

INFORMATION TO USERS

This dissertation was produced from a microfilm copy of the original document. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or patterns which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or "target" for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is "Missing Page(s)". If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting thru an image and duplicating adjacent pages to insure you complete continuity.
2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a large round black mark, it is an indication that the photographer suspected that the copy may have moved during exposure and thus cause a blurred image. You will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.
3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., was part of the material being photographed the photographer followed a definite method in "sectioning" the material. It is customary to begin photoing at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue photoing from left to right in equal sections with a small overlap. If necessary, sectioning is continued again — beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.
4. The majority of users indicate that the textual content is of greatest value, however, a somewhat higher quality reproduction could be made from "photographs" if essential to the understanding of the dissertation. Silver prints of "photographs" may be ordered at additional charge by writing the Order Department, giving the catalog number, title, author and specific pages you wish reproduced.

University Microfilms

300 North Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106

A Xerox Education Company

73-15,345

BRINER, Karl Dean, 1939-

THE SYMBOLIC DESIGN OF CHARLES DICKENS'S BLEAK
HOUSE.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, Ph.D., 1972
Language and Literature, general

University Microfilms, A XEROX Company, Ann Arbor, Michigan

© 1973

Karl Dean Briner

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

THIS DISSERTATION HAS BEEN MICROFILMED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

THE SYMBOLIC DESIGN OF
CHARLES DICKENS'S BLEAK HOUSE

by

Karl Dean Briner

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English

Under the Supervision of Professor Lawrence Poston

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 1972

TITLE

The Symbolic Design of Charles Dickens's

Bleak House

BY

Karl Dean Briner

APPROVED

DATE

Lawrence S. Poston, III

November, 1972

Walter F. Wright

November, 1972

Frederick M. Link

November, 1972

Gene B. Hardy

November, 1972

Joseph Baldwin

November, 1972

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE

GRADUATE COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

PLEASE NOTE:

Some pages may have
indistinct print.

Filmed as received.

University Microfilms, A Xerox Education Company

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After a rather protracted career as a graduate student, I am aware that my thinking and my vocation have been influenced by a large number of people. I am grateful to teachers and advisors who have given intellectual and spiritual richness to my life: Carl Dillon, the late E. T. Sandberg, Erna Moehl, R. W. Frantz, Lee Lemon, Paul Olson, and John Robinson. Special thanks are due Fred Link, in whose course I first encountered Bleak House; Louis Crompton, whose article on Bleak House stimulated my appreciation of its complexities; and Hugh Luke, who has been a trusted friend and advisor. I thank my students for being my teachers as well; my chairmen, Dudley Bailey of the University of Nebraska and Phillip Kildahl of Wartburg College, for creating the genuinely humane departments in which it has been my pleasure to work; and Tom Davies, for being a respected friend as well as a wise and generous employer. I appreciate the assistance given me by Fred Link and Walter Wright in their reading of my manuscript. Finally, I wish to express my profound gratitude to my director, Lawrence Poston, whose supervision of my work has been, like his teaching and his scholarship, exemplary.

I am grateful most of all to my wife Sharon, my daughters, Karla and Kristen, and my parents, Burdett and Doris Briner. In ways that only they know, their unfailing love and support have made possible the completion of my program of studies. To them I dedicate this work, respectfully and with love.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
CHAPTER I. DICKENS'S SYMBOLISM	1
Introduction (1) - - Publication of <u>Bleak House</u> (3) - - Critical Reaction (5) - - Symbolism (10)	
CHAPTER II. CHANCERY	23
The Court (23) - - Pastoral Symbols (28) - - Krook (31) - - The Smallweeds (39) - - Vholes (46) - - Guppy (53) - - Snagsby (57)	
CHAPTER III. CHESNEY WOLD.	62
The Estate (62) - - Cousinhood (65) - - Turveydrop (69) - - Retainers (74) - - Tulkinghorn (77)	
CHAPTER IV. EXETER HALL.	93
Introduction (93) - - Mrs. Jellyby (94) - - Mrs. Pardiggle (106) - - Chadband (110) - - Dickens's Charities (122) - - Dickens's Religion (125)	
CHAPTER V. THE VICTIMS OF OPPRESSION	128
Tom-all-Alone's (128) - - Gridley (136) - - Miss Flyte (137) - - Richard (140) - - Lady Dedlock (146) - - Hawdon (154) - - Jo (159)	
CHAPTER VI. BLEAK HOUSE.	163
Introduction (163) - - Bleak House (167) - - Jarndyce (169) - - Esther (173) - - Minor Characters (194)	
CHAPTER VII. SOME AMBIGUITIES.	203
Skimpole (203) - - Bucket (216) - - Rouncewell (224) - - Sir Leicester Dedlock (229)	
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	233
Works by Charles Dickens (233) - - Selected Bibliography (234)	

