

# Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

**NCLC**

**187**

Volume 187

# Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other  
Creative Writers Who Died between 1800  
and 1899, from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations



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**Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism, Vol. 187**

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## Preface

Since its inception in 1981, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC) has been a valuable resource for students and librarians seeking critical commentary on writers of this transitional period in world history. Designated an “Outstanding Reference Source” by the American Library Association with the publication of its first volume, NCLC has since been purchased by over 6,000 school, public, and university libraries. The series has covered more than 500 authors representing 38 nationalities and over 28,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical reaction to nineteenth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as NCLC.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the list will focus primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

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# *Bleak House*

Charles Dickens

English novelist, short story writer, critic, poet, journalist, and letter writer.

The following entry presents criticism of Dickens's novel *Bleak House* (1853). For additional discussion of the novel, see *NCLC*, Volume 8; for discussion of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), see *NCLC*, Volume 18; for discussion of *Great Expectations* (1861), see *NCLC*, Volume 26; for discussion of *Oliver Twist* (1838), see *NCLC*, Volume 37; for discussion of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), see *NCLC*, Volume 86; for discussion of *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), see *NCLC*, Volume 105; for discussion of *Little Dorrit* (1857), see *NCLC*, Volume 113; for discussion of *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (1852), see *NCLC*, Volume 161; and for information on Dickens's complete career, see *NCLC*, Volumes 3 and 50.

## INTRODUCTION

First published serially in 1852-53, *Bleak House* is considered by many scholars to be the most ambitious and stylistically daring of Dickens's major novels. The narrative revolves around a complicated legal suit, *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, and its impact on the lives of the book's principal characters. Like most of the author's works, the story follows multiple plot lines and delves into the lives of numerous colorful personalities, from the honorable Mr. Jarndyce, whose wealth and generosity bring happiness to the wards entrusted to his care, to the illiterate Krook, owner of a rag-and-bottles shop, who dies suddenly of spontaneous combustion. An elaborate detective story also unfolds as the gruff, tenacious Inspector Bucket attempts to track down the killer of an unscrupulous lawyer. In a more profound sense, however, the novel is a scathing attack on the British legal system of the Victorian era. In Dickens's depiction of the High Court of Chancery, due process emerges as an arbitrary and corrupt force, while the prospect of justice remains an alluring, ultimately unattainable ideal. The book is unlike Dickens's other novels in several respects, notably in its use of two distinct points of view: the first-person narration of Esther Summerson and the omniscient, third-person perspective of the author. It is also among Dickens's most somber novels, as it raises serious questions concerning the obligations of society

to ensure the welfare of all of its citizens. At once a riveting tale of murder, deceit, and loss and a harsh condemnation of a class system that tolerates widespread poverty and injustice, *Bleak House* remains one of Dickens's most complex, haunting works.

## PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

*Bleak House* follows a number of interconnected story lines and revolves around several protagonists. The book focuses primarily on the intricacies surrounding a long-standing lawsuit, *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, and the diverse lives that have become ensnared within it. Although the specifics of the case remain vague throughout the novel, the promise of its eventual outcome hangs persistently over the narrative and exerts a powerful influence on the actions of the book's main characters.

The novel begins when Esther Summerson, a twenty-year-old orphan, moves into the home of her new guardian, John Jarndyce. Although Jarndyce has named his home Bleak House, it is in fact a warm, hospitable environment that offers its inhabitants a safe haven from the brutal, cutthroat realities of urban life. As one of the book's two narrators, Esther is a central figure, although she plays only a marginal role in the novel's complex plot. Esther is a shy, self-effacing young woman; the wealthy Jarndyce entrusts her with the role of housekeeper for Bleak House, which she joyfully embraces, and her sincerity and kindness endear her to the other inhabitants of the home. The evolution of Esther's character over the course of the book reveals itself in the steadily increasing authority of her narrative voice. Diffident and uncertain at the beginning of the novel, Esther gradually gains confidence in herself as she grows older. The emergence of Esther's strength contrasts powerfully with the dismayingly convoluted and tainted quality of the Jarndyce proceedings.

