assigned after the death of her aunt, in the company of the two cousins Ada Clare and Richard Carstone who are beneficiaries in the will of a testator which generates the complicated Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit. In fact, it could be stated that nearly all the events turn around this suit. Esther, herself, is a beneficiary in the Jarndyce case though nobody realized that until

Tulkinghorn; the lawyer of Sir. Leicester Dedlock, discovers the secret and threatens to reveal it.

The Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit took many years and consumed many lives until it started to turn good when another will was found and revoked all the previous ones leaving the bulk of the estate to the cousins Richard and Ada who got married and had a child. However, Richard collapses when he learns that he has no chance in the law suit for all the cash he has acquired has been consumed by the costs of charges. Soon, he dies of Tuberculosis and his wife Ada names their son after him.

Esther Summerson got married with Dr. Allan Woodcourt and both live happily in a house that Mr. Jarndyce gave them.

1.5. CHARACTERIZATION

Four major groups of characters are taken into consideration in *Bleak House*; the first one involves Sir Leicester, Volumnia Dedlock, Mr. Turveydrop, and Harold Skimpole who are, repugnant and absurd, all obsessed by the virtue of their social rank. Mr. Turveydrop, for example, is highly criticized by Dickens as he represents those pathetic people who just trail around the aristocrats and imitate their life style.

The second group members are “*the legal and commercial parasites*” (Crompton, 1958, p. 06) Mr. Tulkinghorn, Mr. Vholes, and Grandfather Smalweed. Mr. Tulkinghorn knows about the secret of Lady Dedlock and

threatens to reveal it which makes him a great opportunist who feeds on others' calamities, though he represents the law.

The third category involves Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardigle, and the reverent Mr. Chadband who seem to be interested in charity, benevolence, and religion but actually they are not. Mrs. Pardigle for instance, forces her sons to give their money for her charities; she is then a careless mother though an effective member in society, and this triggers Dickens' disapproval on the working women in the public sphere.

Another category involves those innocent, naïve but victims of profitability and social oppression namely: Esther Summerson, George Rouncewell, The Bagnets, John Jarndyce, and Boythorn. Esther, for example, plays the role of settling down domestic orders reestablishing happiness in Bleak House and restoring peace and order to the Jellyby and Turveydrop houses with her care, freshness, and innocence. She was taking care of Jellyby's children who were ill-treated and ignored by their own mother.

1.6. CONCLUSION

The Victorian novel was a main form of entertainment and social criticism seeking to represent a large social world with its different classes. It was highly realistic and it was the first time in British literature that women emerged as novelists such as: The Brontes, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot.

Charles Dickens, the outstanding Victorian novelist, implicitly fought for the children's rights and the misery of the working class people in the Industrialized England and under profitability and selfishness that reigned at that time. He also criticized materialism and hypocrisy in many of his works such as *Christmas Carol* and *Bleak House* which will be dealt with in the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO:
ANALYTICAL STUDY OF
BLEAK HOUSE

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Bleak House was published in the form of one book in 1853 and tells the story of several generations of the Jarndyce family who desperately wait for the settlement of their court case in the Chancery Court. The novel represents a sharp criticism of the Court of Chancery in England. Yet, the main focus is on the social aspects of the story and how Dickens used a satirical style to deal with social themes through a complex plot and characterization that will be underlined in this chapter.

2.2. MAJOR THEMES

In this novel, Dickens balances between criticizing society and dealing with personal experience truths. We may notice this when we look at Esther Summerson whose story is about the discovery of her own identity and all the emotional changes in her relationships with John Jarndyce, Lady Dedlock and others. The story ends happily for her as well as for Ada, Allan, and Mr. Jarndyce; this happy ending represents a theme itself. We may explain this by the social fact that happiness is always possible and achievable in spite of all the social evil and sadness.

