TO BUY THIS BOOK

If your search engine has brought you straight to these sample pages please follow this link to the Humanities-Ebooks web page for this item.

PLEASE VISIT
HUMANITIES-EBOOKS.CO.UK
Reading ‘Bleak House’

by Richard Gravil

A Literature Insight from

HEB HUMANITIES-EBOOKS
Contents

A Note on the Author 7

A Note on the Text 8

Chapter 1. Why read Bleak House? 9
  1.1 Apocalypse Now? 9
  1.2 Experimental Fiction 10
  1.3 Reading for the plot 11
  1.4 You, the Detective 14
  1.5 Rewards 15

Chapter 2: Dickens and his Times 17
  2.1 Charles Dickens 17
  2.2 Intellectual Context 20
  2.3 Fictional Contemporaries 23
  2.4 Topicality in Bleak House 24
  2.5 The Law 25
  2.6 Public Health 28
  2.7 Constitutional Deadlock 29
  2.8 Exploitation, appropriation, and philanthropy 32
  2.9 Dandyism, Puseyism, Aestheticism, Aristocracy 34

Chapter 3: Dramatis Personae 35
  3.1 Caricature and Characterisation 35
  3.2 Major Characters 35
  3.3 Doubles—alogous and antithetical 46

Chapter 4: Reading Serially 48
  First Instalment 48
  Second Instalment 54
Chapter 1. Why read *Bleak House*?

1.1 Apocalypse Now?

George Bernard Shaw said of Dickens’s *Hard Times*, ‘This is Karl Marx, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, Carpenter, rising up against civilisation itself as a disease’. Its message, Shaw said, was that ‘it is not our disorder, but our order that is horrible’. That judgement applies just as well to *Bleak House*, a novel in which Dickens develops a range of characters whose manner and behaviour is close to cannibalism or vampirism, to exhibit his views of capitalism. The figures mentioned by Shaw are all varieties of socialist: in fact, Dickens is less obviously socialist than some other novelists of the day, but at the time he was serialising *Bleak House* he was also serialising in *Household Words* his immensely readable *A Child’s History of England* which shows him to be very partisan toward Oliver Cromwell and quite overtly republican.

*Bleak House* is one of Dickens’s greatest achievements. It is rivalled only by *Great Expectations* as an experimental narrative, and by *Our Mutual Friend* for its combination of exuberant style and characterisation with powerful symbolic statements diagnostic of the condition of England. Written on a larger scale than any other ‘condition of England’ novel, *Bleak House* can also seem more radical. This is not because Dickens sets out any practical schemes of reform, but because he describes a social order which is clearly in terminal decay and beyond reform. England, in *Bleak House*, is suffering from some deep systemic disorder, for which the only cure, the imagery sometimes suggests, might be purgation by fire.

You may not notice this on a first reading (you will be too busy trying to follow the plot and remember who is who) but one of the recurring motifs of the novel is a tendency for things to collapse or combust. Symbolic fires, suggesting apocalyptic cleansing or the torments of hell, or both, break out from time to time; lameness is endemic, and London is reverting to mud. In one nightmarish scene, while wandering through the streets of London in search of one of its
innumerable destitute persons, the mild Mr Snagsby and the mysterious Mr Bucket find themselves surrounded by shadowy figures of despair, reaching out from the abyss.

1.2 Experimental Fiction

*Bleak House* is surely one of the most experimental of nineteenth-century classics. Like other famous multiple narratives, Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, and Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*, this novel invites the reader to become engaged in a process of judgment, while rendering that process more difficult by the very manner in which it is told. It interleaves two deeply contrasting narratives, of similar length, each with its own style, its own experience, and (arguably) its own values. Charles Dickens, internationally famous writer, campaigner for all kinds of reform, raconteur, wit, and man of the world, tells one half of the novel in heightened but unmistakably ‘Dickensian’ style. But he elects to have the other half narrated by a diffident, illegitimate young woman—a decision critics have been trying to come to terms with ever since.