CHAPTER I

DICKENS'S SYMBOLISM

The critical reputation of Charles Dickens has oscillated tremendously. He first won acclaim as a popular entertainer, the chronicler and patron of domestic joy and personal virtue. With inexhaustible imaginative vitality he sketched London and the provinces with an eye for detail and an ear for dialogue which has never been surpassed. From works like Pickwick Papers and The Old Curiosity Shop there emerged a picture of Dickens which went for a long while unchallenged. Both admirers and detractors regarded Dickens as "an unsophisticated, erratic, inspired genius who gave his audience what it wanted: crude melodrama, crude pathos, and humanitarian zeal."¹

Yet even in Dickens's earliest work one finds elements which defy so reductive a description. Though the Pickwick Papers are full of the celebration of life, they contain also the harsh anti-democratic satire of the Eatanswill elections, the horrific revenge and insanity motifs of the digressive tales, and the manifest injustice of Pickwick's entanglement with the legal system. Pickwick is, finally, a picaro, and his initiation into a corrupt and dangerous society sends him fleeing from its institutions. Thus, in Dickens's first comic triumph we may see the beginnings of his long preoccupation with social injustice and personal suffering.

¹ Douglas Bush, "A Note on Dickens' Humor," in From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad, ed. by Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 82.

Dickens's later works, beginning with Bleak House, are generally described as more mature and of greater artistic merit than the early novels. It may be useful to read such a description in light of the characteristics I have been describing. The later fictions are, in Lionel Stevenson's famous phrase, "dark novels."² That is, the balance between humor and sobriety has clearly shifted. More and more, injustice and suffering predominate, and the old comic exuberance becomes an occasional diversion rather than the prevailing mood. Thus, we call the later works more mature because their pessimism more nearly agrees with our own assumptions about human nature and social processes.

The later novels are mature also in another sense. As early as Martin Chuzzlewit the reader discerns a more coherent, disciplined imagination at work. Dickens's inventive fertility is undiminished; Sairy Gamp and Pecksniff are but the most memorable figures in one of Dickens's most prolific arrays of comic characters. On the other hand, explorations of social injustice and personal suffering are both more extensive and more intense than in Pickwick. Both the comedy and the darker moods, however, are incorporated into a larger theme of selfishness. Indeed, the entire novel may be read as "a vast series of multiple perspectives on selfishness."³ The sanctimonious hypocrisies of Pecksniff, the greedy meanness of the Chuzzlewits, the bellicose chauvinism of Jefferson Brick, and the cultural twaddle of the Mother of the Modern Gracchi appear, ultimately, as but so many guises of egocentricity. In the thematic unity of Chuzzlewit one may see, I think, the beginnings of Dickens's artistic maturity.

²"Dickens's Dark Novels, 1851-1857," The Sewanee Review, 51 (July-September, 1943), 398-409.

³Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph (2 vols.; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), I, 470.

In the best of Dickens's novels, however, one finds more than simply unity of theme. To say that Bleak House is about institutions impinging upon individual human lives no more captures the essence of the work than to say that King Lear is about growing old. Rather, one must recognize that in Bleak House Dickens creates out of the interaction between individuals and institutions a complex, orchestrated series of suggestions and effects, "joining social and historical substance with symbolic and mythic vision . . . bringing the dramatic instinct to terms with allegoric insight and moral metaphor."⁴ It is precisely this totality of effect, this wedding of social substance to symbolic vision, which I wish to investigate in Bleak House, the first and perhaps greatest of Dickens's later masterpieces.