Similarly, Romance and the search for love are also one of the implied themes of the *Bleak House*, as it is not only an illusion or just a momentary choice but is also important and necessary to life. This may be shown in the passage below where Esther is literally sitting between Ada and Richard; the two lovers, and is talking about their love for each other:

...how this early love could come to anything, and how it could come to happiness only if it were real and lasting and inspired them with a steady resolution to do their duty to each other, with constancy,

fortitude, and perseverance, each always for the other's sake. Well! Richard said that he would work his fingers to the bone for Ada, and Ada said that she would work her fingers to the bone for Richard, and they called me all sorts of endearing and sensible names, and we sat there, advising and talking, half the night (Dickens, p. 126).

The whole law system has been also criticized by Dickens throughout the novel. This is implied in Dicken's attacks of the Chancery Court for representing a major evil in society. In Edgar Johnson's Charles Dickens : His Tragedy and Triumphs (1952), it has been pointed out that : "Both law and fog are fundamentally symbols of all the ponderous and murky forces that suffocate the creative energies of mankind". Thus, the Chancery which represents the *dead hand* of the past, still continues to torment people in the present.

Corrupt lawyers and a London court is only a means that Dickens has used to make the readers feel that this destructive dead hand is still living with them to the present; "*The one great principle of the English law is, to make business for itself*" (Dickens, p. 385). However, Dickens is not rejecting totally the Western tradition in his social and political criticism, for he underlined many traditional traits in his novel such as the necessity of legal codes and institutions and celebrating the British monarchy. What Dickens despises in *Bleak House* is the remains of the past, the institutionalized selfishness that resides in tradition.

Weather has been identified with the human moral throughout the entire novel; starting with the deep description of a foggy London to signify the foggy state of mind of people and especially of those in the Chancery Court. The rain as well falls wherever Lady Dedlock is found, which connotes her deep fatigue and distress. "The

adjacent low-lying ground for half a mile in breadth, is a stagnant river, with melancholy trees for islands in it, and a surface punctured all over all day long with falling rain. My Lady Dedlock's "place" has been extremely dreary." (Dickens, p. 06) Additionally, the mud indicates the disasters of urban life and their inevitability reflects the corruption and failure of all society; "...*the street mud, which is made or nobody knows what, and collects about us nobody knows whence or how: we only knowing in general that when there is too much of it, we find it necessary to shovel it away...*" (Dickens, p. 95) On the other hand, the sun shines when Dickens wants to express cheer and happiness.

2.3. DICKENS' WRITING STYLE

Bleak House was written in a prose style which is largely different from the style that contemporary readers are accustomed to read. Today, our reading habits are closely tied to journalism rather than to the artistic literary style. We think that the audience of Dickens at that time was largely receptive and well-prepared. He was also aware that his readers responded well to words' playfulness so he could entertain them freely by turning a classical allusion into a joke, only because he knew his readers would understand the twist and accept it.

The nineteenth-century society considered the writing and reading skills as primordial to be civilized. One may find many elements in the novel that support this idea as in the way characters speak; they did it elaborately even in casual conversations with flawless grammar and formal words. Language correctness was as important as manners for the typical middle-class person. For contemporary readers, it would be hard for them to bear that people used to speak that way.

The manner in which the story is presented is characterized by two alternations; an alternation in the point of view of the narrator as in the passages narrated by Esther in which the use of the first person singular outlines her point of view such as: “As long as I could see the house, I looked back at it from the window, through my tears” (Dickens, p. 16), and those narrated by an omniscient narrator such as: “While Esther sleeps and while Esther wakes” (Dickens, p. 76). Nabokov (1980) sees this alternation as a strength point in the novel. The second alternation is the one made between the present and past tense;

He withdraws his hand, and falls to looking at the sleet and snow again, until they seem, by being looked at, to fall so thick and fast, that he is obliged to close his eyes for a minute on the griddy whirl of white flakes and icy blots.