At times the two narrators seem to be telling quite different stories, though in fact numerous characters appear in both narratives. Our ability to follow Esther Summerson’s story of what is termed her ‘progress’—from illegitimate childhood to happy and respectable marriage—depends crucially upon the impersonal narrator’s story, which concerns the downfall of the haughty Lady Dedlock, and the disgrace she brings upon an ancient house. When you re-read this novel—and a surprising amount of this huge book is designed to be relished on a second or third reading—you will find that its structure enables you to concentrate on one narrative and skip much of the other. Many people choose the impersonal narrative for their second reading, because it is remembered as funnier; and the personal narrative for their third reading, because (on reflection) it is just as funny, but in a warmer tone.

But there is more to this ‘split narrative’ than technique. *Bleak House* was published at a time of unprecedented agitation on ‘the woman question’ and Dickens’s dual narrative, shared with an ille-
genuine young woman who symbolises woman’s exclusion from legal existence, must be counted a major imaginative response to that major nineteenth-century issue. Although this facet of the novel has been ignored until very recently, thanks to Dickens’s generally well-served reputation for not understanding women, Esther’s half of the book may deserve to be recognised as a minor classic of liberal feminism. Later in this Insight I will try to substantiate that claim.

Dickens was both a novelist and a journalist. He started out as a parliamentary reporter, and later in his career published two popular weeklies, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. Consequently, of all the great novelists of world literature, he is the one whose work has the sharpest flavour of topicality. Three of the novel’s major themes, the inefficiency of the Court of Chancery, the state of sanitation in the city (and the consequent prevalence of killer diseases, such as cholera, typhus, smallpox), and the paralysis of government, were topics of the day. A fourth theme is the muddleheadedness of organised charity. Through one of his most memorable characters, Mrs Pardiggle, Dickens shows the middle class to be incapable of communicating with the working poor. In another, Mrs Jellyby, he satirises the folly and hypocrisy of engaging in remote and impracticable charitable activities—seeking to export civilisation from a benighted and ‘boastful island’. At moments Dickens uses his immense authority as (probably) the most popular novelist of all time to appeal directly to the nation’s rulers, including at one point Queen Victoria herself. And he does so, most dramatically, when dealing with the obscure death of the most insignificant of her subjects, Jo, an illiterate crossing-sweeper, dying of cholera contracted in the squalid heart of London.

1.3 Reading for the plot

According to the reviewer in the *Illustrated London News* (24 September 1853) ‘no man … could tell a story better, if he had but a story to tell’: and it is true that anyone reading *Bleak House* for the plot will find it both bewildering and disappointing. Whether it really has a plot, or whether it matters, is very debatable. But it does tell three
Richard Gravil

simultaneous major stories, interspersed with several minor ones. 

The first story is that of the resolution of a long-standing case in the Court of Chancery, known as ‘Jarndyce and Jarndyce’, into which several generations have been born, and on which several generations of lawyers have ‘fleshed’ their legal wit. The living suitors in the case, which has to do with a disputed will, include John Jarndyce, a man of infinite benevolence and infinite contempt for the law and all of its doings, and Richard Carstone, his ward. Richard is obsessed by the vain expectation that the case will make him rich, and he allows this expectation to divide him from John Jarndyce, who warns him repeatedly that no good ever came from a Chancery suit, except for the lawyers. (As the narrator explains in Chapter 39, ‘Attorney and Client’, ‘the one great principle of the English law is, to make business for itself.’). Richard’s gullibility leads to his exploitation by the parasitical Harold Skimpole and a predatory lawyer, Vholes. The lure of chancery, its spell, makes it impossible for him to settle to a sensible career. He is ruined, in health as well as financially. Secretly, he marries his fellow ward, Ada Clare, against the advice of their guardian, John Jarndyce. On his death he leaves his young wife pregnant and destitute.

The second story (connected very loosely to the first by the fact that papers relating to the two stories are eventually found in the same place: Krook’s Rag and Bottle Shop) concerns the downfall of Lady Dedlock, who long before her marriage to the baronet Sir Leicester Dedlock, had a romance with Captain Hawdon. The romance produced an illegitimate child, who she supposed to be stillborn, but who was in fact spirited away to be brought up in secret by Lady Dedlock’s sister, Miss Barbary (formerly a friend of John Jarndyce and fiancee of his friend Lawrence Boythorn). In consultation with her lawyer, Mr Tulkinghorn, at the start of the novel, Lady Dedlock recognises the handwriting of her former lover. Mr Tulkinghorn, suspicious of her sudden interest, spends the remainder of his life, until the night of his murder, on the track of her guilty secret. Fear that she may be suspected of the murder, and blackmailed or exposed as a fallen woman, lead to Lady Dedlock’s flight and her death. It is typical of the dark implications of Dickens’s plotting, that the person who precipitates this catastrophe, Guppy, thinks he is aiding Esther
establish her parentage, and indeed shows some courage in competing with the much more powerful Tulkinghorn on Tulkinghorn’s own territory.

