

# BLEAK HOUSE



Charles Dickens

ILLUSTRATIONS BY "PHIZ"

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES  
BY TATIANA M. HOLWAY

GEORGE STADE  
CONSULTING EDITORIAL DIRECTOR



**BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS**  
NEW YORK

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## FROM THE PAGES OF BLEAK HOUSE

He is an honourable, obstinate, truthful, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man. (page 25)

All the movables, from the wardrobes to the chairs and tables, hangings, glasses, even to the pincushions and scent-bottles on the dressing-tables, displayed the same quaint variety. They agreed in nothing but their perfect neatness, their display of the whitest linen, and their storing-up, wherever the existence of a drawer, small or large, rendered it possible, of quantities of rose-leaves and sweet lavender. Such, with its illuminated windows, softened here and there by shadows of curtains, shining out upon the star-light night; with its light, and warmth, and comfort; with its hospitable jingle, at a distance, of preparations for dinner; with the face of its generous master brightening everything we saw; and just wind enough without to sound a low accompaniment to everything we heard; were our first impressions of Bleak House. (page 79)

‘Kenge and Carboy will have something to say about it; Master Somebody—a sort of ridiculous sexton, digging graves for the merits of causes in a back room at the end of Quality Court, Chancery Lane—will have something to say about it; Counsel will have something to say about it; the Chancellor will have something to say about it; the Satellites will have something to say about it; they will all have to be handsomely fee’d, all round, about it; the whole thing will be vastly ceremonious, wordy, unsatisfactory, and expensive, and I call it, in general, Wiglomeration. How mankind ever came to be afflicted with Wiglomeration, or for whose sins these young people ever fell into a pit of it, I don’t know; so it is.’ (page 107)

‘I court inquiry.’ (page 522)

Contrast enough between Mr. Tulkinghorn shut up in his dark carriage, and Mr. Bucket shut up in his. Between the immeasurable track of space beyond the little wound that has thrown the one into the fixed sleep which jolts so heavily over the stones of the streets, and the narrow track of blood which keeps the other in the watchful state expressed in every hair of his head! (page 668)



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# CHARLES DICKENS

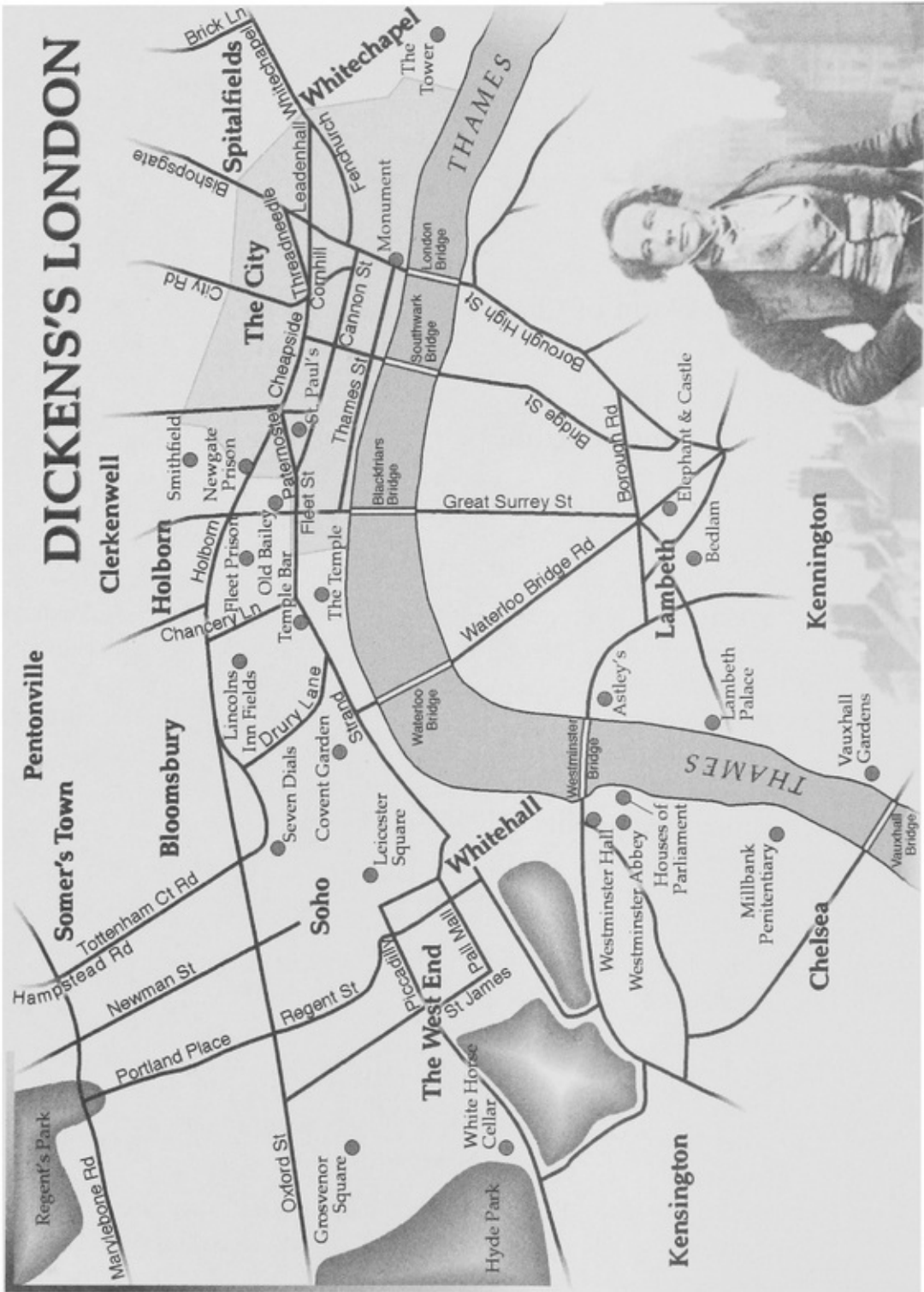
Born on February 7, 1812, Charles Dickens was the second of eight children in a family burdened with financial troubles. By the age of twenty-five, he had attained an unprecedented degree of popularity; at the time of his death at age fifty-eight, he was a long-standing national and international institution.