I

The first monthly number of Bleak House appeared in March of 1852.⁵ Dickens wrote, in the "Preface" of August, 1853, "I believe I have never had so many readers as in this book."⁶ As Dickens no doubt knew, the remark was inaccurate. Sales of The Pickwick Papers had reached 40,000, and some installments of The Old Curiosity Shop had sold

⁴Morton Dauwen Zabel, "Dickens: The Reputation Revised," in Craft and Character in Modern Fiction (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1957), p. 14.

⁵As was customary when Dickens published in monthly parts, the "Preface" was included, along with title pages, dedication, table of contents, and "List of Plates," in the final number.

⁶Bleak House, ed. by Duane DeVries (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971), p. 829. DeVries reprints the text of the earliest edition. Many later editions omitted the remark here cited from the "Preface."

over 100,000 copies.⁷ But his more recent efforts had suffered a serious decline in popularity.

Barnaby Rudge, published serially in Master Humphrey's Clock, may have been more than the admirers of Pickwick and Little Nell had bargained for; its powerful treatment of the Gordon Riots of 1780 evoked associations with contemporary Chartist agitation for parliamentary reform. Perhaps because of its pervasive concern with social unrest,⁸ sales of the novel declined precipitously from 70,000 copies per issue of the early installments to as few as 30,000 of the last issues. Martin Chuzzlewit, published in monthly parts, fared even worse. Early numbers sold as few as 20,000 copies, and not even the exuberant American chapters could much improve upon that figure.⁹

The first number of Dombey and Son outsold the last of Chuzzlewit by over 10,000 copies. Through Dombey and David Copperfield, sales grew slowly but steadily; by the time of Dickens's "Preface" to Bleak House monthly sales of this latest novel were running close to 40,000 copies. Thus, Dickens had cause for elation. Though sales did not rival those of The Old Curiosity Shop, and hardly bear comparison with the 250,000 first-week sales of the later Christmas Books,¹⁰ Dickens had created a

⁷ This and subsequent estimates of sales are taken from Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph (2 vols.; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952).

⁸ "Barnaby Rudge is the first of Dickens' novels to evince a consistent awareness of contemporary social problems." E. D. H. Johnson, Charles Dickens: An Introduction to his Novels (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 36.

⁹ Dickens wrote to John Forster on November 2, 1843, complaining of public reaction to Chuzzlewit: "How coldly did this very book go on for months, until it forced itself up in people's opinion, without forcing it up in sales!" John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens (2 vols., The Gadshill Edition; London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1899), I, 332.

¹⁰ Forster, Life, I, 344.

substantial reading audience for fiction of quite a different kind from his early successes. Both the comic gusto of *Pickwick* and the pathos that produced *Little Nell* had become subservient, in *Bleak House*, to a dark, sombre vision of a corrupt, chaotic society whose institutions degrade and devitalize human life.

It appears that for many readers the book exerted great appeal because it presented, in the character of Esther Summerson, the very model of that goodness of heart and sweetness of disposition which was widely accepted as a feminine ideal. Esther, *Putnam's Magazine* remarked, is "a gentle, loving, true-hearted, and womanly creation; she possesses all the good points of the feminine character."¹¹ The effusiveness of contemporary affection for Esther can hardly be exaggerated:

Esther Summerson is drawn entirely by Esther herself. She scarcely appears on the scene at all, save in her own narrative. Now, among all the amiable and interesting female characters that the pen of Dickens had portrayed [sic], we venture to assert that there is not one so perfectly loveable [sic] in every way as Esther Summerson. Yet we know Esther only from her own account of herself, and anything more simple and modest than that account, cannot be imagined. There is not a grain of self-praise in her autobiography, nor is there on the other hand that mock-depreciation of herself which a person of real vanity, but pretended humility, would assume. All is perfectly natural and easy. She does not once describe her own person - - yet, we feel that we know her well, and should recognize her in the street to-morrow. She does not once give us her intellectual or moral portrait, yet we recognize the clever head, and the noble, generous, single-purposed, sympathising heart, which is all that woman's should be, and all that man's so seldom is. Consummate art this in the author! He does not draw his heroine's picture: he does not even make her do it: he leaves the reader to do it himself, and yet the latter (be he ever so dull-witted) can draw it only one way, under his unseen guidance, and the result is one of the most exquisite female creations that ever issued from the brain of poet or painter.¹²

That "unseen guidance" has since been attacked by various readers for

¹¹(November, 1853), reprinted in A. E. Dyson, *Dickens: Bleak House: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1969), p. 79.