The third story is that of Lady Dedlock’s illegitimate child, Esther Summerson, who narrates almost half of the chapters, and over half of the novel. Her story focuses, for the most part, on the benevolence of Mr Jarndyce, to whom for a time she becomes engaged, and the passage of Richard and Ada from youth, hope and innocence, to romance and ruin. Reluctantly, however, and with great embarrassment, she also tells of a developing love between herself and Doctor Woodcourt, a handsome young doctor, whose useful profession symbolises that he is the romantic hero of the novel. Reluctantly, also, and without seeking it, she acquires knowledge of her parentage. This knowledge confirms (as she sees it, and as she has been told from childhood) that she is her mother’s disgrace. Illegitimacy is not incidental to this tale; it is its thematic heart. To be illegitimate was until quite late in the 20th Century an enormous stigma and Dickens invests a great deal in characterising Esther accordingly, as well as in challenging his respectable readers to examine their feelings on the subject. Illegitimacy, Jarndyce says in Chapter 17, is ‘of no account to any man or woman worth a thought’. Does the strategy of having one narrative centred on a ‘fallen woman’ and the other narrated by her child imply an attack on both stigmas?

Connecting these three narratives, in a novel much concerned with documents and writing, is the handwriting of Esther’s father. Employed as an anonymous law-writer, under the pseudonym Nemo (meaning no-one), the former Captain Hawdon has copied the document that alerts Tulkinghorn to Lady Dedlock’s secret in chapter 2, and (quite possibly) the letter Esther receives from the law firm of Kenge and Carboy in chapter 3. In chapter 4, Esther stands for a moment, without knowing it, outside her dying father’s room. The death of Nemo frustrates Tulkinghorn’s search for evidence to incriminate Lady Dedlock (just as the death of Krook frustrates Guppy in his turn). Nemo’s death also brings two other characters into the clutches of Tulkinghorn: the crossing sweeper Jo, an orphan befriended by Nemo; and Trooper George, as possessor of another document in Hawdon’s handwriting (what this document concerns is
revealed in Chapter 63, where the timing of its deliverance to Esther is one of Dickens’s most delicate touches).

The pursuit of Jo as far as his deathbed, the reuniting of Trooper George with his mother Mrs Rouncewell (Sir Leicester’s housekeeper), the laying of false clues as to the identity of the murderer and the eventual arrest of the true murderer of Tulkinghorn, thanks in part to the detective sagacity of Inspector Bucket’s wife, constitute further sub-plots in this complex and mysterious novel. All of these plots involve their various characters, and the reader, in a constant process of detection.

1.4 You, the Detective

In J. Hillis Miller’s famous argument (once available as the introduction to the Penguin edition; now the opening essay in Jeremy Tambling’s ‘New Casebook’) the novel is essentially about language: about naming, reading signs, interpreting. The characters are constantly poring over signs and documents and seeking to decipher meanings and identities. The reader is decoyed into the same of detection in which almost all of the characters are engaged, and may even feel frustrated by the way the deaths of Nemo, and Krook, and Tulkinghorn frustrate the early completion of the ostensible plot, which is the unmasking of Lady Dedlock. As Miller points out, we are all implicated in the moral quagmire of the novel by allowing ourselves to accuse the wrong character of the murder of Tulkinghorn: and it is the innocent George and the official detective, Bucket, who invite us to do so.

