



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

‘I don’t know nothink’

Double Standards and Dual Narration in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*

BA essay in English

Kolbrún Ingimarsdóttir

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Summary

Charles Dickens used his novel *Bleak House* to touch on unconnected topics concerning urban poverty and how society mistreated children, and to bring out the double standards in society in the Victorian era. London was foggy and muddy and large crowds of people lived under terrible conditions in slum houses in his era.

The novel is written from dual viewpoints, with a double narration. One of the narrators is Esther Summerson, the heroine of the novel, and the other is an anonymous masculine voice. Dickens attacks corruption in society, including the legal system, the church and telescopic philanthropy groups focusing on foreign missions instead of looking inwards and helping the needy close at home. He wanted to see improvements in sanitation, education, and government as well as in the legal profession. The characters of the novel, both good and bad characters, interact with each other in several ways. The main character, and one of the narrators, is an illegitimate child brought up in the notion that she is a disgrace, but as her story goes on we learn how she used her life to care for people around her who needed care and advice. Her mother, Lady Dedlock, plays a large role in the novel as a woman having a love affair and giving birth to a child out of wedlock. In the end she pays for her sin with death, which raises the question of social decay in the novel.

The question of a feminist perspective is also raised in the novel as most of the female characters play different roles from what was normal in society at that time. They are strong and independent women who have careers and there are several examples in the novel where it is women who are in control.

‘I don’t know nothink.’

Double Standards and Dual Narration in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*

The novel *Bleak House* was written between March 1852 and September 1853 and was published in nineteen monthly instalments, the final one being a double number. It was thus written in the Victorian era, an era of double standards, both moral and religious, as revealed in much of the literature of that time, for example in Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* and in Charles Dickens’ other novels such as *Oliver Twist* and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Historians now regard this “as a time of many contradictions, such as the widespread cultivation of an outward appearance of dignity and restraint together with the prevalence of social phenomena such as prostitution and child labor. A plethora of social movements arose from attempts to improve the prevailing harsh living conditions for many under a rigid class system” (“Victorian morality”).

Once Queen Victoria had come to the throne she proclaimed moral principles and brought about many moral improvements in the royal family. But were there any real improvements in society? What happened behind the scenes and how did people treat other people in the name of charity or missions overseas? How were children treated and what about child labour and orphanages? The poor people in London were suffering from a brutal existence and diseases at the same time as Britain held the 1851 Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, London . In Dickens’ mind Britain was self-congratulating and he was appalled by it, as shown in his disgust at the exhibition. He believed it was his role as a writer to expose the circumstances in society to the public. As Miguel Mota notes:

The novelist, Dickens believed, had a duty to present his readers with valid models of human behaviour and to provide a vision of life capable of urging people to virtue and goodness. On one level this view commits the writer to portraying fictional figures who are useful models of human behaviour, characters whose struggle against confusion, error and evil gives support to our own battles with similar problems. (Mota, 188)

Dickens tried to let his fictions show what was invisible in society, by creating situations and settings for his characters that would perhaps awaken the public and create some reforms in England.

Charles Dickens's first job was a solicitors' clerk and later he was a criminal reporter for the newspapers. Through his experience he got an understanding of human failures and weaknesses and used it in his novels. His criticism of the court of Chancery is based on his work for a solicitor and his own experience as he had filed a suit to protect his copyright; he was receptive of the injustice and failures of Chancery and how hollow it was. Dickens, along with many others, called for the reform of the Court of Chancery. The legal profession is one of the things Dickens is attacking in his novel as a cause of corruption in society. It was dragging cases on and on for years and swallowing up every penny the case was about. The legal system in society was not working for the people concerned but "The one great principle of the English law is, to make business for itself" (Jahn, 371).

One would imagine that the two main institutes of the church and the law should be able to protect the underdogs in society, this is not the case as Dickens reveals in this novel. While judges and lawyers get rich from the ongoing notorious cases for years, Chancery suitors go mad, and commit suicide or murders and live in places like Tom-all-alone's. "The profession could be defined as a sort of organised, legitimated irresponsibility" (Robbins, 144). There are also some

bitter attacks against organized religion, both Protestant and Catholic, which is represented in at least two of the characters in *Bleak House*: Mrs Pardiggle as a voice for the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the Reverend Chadband for the Church of England that was expressing a new spirit of seriousness at the time.