In 1824, Dickens's father was imprisoned for debt, and, while the rest of the family stayed with him in prison, young Charles lodged elsewhere and worked in a factory that produced boot-blackening polish. After several months of this humiliating experience and the release of his father from prison, Charles was enrolled in a private school, which he attended for three years. The young man then became a solicitor's clerk, mastered shorthand, and before long was employed as a parliamentary reporter. When he was in his early twenties, Dickens began to publish stories and sketches of London life in a variety of periodicals.

It was the publication of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837) that catapulted the young writer to fame. This serialized novel was followed rapidly by several more, including *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839), and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841), which increased his already immense popularity and growing reputation. So, too, did his production of annual Christmas stories, starting with *A Christmas Carol* (1843). While Dickens's autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), contributed further to the uniquely intimate relationship he had with his readers, his publication of his own journals, from 1850 onward, extended his influence and renown even more. At this time, his vision of society became more critical, his humor darker as he reflected more seriously on the condition of England. *Bleak House* (1852-1853), *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865) are among the masterful novels of this later period. Another, *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), remains one of his best-loved, critically acclaimed, and widely read books.

In 1858, Dickens separated from Catherine Hogarth, his wife of twenty-two years with whom he had ten children. He also became infatuated with Ellen Ternan, a young actress who became his mistress in later years. During those years, the intense activity that always characterized Dickens—writing, editing, performing public readings, managing amateur theatricals, and much else—intensified even more, and, working feverishly to the last, he collapsed and died on June 9, 1870, leaving his fifteenth novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, unfinished.

# DICKENS'S LONDON



# THE WORLD OF CHARLES DICKENS AND BLEAK HOUSE

**1812** Charles Huffam Dickens is born at Portsmouth to John and Elizabeth (nee Barrow) Dickens. He is the second of eight children.

**1814** Sir Walter Scott's prolific career as a popular novelist begins with the publication of *Waverley*.

**1815** Napoleon is defeated at the Battle of Waterloo.

**1817** The Dickens family moves to Chatham, in Kent, one of several moves prompted by John Dickens's position as a naval pay clerk. Charles begins reading books in his father's library. His favorite authors include Miguel de Cervantes, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett.

**1822** Troubled by financial difficulties, the Dickens family moves again, this time to Camden Town, in north London. Charles comes to know the city intimately, and this knowledge becomes an invaluable resource in his later writing.

**1824** Early in the year, Charles is sent to work at Warren's Blacking Factory, a manufacturer of boot-blackening. His father is arrested for debt and imprisoned for three months, and, while the rest of the family stays with John Dickens in prison, Charles lodges elsewhere and continues the humiliating work of pasting labels onto bottles of blackening at Warren's.

**1825** The first passenger railway, the Stoughton-Darlington line, opens in England. John Dickens retires on a naval pension, and Charles attends Wellington House Academy, a private school where he wins a prize in Latin.

**1827** Dickens's formal schooling ends, and he becomes a solicitor's clerk.

**1829** After learning shorthand, he establishes himself as a reporter in the law court of Doctors' Commons.

**1830** Dickens acquires a pass to the British Museum, where he reads Shakespeare. He meets and falls in love with Maria Beadnell. Their romance, which lasts three years, is eventually brought to an end by Maria's father, who takes a dim view of Dickens's prospects.

**1831** Dickens joins the staff of the *Mirror of Parliament*, for which he transcribes parliamentary speeches on central topics of the time, including the condition of factory workers and of the poor,

penal and educational reform, and the extension of the franchise beyond the landed upper classes.

**1832** The First Reform Bill is passed, granting voting rights to the middle classes. Dickens, who considers a career in the theater, misses an audition due to illness.

**1833** Slavery is abolished throughout the British Empire. Dickens publishes his first story, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk," in the *Monthly Magazine*.