Jarndyce and two of his other recent charges, cousins Ada Clare and Richard Carstone, play central roles in relation to the lawsuit. Ada is a beautiful and unassuming young woman who quickly becomes Esther's best friend and confidante. Richard is one of the case's primary suitors and stands to inherit a fortune from a distant relative once the lawsuit is resolved. A romance blooms between Richard and Ada in the novel's early

chapters and they become engaged with the agreement that Richard will devote himself to a profession of his choosing so that he may support a wife. Although Richard is an amiable, if naïve, young man, he is also a day-dreamer prone to grandiose declarations of his ambitions. These ambitions prove capricious, however, largely because of his lack of focus and discipline; Richard's aspirations change continually throughout the book, and at various times he pursues careers in medicine, law, and the military, though never with serious conviction or passion because he remains indefatigably hopeful about his prospects, in spite of the seemingly endless nature of the legal proceedings.

Chesney Wold, the home of Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock, serves as another focal point of the novel. Aloof and arrogant, Lady Dedlock seems to represent the quintessential society woman, an isolated figure who has little time to devote to the needs of others. It soon becomes apparent, however, that Lady Dedlock's remoteness is the result of an emotional trauma: she gave birth to a child out of wedlock years before her marriage to Sir Leicester. The death of Lady Dedlock's child at birth, coupled with the anxiety of concealing her past, has left her permanently scarred beneath her implacable exterior. The Dedlocks' lawyer, Mr. Tulkinghorn, who is also involved with the Jarndyce case, begins to suspect Lady Dedlock's secret and hires a private detective, Inspector Bucket, to uncover the truth.

In the course of Bucket's investigation, a number of minor characters emerge: Nemo, a recently deceased stranger with mysterious links to the Jarndyce case; Mademoiselle Hortense, Lady Dedlock's former maid, whom Tulkinghorn uses in his investigation of Lady Dedlock; Miss Barbary, Esther's former guardian and Lady Dedlock's estranged sister; and Guppy, a law clerk who proposes marriage to Esther and who, when she refuses him, determines to uncover the truth about her origins. In the course of his probing, Guppy discovers that Miss Barbary was Esther's guardian and that Nemo, whose real name was Captain Hawdon, was her father. After Guppy divulges what he knows to Lady Dedlock, she is in anguish: Captain Hawdon was the father of her child. She now understands that her sister lied to her about her child's death and that Esther is actually her daughter. Wishing to see Hawdon's grave, Lady Dedlock disguises herself as her maid and enlists the help of Jo, a street urchin, to guide her through the cemetery.

Tulkinghorn soon discovers the same truth about Lady Dedlock and confronts her with the evidence. Although he at first agrees not to divulge her secret, he later threatens her with blackmail. Mademoiselle Hortense reminds Tulkinghorn that he agreed to help her find a new position in exchange for her assistance, but he threatens to have her arrested if she doesn't leave him

alone. Meanwhile, Esther contracts smallpox and nearly dies; the illness has left her face permanently scarred. A short time later Lady Dedlock reveals to Esther that she is actually Esther's mother. Following a heart-wrenching reunion, Lady Dedlock insists that Esther must never disclose the secret to anyone except Mr. Jarndyce, fearing that both Sir Leicester and Esther will suffer. Distraught, Esther does confide in Mr. Jarndyce, who admits that he has known the truth for a long time. Over the course of their conversation, he proposes marriage to Esther, and she accepts.

One night Tulkinghorn is found murdered in his office. Bucket launches an investigation, with Lady Dedlock as one of his suspects. In the midst of these sordid events, Esther discovers that Ada and Richard have secretly married, in spite of Mr. Jarndyce's admonitions that Richard be situated financially first. The legal proceedings have taken a toll on Richard's mental and physical health; no longer optimistic about his prospects, Richard has become morose and irritable, obsessing about the outcome of his suit. Even Ada's becoming pregnant does little to improve his mood, and he soon falls seriously ill. Allan Woodcourt, a doctor and an old friend of Jarndyce, attends to Richard during his illness. While walking home with Esther one evening, Woodcourt reveals that he loves her, and he proposes marriage. Although Esther has strong feelings for Woodcourt, she refuses him out of loyalty to Jarndyce. Bucket's investigation has taken a number of twists and turns, and after arresting and releasing the wrong man, finally proves that Lady Dedlock's former maid, Mademoiselle Hortense, was Tulkinghorn's killer.