Dickens associates the world of law, the world of Chancery, with the institution of the church in the novel, as when Esther describes her arrival in London:

We drove slowly through the dirtiest and darkest streets that ever were seen in the world (I thought), and in such a distracting state of confusion that I wondered how the people kept their senses, until we passed into a sudden quietude under an old gateway, and drove on through a silent square until we came to an odd nook in a corner, where there was an entrance up a steep, broad flight of stairs, like an entrance to a church. And there really was a churchyard, outside under some cloisters, for I saw the gravestones from the staircase window. This was Kenge and Carboy's. (BH, 37)

The glimpse of the gravestone suggests the evil and injustice of society.

In the beginning of the novel we are introduced to the Chancery suit of Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce, a legal dispute about an inheritance. "This scarecrow of a suit has, in course of time, become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means" (BH, 14). Tom Jarndyce had killed himself, leaving behind him several wills that could not be found anywhere, and one of the properties belonging to the case was called Tom-all-alone's. This suit influenced so many people and because of its length generations had been waiting for the verdict. Robert Alan Donovan writes: "the lawyer cares nothing for justice; he cares only for the law" (cited in Robbins, 143).

The legal system has people like Vholes working for it, the lawyer who is working for Richard on the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case that had been going on for years. He is draining out of him every penny Richard owed and even mortgaged his future, along with his health and sanity. Vholes does not point out to Richard that even if he were to be successful in the suit, that Richard depended on for his support the rest of his life, and would get his share, this might still not be enough to pay Vholes for his costs for working on the case. In the end it draws Richard to his death. He couldn't handle the pressure of the lawsuit. "In one of his radiant enthusiasms Dickens had set himself to awaken the public mind to the sinful waste of time and money then characteristic of the Court of Chancery, and to illustrate the tragic-comedy of that institution" (Hammerton, Vol.11, 1). Vholes turns his back on Richard when the suit came to an end.

Mr Tulkinghorn is a lawyer, who is concerned for his clients but also enjoys the power of control he has when discovering their secrets. He works for Sir Leicester Dedlock. Mr Tulkinghorn is sneaky and manipulates people, like with Mr George, when he wants him to give him an example of Hawdons' handwriting in order to link him to Lady Dedlock as he discovers her secret. He steps on others in order to uphold the class structure.

Bleak House is sometimes called the first of Dickens' dark novels. It portrays the nineteenth-century society as a dark and oppressive one, with little hope, as he uses the fog and dirt and soot to describe the city. Nevertheless, the narrative is trying to counter the author's pessimistic understanding of the universe as devoid of the divine and human touch.

One of Dickens' contemporary critics, Channing, said of him: "Dickens shows that life in its rudest forms may wear a tragic grandeur; that amidst follies and sensual excesses, provoking laughter or scorn, the moral feelings do not wholly die; and that the haunts of the blackest crimes are sometimes lighted up by the

presence and influence of the noblest souls. (Channing, *On the Present Age*, cited in Hammerton, Vol.18, 290). This is what we find in the novel *Bleak House*, people who care for and try to bring some goodness into the lives of others.

As regards children in this era, for example, they often suffered terribly from the situation of their lives. Illegitimate children were sold, so to speak, to people that advertised in the papers for an adoption or as a child care services. The mother believed that the child would receive a better home and care than what she had to offer. In many of these cases single mothers gave their children to these people and even paid them some money, but in many cases the babies were found dead in the river Thames shortly after. They had been killed. Quite a few women were sentenced to the death penalty for these horrible crimes.

Dickens refers to Tooting in this novel. Tooting was a place where a man named Peter Drouet ran a place called a baby farm, a place to which pauper children were sent rather than having them kept in workhouses. The children were boarded out there by London parishes. “One of the more distasteful aspects of Victorian England was the practice of taking in unwanted babies, and, in return for a commercial fee, either over-crowding them, or killing them. It was known as baby farming” (“Baby Farming”). In 1848, more than 150 children were killed at the Tooting baby farm, due to a raging cholera epidemic. Drouet was accused of manslaughter but was cleared. This event opened the eyes of many people and Dickens wrote at least four articles for the *Examiner* about this abuse of children. “Dickens was much exercised by the facts of the case and what they revealed about attitude to the care of children” (Gill, 923).

Sanitation is another aspect of Dickens’ criticism. “Like the great philanthropist, Dickens felt that it was ‘the sty that makes the pig’ rather than reverse.’ ...Dickens ... fought for better sanitation and living conditions for the poor” (Jahn, 370). He spoke to the Metropolitan Sanitation Commission in 1850,

and pointed out current circumstances which denied the progress of civilization, by summing up the effect of urban poverty. He wanted a better life for the poor and needy in England. The story of Jo is an example of how he used his novels to make a point on the matter. Jo lives “in a ruinous place, known to the likes of him by the name of Tom-all-alone’s.” (BH, 235). It is such a terrible place that houses collapse because of ill maintenance in the area, caused by the legal case to which it belonged. The landlord is now Chancery and the inheritor would get it, but no one would take care of it until the verdict. Human society and the houses rot because of the delay in the case. The poor and the weak and the lowest of the society inhabit Tom-all-alone’s.