¹²*Bentley's Monthly Review* (October, 1853), reprinted in Dyson, *Casebook*, p. 67.

creating a character who is both inherently self-contradictory and so cloyingly virtuous as to be utterly without credibility. On the first charge, John Forster's indictment is typical: "To represent a storyteller as giving the most surprising vividness to manners, motives, and characters of which we are to believe her, all the time, as artlessly unconscious, as she is also entirely ignorant of the good qualities in herself she is naively revealing in the story, was a difficult enterprise, full of hazard in any case, not worth success, and certainly not successful."¹³ That Esther is too good to be true has become part of the more general accusation that Dickens seldom if ever achieved an imaginative conception of women as fully human beings, that is, as having moral and intellectual lives just as men are presumed to have. Carolyn Heilbrun, for example, says that "Dickens's works are exceptional among non-American novels precisely in their . . . refusal to allow full humanity to women." "Fielding and Dickens . . . [turn] away from fully human women whom the great non-American novels have seen as a redeeming force."¹⁴

Dickens's contemporary reviewers were nearly unanimous in condemning the novel's lack of a satisfactory plot. Said Spectator, "Bleak House is, even more than any of its predecessors, chargeable with not simply faults, but absolute want of construction Mr. Dickens discards plot, while he persists in adopting a form for his thoughts to which plot is essential, and where the absence of a coherent story is

¹³Forster, Life, I, 137-38.

¹⁴"The Masculine Wilderness of the American Novel," Saturday Review, January 29, 1972, pp. 41, 43. Both accusations have been vigorously contested, and both will be dealt with in a subsequent chapter. I wish to note here only that the role of Esther has been a crux in the reevaluation of the worth and significance of Bleak House.

fatal to continuous interest. In Bleak House, the series of incidents which form the outward life of the actors and talkers has no close and necessary connexion . . ."¹⁵ "The thing which Dickens has yet to do," added Putnam's Magazine, "is to write a good story He has found the public greedy enough to take his single characters, and has not attempted to add to their value by weaving them together into a plot."¹⁶ Yet those who admire the book have praised its plot extravagantly. Here, as is so often the case, Forster anticipated the reactions of later admirers: "The novel is . . . in the very important particular of construction, perhaps the best thing done by Dickens." "Nothing is introduced at random, everything tends to the catastrophe, the various lines of the plot converge and fit to its centre . . ."¹⁷ Thus, Edgar Johnson can speak of the plot as "a centripetal one, like a whirlpool, at first slow and almost imperceptible, but fatefully drawing in successive groups of characters, circling faster and faster, and ultimately sucking them into the dark funnel whence none will escape uninjured . . ."¹⁸ Even so improbable a Dickensian as T. S. Eliot has announced that "Bleak House is Dickens's finest piece of construction . . ."¹⁹

Like the role of Esther and the quality of the plot, the value of the novel as social criticism has stimulated widely varying appraisals. A number of contemporaries argued that Chancery reform, having long been championed by the Times of London, was rather a tired subject for a "reform"

¹⁵ (24 September, 1853), reprinted in Phillip Collins, Dickens: The Critical Heritage (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1971), p. 283.

¹⁶ (November, 1853), reprinted in Dyson, Casebook, p. 75.

¹⁷ Life, II, 138.

¹⁸ Tragedy and Triumph, II, 765.