A number of key characters die as the novel reaches its conclusion: the street urchin, Jo, succumbs to illness; Lady Dedlock, her secret revealed, flees her London residence and, despite Inspector Bucket's valiant pursuit, is found dead the next day at the gates of the cemetery; and Richard dies after he learns that all of the money he stood to inherit from the Jarndyce case has been exhausted on legal fees. Jarndyce breaks his engagement with Esther, believing she will be happier marrying Woodcourt. The novel's final chapter takes place seven years later and finds Esther happily married to Woodcourt, with whom she has two daughters. The couple remains close friends with Ada and Jarndyce.

## MAJOR THEMES

Questions of social justice and the struggle of individuals to maintain their integrity in a callous, brutal society are central to *Bleak House*. Dickens created a nightmarish vision of nineteenth-century London in the novel—no aspect of corruption or urban squalor escaped his scrutiny: not the arcane, impersonal workings

of the High Court of Chancery, nor the blunt indifference of the population toward the sufferings of the poor, nor the petty greed and distrust that governed the everyday actions of most of the city's inhabitants. In exploring the convoluted relationships between social class, poverty, and crime, Dickens exposed a world that had ceased to function in any recognizably humane manner. In the midst of this social deterioration, the novel's characters all find themselves alienated, to some degree, both from society and from one another. Richard drifts slowly and inexorably away from the people who love him as he waits vainly for a resolution to his lawsuit; Esther's reunion with her long-lost mother is tragic rather than celebratory, for Lady Dedlock must be concerned with the sanctity of her social standing—not only for her own sake, but for Sir Leicester's and Esther's as well. Even the work's minor characters—the illiterate Krook; the sickly, doomed street urchin Jo; the vengeful Hortense—embody, to some degree, varying states of isolation. Ironically, it is *Bleak House* that offers the principal characters shelter from the gloomy, hopeless circumstances of the city.

In one sense, the novel suggests that powerful social forces—the weight of history and custom, the complexities of government bureaucracy, the inertia of a deeply entrenched class system—exert an almost inescapable power over the individual in modern society. In spite of the purity of his intentions and the justice of his cause, Richard Carstone is ultimately ruined by the destructive, machinelike workings of the High Court. At the same time, however, Dickens implies that Richard himself bears some responsibility for his fate. In spite of the entreaties of the people around him, he refuses to take an active role in shaping the course of his own life, and his indolence and passivity, as much as external forces, lead to his demise. With Richard's death, Dickens offers both a searing indictment of a needlessly complicated, ultimately corrupt British legal system and also a stern admonition about the perils of relinquishing personal accountability.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

While *Bleak House* earned a fair amount of praise from contemporary reviewers, the novel had its share of detractors. A writer for the *United States Review* ridiculed the book's sensationalism, mocking in particular the death of one minor character, the illiterate shopkeeper Mr. Krook, by spontaneous combustion. A. E. Murch was among the first critics to assert that *Bleak House* represented the first true detective novel in English, describing Inspector Bucket as the "first police detective-hero in English fiction."

Twentieth-century scholars offer a range of more specialized, theoretical readings of the work's central themes. In the 1950s and 1960s, critics such as Louis

Crompton and Ann Y. Wilkinson analyze the moral underpinnings of the novel, paying special attention to the process by which the human psyche becomes deformed and corrupted by external social forces. Numerous commentators provide in-depth analyses of Esther Summerson's character: in particular, John R. Reed identifies qualities of Christian grace in Esther's narrative persona, while Martin A. Danahay argues that Esther represents, in many respects, the embodiment of Victorian femininity. Carol A. Senf examines the dichotomy between masculine and feminine styles of discourse in the work's dual narration.

A number of scholars, including Alan Burke, Robert E. Lougy, and Gordon Bigelow, focus on Dickens's portrayal of the city itself, exploring such issues as the essential meaninglessness of financial and governmental systems, the relationship between disease and chaos in modern urban life, and the dehumanizing effects of urban blight on the social fabric. The novel has been interpreted from the standpoint of political and social theory by several scholars, among them Kathleen Blake, who discusses representations of utilitarian philosophy in the work; Timothy L. Carens, who examines the connection between British colonial culture and the disintegration of the nineteenth-century urban landscape; and David Plotkin, who analyzes images of fragmentation in the novel and their relationship to postcolonial British society.