Education was also one of Dickens concerns. Take for example the picture drawn up of Jo sitting down to eat on the door-step of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (BH, 237), and not knowing the name of the building because he is illiterate. The point made here by Dickens is that it would be better to eradicate poverty and ignorance at home before venturing overseas, and that this would be much more effective action by these groups supporting philanthropy and Christianity abroad.

Jo is uneducated, and as he says himself; “‘For I don’t’ says Jo, ‘I don’t know nothink’ ” (BH, 236). The only thing he knows, and does not know how he knows, is not to lie. The introduction to Jo in the novel is one of the most devastating descriptions of a person we might ever read. “Here he is, very muddy, very hoarse, very ragged” (BH, 162), and then:

Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don’t know that everybody has two names. Never heerd of sich a think. Don’t know that Jo is short for a longer name. Thinks it long enough for *him*. *He* don’t find no fault with it. Spell it? No. *He* can’t spell it. No father, no mother, no friends. Never been

to school. What's home? Knows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom, or about the lie, but knows both. (BH, 162)

In this scene in the novel, there are quite a few people surrounding Jo. He had been called in as a witness regarding Nemo's death. Tulkinghorn the lawyer is there along with the Coroner and Mr. Snagsby. None of the people around think of helping Jo or supporting him in any way except Mr Snagsby who gives him a half-crown, and tells him not to talk to him if he saw him with his wife. The response of the Coroner, when he thinks Jo is not good enough to testify to the Court of Justice is: "We can't take *that*, in a Court of Justice, gentlemen. It's terrible depravity. Put the boy aside" (BH, 162). He refers to Jo as *that* and does not think of him as a human being, let alone a child that needs some help to be able to live. As the story goes on we are informed of Jo's destiny.

There were quite a few groups, both humanistic and religious outgrowths of the church, and even the government that focused their efforts on foreign philanthropy. Charles Dickens used some of his novels to criticise these groups and *Bleak House* is one in which a caustic attack on philanthropy can be found in two of his characters, the religious and social hypocrites Mrs Jellyby, and later Mrs Pardiggle, "a woman who does 'good works' for the poor, but cannot see that her efforts are rude and arrogant and do nothing at all to help. She inflicts her activities on her five small sons, who are clearly rebellious" ("Bleak House"). She is in all kinds of committees, and drags her five boys to all kinds of activities which she attends in the name of a mission or a charity. She impounds the boys' allowances in order to give to the Tockahoopo Indians of America. It is very unlikely the boys approve of both these actions of their mother for Esther says: "We had never seen such dissatisfied children" (BH, 114). The comparison between Mrs Pardiggle and

Mrs Jellyby is that the former includes her children in her foreign philanthropy whereas the latter excluded them. Both of these women disassociate them from the problems at home, their whole devotion is for the unknown natives in distant lands, ignoring what is happening in England where the people suffer starvation and poverty and live under wretched conditions. Dickens wanted the foreign philanthropic groups to look closer to home; he thought that England would be the immediate beneficiary if the time and money involved in missionary work were reallocated. He held them in contempt for the sufferings of children like Jo and families like the brickmaker's by their disinterestedness of their condition and were condoning their death like Jo's.

While there were social problems that needed to be solved in England, these groups collected almost one million pounds a year in London alone for foreign missions in 1860. Dickens thought foreign missionary societies ignored the destitute of England as they suffered under the throes of the economy; instead these missions wanted to introduce and develop culture and Christianity into far away countries like Africa and the West Indies. "During this period the character and the tone of Dickens's social criticism markedly changed as his view of the "Condition of England" became increasingly one of despair rather than hope" (Tarr, 275). Charles Dickens had a friend named Thomas Carlyle and they shared similar views on this matter. Carlyle influenced him and they both criticised the work of these movements:

Aside from the magnitude of the expenditure involved, which they felt should be used to help alleviate the social problems in England, both were convinced that the objectives of the missionaries—most of whom knew little or nothing about the subjects of their benevolence—were detrimental to those concerned. (Tarr, 276)

In *Bleak House* we see double standards in several ways, in parents neglecting their children, in society neglecting the poor and lonely, and in the law, as Bruce Robbins says: “For many critics, the professions are the true villains of *Bleak House*” and “The court of Chancery that sits at the centre of the London fog in the first chapter and is the central symbol of English society throughout the novel is the court that is supposed to take care of the helpless, the widows and orphans who make up a large percentage of this novel’s cast of characters. But instead of taking care of them, it takes care of itself” (Robbins, 143-144). And in *Bleak House* Dickens has moved from the individual as a villain to the system as a part of the problem people are dealing with. “Critics have remarked that in *Bleak House* Dickens moves away from the individual villains of his earlier novels toward an understanding of social evil as, in Terry Eagleton’s term ‘systematic’” (Robbins, 142).