¹⁹ "Wilkie Collins and Dickens," Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1932), p. 411.

novel. Moreover, it was claimed that Dickens was not well enough informed to make the assault on Chancery socially significant. Bentley's Monthly Review sounded a typical note:

But we have said that Mr Dickens always writes with a purpose now. And what is the task he has set before him in Bleak House? No less a one than the exposure of the infamies of Chancery. A great theme and a difficult one. Not difficult in one sense - - for it is easy to attack and to abuse any system, and especially one which is confessedly most faulty. But an author who sets out with the intention of running a tilt against any institution, either of our constitution or of society, should first take care to understand his subject. We do not think that Mr Dickens displays this knowledge in Bleak House. That Chancery Suits were long and expensive; that people got very weary of them; were occasionally imprisoned in respect of them; and that reform was needed somewhere: all this we knew before, and the whole country knew. But if Mr Dickens wished to effect any good in this matter, why did he not point out the roots of the particular evils he complains of, and suggest remedies? The answer will probably be - - how can he, a layman (though a 'student for the bar', by the way) understand the subject? Exactly so: then until he does understand it, to what practical purpose do his blows, dealt in the dark, serve?

Heartily, most heartily, do we wish for 'Chancery Reform' - - some reform there has been, but more is still needed: however, we really do not think that Bleak House will aid in obtaining that desideratum. The aim is good and honest, no doubt; but it is futile. And while there are ten thousand social evils which Mr Dickens does understand, and against which his pen might be employed with real power and effect, we cannot but regret that his talents should have been wasted, and so much energy spent in a vain attempt to crush the giant of Chancery. Wiser and more experienced heads than his (on this subject) are at work to remedy the abuses of this portion of our judicial system: hitherto they have worked well and honestly to that end, and we are sure that Lord St Leonards is as hearty a Chancery Reformer as Mr Dickens, while we humbly opine he will be the more effectual one.²⁰

Among the first to reject so complacent a dismissal of the Chancery satire was George Gissing, who called Bleak House "a brilliant, admirable, and most righteous satire upon the monstrous iniquity of 'old Father Antic the law,' with incidental mockery of allied abuses . . ."²¹ In more

²⁰ (October, 1853), reprinted in Dyson, Casebook, pp. 69-70. ("Mr" and "St" are spelled without concluding periods.)

²¹ Critical Studies of the Works of Dickens (New York: Greenberg, Publisher, Inc. 1924), p. 140.

recent years, no other aspect of the novel has drawn such lavish praise as its social vision. Edgar Johnson indicated the centrality of the social satire to his reading of the novel by calling his chapter on Bleak House "The Anatomy of Society."²² In his famous introduction to Hard Times, George Bernard Shaw compared Dickens as social critic to the likes of Marx, Carlyle, and Ruskin, and praised his books, Bleak House among them, for their "mercilessly faithful and penetrating exposures of English social, industrial, and political life . . ."²³

Thus, Bleak House: Its heroine either a delightful representation of the feminine ideal or an insufferable ingenue, its plot either negligible or masterful, its social outlook either ill-informed or visionary. One might well wonder, reading its critics, whether any certainty whatever is to be had about Bleak House, whether, that is, any reading of the novel can satisfactorily account for its disposition of characters, for the ramifications of its plot, and for the vision of society which informs it.

The beginnings of an answer may be found by examining yet one more complaint which was routinely voiced by Dickens's contemporaries. Henry Fothergill Chorley, for example, offered a typical objection to the book's exaggeration: "Were its opening pages in anywise accepted as representing the world we live in, the reader might be excused for feeling as though he belonged to some orb where eccentrics, Bedlamites, ill-directed and disproportioned people were the only inhabitants."²⁴ Characters as diverse as Esther, Krook, Mr. Jarndyce, and Mrs. Jellyby are dismissed as mere

²²Tragedy and Triumph, II, 762-82.

²³"Introduction" to Hard Times (The Waverley Edition; London, 1912), reprinted in The Dickens Critics, ed. by George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1961), p. 129.

²⁴Athenaeum (17 September, 1853), reprinted in Collins, Heritage, p. 276.