Both narrators ask leading questions of us, invite us to add two and two and make five, and lay a trail of clues. The impersonal narrator’s famous question—‘What connection can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom?’ (in chapter 16)—is rhetorical at first, though slowly answered: the connection is that by seeking out the ‘outlaw’ to retrace the last days of her former lover, Lady Dedlock brings down that Norman House. Dickens lays some false clues, of course, so that the reader is likely to be as mistaken as Mrs Snagsby (who comically concludes that Jo is her
husband’s child). But he also plants quite remarkably subtle linguistic clues, which seem to be placed there to be enjoyed only on a second or third reading. One instance is in Chapter 11 when Nemo is described as having left ‘no more track behind him, that any one can trace, than a deserted infant’ (which deserted infant, we may or may not yet suspect, is narrating one half of this novel). In another, Esther meets Lady Dedlock and says that she soon cast her eyes down, but ‘I knew the beautiful face quite well, in that short space of time’ (304) where the tense of ‘knew’ is not quite right (‘came to know’ would be more correct) and the corrective addition of ‘in that short space of time’ does not quite erase one first impression—namely that she already knew a face she is seeing for the first time. Guppy, Jo, and Trooper George, when they see one of these two faces for the first time, have the same sensation, though with different effects.

1.5 Rewards

All this sounds pretty sombre, and Edgar Johnson rightly called Bleak House ‘this dark storm of a story’. Yet it is also brilliantly comic, an effervescent performance, and shot through with a surprising variety of reassuringly good characters. Partly because it was written for serialisation, the novel is full of realised scenes and a gallery of sharply drawn characters all with their own unique and memorable speech signatures: no two characters, in a novel with dozens of characters, sound quite alike, even when they are intended to remind one of each other. Dickens not only wrote Bleak House in less time than it may take to study it, but he did so while simultaneously writing his Child’s History, editing Household Words, campaigning for sanitary reform, supporting homes for fallen women, conducting voluminous correspondence, and giving speeches and lectures up and down the country. Yet despite the speed of composition, there are touches of quite astonishing subtlety and sentences to die for.

If this praise sounds exaggerated, some critics think Bleak House not only Dickens’s best novel, but the finest novel created in England in an age devoted to the novel. Its only serious rival for that title, apart from Dickens’s own Our Mutual Friend, which you should
read next, is George Eliot’s much more sober (though equally ironic) *Middlemarch*. Every copy of this book should carry a health warning: ‘reading Dickens may seriously damage your taste for modern fiction’. There is more invention in the average Dickens *chapter* than in many prize-winning novels, and Dickens at this date was at his most inventive. Enjoy!
Chapter 3: Dramatis Personae

3.1 Caricature and Characterisation

Compared with other novelists of the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, such as George Eliot, Thackeray, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Flaubert and Henry James, Dickens is not notable for psychological realism. He is just not in the same league and it is barely possible to imagine one of his characters walking into a novel by any of them, or vice versa. Yet he has a knack of giving characters precisely as much life or ‘roundness’ as they need for their function in his novel. Some are round and capable of development, or decline. We know their inner lives. Oddly enough there are rather few of these in *Bleak House*. The ‘roundest’ is Esther herself, and although we are told a lot about her, there is much that remains mysterious. Others are complex but static. Skimpole, for instance, does not change, but it may take us a while to read him correctly and we experience some of Esther’s confusion here. ‘Flat’ characters can be figures of simple goodness (Mrs Bagnet in her grey cloak), or malignity (Grandfather Smallweed). Others seem to be just as ‘flat’ to begin with, but come to life when needed, like Sir Leicester Dedlock. And the deployment of these characters in relation to each other can be extraordinarily suggestive of psychological grasp.

3.2 Major Characters

**Lady Dedlock**, we know from the beginning, is more vulnerable and more transparent than she likes people to think. She possesses a force of character that is admired by both Tulkinghorn and Esther, and she is worshipped by Lawrence Boythorn. But the vivid phrase by which her response to social success is captured—‘she fell, not into the melting but rather into the freezing mode’—prepares us at once, as does the lengthy depiction of her childlessness and her boredom, to expect some climactic outbursts of passion, fatally impulsive acts,
and revelations concerning a life of repression. When, in chapter 29, Guppy reveals the result of his researches into Esther’s background, his gaucheness makes his manner half-threatening, and Lady Dedlock could be forgiven for taking him as intent on blackmail. So it is much to her credit that her private reaction to his revelations is grief rather than alarm: she cries ‘O My child, O my child’, not as a selfish person might, ‘What is to become of me?’, Sir Leicester promises no such revelations, yet he progresses from a cipher to a man. Oddly, in fact, by the end of the novel he seems to stand for exactly what Lady Dedlock has betrayed in herself (except in her tell-tale adoption and protection of her maid Rosa) namely a life lived according to love. The character introduced in chapter 2 gives no sign of such development. Later on, incidentally, he seems at first, less honourable than he is said to be at the start (in ‘National and Domestic’ we are made aware of his complicity in a network of political corruption and we may wonder if Dickens remembered having credited him with truthfulness and integrity on page 22). In ‘The Ironmaster’ he is shown as a dinosaur in an age of social mobility. Yet moving testimonials to his side of the marriage remind us that ‘he married her for love’. In Chapter 54 the stricken Sir Leicester is left to muse on the fall of Lady Dedlock, who has been ‘a stock of living tenderness and love’ amid the strained formalities of his life, and whom he now sees ‘almost to the exclusion of himself’. The reader is not allowed to rest in one estimate of Sir Leicester.