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### PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People*. 2 vols. [as Boz] (sketches and short stories) 1836-37; also published as *Watkins Tottle and Other Sketches Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People*. 2 vols. 1837; also published as *The Tuggses at Ramsgate and Other Sketches Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People*, 1837

\**Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy's Progress*. 3 vols. [as Boz] (novel) 1838

*The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. 5 vols. [as Boz] (novel) 1838

*The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (novel) 1839

*Barnaby Rudge* (novel) 1841

*The Old Curiosity Shop*. 2 vols. (novel) 1841

*American Notes for General Circulation*. 2 vols. (travel essay) 1842

*A Christmas Carol, in Prose: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* (short story) 1843

*The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (novel) 1844

†*The Chimes: A Goblin Story of Some Bells That Rang an Old Year Out and a New Year In* (short story) 1845

‡*The Cricket on the Hearth: A Fairy Tale of Home* (short story) 1845

*Pictures from Italy* (travel essay) 1846; also published as *Travelling Letters Written on the Road*, 1846

*Dombey and Son* (novel) 1847

*The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain: A Fancy for Christmas Time* (short story) 1848

*Household Words* [editor] (novel, short stories, sketches, essays, journalism, criticism, and poetry) 1850-59

*The Personal History of David Copperfield*. 2 vols. (novel) 1852

*Bleak House* (novel) 1853

*Hard Times: For These Times* (novel) 1854

*Little Dorrit* (novel) 1857

*A Tale of Two Cities* (novel) 1859

*All the Year Round* [editor] (novel, short stories, sketches, essays, journalism, criticism, and poetry) 1859-70

*Great Expectations* (novel) 1861

*The Uncommercial Traveller* (sketches and short stories) 1861

*Our Mutual Friend* (novel) 1865

*The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (unfinished novel) 1870

*The Works of Charles Dickens*. 21 vols. (novels, short stories, and sketches) 1892-1925

*The Letters of Charles Dickens*. 12 vols. (letters) 1965-2002

\*All of Dickens's novels were originally published serially in magazines.

†*The Chimes* was published in 1844 but was dated 1845.

‡*The Cricket on the Hearth* was published in 1845 but was dated 1846.

## CRITICISM

### Charles Dickens (essay date 1853)

SOURCE: Dickens, Charles. Preface to *Bleak House*, pp. 7-9. London: Chapman & Hall, Limited; and Humphrey Milford, 1901.

[In the following excerpt from the 1853 preface to *Bleak House*, Dickens attests to the essential truth underlying his fictional portrayal of the British Chancery.]

A Chancery Judge once had the kindness to inform me, as one of a company of some hundred and fifty men and women not labouring under any suspicions of lunacy, that the Court of Chancery, though the shining subject of much popular prejudice (at which point I thought the Judge's eye had a cast in my direction), was almost immaculate. There had been, he admitted, a

trivial blemish or so in its rate of progress, but this was exaggerated, and had been entirely owing to the "parsimony of the public"; which guilty public, it appeared, had been until lately bent in the most determined manner on by no means enlarging the number of Chancery Judges appointed—I believe by Richard the Second, but any other King will do as well.

This seemed to me too profound a joke to be inserted in the body of this book, or I should have restored it to Conversation Kenge or to Mr. Vholes, with one or other of whom I think it must have originated. In such mouths I might have coupled it with an apt quotation from one of Shakespeare's Sonnets:

My nature is subdued  
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand:  
Pity me then, and wish I were renew'd!

But as it is wholesome that the parsimonious public should know what has been doing, and still is doing, in this connexion, I mention here that everything set forth in these pages concerning the Court of Chancery is substantially true, and within the truth. The case of Gridley is in no essential altered from one of actual occurrence, made public by a disinterested person who was professionally acquainted with the whole of the monstrous wrong from beginning to end. At the present moment<sup>1</sup> there is a suit before the Court which was commenced nearly twenty years ago; in which from thirty to forty counsel have been known to appear at one time; in which costs have been incurred to the amount of seventy thousand pounds; which is a *friendly suit*; and which is (I am assured) no nearer to its termination now than when it was begun. There is another well-known suit in Chancery, not yet decided, which was commenced before the close of the last century, and in which more than double the amount of seventy thousand pounds has been swallowed up in costs. If I wanted other authorities for JARNDYCE AND JARNDYCE, I could rain them on these pages, to the shame of—a parsimonious public.

In *Bleak House*, I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things.

Note

1. In August, 1853.

### United States Review (review date September 1853)

SOURCE: Review of *Bleak House*, by Charles Dickens. *United States Review* 33 (September 1853): 276-80.