**1834** The Poor Law Amendment Act (known as the "New Poor Law") is passed. Dickens will agitate, both in his later writings and in person, against the harsh bureaucratic system created by the law. He becomes a journalist for the *Morning Chronicle*, a liberal newspaper that rivals the *Times*. Here, and in other periodicals, he publishes sketches and stories under the pseudonym "Boz," based on the childhood pronunciation of a brother's pet name, Moses as "Boses."

**1835** Dickens becomes engaged to Catherine Hogarth, whose father, editor of the *Evening Chronicle*, encourages Dickens's literary efforts.

**1836** Dickens marries Catherine. They will have ten children together. He meets John Forster, who becomes his closest friend and future biographer. Dickens's output of various short fictions increases. He also writes theatrical farces, as well as a political pamphlet, *Sunday Under Three Heads*, in which he criticizes legislation that would curtail the Sunday amusements of the poor and laboring classes. Resigning from the *Morning Chronicle*, he agrees to become the editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, a new monthly journal to which he contributes many humorous and satirical pieces over the course of the next two years. Dickens publishes the first series of *Sketches by Boz* in volume form, and he begins *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837), the monthly serial that launches him to fame. All his subsequent novels will be published in monthly or weekly installments before being issued as volumes.

**1837** Victoria is crowned queen. While continuing to write installments of *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens begins *Oliver Twist* (1837-1838), which is serialized monthly in *Bentley's Miscellany*. Unauthorized stage adaptations as well as outright piracies of Dickens's writings begin to proliferate and will continue to vex him throughout his career. Mary Hogarth, Catherine Dickens's sister, dies suddenly, leaving Dickens grief-stricken. Her image haunts him and reappears in his idealized depiction of feminine purity in many novels.

**1838** Dickens makes an expedition to Yorkshire and visits the notoriously poorly run schools there. The experience figures in *Nicholas*

*Nickleby* (1838-1839), another monthly serial, which overlaps for some time with the production of *Oliver Twist*.

**1839** Dickens resigns his editorship of *Bentley's Miscellany*. The Dickens family moves from Doughty Street to Devonshire Place, Regent's Park, where they will remain until 1851.

**1840** The Penny Post is introduced. Dickens establishes his own weekly miscellany, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, where he begins the serialization of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841).

**1841** He writes *Barnaby Rudge*, another novel that appears as a weekly serial in *Master Humphrey's Clock*.

- Accompanied by Catherine, Dickens travels to America, where he is initially lionized and then criticized for his promotion of proposed international copyright legislation. He
- 1842** publishes *American Notes for General Circulation*, which records his disillusionment with the young republic. He begins *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842-1843), which also draws on his American experience.
- 1843** He publishes *A Christmas Carol*, the first of many Christmas stories, including *The Chimes* (1844) and *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845).
- 1844** The Dickens family moves to Italy for a year.
- 1845** Dickens begins to write his autobiography, which he eventually abandons. He and other writers and artists perform Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*. Amateur theatricals, often produced to benefit a variety of causes, will continue to preoccupy Dickens throughout his career.
- 1846** The repeal of the Corn Laws signals an important victory for proponents of free-trade capitalism. Dickens edits the *Daily News* for two months and then resigns after a dispute with the publishers. He publishes *Pictures from Italy* and begins the monthly serialization of *Dombey and Son* (1846-1848), his most carefully and consciously crafted novel to date. The Dickens family lives in Switzerland for six months. At the end of the year, they move to Paris, where they will remain for several months.
- 1847** A Factory Act, restricting working hours for women and children, is passed. Back in London, Dickens helps Angela Burdett-Coutts found Urania Cottage, a reformatory for prostitutes, which he runs for many years. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* are published. William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848) begins to appear in monthly parts.
- 1848** Revolutions break out throughout much of Europe.
- 1849** Dickens begins the monthly serialization of *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), his autobiographical novel and "favorite child."
- 1850** He establishes *Household Words*, a weekly journal over which he scrupulously presides and to which he contributes extensively during its ten years of publication. William Wordsworth dies. Alfred, Lord Tennyson becomes the next Poet Laureate.
- 1851** The Great Exhibition opens in London in May and closes in October. Dickens's Amateur Players perform before Queen Victoria. Wilkie Collins, who will become an important collaborator of Dickens and a novelist in his own right, has a role in the production. Dickens's father dies, as does an infant daughter. The family moves to Tavistock House in London.
- 1852** Dickens begins the monthly serialization of *Bleak House* (1852-1853). The novel initiates his more mature, darker phase of social criticism.