Bleak House creates Dickens’s new mode of the brilliantly ambiguous character, especially in his most topical creation, Mr Bucket. The plain-clothes detective branch was first created in 1844 and one might expect a purely realistic treatment. In fact, from his first introduction into the novel he seems to belong to the world of fable, or if such a thing had then been invented, ‘magic realism’, more than that of naturalism. In Chapter 22, Mr Bucket (who was not there when Mr Snagsby entered and has not entered it since!) materialises, and, as his name implies, dips down to the bottom of Mr Snagsby’s startled mind. He seems able to project himself in different forms (he makes his victims see him as a doctor in the scene at Gridley’s death); he makes police constables evaporate; waiting for Esther towards the
end he mounts ‘a tall tower in his mind’ and scans the countryside for Lady Dedlock. He is courteous, affable, and apparently well-meaning, even surprisingly sentimental; yet worldly-wise to the verge of cynicism. In Chapter 49 when he calls on the Bagnets, he is sociability itself: he talks of his desire to find a second hand cello, compliments the children and the parents, admires the backyard (noting that there is no way out), appreciates the son playing the fife, and is generally the life and soul of the party. He cements a friendship with the entire family, and then, as soon as they are alone, arrests George for the murder of Tulkinghorn. Amusing though the narration is, it is hard to feel confident that George will survive this arrest. What motivates him, who he really serves, and what ultimate values he represents, may be very hard to pin down. He is described in Chapter 53 as ‘mildly studious in his observation of human nature, on the whole a benignant philosopher, inclined not to be severe on the follies of mankind’; yet as Volumnia perceives, he is ‘charmingly horrible’.

He certainly seems remorseless in communicating Lady Dedlock’s activities to Sir Leicester in Chapter 54. And as A. E. Dyson observes, in his casebook, he is invariably fatal to those he pursues (Gridley, Jo, and Lady Dedlock). Does Bucket serve decency and justice, or authority and power?

Jarndyce himself shares some of this disturbingly ambiguous quality. Sometimes he is simply the epitome of decency; sometimes he is Dickens’s voice (as in the marvellous denunciation of Chancery in Chapter 8); sometimes he seems morally blind. He spends a life making amends for being caught up in a system of property which links him—ultimately—to a row of houses in Tom All Alone’s. Is he ‘The Good Man in Victorian Society’ as Q. D. Leavis suggests? We are assured by Ada (Chapter 4, p 59) that in her mother’s eyes, ‘the noble generosity of his character … was to be trusted above all earthly things’, and certainly his halo gets brighter and brighter until he is almost transfigured into sainthood at the close. His philanthropy is generous, practical and immediate, and most often performed anonymously (as with his allowance to Miss Flite, reported in Chapter 14). Yet this critic of organised philanthropy sometimes treats both Charley and Esther as if they were parcels; and it is odd,
some readers may feel, that he has the effrontery to lecture Richard on the importance of vocation, while having none himself, and sheltering the monstrous parasite, Skimpole, whose only vocation is pleasure, at whatever cost to others.

**Harold Skimpole** exploits Esther and Richard shamelessly on their first meeting, and proves cruelly indifferent to the sufferings of the Neckett children and of Jo, other than as subjects for poetry. Skimpole is a man of style who lives for himself and on his friends. He mystifies Esther from the start: how could he be so free of the accountabilities of life? He talks brilliantly, reasons himself out of any sense of duty quite amazingly, and can sometimes produce a brilliant summing up of other characters, such as the warm-hearted blunderbuss Lawrence Boythorn (‘Nature forgot to shade him off, I think?… A little too boisterous, like the sea?’ [Chapter 15, p. 241]). But this man who can sing affecting ballads about orphan children, yet betray the feverish orphan Jo for ‘a fypunnote’ (he also sells Richard to a man-eating lawyer, Vholes, for another five pound commission), has also reduced his long-suffering wife to an invalid, and given his daughters just enough education ‘to be their father’s playthings in his idlest hours’ (Chapter 43, pp. 676, 679). As the novel progresses, the early impression of his childlike irresponsibility darkens to a sense of evil and the reader is likely first to weary of Skimpole, and then to judge him ever more harshly, as Esther does.