"daguerreotypes," vivid but unrepresentative figures as flat and sharply etched as the photographic plates which the term names. Yet it is precisely as a construction of elements whose power and coherence cannot be explained in terms of realistic portraiture that Bleak House has appealed to readers in the twentieth century. In "Dickens: The Two Scrooges," Edmund Wilson argues that the world pervaded by London fog, a universe symbolically rather than realistically defined, "obscures and impedes at every point the attempts of men and women to lead natural lives." Thus, the power and coherence of Dickens's work might be understood as the product of his artistic techniques rather than as a mysterious efflorescence of genius which somehow survives in spite of them. ". . . people who talk about the symbols of Kafka and Mann and Joyce have been discouraged from looking for anything of the kind in Dickens, and usually have not read him, at least with mature minds. But even when we think we do know Dickens, we may be surprised to return to him and find in him a symbolism of a more complicated reference and a deeper implication than these metaphors that hang as emblems above the door."²⁵ I believe that Bleak House is informed by a coherent symbolic design and that careful examination of that design resolves some of the difficulties of characterization, plot, and social outlook that have troubled many readers.

II

Bleak House was misread by much of its contemporary audience because Dickens created it in a literary idiom for which neither he nor his critics had an adequate descriptive vocabulary. Although early

²⁵The Wound and the Bow (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 37-38.

reactions to the book often came close to recognizing that it must be read as a symbolic statement, such perceptions were almost always subordinated to critical demands that the novel be "well plotted," that its characters be "representative," and that the contemplation of people and events in the novel be "edifying." Thus, for example, the unsigned review in Putnam's Magazine described Tulkinghorn as "like a gloomy looking dark passage in a building that leads nowhere, and puzzles you to guess what it was intended for."²⁶ But the analogy, much as it could suggest about Tulkinghorn's place in the novel, is part of a complaint that Mr. Tulkinghorn has, finally, no significant function in the plot and is not adequately motivated.

Of all the earlier readers of Bleak House, none came so close to recognizing its essentially symbolic character as G. K. Chesterton:

. . . The description of the fog in the first chapter of Bleak House is good in itself; but it is not merely good in itself, like the description of the wind in the opening of Martin Chuzzlewit: it is also good in the sense that Maeterlinck is good; it is what the modern people call an atmosphere. Dickens begins in the Chancery fog because he means to end in the Chancery fog. He did not begin in the Chuzzlewit wind because he meant to end in it; he began in it because it was a good beginning. This is perhaps the best short way of stating the peculiarity of the position of Bleak House. In this Bleak House beginning we have the feeling that it is not only a beginning; we have the feeling that the author sees the conclusion and the whole. The beginning is alpha and omega: the beginning and the end. He means that all the characters and all the events shall be read through the smoky colours of that sinister and unnatural vapour.²⁷

To apprehend that "all the characters and all the events shall be read through the smoky colours" of the London fog is to recognize that Dickens has created a fictive universe. Rather than demanding that the novel satisfy extrinsically conceived demands, the reader enters into an

²⁶ (November, 1853), Dyson, Casebook, p. 79.

²⁷ Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1911), p. 152.

an experience whose elements have been selected and ordered. William York Tindall's description stresses the necessary predominance of discovery over prescriptive examination: ". . . we commonly have recourse to the metaphor of levels the metaphor is inexact we may change the metaphor for that of the symphony, which implies time, or for those of labyrinth or world, which imply surface, organization, or development. Whatever the trope, it means that, entering the work by degrees, we discover parts at first and, if we can, the whole . . ." ²⁸

Bleak House is entered through four chapters which brilliantly define the symbolic centers of the novel. The reader first encounters London, a place full to overflowing with mud, smoke, soot, and most of all fog. As J. Hillis Miller has demonstrated, ²⁹ the presentation of these elements in participial constructions and in sentences without verbs suggests that their predominance in the London landscape is a given, a static, ongoing condition of life in the city. Taken as generalized descriptions of an environment, such elements might, by virtue of their traditional associations, suggest that life in such a place is characterized by an absence of vitality and human warmth, by confusion and difficulty in perceiving clearly, and by a sense that individuals are both besmirched and separated from one another by the vile atmosphere of the place. However, far from satisfying himself with such generalized suggestions, Dickens presents his elements in language which insistently prefigures one great set of forces that operate within the novel.