Dickens wanted to see the community supporting its citizens, and “he hated the formalism and the suggestion of priestcraft with the same vigour, one assumes, that he despised all social institutions which eventually grew to oppress the very people they were meant to serve” (Mota, 189). Here he is talking about the institution of the church and the world of law.

Bleak House is told by two narrators, one of whom is Esther Summerson, a female voice and the main character of the novel. She speaks from a single first person point of view, in the past tense, focusing on her world and what is happening around her, a private and personal viewpoint. The other narrator is omniscient, and although unnamed is clearly a masculine voice. The masculine narrator is thought to have the broader point of view, and gives us the overview of the novel’s world and speaks in third person and in present tense. Each narrator has been given almost exactly half the space. Virginia Blain states: “It seems to me

that the juxtaposition of the two narrative voices sets up a submerged dialectic between male and female viewpoints” (Blain, 1). The structure of the narrative has been regarded as one of the most brilliant and complex by Charles Dickens. These two narrators “do not confirm, augment, balance, or directly contradict each other; they are simply different from each other” (Mota,191).

This dual narration could be significant in any interpretation of the novel. It can also be analysed justly as an expression of the complexity of human life. Moers notes: “There appears in fact to be an incongruity between the man’s world and the woman’s world of the novel, which may be Dickens’s point: that the masculine world of *Bleak House* has fatally slowed down, while the feminine world is alarming speeding up” (Moers, 21). Later on that page she says: “But there is more than mockery to Dickens’s response to feminist agitation; there is in *Bleak House* a sense of anxiety that approaches respect, and an imaginative concern with the movement of women” (Moers, 21). Moers suggests that the novel is full of strong women, and that makes *Bleak House* unusual from other of Dickens’s novels as there were many things he wanted to present of the social and sexual role of women. They are more forceful, capable and independent. The servants as Guster the maid of the Snagsbys, and Charley, Esther’s maid, and Mademoiselle Hortence, Lady Dedlocks’ maid show resilience.

Gender viewpoints are different in the novel and focus more on the women’s issues that are more like a social themes rather than a diversion. It shifts the masculine point in the novel. Women work for a living, as the trooper’s wife Mrs Bagnet, and the detective’s wife Mrs Bucket, and Caddy Jellyby, and women even have careers as Mrs Rouncewell, the housekeeper of Chestney Wold, Lady Dedlocks’ estate. They travel alone if they need to, as Esther usually does, and also Mrs Bagnet who tells her husband to take care of the children, as she is off to Lincolnshire to get the mother of her friend George who was in prison after he had

been arrested for the murder of Mr. Tulkinghorn by Mr Bucket. This is an interesting aspect in the novel that shows the work of women outside of the domestic sphere which was unusual in this era where the main view of women was that they were destined to be the helpmate of man in a patriarchal society.

Bleak House is a story of gender conflict, where the female has to surrender to the male as the female is presented as having sexual flings. “That Dickens should have chosen Lady Dedlock and her illegitimate daughter as representative examples of the female sex is both extraordinary and profoundly significant; and it is equally significant, though less immediately extraordinary, that he chose lawyers for his ‘representative’ males” (Blain, 5). Lady Dedlock did not suffer exile, even though she had a love affair with Captain Howdon and had an illegitimate child with him, instead she married into the highest rank of society, had a husband that married her for love, had wealth and status and was the top fashion figure of her time. Her death in the end could be an example of the purification of society, “as she represents the secret ‘guilt’ of sexuality in every woman that must be driven out of the community so that it can be purged from the threat of its own consuming violence” (Blain, 10). In her death she believes in her mind that she is disgraced and believes her husband is unable to forgive her for her transgression, as the secret has been revealed to him, not knowing that he did forgive her and wanted her back home.

Bleak House can also be looked at as two different novels, “a melodramatic fairy-tale and an extraordinary bitter and inclusive social satire” (Mota, 190). The fairy tale is the story of Esther, who in the end marries her love Allan Woodcourt, as opposed to several stories of the poor and the injustice of society. Mota also suggests that “the division of the story between Esther and an anonymous narrator segregates the world of good from the world of evil” (Mota, 190). Esther talks about local responsibility, she is concentrating on what is close, and trying to be

useful to those around her, while the omniscient narrator writes his story with many versions of the irresponsible telescopic philanthropy, the most evident of those is Chancery.