In *Bleak House* numerous characters seem to be versions of each other. They seem to constitute an infinite series of variations on particular themes. With a little ingenuity you could probably arrange them all, like beads on a necklace (to use an image from Esther’s delirium), or linked hand in hand in a dance of death, or a giant mamba. **Mrs Jellyby**, as a philanthropist, is comparable to the altogether more organised and less affable **Mrs Pardiggle** whose habit of taking charge of people and delivering meaningless moralities is later echoed in Mr Chadband’s self-regarding flights of rhetoric on Jo. The two women exist to satirise ‘telescopic philanthropy’ and ‘rapacious benevolence’, especially when allied with neglect or exploitation of children. Unlike the two women, however, who at least appear to have good intentions, Old Mr Turveydrop and the Reverend Chadband
are monstrous pieces of humbug. **Mr Turveydrop**, the professor of deportment, works his son (as he worked his wife) to exhaustion, while condescending to deport himself quite beautifully, in homage to the Prince Regent. **Chadband**, who eats and preaches his way through the novel, is not merely the monster of vanity he appears to be from the outset; he is shown to be thoroughly venal when he joins the blackmailling party at the close of the Dedlock story.

The forms of exploitation embodied in Skimpole, Chadband and Turveydrop are somewhat subtler than the treatment of Jenny and Liz by their brutal husbands. And the brickmakers’ violence is echoed in Punch and Judy fashion by Grandfather Smallweed’s constant attacks on Grandmother Smallweed. These unaccountable fits of belligerence are also analogous to those of Gridley (whose agony is shared by Miss Flite, whose own ‘madness’ portends that of Richard) and to those of Boythorn, whose comic feud with Sir Leicester mirrors Hortense’s passion for revenge (both Boythorn’s and Hortense’s rage may be equally rooted in sexual energies). And so the dance continues.

**Jo** is in some ways the central character of *Bleak House*, simply because he embodies injustice and carries disease, and because he connects almost all of the main characters, and reveals them in their true lights. For instance, Nemo (the law-writer) and **Snagsby** (the inoffensive law-stationer married to a vinegary wife whose jealousies may have fatal consequences) both appear as Jarndyce figures—stepfathering and befriending Jo just as Jarndyce fosters Esther. Snagsby and Jarndyce endlessly hand out more money, to no more ultimate effect. Jo, as victim, exposes both Chadband and Skimpole, who sells him to Inspector Bucket. He exposes the ambiguity or moral nullity of various agents of the law: the policeman (endlessly urging him to move on); the detective (who pursues him for no good reason except that Tulkinghorn wants him to) and Tulkinghorn himself who merely uses him to incriminate Lady Dedlock. He reveals, on the other hand, the practical goodness of an amazing range of genuinely benevolent characters, including the eccentric Miss Flite, the surgeon Mr Woodcourt, and Trooper George, as well as Esther, Guster and Phil Squod (all orphans like himself). As an illiterate child, munch-
ing his breakfast on the doorstep of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, and wondering what the building signifies, Jo illustrates most fully the wickedness, as Dickens sees it, of ‘telescopic philanthropy’. Innocently, he observes the likeness of Esther to Lady Dedlock, whom he has led to the pauper’s grave of her dead lover. As an innocent plague carrier, he carries the smallpox that visits upon Esther the ‘sins’ of her mother. He is tended in his final hours, dying of smallpox, by the surprisingly motherly Trooper George, who has spent much of his life as a sort of voluntary orphan, but who ends the novel as resident male nurse to that embodiment of aristocracy, the stricken Sir Leicester Dedlock. All of which is to say, that in reading *Bleak House* the name of the game is not so much sketching individual characters as following the analogies and the relationships.