He began to look at them as soon as it was light. The day is not yet far spent, when he convinces it to be necessary that her rooms should be prepared for her (Dickens, p. 559)

Therefore, there is such suspense in the narration, which is important if we want to catch Dickens’ irony. As for the omniscient narrator, Dickens switches from time to time to Esther’s narrative causing the point of view to call attention to itself. Dickens’ omniscient narrator is consistently satiric in tone for Dickens used “*pastoral conventions to mock a corrupt society*” (Crompton, 1958, p. 294) in the same way Crompton adds: “*How Dickens happened to hit upon this traditional mode of satire for his novel remains obscure*” (Crompton, 1958, p. 294), while Esther’s narrative is fresh and innocent, and she has as many tones as she has responses.

In addition to this, Dickens keeps his readers amused by this tone change and the length of his sentences; he creates original figures of speech, forceful repetitions and many other techniques to get the attention of readers. In this sense, Hara states that: “*the world of Bleak House may be called a kingdom of metaphor, for the specific metaphors seem undisguisedly and unabashedly to exercise a ruling power over the plot, the themes, the characters, and the language of the novel.*”⁴

2.4. SYMBOLISM IN THE NOVEL

Symbols are simply images used in such a way to give a meaning beyond the physical facts of the images themselves.

The diversity of symbols in the novel are due to its different characters and subplots, and what follows is not an exhaustive listing of symbols in the novel but rather what one thinks may be the most important.

2.4.1. Miss. Flite’s Birds

Among the first symbols in the novel is the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit which has consumed many people’s lives and money. In the case, Miss. Flite who is very obsessed with that court case and always frequents the law courts waiting for the settlement of her own inheritance, keeps at home many birds in cages. The thing about those birds is the assumption that they represent all the things consumed in that suit such as *Joy*, *Hope*, and *Youth* or the consequences of the case as *Waste*, *Ruin*, *Despair*, *Madness*, and *Death*. After the suit was over, Miss. Flite released the birds but at the expense of many lives.

⁴ <http://www.dickens.jp/archive/bh/bh-hara.pdf>

1.4.2. Fog

The main recurrent symbol in the novel is *fog*, and it has been referred to in the opening of the book when Dickens was describing London;

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. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. (Dickens, p.3)

Dickens, in this novel opening, remarks that the world seems to have “*gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun*” (Dickens, p. 01).

Fog symbolizes the theme of evil which, in the end, brings ruin into itself. It involves many important themes as well; for example, Richard Carstone gradually becomes lost and unable to see because of the mental and physical fog generated by the Court of Chancery.

Fog in *Bleak House* also symbolizes the spread institutional oppression in the Victorian society. London is; for Dickens, a miserable place which streets, buildings and people are described by Dickens vividly to reflect the true living conditions of England in the mid-19th century;

The sea was heaving under a thick white fog; and nothing else was moving but a few early rope makers, who, with the yarn twisted round their bodies, looked as if, tired of their

present state of existence, they were spinning themselves into cordage (Dickens, p. 436)

In the above passage, Dickens is describing a foggy and gloomy setting along with a couple of rope makers when they were spinning around their bodies, may be to symbolize people's lives who were not moving forward but only twisting around their bodies in the middle of a thick fog; misery and oppression.

2.5. SOCIAL CRITICISM IN *BLEAK HOUSE*

Bleak House was published in the time of industrialized Victorian England which witnessed a change in the social structure; the middle-class people were trying very hard to climb the social ladder and make status and money. Nevertheless, they were not aware that their lives were more enjoyable than those of the Aristocracy.

We may consider James M. Brown who states that:

"His (i.e. Dickens) social criticism is embodied in a vision of social experience in its generality-the essential quality of everyday social relations throughout the system, and the general possibilities for a fulfilling social life" (Brown, 1982, p. 14).

Accordingly, the novel has; through the complexity of the plot and narrative, the same targeted themes. As it has been stated earlier, Dickens tells the story from two points of view; Esther's narrative and an omniscient narrative. According to Galloway (1997), this two-fold narrative is not done randomly; as social and public concerns are connected with the omniscient narrator while private and residential life are connected with Esther's. That is to say, the third person narrator is responsible for *economic*

interconnectedness and social criticism while Esther's narrative is reserved for *moral connectedness* and individual choices and responsibilities. (Galloway, 1997)⁵

Dickens shows through the novel that nobility is something inherited and an innate social status. He constantly mocks those who affect benevolence to make their social standing better; Mrs. Jelleby is a charitable woman who uses charity to improve her social status. Her charity "*involves the devotion of all (her) energies*" (Dickens, p35). However, she neglected her own home and her children who wish Africa to be dead, because their mother was so preoccupied with improving the way "natives of Borriboola-Gha" lived.