- 1853** Dickens gives his first public reading of *A Christmas Carol* to help raise money for an educational institution in Birmingham. His popular readings will continue to bring in considerable sums to benefit a variety of organizations and causes over the next five years.
- 1854** The Crimean War (1854—1856) breaks out. Dickens serializes *Hard Times* in his weekly journal, partly in order to boost flagging sales of *Household Words*.
- 1855** Dickens and his family winter in Paris. He begins the monthly serialization of *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), his most extensively critical novel to date.
- 1856** Dickens purchases Gad's Hill Place, a large house near Rochester that he had dreamed of owning as a child. Settling there permanently in 1860, Dickens will make Gad's Hill his home for his remaining years.
- 1857** *The Frozen Deep*, a melodramatic play written by Collins and Dickens, stars Dickens and Ellen Ternan, a young actress with whom he becomes infatuated.
- 1858** Dickens begins performing public readings for his own benefit in London and then begins a series of reading tours that extend to Scotland and Ireland. After some years of strain in their marriage, he separates from his wife and makes a public statement of the fact in *Household Words*.
- 1859** *All the Year Round* succeeds *Household Words* as Dickens's weekly. He serializes *A Tale of Two Cities* in the journal. He also embarks on another extensive public-reading tour. Darwin publishes *The Origin of Species*.
- 1860** Dickens begins the weekly serialization of *Great Expectations* (1860-1861). George Eliot publishes *The Mill on the Floss*.
- 1861** The American Civil War (1861-1865) breaks out. Dickens begins another series of public readings, which again will last for several months.
- 1863** Work begins on London's first Underground Railway Dickens's mother dies. His fourth child, Walter, dies in India. Thackeray dies.
- 1864** Dickens begins the monthly serialization of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864—1865), his last completed novel.
- 1865** Ellen Ternan, who is traveling from France with Dickens, is injured in a serious train wreck. Unhurt, Dickens is severely shaken by the accident.
- 1866** Dickens begins another series of exhausting readings.
- 1867** Concluding one reading tour in England and Ireland, Dickens begins a series of Farewell Readings in America, which continue into 1868 in spite of his poor health.
- 1869** Dickens initiates another series of Farewell Readings in England, which he is forced to suspend because of ill health.



**1870** He performs twelve more Farewell Readings. He publishes the first installment of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Only six of the twelve intended numbers are written when Dickens dies of a cerebral hemorrhage on June 9. He is buried in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

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## INTRODUCTION

“ ‘What do you think of *Bleak House*?’ is a question which everybody has heard propounded with the last few weeks, when this serial was drawing towards its conclusion; and which, when the work was actually closed, formed, for its own season, as regular a portion of miscellaneous chit-chat. ‘How are you?’ ”<sup>1</sup> So began a review of Dickens’s ninth novel, commenting on the commentary *Bleak House* was generating and attesting, in this way, not just to the popularity of the writer but, even more so, to the supra-literary status of his works. “His current story was really a topic of the day,” a reviewer later reminisced; “it seemed something almost akin to politics and news—as if it belonged not so much to literature as to events.” There was a difference, though: in the serial form in which Dickens’s novels were originally published, the topic of the day stretched on for many, many weeks and months, and with most of them being published in nineteen monthly numbers, these works were before the public for over a year and a half.

By the time the serialization of *Bleak House* concluded, in September of 1853, Dickens had been publishing prodigiously for seventeen years, and his continuous, unprecedented popularity was itself a “regular ... portion” of contemporary criticism. From the day that “ ‘Boz’ first carried away the prize of popular applause... by the publication of the unrivaled *Pickwick* ... he has had no equal in the favor of the reading public,” another review of *Bleak House* began. Other Victorian writers could sell more books: G. M. Reynolds, for one, whose career began with a plagiarism of *The Pickwick Papers*, far surpassed Dickens in sales of his sensational series on *The Mysteries of London* (1845-1855). But Dickens sold extraordinarily well: “I believe I have never had so many readers as in this book,” he remarked in the preface to *Bleak House*. And these readers were confined to no class. Dickens was a fixture at “every fireside in the kingdom.” When it came to *Bleak House*—“To ‘recommend’ it would be superfluous. Who will not read it?”

Such a popular novel “is, to a certain extent, independent of criticism,” yet another reviewer asserted, effectively throwing up his hands. Nonetheless, critics had to say something, and what they said was quite mixed. There was censure: “*Bleak House* is, even more than any of its predecessors, chargeable not simply with faults, but absolute want of construction.” There was praise: *Bleak House* is “the greatest, the least faulty, the most beautiful of all the works which the pen of Dickens has given to the world.” Most readers of Dickens had long agreed that “the delineation of character is his forte” but whether the characters of *Bleak House* were “life-like” or “contrived,” “truthful” or “exaggerated” was another matter. So, too, was the plot: in this regard, the novel represented either “an important advance on anything that we recollect in our author’s previous works” or, quite simply, a “failure.” In short, there may have been a great deal of talk about *Bleak House*, but there was little consensus about what critics said about *Bleak House*.

Such controversy is notable in itself. Although Dickens’s reputation among critics had fluctuated somewhat, especially in the 1840s, never before had assessments of his work been so conflicting. Never had derogatory commentary been so pointed. Going beyond the “merits” and “defects” of the work—which was, after all, not exempt from such judgments—criticism of *Bleak House* became criticism of the author, whose “usefulness, instructiveness, and value” were coming to be increasingly questioned and whose very popularity was becoming grounds for alarm. “Author and public react on one another,” another critic began; where “truth of nature and sobriety of thought are largely sacrificed

mannerism and point,” the effect was not good. Within a few years, Dickens’s reputation among critics—though not his sales—would take an even more pronounced turn for the worse.