At the heart of modern readings of the novel, undoubtedly, is Esther. Once thought static and insipid, or simply a rather inconsistent mask (through whom we see Dickens himself when she has anything funny or penetrating to say, as if she were really ‘not very clever’) Esther has been recognised in recent readings as one who is capable of very individual and very shrewd insights. Early in the novel, as in the treatment of Mrs Pardiggle or Krook, she deferentially attributes some of her sharpest observations to other people—usually Richard. But it is she (rather than Jarndyce), who condemns Skimpole’s worldiness. By chapter 37 she is capable of advising Richard; and in chapter 38 she cuts sharply through Guppy’s equivocations. In advising Richard she assumes the functions of guardianship. In fact, she takes the initiative surprisingly often in conversations where Jarndyce is silently present (almost as silent as Mr Jellyby). She could be termed an ‘Angel in the house’, but only if we realise that to the Victorians the word Angel suggested strength. She represents a decisiveness and moral force that compensates for the lack of it in Richard or even in Jarndyce. Yet at the same time she is marked by reticence, self-deprecation, and a very irritating habit of constantly apologising for talking about herself. This last characteristic, however, can be understood as a realistic aspect of Dickens’s grasp of illegitimacy. In some ways, one may feel, Dickens has it
are also metonymies for carriages, decay, angry travellers, writing, documents, authority. Even the characters in this novel tend to be metonymic of classes (Jo represents an entire under-class; Mrs Pardiggle the whole problem of ‘rapacious benevolence’) and social relations.

**Narrator.** The teller of a story, or a history. Fictional narrators range from the omniscient to the dysfunctional, and may be dramatised or undramatised. At one end of the scale there may be an impersonal narrator whom we are likely to trust, if only because we have no other viewpoint within the story; at the other a dramatically involved narrator who may be ignorant of some events, prejudiced, or incapable of understanding what is happening. In *Bleak House* the two narrators may, at first, seem to occupy these two extremes.

**Point of View.** In fiction this means the perspective from which the narrative is offered. See Narrator. Although one narrator in this novel is usually considered omniscient, ‘he’ clearly chooses to conceal a number of matters from the reader, as, in a different way, does Esther, who appears for much of the novel as an innocent eye but knows considerably more than she chooses to reveal.

**Psychological criticism.** Some psychological critics approach the work of art as the expression of the author’s personality, perhaps shaped by unconscious drives and symbolising, involuntarily, what is repressed in the writer’s conscious mind; others simply interpret literary texts by applying the insights of such authorities as Jung, Freud, Winnicott, Lacan.

**Realism.** Realism as a literary mode, is desirous of creating a faithful picture of reality (or the illusion of reality). Paradoxically, it tends to be associated, also, with the desire to project a moral view of life, mainly because Realism, originally, meant a preoccupation with the ‘Real’ world of Ideas, rather than the world of appearances.

**Reportage.** A style of writing based upon compressed report of dialogue or incident frequently using a form of short-hand, such as including only one side of a dialogue, as in the report of Jo’s interrogation at ‘the Inkwich’.

**Satire.** Literature which exhibits or examines vice and folly (or simply ideas or values the writer does not agree with) and makes
them appear ridiculous or contemptible.

**Symbolism.** Some of the abundant imagery in *Bleak House* is clearly metaphorical or metonymic, in that Dickens is referring to something else through the image. Some of it, however, through frequent usage, seems to carry a much broader meaning. ‘Fog’ is a meteorological image, a fact of London life, and a metaphor for the obfuscation caused by the law; but more than that it seems to symbolise the human condition. ‘Sheepskin’ is not only the raw material out of which parchment is made, but from its nauseous recurrence in the novel, a symbol expressive of how life is converted into property. Sometimes a pair of frayed slippers is just a pair of frayed slippers; but in *Bleak House* they symbolise entropy.

**Theme.** The central ideas of a work, such as, in this case, reification, control, exploitation, cruelty, avarice, detection.

**Utilitarianism.** A philosophy founded by Jeremy Bentham which argued that all things can be settled by appeal to ‘the greatest good of the greatest number’ but which Dickens saw as encouraging the replacement of benevolence by calculation and self-interest.
To Buy This Book

If this is what you are looking for please

Buy this Book

or

Browse our lists

Pdf Ebook Features:

elegantly formatted
fixed page formats are easily cited
high quality graphics
internal and external hyperlinks
easy navigation by bookmarks
ideal for laptops, desktops and tablets

The book is yours to keep - and a copy is stored on your bookshelf in case you lose it.