Mr. Turveydrop is also another social status seeker who uses money; that his son works hard to get, to lead an idle life in front of the public. He shows generosity by offering to share the house with his son, but his false generosity shows him as a wealthy aristocrat condescending to endow a peasant with his presence. Dickens depicts him as a pathetic man who desperately imitates the upper-class style.

On the other hand, the protagonist of the novel, Esther Summerson, is totally the opposite of the above-mentioned characters. Her friend Ada remarks: "you are so thoughtful, Esther, and yet so cheerful! And you do so much, so unpretendingly!" (Dickens, p. 40) Esther took good care of Mrs. Jelleby's children and thus was taken by Dickens as an example to all women; an example of humility and generosity. Her personality and attitude towards life is positive. She delivers help while being affectionate about those around her. Her deliberation in her actions, along with careful consideration of others, allows her certain control in her life. Those that lose control over their lives through obsession, even a most noble one such as charity work, are

⁵ <http://www.cyberpat.com/shirlsite/essays/bleak.html>

punished. Only caring for others can assure that personal lives can achieve success and happiness.

Dickens criticizes the High Court of Chancery which condemns petitioners to injustices and expresses his dislike to the lawyers of the court as they envied the upper classes for their positions; “*The one great principle of the English law is, to make business for itself*” (Dickens, p. 569). The lawyer of Dedlock, Mr. Tulkinghorn, is described as “*very jealous of the profit, privilege, and reputation of being master of the mysteries of great houses*” (Dickens, p. 475). This lawyer exercises a great deal of influence in the Dedlock family but still lacks aristocracy which will always prevent him from climbing the social ladder to the upper class. This fact justifies his hatred to Sir Leicester and his tearing down of his fortune. However, the former maid of the Dedlock family ultimately murdered him and this expresses Dickens’ belief that alike people deserve the most severe of punishments like death.

In *Bleak House*, Dickens satirizes the middle-class’ attempts to ascend to aristocracy all by expressing the belief that the middle class people lead more happy and enjoyable lives if only they had enough love and satisfaction. He does, actually, ask the middle-class to play their roles in society in their own rank rather than wasting their time and lives in pursuing the highest social ranks which they will never get to.

On the other side, Dickens portrays the urban neediness by the illustration of the ghetto street, where poor Jo lives, in a way like the Sanitary Reports and he blames the Chancery abuses for the decay of others’ lives: “*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...*” (Dickens, p. 182)

One may say that *Bleak House* is one of the most authentic novels about the Victorian England; Dickens faithfully and artistically described the atmosphere, places, and events. In this respect, Terry Eagleton states in her *Preface to Bleak House*: “*Dickens sees his society as rotting, unraveling, so freighted with meaningless matter that it is sinking back gradually into some primeval slime*” (Eagleton, p. 40 in Diniejko)⁶.

2.6. CHILDREN DEPICTION IN *BLEAK HOUSE*

In fact, Charles Dickens draws a lot of aspect from his childhood to mount the plot of *Bleak House*; the misery he lived and the imprisonment of his father rose his empathy for the deplorable conditions of the children in England. In this vain, Dickens states: “*No words can express the secret agony of my soul ...the deep remembrance of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day, what I had learned and thought delighted in and raised my fancy and emulation up by was passing away from me...*” (Dickens in Dutta, 2014, p. 02) So, Dickens was well-placed to understand, feel, and express the sufferings of those deprived children as well as denounce those social injustices.