The main character and one of the two narrators in the novel is Esther, a girl who was raised by her godmother Miss Barbary. Esther later finds out that Miss Barbary was her aunt. Miss Barbary was a woman who went to church three times on Sundays and at least twice during the weekdays; however, this woman raises Esther in the knowledge that she is a disgrace, since she was born out of wedlock, and never celebrates her birthdays saying: “It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born!”(BH, 26). This is the ultimate picture of how a woman uses her religion to do evil instead of good; instead of taking the little girl under her wing and giving her love and protection, she only shows her cold affection and the non-loving side of her. Even though she does not show Esther any sign of love or caring, Esther still thinks well of her: “She was a good, good woman!” (BH, 24). Esther describes her in the introduction to her story as follows: “She was handsome; and if she had ever smiled, would have been (I used to think) like an angel—but she never smiled” (BH, 24).

Esther is not told of her parents by her godmother, so she grows up not knowing who they were or any more of her story whatsoever. She learns of her background and roots as the story goes on. The way she is brought up suggests her parents are not poor, compared to other children at this time, who were often put into orphanages to be brought up. Miss Barbary had a maid named Mrs Rachel; she too could not connect to Esther because of her status in society of being illegitimate. “I clung to her and told her it was my fault, I knew, that she could say good bye so easily! ‘No, Esther!’ she returned. ‘It is your misfortune!’ ” (BH, 31).

She could not love this little orphan girl. Mrs Rachel later became Mrs Chadband and meets Jo the street sweeper as will be mentioned later.

This story is also about Esther's mother Lady Dedlock who got pregnant by her lover Captain Hawdon and gave birth to the illegitimate child. As Hillis Miller says about Dickens in this part of *Bleak House*: "Perhaps he wanted to mislead the reader into thinking that the revelation of Lady Dedlock's secret is at the same time an explanation of the real mystery of the novel –that is, the question of why English society is in such a sad state?" (cited in Blain, 4). Dickens suggests that society is unjust and evil and eventually drives Esther's mother and father to the graveyard.

Lady Dedlock, Esther's mother, was told by her sister Mrs Barbary that her child had died at birth, but when she finds out she has a daughter, she desperately tries to contact her and wants to know her, but her status in society deprives her of the privilege of making it known that Esther is her daughter. The story is complicated regarding Esther's mother, for it seems that Dickens uses her as a scapegoat for a purgation of a tainted society. As Lady Dedlock she is in a high position in society, married to a very respectable man. "His family is as old as the hills, and infinitely more respectable" (BH, 18). He married her out of love. When he found out about his wife's secret, that is she had borne an illegitimate child, he forgave her and all he wanted was for her to be with him despite the scandal it cost him and his reputation.

In *Bleak House* there is shown a passionate sympathy for those who are fighting an unequal battle. The story of Jo is a good example of this. Jo the street sweeper is an orphan and no one knows who he is or where he came from, he is totally on his own. No one seems to care for him except Nemo whose name is Latin for "no one" as stated by Mr Tulkinghorn (BH, 148). We see that Jo recognizes Nemo as the man who gave him supper and money when he had some to share (BH, 199). One of the few human beings to take notice of Jo and care for

him was a man that had almost nothing in the world. We are later informed that this man Nemo is Captain Hawdon, Esther's father.

Nemo (Latin for 'nobody') — is the alias of Captain James Hawdon, an officer in the British Army under whom Mr George once served. Nemo copies legal documents for Snagsby and lodges at Krook's rag and bottle shop, eventually dying of an opium overdose. He is later found to be the former lover of Lady Dedlock and the father of Esther Summerson. (“Bleak House”)

Even though they did not know of each other, Esther takes after her father and acts out of love.

In Jo's case, when he meets the Reverend Chadband, the Reverend threatens him to make him come to Cook's Court the next night or he would bring the boy to the police. He wanted to improve this tough subject that Jo was. The only thing the Reverend wants Jo to do is to repent. Jo shows up in the home of Mr Snagsby where Chadband preaches over the household and Jo, who falls asleep. Chadband is now married to Rachel, a former maid of Esther's godmother. They do not show Jo any affection or try to help him in any way Jo needed the most, which is to be taken care of and be cared for. He preaches but does not give bread. Being a minister Chadband should have seen the boy's needs and met them instead of sending Jo back onto the streets. The story of Jo is a sad story of a child who no one cares for. We are not told what happened to his parents or why he is on the streets all alone. It is like he never had anyone around him that cared for him or thought anything of him. He lives in the Tom's-all-alones slum where poor people lived. The fact that no one took care of him shows us how strange society was. Guster, one of the pauper children in this novel and Snagsby's maid, gives him