[In the following review, the author sarcastically laments Dickens's failure to provide the novel with a sensational conclusion. The reviewer goes on to criticize Dickens's indictment of the English legal system as shallow and the work's prose as vulgar and tedious.]

At length our anxiety is relieved, our fearful excitement is quieted!

Mr. Charles Dickens has shut up *Bleak House*, and put the key in his pocket.

The curtain has fallen on the last and twentieth act of the interesting melo-drama—the novel of *Bleak House* is ended.

*Harper's Magazine*, which, like the moon, shines by borrowed (not to say stolen) lights, has lost its brightest star, and must cruise in search of some new British prize wherewith to entertain us poor American savages, who can't even write our own magazines, if great book-publishers are to be credited.

The final catastrophe is not so alarmingly strong as might have been expected. In fact, we were rather disappointed at not getting something more startling, as a finale from a gentleman, who had—

1. Killed Mr. Krook, by spontaneous combustion.
2. Poisoned off a mysterious opium-eater and law-writer.
3. Sent a mad chancery suitor beyond the troubles of this world and all earthly litigation.
4. "Moved on" poor Joe to such an extent, that he had (as the spirit-rappers say) begun to move "in quite another sphere."
5. Caused a lady of fashion to die at the door of a graveyard.
6. Made a French lady's maid shoot old Tulkinghorn, the attorney, with an old Roman in fresco for her accomplice.

Not to mention the death of a baby or two, with some less important characters, and a young lady's beauty destroyed by the small-pox, scarcely the least cruel feature of Mr. Dickens' most murderous system of novelism!

Well, after all this slaughter of men, women, babies, and beauty, we certainly did expect a consistent ending, to so consistent a beginning and middle.

But Mr. Dickens laughs at consistency.

He writes on as hard as he can, without looking behind him, till he finds that he has full a couple of sheets to wind up in. Now, in the space of two sheets, a dexterous author might surely kill off the balance of his personages, leaving, of course, *one* alive to tell the fatal story. Eugene Sue would have done it in a page if necessary. We could have done it ourselves in a sheet, even

though we had resorted to the boldest devices; such, for example, as an earthquake, a plague, a famine, or any other form of battle, murder and sudden death.

But Dickens fails ingloriously at the conclusion of his campaign. "He caves in," if we may use the expression in a solemn critical article, and not only leaves the young lady, whose autobiography he writes, alive (though marked with small-pox), but actually married and happy. It is true, that since Moses, authors have not been in the habit of describing their own deaths. But why spare old Jarndyce? As for Ada, *she* is, of course, left alive. And why of course? Because the death, at the close of her adored husband, the unfortunate young Rick, victim of Vholes and chancery, renders her life not worth taking, so dreary and sad is its future to contemplate.

The thread, on which hang loosely the incidents of *Bleak House*, is an English chancery suit, "Jarndyce and Jarndyce," at the conclusion of which Richard Carstone, married to his cousin, dies, worn out by anxiety, as others have died before him. The plot of the narrative requires no description. There is none.

The *aim* of the story is to upset the Court of Chancery, with its fearful system of delays and endless expenses.

To this we see no objection. But we do not think that Mr. Dickens has really touched the question. In reality, he has told us nothing of the Court of Chancery, beyond a general statement, that it is a nuisance. Whether a novel is the best medium for advocating law-reforms, we do not pretend to decide. At any rate, we need not argue a question which Mr. Dickens himself has not even attempted seriously to argue.

As there is no plot in *Bleak House*, we cannot criticise its artistic construction. When we state, that the majority of the characters being killed off, Esther Summerston, the autobiographical heroine, marries a young doctor in spite of the small-pox, and that *he* is quite satisfied with the arrangement, we have said all that is necessary on the subject.

Every body knows that Dickens excels mainly in description.

He throws an interest about a coal scuttle, or an old chest of drawers, which few novelists can impart. He is also great in human specimens. Each of his characters is an individuality. The most interesting things, therefore, to examine in *Bleak House* are its inhabitants.

Let us begin with Skimpole—Harold Skimpole, the gentleman whose natural child-like simplicity causes him to ignore the value of money. This character is a caricature of Leigh Hunt, and is that of a very amusing, mean, and impudent vagabond.

Most assuredly there is retribution in store for every crime.