During the Industrial England, children made up a cheap working force because a great number of families were living in such miserable conditions that they really needed the wages of their children. Being so vulnerable and naïve, the children in *Bleak House* are neglected like Mrs. Jellyby’s children, abused like Esther who had to endure many sufferings with her aunt who blamed her for being an illegitimate child, and exploited like Mrs. Pardigle’s sons.

⁶ <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/diniejko.html>

As for Jo, the crossing sweeper: “*Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets, inly in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely scores are in him, homely rags are on him*” (Dickens, p. 452) is only a minor character in the novel but who plays an important role in the plot for he is the one to identify Nemo and lead to the discovery of Lady Dedlock’s secret and eventually to her death. Through Jo, Dickens highlights a big social problem blaming the English society for his miserable condition: “*...the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish*” (Dickens, p. 452).

The English society with its various classes and divisions is culpable of the harsh and miserable life of people like Jo and also condemns them to social death. Dickens uses this fact in his novel and poor Jo is eventually dead because of the disease; in fact, when reading the novel one desperately hopes poor Jo will recover just like Esther does, but it is like Dickens wants to say that there is no hope for this kind of people in this kind of society.

On the other side, we find the five miserable sons of Mrs. Pardigle who are highly neglected and exploited in favor of their mother’s charitable work. Dickens shows through these children the selfishness of parents which they have to endure and live with. Similarly, Mrs. Jellyby’s children are neglected for their mother is so preoccupied with helping the children of Africa:

She was greatly occupied during breakfast; for the morning’s post brought a heavy correspondence relative to Borrioboola-Gha, which would occasion her (she said) to pass a busy day. The children tumbled about, and notched

memoranda of their accidents in their legs, which were perfect little calendars of distress; and Peepy was lost for an hour and a half, and brought home from Newgate market by a policeman (Dickens, p. 42)

Bleak House is a sharp criticism to both domestic and social injustices and abuses towards children in the Victorian England.

2.7. CLASS DISCOURSE IN *BLEAK HOUSE*

The discourse of the novel is said to represent a nation that is torn between the middle and the upper class, for neither Skimpole nor Turveydrop is an aristocrat, but both of them use the language of the upper class to show up as the gentry. Turveydrop who “*fully believes he is one of the aristocracy*” (Dickens, p227) says to his son: “*But so long, I will do my duty to society, and will show myself, as usual, about town (...) For yourself, Prince, whose character is different, work, be industrious, earn money, and extend the connexion as much as possible*” (Dickens, p. 233). He even states that nobility is something innate but which can be acquired in life: “*My son, ... for those little points in which you are deficient-points of Deportment which are born with a man—which may be improved by cultivation, but can never be originated-you may still rely on me*” (Dickens, p. 233).

The claims of each class to social superiority is revealed in Dickens’ depiction of these characters which sets each class critique against the other. The narrative of the novel criticizes both *philanthropists* and *dandies* for using class discourse to conceal the fact that they are bad to their families. Examples from the novel may be of Jelleby’s enslavement of her own daughter to fight slave trade at that time. In this sense, Bossche (2004) outlines: “*These figures, three of whom like precariously at the*

margins of society-the Jellybys go into bankruptcy, Mr. Skimpole is repeatedly arrested for debt, and Turveydrop's school operates at the limits of respectability- use the language of class to establish their social authority and their right in inclusion in English society" (Bossch, 2004, p. 14)

In this discourse, Esther stands as neither a middle-class nor an aristocrat, but rather as someone who does not belong to the nation; she told a story of social exclusion.

Dickens did not promote any class over the other, but rather represents the social sufferings caused by class identities and his representation of Victorian society demonstrates the ways in which class discourse serves to define popular agency and thus promote public harshness (Morris, p. 271-273).

2.8. CONCLUSION

Dickens was highly dedicated in this novel to denounce the political and economic abuses of the law system as well as the domestic abuses and ill-treatments. Through a satiric style, Dickens depicts the different lives of characters, who seem to be so real, in order to criticize many practices in the Victorian England that only deprived the poor as well as children from the basic elements of life, spread corruption, and ultimate death to those who deserve it. Nevertheless, the happy ending of the good characters expresses the end of a gloomy and desperate image of the English society at that time showing Dickens' sharp and critical social eye.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Dickens started publishing *Bleak House* in the form of serials at his London home; Tavistock House, in November 1851, and was done with it at Boulogne in August 1853. This novel extended Dickens' successful string of fiction, after *David Copperfield* and before *Hard Times*.