something to eat. The first time Jo felt any affection or physical touch is when Guster puts his hand on Jo's shoulder; "Jo stops in the middle of a bite, and looks petrified. For this orphan charge of the Christian Saint whose shrine was at Tooting, has patted him on the shoulder; and it is the first time in his life that any decent hand has been so laid upon him" (BH, 383). She shows interest in him, as he is of same origin as she is. No one had ever treated Jo as a human being. Dickens even compares him to a drover dog. Not even the detective Bucket helps him; he is so concerned for the law and his job that he did not care what happened to the boy. Bucket paid Mr Skimpole to tell him about Jo when Esther had taken Jo into her home at Bleak House, and when he found Jo even though Jo was very sick, Bucket told him to leave and threatened Jo. Jo was afraid of him ever since and tried to hide when he came back to Tom-all -alone's. The detective, we would think, the official authority dismissed the child without regarding how he would survive in the world, telling him to keep out of the way. Instead he made Jo so terrified of him that Jo hid in the slums imagining the detective to be everywhere and knowing everything.

The picture of Jo's death as Dickens describes it in the novel starts when Allan Woodcourt finds Jo very sick, hiding in the slums from Mr Bucket. Allan brings Jo to Mr George the trooper's house. Mr George's home, the shooting gallery was like a shelter for people hiding from Bucket. Allan tells George of his difficulties regarding Jo since Jo was so terrified of Bucket. "I am unwilling to place him in a hospital, even if I could procure him immediate admission, because I foresee that he would not stay there many hours, if he could be so much as got there. The same objection applies to a workhouse; supposing I had the patience to be evaded and shirked, and handed about from post to pillar in trying to get him into one-which is a system that I don't take kindly to" (BH,667). Here, Allan states what is going on in London. The workhouse was a system that had been created

for the poor, but deliberately made so unattractive by their regimes that they were the ultimate terror for the poor and only the utterly destitute entered them. There was no place for a pauper child as Dickens brings out in the novel: “He is not one of Mrs Pardiggle’s Tockahopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs Jellyby’s lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borrioboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article” (BH, 669). The description goes further saying Jo is a heathen soul, and a homely lad ending with: “From the sole of thy foot to the crown of thy head, there is nothing interesting about thee” (BH, 669). Allan says the Lord’s Prayer with Jo; Mr Snagsby is there and Jo wants him to write his will that is his final testament to the world, which was this prayer.

Among the rather large cast of characters in the novel, there were many of them gathered around the boy’s deathbed. These were the people that had been good to him, that gave him human contact. “Jo’s predicament serves to bring out the basic moral goodness of those who try to help him” (Mota, 195). This was a caring community, and even though they wanted to help him, they could not prevent him from dying. Charity soothes but cannot save. The disease of the irresponsible and selfish society is able to make the good work of people ineffective. Dickens emphasizes in this scene that the ill of society as depicted in the novel works against the kindness and love and hope for society.

Bleak House has many characters that interact with each other in the plot, containing a complete sweep of society from Jo, the ignorant street sweeper, to Lady Dedlock, one of the aristocrats at the top of society in *Bleak House*. There are both good characters and bad characters in the novel. People that work for their own good, such as Tulkinghorn the lawyer, Mr. Harold Skimpole protégé, of Mr. Jarndyce, Mr. Vholes, Richard Carstone’s solicitor, and Grandfather Smallweed, a money lender, and then those who take care of others and are concerned for their

well-being such as Esther, Trooper George, the Bagnet family, Alan Woodcourt and Mr. Jarndyce. As Mota says: “In *Bleak House* it is not difficult to separate the good from the bad in this context, Mrs. Jellyby from Captain Hawdon, Mrs. Pardiggle from Mr. Snagsby, Mr. Chadband from Esther Summerson” (Mota, 188). The third group of characters in the novel are the victims of social oppression like Jo, the brickmaker’s family, and Caddy Jellyby, who all need someone’s help and care. Esther is the one who is trying to repair the social damage of these people lives and restore order in the households. She helps Caddy with her wedding to Prince Turveydrop, when Caddy’s own mother Mrs Jellyby totally ignores the situation, and she teaches her wifely arts and housekeeping. She nurses and pacifies the other Jellyby children, by telling them fairy tales, as they are neglected by their mother altogether. Their father is acting like a sloth and is totally passive in the household as are some other male characters in the novel. This is an interesting point of view in the novel, especially when we look at the time the novel was written, that many of the male characters are oppressed by their wives, and in other parts of the novel, the women are more successful than the men.