When Leigh Hunt slandered his deceased friend and benefactor, BYRON, one might have imagined that the contempt of all noble and good men was in itself sufficient punishment. But, behold! the great painter of men and manners of the age comes, with a whip of scorpions, to lash once more the poor disreputable old libeller, ere his departure to that mysterious world of which so much has been said and written, whilst so little is actually known—so little that, in fact, we need not attempt to describe it.

Perhaps Andrew Jackson Davis, who saw the ghost of an Irishman ascend to the third sphere; or Horace Greeley, who accepted the Fish and Fox girls, as his prophets, could assign to the hapless Skimpole his probable future destination.

We are no Dantes, and do not pretend to edit an Inferno, for our readers.

Of MR. JARNDYCE, we have only to remark, that he is a very amiable old gentleman, very much imposed upon by Mr. Skimpole, and rather a brilliant specimen of the "Heavy father" than otherwise.

ESTHER SUMMERSON, is so nice a girl, so affectionate, domestic, and all that sort of thing, that she captivates every body, including Mr. Woodcourt, a highly respectable and good-hearted young doctor, who ultimately marries her. She is called "Dame Durden" by her friends, and tells her own story in a very modest manner. So very quiet an angel is she, that we never could feel any desire to make her personal acquaintance in real life. We feel ourselves, with all humility be it spoken, a great deal too wicked to associate with such aggravatingly perfect virtue.

What says Schiller—the German poet? "I hate vice, and doubly detest it, chiefly for causing so much cant about virtue itself."

"Then you detest virtue?"

"I would it were practised by all, and, God willing, the word never were mentioned again!"

ADA is also perfect, but we forgive her perfection for the sake of her beauty, to which H. K. Browne has done justice, with his usual felicity and taste, in the illustrations.

RICHARD CARSTONE, who marries his cousin Ada and fellow ward in Chancery, is a spirited young man, who takes so deep an interest in his Chancery suit that he neglects every thing else, and dies as we have mentioned. There are plenty of young men like him in the world.

INSPECTOR BUCKET, is a really good portrait of an effective police officer.

SMALLWEED, is a queer old usurer, who throws pillows at his wife, and calls her a "Brimstone chatterer."

JOE is a poor boy, a crossing sweeper, whom the London Police are constantly telling to "move on."

MR. TURVEYDROP is a dancing master, an admirer and imitator of the late George IV., and a great man for "deportment."

MRS. JELLYBY is a philanthropist by profession, and so deeply interested in the Negroes of "Boorioboola-Gha" and "Africa" generally, that she lets her household affairs go to rack and ruin.

TULKINGHORN is an old dry lawyer—a hard case.

LADY DEDLOCK is the object of his persecution, from his knowledge that Esther Summerson is her illegitimate child by the law writer. She is well portrayed, and is, to our taste, the only female character of any interest in the book. She is a proud, noble woman, who has sinned (in the parlance of the saints), and is consequently an object of some interest, from the fact that she is not *quite* perfect of her kind, like Esther, Ada and Co. It is quite a relief to be able to pity this great lady in all her pomp and beauty, after staring in stupid admiration at the juvenile paragons we have mentioned.

GUPPY is one of Dickens' monsters. He is a lawyer's clerk, so disgustingly vulgar and stupid, that we doubt his *possibility*.

CHADBAND is a capital satire on the canting, low-class preachers of England.

GEORGE the trooper, is a fine manly and satisfactory impersonation, as are also his friends Mrs. Bagnet, "the old girl," and her husband.

Of course, *Bleak House* has plenty of sparkling dialogue to fill up the intervals between the murders and sudden deaths. But there is a great deal of tedious matter in the book, unless we are much mistaken, and the public is much fonder of domestic details than we imagine.

Dickens is—to use a German formula—a terribly *objective* writer. He describes the external, as an indication of the internal; but profound analysis of thought or feeling is strange to him. He hardly draws his characters from a just point of view. He takes them as they may be, or appear to be, and gives as it were a hasty impression. In this respect he differs widely from the

great Balzac, who wrote in his novels the life of his age, with all the care and penetration of a cosmopolite philosopher, and the precision of a man of science.

Dickens makes no such pretensions; he is simply an Englishman of the middle class, with limited sympathies and limited knowledge. He does not ride on the advanced ideas of the age. He seems to hesitate on the brink of the great river of progress, and fear to plunge headlong into its current.