Now, though, we bask in *Bleak House*. Resurrected by a series of influential twentieth-century readers, such as George Orwell and Edmund Wilson, *Bleak House* has come, once again, to be a “regular portion” of literary inquiry, its interest sustained and augmented by the many modes of reading we have available to us, both within academic institutions and without. In the last twenty-five years, more than four hundred studies of one form or another have been devoted to *Bleak House*,<sup>2</sup> and although disagreements certainly persist, Dickens’s most ambitious novel has come to be widely regarded as his most accomplished one, too. Still, the question of what he accomplished in *Bleak House* remains worth asking, however partial and provisional the answers may be.

For one thing, Dickens wrote a novel that is about virtually anything and everything in mid-Victorian Britain. Comprehensive in its reach, exhaustive in its detail, *Bleak House* assimilates the multifarious characteristics of society into a coherent imaginative vision that is also a thoroughgoing revision of the sanguine image society held of itself at the time. “Progress” was the catchword of the day in the early 1850s, as well as an ideology encouraging a nearly boundless confidence in the human capacity to shape the world at will. Looking back over the widespread (albeit uneven) economic growth and increasing social mobility of recent decades, Victorians saw the present as a dramatic advance over the past, and they forecast a future that continued the accelerating pace of improvement. Taking a decidedly different view in *Bleak House*, Dickens depicted a society bound up in “perpetual stoppage” (p. 164).

This is not because Dickens did not share the belief in progress. On the contrary, his affirmation of his “faith ... in the progress of mankind” had recently and prominently appeared in the editorial manifesto for *Household Words*, the weekly journal he launched in 1850. There, where he spoke of the writer’s duty to spread “sympathy” throughout society by “cherish[ing] that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast,” he also expressed gratitude for “the privilege of living in the sun at the dawn of time” (“A Preliminary Word”). In *Bleak House*, however, “the fire of the sun is dying” (p. 534); “darkness ... dilat[es] and dilat[es]” (p. 590); the “light of Fancy” glints rather than shines.

Shadows in Dickens’s personal life certainly contributed to the darkening of his imaginative vision. His father’s death in March of 1851 was followed a month later by that of an infant daughter. In 1851 several close friends died as well. While his wife suffered from a prolonged illness, Dickens, who confessed to feeling “as if I could have given up” (April 5, 1851), did not. The press of the necessity of work was always upon him, regardless of the degree of financial security he attained, and, alongside the discharge of his own daunting agenda of self-appointed duties—which included the painstaking conduct of *Household Words*, the conscientious management of a “Home for Homeless Women,” a taxing tour of amateur theatricals on which he embarked, and much else besides—there was the obligation to fulfill the ever-increasing demands made upon him by virtue of his stature as a public figure. Having attained an unprecedented measure of success in Victorian letters and prominence in public life, Dickens was coming to be oppressed by his own achievements. However strong such a feeling may have been, though, it extends far beyond Dickens or any individual in *Bleak House*. “For everywhere,” the novelist asserts on the first page of the book. There, Dickens’s severely critical and fiercely satirical vision of society also had something to do with the atmosphere of complacency that had been thickening in mid-Victorian Britain and was consolidated in London in the Great Exhibition

of 1851.

The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was a colossal endeavor, as its full title announces. Among its many aims, the representation and the promotion of progress through the display of industrial manufactures and technological ingenuity were foremost. If the vast miscellany of goods assembled from many nations (not quite “all”) served this agenda rather unevenly—the hordes of visitors to the exhibition tended to be overwhelmed by the sight—the revolutionary plate-glass and iron edifice that was built to house the display did so spectacularly well. Dubbed the “Crystal Palace,” the monumental structure covered nineteen acres of Hyde Park, where it stood as an impressive testament to Britain’s achievements and a potent symbol of its dynamic modernity. Indeed, although the Great Exhibition was initially conceived as an international project, its result was to focus global attention on the triumphs of Britain, which were widely—and wildly—praised. In the rhetoric of the moment, Britain was said to have attained the pinnacle of civilization and to be ushering a time when “Utopia ... will take the form and substance of a possible fact” (*Illustrated London News*, May 3, 1851). In effect, the condition-of-England question—much investigated, widely debated before and after Thomas Carlyle’s coinage of the famous phrase in 1839—seemed to have found a conclusive answer in the summer of 1851.

Inasmuch as the Great Exhibition may have suggested that this condition was exemplary, if not better, the vision it projected, however compelling, was partial. It excluded the condition of the working classes and the impoverished population of the country. Eclipsed by the Crystal Palace and the goods it encased, these realities were also effectively erased in 1851, when “the Exhibition—its glories and its wonders, its accomplishment in the present, and its example to, and promise of, the future” were “the only topics of writing, speaking and reading, and form[ed] almost the only subject of the draughtsman and the engraver” (*Illustrated London News*, May 3, 1851). While Dickens had spilled his share of ink on the topic of the day, he was never an avid enthusiast. Privately, he said he was “ ‘used up’ ” by the spectacle. “I don’t say ‘there’s nothing in it’—there’s too much,” he wrote after a foray into the Crystal Palace. “So many things bewildered me” (July 11, 1851). By mid-summer, he was also utterly fed up with the mania for the exhibition and its puffery by the press. It was at that time that he began “pondering afar off” a new novel: “Violent restlessness, and vague ideas of going I don’t know where, I don’t know why are the present symptoms of the disorder” (August 1, 1851), Dickens reported. But he had already indicated his direction earlier that year. Having commented with some admiration on the great resources and extraordinary ingenuity being devoted to the production of the Great Exhibition in an article entitled “The Last Words of the Old Year” (January 31, 1851), Dickens had gone on to ask: “Which of my children shall behold the Prince and Prelates, Nobles, Merchants, of England equally united, for another Exhibition—for a great display of England’s sins and negligences, to be, by the steady contemplation of all eyes, and steady union of all hearts and hands, set right?” *Bleak House* is that “great display,” in which Dickens turned his back on the other one.