One illustration of the difference between the care or concern of Esther , as compared to someone who is a social hypocrite and acts for their own benefit, that is Mrs Pardiggle, is when both of them, along with Ada, visit the house of the brickmaker’s family at the request of Mrs Pardiggle. “Mrs Pardiggle, leading the way with a great show of moral determination, and talking with much volubility about the untidy habits of the people (though I doubted if the best of us could have been tidy in such a place), conducted us into a cottage” (BH, 118). In the cottage there were some people, and a woman with black eye sat by the fire nursing a baby. “‘Well, my friends,’ said Mrs Pardiggle; but her voice had not a friendly sound, I thought; it was too business-like and systematic” (BH, 121). She had been in this dreadful household before where children had died and everything was filthy, and

given them a book, as if that was what they needed. She starts to read to these people, and as Esther describes it, takes the whole family into some kind of religious custody. What Esther senses is that this behaviour toward these people in these circumstances is not at all right, “we both felt painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier, which could not be removed by our new friend” (BH, 122).

Mrs Pardiggle shows contempt for the poverty of the brickmaker’s family, and this is sharply contrasted with her concern for the unknown Tockahoopo Indians in America. Esther however succeeds in breaking this iron barrier and repairing the damage caused by Mrs Pardiggle after she left the hovel, by showing sympathy for them. It turns out that the baby in the woman’s arms is dead. Esther and Ada show the mother such compassion and gentleness that she burst into tears. It was as if she had never experienced such before. Esther respectfully takes the dead baby and covers it with her handkerchief. Then they try to comfort the mother and Esther whispers to her words from the Bible, what the Saviour said about children. Esther acted out of the goodness of her heart and the passion to do well to others. This is a sharp attack on how the “religious” groups tried to help. Dickens suggests here that the world won’t be saved through institutions or organizations but by responsible and sympathetic acts of one individual towards other individuals.

The notion of a double standard is shown in many ways in this novel. It is amazing how the people in the story create their own reality, a world of deception and wrongheaded decisions that will have a bad influence on their families. They surround their world with an occupation for a cause that they believe is the most important task in their lives. They also include the people around them and expect them to participate in the good deed they think they are doing. These people cannot see the wrong they are doing because of the blindness of the socially good

thing they are doing. They deny the world of truth and reality and how their relatives suffer because of their own selfishness and righteousness. There are several examples in the novel where we see this as a double standard in parenthood: who is responsible for whom, who are the children and who is the parent?

The parents are not taking care of their children as we see in the case of the Jellyby family, Mr Turveydrop and Harold Skimpole, for example. When Mrs Jellyby is introduced to the story (BH, 44), she is such a busy woman with her mission for the children in Africa that she doesn't even have time to comb her hair, let alone take care of her own children which are described thus: "there was a confused little crowd of people, principally children, gathered about the house at which we stopped, which had a tarnished brass plate on the door, with the inscription, JELLYBY." And further down the page: "I made my way to the poor child, who was one of the dirtiest little unfortunates I ever saw" (BH, 46). Instead of looking to her nearest circle, and taking care of her family, Mrs Jellyby puts all her efforts into the mission abroad, the natives of Borrioboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger. She has to devote her energy and strength in her effort to help them; on the other hand her house is dirty and very messy and there is muddle in the household. Mrs Jellyby is thus neglecting her role as a mother and a woman and uses her daughter Caddy as a slave for her and her job with for the children of Africa. Caddy says to Esther: "where's Ma's duty as a parent?" (BH,59).

Mr Jellyby, Caddy's father, does not do anything to prevent it, and is totally neglecting his role as the "man of the house" by letting his wife run it to its ruination; he is a pathetic image of a husband. Esther teaches Caddy to do housework and to take care of the household, a job her mother should have trained her to do.

Mr Turveydrop is another person in the novel who does not take care of his family. He has a son, Prince Turveydrop, and had a wife that used to be a dancer. Mr Turveydrop did nothing in life except be “a gentleman”, his life and being only focusing on Deportment. He did not work but had his wife and son work for him so he could only be a model of Deportment.

He had married a meek little dancing-mistress, with a tolerable connexion, (having never in his life before done anything but deport himself), and had worked her to death, or had, at the best, suffered her to work herself to death, to maintain him in those expenses which were indispensable to his position” (BH, 209)

At this time in the story he is using his son exactly the same way, the young Mr Prince Turveydrop is doing everything in the dancing school. “My eyes were yet wandering, from young Mr Turveydrop working so hard to old Mr Turveydrop deporting himself so beautifully” (BH, 210). The son is doing the father’s duties. He doesn’t get paid but is under the heel of his father. Everything he wants in life has to be agreed to by his father. Even when he falls in love with Caddy Jellyby he does not dare take any action unless he has his father’s approval. Both Caddy and Prince were neglected by their parents.