Hence, the London mud is not merely inconvenient; the streets are rather as muddy "as if the water had but newly retired from the face of the

²⁸ The Literary Symbol (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1961), pp. 71-72.

²⁹ Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 164-65.

earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus . . . waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill."³⁰ The disorder is so great as to suggest that here, in the very bastion of civilization, life has reverted virtually to conditions of primeval chaos in which people are "losing their foothold . . . slipping and sliding" (I, 1). In like manner, the smoke and soot suggest more than mere darkness; they are imaged as "gone into mourning . . . for the death of the sun" (I, 1). Mere darkness thus becomes death, the explicit denial of life and light. Most importantly, the fog is kinetic; an active presence in the world, it is seen "creeping," "hovering," "drooping," "cruelly pinching the toes and fingers . . ." (I, 1). Above all, it grows, "rolls" and "flows," "up the river" and "down the river," up onto "the Kentish heights," down across "the Essex marshes" (I, 1). The picture Dickens paints suggests roiling, insidious, malignant expansion. In such a milieu, associations with disease are inescapable. Pedestrians jostle one another "in a general infection of ill temper" (I, 1). Even the gas lamps that contend ineffectually against the massive darkness of the scene have "a haggard and unwilling look" (I, 1). By all these means, Dickens transforms the atmospheric elements of the "London particular" into harbingers of a human universe characterized by reversion into chaos, by the deprivation of life and energy, and by the presence of such evils as energetic forces insidiously spreading their tentacles out into the world.

One explanation for the great coherence which most sensitive readers have felt in Bleak House can be found in Dickens's persistent application of the symbols established in his first chapter. Wherever

³⁰ Charles Dickens, Bleak House (The Oxford Illustrated Dickens; London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 1. All subsequent citations of Bleak House are to this text unless otherwise identified. As has become customary because of the number of editions extant, citations will be identified in my text both by chapter number and by page in this edition.

in the novel one finds fog, chill, smoke, moisture, mud, or blackness, he will find at work characters whose actions and ideas make them the agents of dissolution, death, and disease. The enemies of order, life, and health are, indeed, as Edmund Wilson observes, characters in "a social fable."³¹

First among the places wherein dwell the agents of the world of fog comes the High Court of Chancery. The Lord High Chancellor, "with a foggy glory round his head," presides over a court that admits "no light of day," directs the work of court officials "all lost in a fog-bank," and stares into a skylight "where he can see nothing but fog." As the fog's center and source, the court shares all of its qualities. Here, as in the streets of London, is dissolution into chaos; the court maintains a "groping and floundering condition" in which sundry functionaries can be found, like their jostling counterparts in the streets, "tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities" (I, 2). Mr. Tangle's addressing the Lord High Chancellor as "Mlud" (I, 5) adds a powerfully comic suggestion to the parallel. Here, too, the suggestions of death are pervasive. A prisoner who has fallen innocently into contempt and thus cannot purge himself of it finds that "his prospects in life are ended" (I, 3). The matter of Jarndyce and Jarndyce consumes life; "the legion of bills in the suit have been transformed into bills of mortality," calling to mind that "old Tom Jarndyce in despair blew his brains out" (I, 4). It seems altogether appropriate that in such a setting the narrator should hear a lawyer's address as "a sepulchral message" (I, 6) and should dream of the place being "burnt away in a great funeral pyre" (I, 7). Here, finally, disease is endemic. The name Jarndyce, being the old pronunciation of

³¹ The Wound and the Bow, p. 36.

"jaundice," suggests the diseased state of Victorian law and perhaps of Victorian society in general. The High Court of Chancery is "pestilent" (I, 2). Like the fog, its effects spread malignantly; it "has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; . . . its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard" (I, 3). Like the fog, "Jarndyce and Jarndyce has stretched forth its unwholesome hand to spoil and corrupt" (I, 5).

In Dickens's picture of the court, one very important characteristic appears which was not specifically prefigured in the atmospheric elements alone: human irresponsibility. So pervasive is the evil suggested by Chancery proceedings that opposition seems futile: ". . . even those who have contemplated its history from the outermost circle of such evil, have been tempted into a loose way of letting bad things alone to take their own bad course, and a loose belief that if the world go wrong, it was, in some off-hand manner, never meant to go right" (II, 5). That passive acquiescence in evil identifies one with that evil becomes increasingly clear as the novel proceeds. As I will show, Dickens applies the symbols of evil to the actively evil and the passively evil alike.