In so doing, he produced a more inclusive vision of mid-Victorian Britain than the Crystal Palace had done. Having spoken of the need to “study the Humanities through *these* transparent windows” (“Last Words”), Dickens looked squarely at streets of “ ‘perishing blind houses, with their eyes stoned out; without a pane of glass, without so much as a window-frame, with the bare blank shutters tumbling from their hinges and falling asunder; the iron rails peeling away in flakes of rust’ ” (p. 106). If he was among “ ‘the few’ ” who could “ ‘distinguish the grim misery lying underneath the magnificent brilliance which dazzles the visitor in the Great Exhibition’ ” (the *Leader*, quoted in Davis, *The Great*

*Exhibition*, p. 192), Dickens was in an even smaller minority in taking a grim view of the entire condition of England. For, by mid-century, he had come to realize forcefully that Britain's problems could not be isolated from one another, confined within class divisions, compartmentalized under discrete headings. Far from being local, such problems were inherent in the structure, the institutions, the practices, and the attitudes of society. From this perspective, Dickens could represent the disease emanating from the slum of Tom-all-Alone's as "work[ing] its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high" (p. 590). Equally, he could represent the abuses of Chancery, the highest court in Britain, as leaving deadly "'impressions ... a blot over England'" (p. 106). And, where this court could, and did, hold property interminably in its bureaucratic grasp, he could, and did, link the institution that was supposed to be dedicated to equity with the slum that gave ample evidence of inequity.

When Dickens began writing *Bleak House*, the injustices perpetrated and perpetuated by the courts were not just topical; they were already proverbial. The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the phrase "in Chancery" referred, among other things, to "the tenacity and absolute control with which the Court of Chancery holds anything, and the certainty of cost and loss to property" and dates the usage from the 1830s. Twenty years later, when the abuses of Chancery were being widely publicized in the press, Dickens's indictment of the court extended to the equally dilatory procedures of Parliament, as well as to the reactionary upper classes, figured in the novel by the Dedlocks and the milieu. Both the world of Chancery and that of Fashion are "things of precedent and usage" (p. 23). *Bleak House*, where Dickens further links the two in the cohesive symbolic pattern that encompasses all of Britain: "Fog everywhere." "And ... at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor, in his High Court of Chancery," where dozens of bewigged lawyers are "mistily engaged" (p. 18). Jarndyce and Jarndyce, a "slow, expensive, British, constitutional kind of thing" (p. 28). Based in part on an actual case that had been dragging on for fifty-three years by 1851, the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce in *Bleak House* epitomizes the "trickery, evasion, procrastination, spoliation, botheration" (p. 21) of the court. "Conglomeration" is one of Chancery's effects; "Wiglomeration" (p. 107) is the portmanteau summation John Jarndyce gives of the 'deplorable cause' (p. 105). "'The Lawyers have twisted it into such a state of bedevilment that the original merits ... have long disappeared from the face of the earth'" (p. 104), he explains. Nonetheless, "'through years and years, and lives and lives, everything goes on, constantly beginning over and over again, and nothing ever ends'" (p. 105).

Something like this can be said<sup>3</sup> of the structure of the novel that begins "In Chancery" (chapter 1) "hanging" (p. 17) in a state of suspended animation; goes on to the world of "Fashion" (chapter 2) which is "wrapped up in too much jeweller's cotton and fine wool" (p. 23); and then, departing for yet another scene, concludes an account of "A Progress" (chapter 3), on "streets ... so full of dense brown smoke that scarcely anything was to be seen" (p. 42), back "in Chancery" once more. "'Beginning over'" and over "'again,'" *Bleak House* also closes without closure. Leaving off with an ambiguous unfinished sentence, Dickens leaves behind the formulaic fulfillment of wishes that characterizes so many nineteenth-century novels' endings.

And yet, *Bleak House* not only has a plot—that mechanism of cause and effect that propels the narrative from beginning to end. It has a compelling one, too, centering on mysteries of identity driven by the desire to uncover guilty secrets, urged on by the first professional detective in English fiction. Set against the "bedevilment" of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, the plot moves forward, gathering momentum, and then, accelerating in "Flight" (chapter 55) and "Pursuit" (chapter 56), yields "Discovery" (chapter 61) and "Another Discovery" (chapter 62) in the climactic final chapters of the

book. Contributing to the vogue for sensation fiction, which flourished in the 1860s, *Bleak House*, like the later work of Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, is a thoroughly good read.