Esther meets Harold Skimpole when she comes to dwell in John Jarndyce’s home, Bleak House. Mr Skimpole was staying there at the time. He is one of the most extraordinary characters in *Bleak House*. He is despicable, amoral, and without remorse. He claims he does not understand the complexities of human relationships, circumstances, and society, as he sometimes refers to himself as "a child" but he understands them too well. He acts like a child sometimes enjoying life as the one who has no cares in the world. He does not want to take any

responsibility for his own life. He lives off other people, in their house, eating their food and even having them pay his debts. His notion is that he provides employment for the debt collectors. He is clever and attractive, selfish and unprincipled and content to sponge upon his friends. He was educated as a physician but has no intention of working for a living. He has a wife, Mrs Skimpole, who had once been a beauty, but beauty has faded away, and three daughters, but leaves them at home if he feels like it. His wife and daughters suffer from disorder in their house, for he does not take care of them in any way. Things he buys are taken back because he doesn't pay for them. His extraordinary selfishness is shown when Jo comes to Bleak House and Skimpole does not want him there; it wasn't even his house. Jo is sick with smallpox, and Skimpole has no intention of getting that disease. As a physician he could have helped him but instead he takes a bribe from inspector Bucket, who is looking for Jo, and tells him where he is sleeping; no one in Bleak House knew about it and when Jo had disappeared in the morning when Esther was looking for him, Skimpole pretends he knows nothing of what had happened that night. This could be questioned though in the light of Dickens' ethics. Skimpole is placing the burden on society where Dickens believed it belonged, whereas Esther was taking the matter into her own hands, risking her life and others in the house for the boy. The double standards in Mr Skimpole's life are obvious. He wants to have everything fancy and associate with upper class people, but he does not want to have any responsibilities or think for the slightest moment that he is a burden on the people which he calls friends. While he is associating with friends, his wife and his girls wait at home with almost nothing and with no one to take care of them. He is the one to take a bribe from Vholes, and introduce him to Richard. He is a sneaky character and rejects his friendship with Mr Jarndyce by writing in his diary that

Jarndyce is the most selfish man he had known, that he is the Incarnation of Selfishness, which is precisely what Mr Skimpole is himself.

Then we have another aspect of how society treated children. Dickens shows how it is clearly not prepared to take care of orphans in the case of *Coavinses*, a man named Neckett, who dies and leaves behind him three children. The oldest, a girl called Charley is at the age of thirteen, when she has to become the “mother” and breadwinner for her and her two younger siblings, at the age of five or six and an eighteen-month old baby. The mother had died just after the youngest child was born and the father asks Charley to be as good as a mother to them and she takes care of the household at the age of eleven. When her father dies she has to go out to work and looks after her brother and sister in the room they live in, where there is no fire to warm up the room. The brother is taking care of the baby while Charley is gone. No authorities are involved in the situation. The neighbours did not get involved. No one cared. Mr Jarndyce and Esther take them under their wings and give them a better life with care and concern. This is part of the reform Dickens was looking for in society. He wanted local responsibility, and that is what he exemplifies in Esther, “against the novel’s many versions of irresponsibly telescopic philanthropy, of which *Chancery’s* is the most evident” (Robbins, 142).

The double standards are obvious in the Victorian era. I have drawn out the points which concerned Charles Dickens for reforming society. He saw corruption in society and wanted to work against it and for improvements for the poor and unfortunate. Dickens was concerned with the treatment of children and how they were underdogs in society. He wanted to see improvements in their lives and situations. He wrote many articles about the matter. He also believed that urban poverty, as he wrote about it in his novel, acted as a barrier to progress as physical degradation as well as mental depravity where their companions. Education and sanitation were some of his concern. He used some of his novels to reveal to the

public what was going on in England by attacking the legal system and religious groups and the philanthropy groups only looking afar instead of looking close to home and helping the poor and needy.

In this novel, *Bleak House*, Dickens introduced a new form of narration by using two narrators, one male, one female. It results in an interesting point of view as his female characters have unusual roles in the novel. The question of responsibility is brought up, like who is responsible for whom, responsibility in the home, for parents and children and husband and wife. As the picture is drawn up in many cases in the novel, who is taking care of whom? The children are made responsible for their parents and the woman rules over the man. There are some interesting characters in the novel that interact with each other. Some of them work out of kindness and love for the individual, but others are selfish and work for their own good. The novel brings out the decay of society despite the goodness and hope of some of its people.

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