If, as I have argued, Dickens identifies Chancery proceedings with dissolution, death, and disease by his manipulation of physical symbols, his labelling of aristocratic life at Chesney Wold is hardly less clear: "It is not so unlike the Court of Chancery, but that we may pass from the one scene to the other, as the crow flies" (II, 8). In describing a straight line from Chancery to Chesney Wold, one encounters an atmosphere as cold and dank as that of Lincoln's Inn Fields. The land for half a mile around "is a stagnant river" (II, 8). Rain falls incessantly out of a cloudy sky, so that "the view from my Lady Dedlock's own windows is alternately a lead-coloured view, and a view in Indian ink" (II, 9).

As in Chancery, the dark and the wet evoke thoughts of disease and of death. Just as the name Dedlock implies paralysis and the failure of vitality, so the world of the fashionable is "a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air" (II, 8). From the beginning, Chesney Wold is, like London, part of death's domain: "On Sundays, the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves" (II, 9).

Two of the characters who appear at Chesney Wold are explicitly connected with this atmosphere. Mr. Tulkinghorn is part of the darkness. "One peculiarity of his black clothes, and of his black stockings, be they silk or worsted, is that they never shine. Mute, close, irresponsive to any glancing light, his dress is like himself" (II, 11). Indeed, Mr. Tulkinghorn is so far removed from life that Dickens calls him a tomb wherein are interred other men's secrets. He receives the salutations of the great "with gravity, and buries them along with the rest of his knowledge" (II, 11).

Lady Dedlock, even more than Tulkinghorn, calls up suggestions of death. Edmund Wilson attempts to explain Lady Dedlock's coldness, as in fact he explains many things in Dickens's work, by a biographical surmise: "Dickens had evidently in the course of his astonishing rise, found himself up against the blank and chilling loftiness - - what the French call la morgue anglaise - - of the English upper classes: as we shall see, he developed a pride of his own, with which he fought it to his dying day."³²

³²The Wound and the Bow, p. 42. British critics have protested, with considerable justification, Wilson's tendency to explain Dickens's art as the fortuitous by-product of psychic wounds. See, for example, A. E. Dyson, The Inimitable Dickens (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1970), pp. 10-11, and F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. XIII-XVIII.

Whatever Dickens's motivation, his symbolic treatment of Lady Dedlock comports entirely not only with the rest of Chesney Wold but also with London and Chancery. First, "put quite out of temper" by observing a typical domestic scene, she announces that "she has been 'bored to death'" (II, 9). In describing her "freezing mood," Dickens links her explicitly to the other instances of devitalization in the novel. "An exhausted composure, a worn-out placidity, an equanimity of fatigue not to be ruffled by interest or satisfaction, are the trophies of her victory" (II, 10). In other words, she has "conquered" the fashionable world by adopting its lifelessness. Thus, her momentary lapse into life provides Tulkinghorn - - "surprised by my Lady's animation" (II, 14) - - with the clue that leads to his discovery of her secret. In such circumstances, her description of her condition as "like the faintness of death" and Sir Leicester's explanation that "she really has been bored to death" (II, 14) reverberate with ironies.

In the first two chapters, then, Dickens creates a rich complex of images within which many of the characters of this novel will live and move and have their being. In London, in Chancery, out at Chesney Wold, the world is everywhere the same - - full of mud, cold, moisture, soot, smoke, chill, decay, and fog. Through these gloomy scenes move characters whose appearance, costume, and behavior mirror the elements. Both the natural universe and the human society it contains teem with signs of disorder, of devitalization, and of sickness.

At first glance, the world of the third chapter, the world seen by Esther Summerson, seems totally disjunct from the earlier settings. With little of the outside narrator's verbal genius, Esther can only protest her sincerity. "I know I am not clever," she says. She does, however, admit to cultivating "a silent way of noticing what passed