It is also a strange one. A novel in which Dickens answers the wish of the opening chapter of the book for “the whole” of Jarndyce and Jarndyce to be “burnt away in a great funeral pyre” (p. 23) with something as bizarre as the “Spontaneous Combustion” (p. 436) of Krook, the gin-sodden rag-and-bottle dealer who styles himself the Lord Chancellor, follows this with the “ ‘smouldering combustion’ ” (p. 526) of Richard Carstone as this youthful hero becomes absorbed in the case, and then goes on to represent the suit as being consumed by its own costs is evidently up to something unusual. “Unnatural” is the word critics of *Bleak House* used.

While the apocalyptic theme is one of the many linkages between the story line (or snarl) that concerns Jarndyce and Jarndyce and the one that pursues detection—apocalypse being a mode of discovery, unveiling—these strands of the novel are also structurally consistent, as well as being consistently subversive of the onward and upward motion of progress and of narrative that follows the path. As one of the earliest instances of detective fiction, *Bleak House* demonstrates the distinctive circularity of this genre, which begins after the fact—after the action, criminal or otherwise, that instigates the investigation—and moves forward, gathering the clues and making the discoveries through which the original actions and motives and means are reconstructed. In the backward-looking logic of the forward-moving detective plot, the end recapitulates the beginning. This recursive narrative pattern is even more prominent in the proceedings of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. “ ‘It won’t do to think of it!’ ” says John Jarndyce. “ ‘When my great uncle, poor Tom Jarndyce, began to think of it it was the beginning of the end!’ ” (p. 105). So it is with Richard, who does not heed such warnings, and “ ‘hoping against hope to disentangle it from its mystification’ ” (p. 105), becomes another victim of the “ill-fated cause” (p. 21).

In these and other ways, *Bleak House* coheres in a deadly whole that is emblematic of the deadly condition of England. Indeed, while John Ruskin argued that the number of deaths in *Bleak House* (nine, by his miscount; there are more) answered “a craving of the human heart for some kind of excitement” and that such a novel “entertain[ed]” the jaded reader “by varying to his fancy the mode and defining for his dullness the horrors, of Death,” this criticism is offset by Ruskin’s own observation that the number of deaths in Dickens’s fiction is “a properly representative average of the statistics of civilian mortality in the centre of London.” But the point Dickens makes is closer home. When Jo, the crossing sweeper who figures centrally in *Bleak House*, succumbs to slum-propagated diseases, he is one of many “dying thus around us every day” (p. 610).

At the same time that Dickens pointed insistently in the novel to the need for reform, he also engaged in a reform of the novel. That is, beyond the subversion of conventional narrative patterns, apart from the introduction of new conventions as well, *Bleak House* is a radical—and fundamentally unsettling—experiment in story-telling. Marked by its rudimentary difference from any novel written before, *Bleak House* is equally marked by the acute difference incorporated within, in the rupture that is created by the presence of two narrators and sustained throughout the entirety of the book. To be sure, the play of multiple voices and perspectives in fiction is not unprecedented. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) comes readily to mind as an early nineteenth-century example. What distinguishes *Bleak House* from other novels that employ a plurality of points of view, however, is how entirely incommensurate Dickens’s two narrators are in persona and perspective.

Speaking in “the voice of the present” (p. 84), the third-person narrator is omnipresent in his portions of *Bleak House*. Able to move from scene to scene “as the crow flies” (p. 23), covering territory both “National and Domestic” (chapter 40), he guides us through the far-flung reaches of the book and prods us to recognize relationships between its seemingly disparate elements. “What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom ... ?” (p. 220), this narrator asks in a famous rhetorical question that re-emphasizes the “connexions” to which Dickens everywhere points. Possessed of the ironic consciousness that can assimilate the diffuse and contradictory features of the book and the world, the third-person narrator exemplifies what Dickens termed “a long-sight,” which “perceives in a prospect innumerable features and bearings non-existent to a short-sighted person” (preface to *Martin Chuzzlewit*). He can also see clearly what characters in the novel perceive “only by halves in a confused way” (p. 518). For all of his perspicuity, however, the third-person narrator can no more “‘read the heart’ ” (p. 523) or the minds of characters than they themselves can. Singularly canny, even “On the Watch” (chapter 12), the third-person narrator is not omniscient. His perspective, which encompasses many points of view, does not comprehend all points of view.