We also sell:
Kindle editions from Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk
Paperbacks from Lulu.com and Troubador.co.uk
Library Editions from MyiLibrary and EBSCO
Some Academic titles

Sibylle Baumbach, *Shakespeare and the Art of Physiognomy*
John Beer, *Blake’s Humanism*
John Beer, *The Achievement of E M Forster*
John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*
Jared Curtis, ed., *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth* *
Jared Curtis, ed., *The Cornell Wordsworth: A Supplement* *
Steven Duncan, *Analytic Philosophy of Religion: its History since 1955* *
Simon Hull, ed., *The British Periodical Text, 1797–1835*
Rob Johnson, Mark Levene and Penny Roberts, eds., *History at the End of the World* *
John Lennard, *Modern Dragons and other Essays on Genre Fiction* *
C W R D Moseley, *Shakespeare’s History Plays*
Paul McDonald, *Laughing at the Darkness: Postmodernism and American Humour* *
Colin Nicholson, *Fivefathers: Interviews with late Twentieth-Century Scottish Poets*
W J B Owen, *Understanding ‘The Prelude’*
W J B Owen and J W Smyser, eds., *Wordsworth’s Political Writings* *
Pamela Perkins, ed., *Francis Jeffrey’s Highland and Continental Tours* *
Keith Sagar, *D. H. Lawrence: Poet* *
Reinaldo Francisco Silva, *Portuguese American Literature* *
William Wordsworth, *Concerning the Convention of Cintra* *

* These titles are also available in print using links from [http://www.humanities-ebooks.co.uk](http://www.humanities-ebooks.co.uk)
Humanities Insights

These are some of the Insights available at:  
http://www.humanities-ebooks.co.uk/

General Titles

An Introduction to Critical Theory
Modern Feminist Theory
An Introduction to Rhetorical Terms

Genre FictionSightlines

Octavia E Butler: Xenogenesis / Lilith’s Brood
Reginal Hill: On Beulah’s Height
Ian McDonald: Chaga / Evolution’s Store
Walter Mosley: Devil in a Blue Dress
Tamora Pierce: The Immortals

History Insights

Oliver Cromwell
The British Empire: Pomp, Power and Postcolonialism
The Holocaust: Events, Motives, Legacy
Lenin’s Revolution
Methodism and Society
The Risorgimento

Literature Insights

Austen: Emma
Conrad: The Secret Agent
Eliot: ‘The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’ and The Waste Land
English Renaissance Drama: Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare’s Time
Reading William Faulkner: Go Down, Moses and Big Woods’
Faulkner: The Sound and the Fury
Gaskell, Mary Barton
Hardy: Selected Poems
Hardy: Tess of the Durbervilles
Heller: Catch-22
Ibsen: The Doll’s House
Hopkins: Selected Poems
Ted Hughes: New Selected Poems
Philip Larkin: Selected Poems
Lawrence: Selected Short Stories
Lawrence: Sons and Lovers
Lawrence: Women in Love
Paul Scott: *The Raj Quartet*
Shakespeare: *Hamlet*
Shakespeare: *Henry IV*
Shakespeare: *King Lear*
Shakespeare: *Richard II*
Shakespeare: *Richard III*
Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*
Shakespeare: *The Tempest*
Shakespeare: *Troilus and Cressida*
Shelley: *Frankenstein*
Wordsworth: *Lyrical Ballads*

*Fields of Agony: English Poetry and the First World War*

**Philosophy Insights**

- American Pragmatism
- Barthes
- Thinking Ethically in Business
- Critical Thinking
- Metaethics
- Existentialism
- Philosophy of Humour
- Formal Logic
- Contemporary Philosophy of Religion
- Philosophy of Sport
- Plato
- Wittgenstein
- Žižek

**Some Titles in Preparation**

- Georges Bataille
- Political Psychology
- Rousseau’s legacy
- Chatwin: *In Patagonia*
- Dreiser: *Sister Carrie*
- Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*
- Heaney: Selected Poems
- James: *The Ambassadors*
- Melville: *Moby-Dick*
- Melville: Three Novellas
- Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*
- Toomer: *Cane*