Bleak House has been considered as one of Dickens' most impressive and mature achievements as a novelist and many critics and writers such as Vladimir Nabokov, John Forster, and James M. Brown agree on that fact. In *Bleak House*, Dickens used vivid characters, captivating storylines, a complex plot, social criticism, humour, and even the gothic. Among its many qualities, *Bleak House* is essentially an intense denouncement of hypocrisy and neglect on both the institutional and personal levels.

Generally speaking, Dickens expresses his disgust to the prevailing bureaucratic and corrupt process of law and social change in the Victorian era using a language full of anger, sarcasm, and sadness.

All the characters of *Bleak House* are; in one way or another, involved in the Jarndyce suit and all of them endure different kinds of suffering and ills through two narratives; the main one is Esther Summerson's whose story ends happily in spite of many difficulties, while the other narrative is omniscient and is characterized by objectivity.

Reading *Bleak House*, one can notice that Dickens is trying to emphasize on the social fact that people get rewarded by their own acts; those who do good and care for

others deserve happiness while those selfish, corrupt, and opportunist ones deserve the harshest of punishments like death.

Bleak house is considered as a novel of social criticism and Charles Dickens; through his style of realism, does not overthrow the corrupt system of England during the Victorian period. Moreover, he offered a solution through Esther Summerson who survived the gloomy and desperate image of the English society. This involves performing our duty towards the family as well as society and tis necessity generates in itself a certain personal freedom, relief, and ultimately, happiness.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

List of major characters in *Bleak House*

- ❖ **Esther Summerson**: She is the narrator of half of the novel, befriends, and helps many other characters. She is considered as the angel of *Bleak House*.
- ❖ **Lady Dedlock**: A high class woman and biological mother of Esther Summerson whose life turned upside down after the discovery of her secret.
- ❖ **Sir. Leicester Dedlock**: A rich Baronet who loves his wife; Lady dedlock, so much.
- ❖ **John Jarndyce**: A wealthy man who gathers orphans at bleak house like Ada and Esther and takes care of them.
- ❖ **Richard Carstone**: A young man who fights throughout the novel for his right in the Jarndyce lawsuit but who dies in the end.
- ❖ **Ada Clare**: A good friend to Esther who marries Richard.
- ❖ **Mr. Tulkinghorn**: An opportunist and menacing lawyer who ends up dead because of his selfishness and taking advantage of others.
- ❖ **Inspector Bucket**: A police detective who does his work faithfully and correctly.
- ❖ **Mr. Guppy**: Esther's first suitor who works at the office of Kenge and Karboy and an unskilled detective; for he could have discovered the relationship between Esther and Lady Dedlock if he had been more motivated.

- ❖ **Jo**: A poor and illiterate kid who sweeps the streets for handouts who is totally pathetic and vulnerable but who plays an important role in revealing the secret of Lady Dedlock.
- ❖ **Miss. Flite**: A good woman who is viewed by many characters as crazy and delusional but who; in fact, does many symbolic actions in the story.
- ❖ **Mr. George**: An honourable man who retired from the army and who teaches others how to use guns.
- ❖ **Mrs. Jellyby**: A philanthropist who is obsessed with charity and helping people in Africa neglecting her own home and children.
- ❖ **Caddy Jellyby**: She was raised by Mrs. Jellyby and is fond of housework and always longed to get married.
- ❖ **Skimpole**: An irresponsible man who betrays his master Jarndyce.
- ❖ **Mr. Smallweed**: An angry old man who is described as greedy and an opportunist whose hatefulness is reflected in all his actions.
- ❖ **Mr. Snagsby**: A generous and peaceful guy who just wants to be left alone.

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