Just as Bulwer is a superficial aristocrat, Dickens is a superficial democrat. Hence their popularity. They write “easy things to understand,” things which every body knows, familiar facts, and commonplace morality. Bulwer is quite as commonplace in his sphere, as Dickens in his. They keep retail stores in the literary mart, and all we can say for them after all, is, “success to trade.”

Homer and Shakespeare will be always read, because valor and heroism and grand storms of passion will always necessarily interest human nature. But Bulwer and Dickens will pass away with the manners they describe. They are no poets, *not* because they do not write verse (which, *perhaps*, is merely an imperfect sort of prose after all), but because *they do not write well*, because they spin out their works for money, because their standard of excellence is low—their styles diffuse, vulgar and cockneyfied.

There is an open field for genius.

Get up some one, and write a match against Bulwer and Dickens! In sober earnest, it is not half so difficult as it looks.

#### Frank T. Marzials (essay date 1887)

SOURCE: Marzials, Frank T. In *Life of Charles Dickens*, pp. 102-20. London: Walter Scott, 1887.

[In the following excerpt, Marzials offers an assessment of the novel's major characters.]

In this same year, 1851, Dickens left the house in Devonshire Terrace, now grown too small for his enlarging household, and, after a long sojourn at Broadstairs, moved into Tavistock House, in Tavistock Square. Here *Bleak House* was begun at the end of November, the first number being published in the ensuing March. It is a fine work of art unquestionably, a very fine work of art—the canvas all crowded with living figures, and yet the main lines of the composition well-ordered and harmonious. Two threads of interest run through the story, one following the career of Lady Dedlock, and the other tracing the influence of a great Chancery suit on the victims immeshed in its toils. From the first these two

threads are distinct, and yet happily interwoven. Let us take Lady Dedlock's thread first. She is the wife of Sir Leicester Dedlock, whose “family is as old as the hills, and a great deal more respectable,” and she is still very beautiful, though no longer in the bloom of youth, and she is cold and haughty of manner, as a woman of highest fashion sometimes may be. But in her past lurks an ugly hidden secret; and a girl of sweetest disposition walks her kindly course through the story, who might call Lady Dedlock “mother.” This secret, or perhaps rather the fact that there is a secret at all, she reveals in a moment of surprise to the family lawyer; and she lays herself still further open to his suspicions by going, disguised in her maid's clothes, to the poor graveyard where her former lover lies buried. The lawyer worms the whole story out, and, just as he is going to reveal it, is murdered by the French maid aforesaid. But the murder comes too late to save my lady, nay, adds to her difficulties. She flies, in anticipation of the disclosure of her secret, and is found dead at the graveyard gate. To such end has the sin of her youth led her. So once again has Dickens dwelt, not on the passionate side of wrongful love, but on its sorrow. Now take the other thread—the Chancery suit—“Jarndyce *versus* Jarndyce,” a suit held in awful reverence by the profession as a “monument of Chancery practice”—a suit seemingly interminable, till, after long, long years of wrangling and litigation, the fortuitous discovery of a will settles it all, with the result that the whole estate has been swallowed up in the costs. And how about the litigants? How about poor Richard Carstone and his wife, whom we see, in the opening of the story, in all the heyday and happiness of their youth, strolling down to the court—they are its wards,—and wondering sadly over the “headache and heartache” of it all, and then saying, gleefully, “at all events Chancery will work none of its bad influence on *us*”? “None of its bad influence on *us*!”—poor lad, whose life is wasted and character impaired in following the mirage of the suit, and who is killed by the mockery of its end. Thus do the two intertwined stories run; but apart from these, though all in place and keeping, and helping on the general development, there is a whole profusion of noticeable characters. In enumerating them, however baldly, one scarcely knows where to begin. The lawyer group—clerks and all—is excellent. Dickens' early experiences stood him in good stead here. Excellent too are those studies in the ways of impecuniosity and practical shiftlessness, Harold Skimpole, the airy, irresponsible, light-hearted epicurean, with his pretty tastes and dilettante accomplishments, and Mrs. Jellyby, the philanthropist, whose eyes “see nothing nearer” than Borrioboola-Gha, on the banks of the far Niger, and never dwell to any purpose on the utter discomfort of the home of her husband and children. Characters of this kind no one ever delineated better than Dickens. That Leigh Hunt, the poet and essayist, who had sat for the portrait of Skimpole, was not alto-