After all, there is Esther Summerson, whose narrative also occupies Bleak House. At first glance Esther’s difference from her counterpart is striking. Whereas the third-person narrator is supremely urbane, majestically confident, Esther is painfully inhibited, agonizingly uncertain. “I know I am not clever” (p. 30 and elsewhere)—unthinkable coming from the other narrator—is a refrain in her part of the book. The source of Esther’s self-denial is the denial of herself that she experienced as an illegitimate orphaned child. Raised by the harsh Miss Barbary, Esther is not permitted to know anything about her own or her mother’s identity except that both are bound up in guilt: “‘Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers’ ” (p. 32). While Dickens lays a foundation for melodramatic plot complications in this scene, he also demonstrates the acute sensitivity to the impressionable fragility of children for which he is so well known. Told “‘It would have been far better, little Esther, ... that you had never been born!’ ” (p. 32), she grows up to feel that she is “no one.” Self-denigration—even in the face of affirmation—is her habitual mode. “O my goodness, the idea of asking my advice” (p. 107), she demurs in a way that has rankled generations of readers. Modern readers have also been irked by Dickens’s depiction of Esther’s selflessness (the other and better face of her self-denial) and not just because she embodies a stereotype of feminine virtue (which some Victorian readers regarded with incredulity as well). More troubling still is Dickens’s positing Esther’s acts of goodness as a foil to Chancery’s acts of injustice. Esther’s “circle of duty” which “gradually and naturally expand[s] itself” (p. 113) according to her own “‘little orderly system’ ” (p. 503), hardly seems an adequate antidote to a system as extensively and devastatingly circuitous as Chancery.

Inasmuch as Esther’s persistently cheery “jingling about with [her] basket of keys” (p. 578) can be as exasperating as her coyness, the response she solicits most directly—“Of course, you are worth it (you silly goose)” —has at least one reforming effect: it confirms that Esther is “Somebody” (p. 40) and thereby corrects the original negation from which she never fully recovers. Such a process of emendation obtains in the structure of her narrative as well. “I have a great deal of difficulty beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever” (p. 30), Esther begins by emphasizing the impediments under which she labors to tell her story—even though, having begun to write it seven years after the events she describes, Esther has command of this story. Giving her the advantage of knowing “now” what “I did not [know] then” (p. 396), the retrospective perspective



reveals that Esther has gained a measure of self-knowledge as well: she is knowing enough “now” know she was not knowing enough “then.”

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If the revisions built into Esther’s narrative make reading it a less than straightforward enterprise, this narrative presents a further problem from the outset. For, at the same time that Esther exhibits the extreme self-consciousness that cripples her, she also demonstrates a curious meta-consciousness of having a narrative companion as she sets out to write “my portion of these pages.” Given the third person narrator’s preternatural awareness of Esther—he can move from scene to scene “while Esther sleeps, and while Esther wakes” (p. 92)—it is tempting to imagine Dickens imagining the two narrators consciously collaborating in producing their distinct contributions to the book. One of the mysteries of Dickens, though, is how unfathomable his creative processes were and are. Writing in silence, behind closed doors, he revealed precious little about his imaginative life. What we have are its effects, and in *Bleak House* the effect of the presence of the two narrators is disconcerting. Both, be sure, exhibit Dickens’s focus on the range and the limitations of vision and knowledge; together they also further the characteristically Victorian project of studying the signs of the times. In *Bleak House*, though, Dickens pursues the project in an arrestingly new way, juxtaposing the perspectives of the two narrators whose chapters alternate in no regular or predictable pattern. For the original reader of *Bleak House*, this meant that the discontinuity inherent in the experience of reading a novel in monthly numbers was heightened by the discontinuities embedded within the monthly installments of this serial. Even now, though, the novel that must be read “by halves” keeps us “oscillating” in a “troubled state of mind” (p. 517) that comes of alternating between two minds throughout the entire of the book.

Literally binocular, *Bleak House* inculcates a kind of double vision in the reader, who also confronts the highly concentrated double-ness of Dickens’s style page after page. Puns abound in this novel and rebound in several directions at once. Thus, when John Jarndyce calls the will in the Chancery suit “a dead letter” (p. 105), this pun, like so many others in *Bleak House*, sets off a chain of biblical and legal associations, but as the narrative moves forward, playing off this scriptural conceit, as it were, also circles back to the literal meaninglessness of “‘dead letter,’” which, in the end, amounts to what it was in the beginning: a moot point. Indeed, even when Dickens offers respite from the “great wilderness of London” (p. 621) and, focusing on Lincoln’s Inn Fields on a “very quiet night,” gives us a scene that is “ethereal,” bathed in a “pale effulgence,” with sounds of the city “softened,” “pass[ing] ... tranquilly away,” there comes a jolt “where the shepherds play on Chancery pipes that have no stops” (p. 622). Chancery, indeed, “drones ... on” (p. 20) inconclusively “‘We are really spinning along’” (p. 651), Richard declares.

Such instances of word-play—of which there are a great, great many in *Bleak House*—are not merely witty. They are consistent with the wit that animates much of Dickens’s writing and especially his writing in *Bleak House*. “Wit ... may be considered a kind of *discordia concors*,” observed Samuel Johnson, “a combination of dissimilar images, or a discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike.”<sup>5</sup> Dickens had this startling capacity, this illuminating faculty: “I think it is more infirmity to fancy or perceive relations which are not apparent generally” (quoted in Ford, *Dickens and His Readers*, p. 144), he wrote. In *Bleak House*, he appears to have been determined to inculcate this “infirmity” in his readers: “What connexion can there be ... ?” is a question directed at us.

In a novel that is extraordinary for its vast scope and its superfluity of peculiarities, perceiving



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