

Spring 5-9-2018

# Challenging Society in Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist and Bleak House

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## Recommended Citation

Oliver, Adrienne, "Challenging Society in Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist and Bleak House" (2018). *Student Research Submissions*. 261. [https://scholar.umw.edu/student\\_research/261](https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/261)

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Challenging Society in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House*

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Papers from ENGL 449A: Charles Dickens Seminar

University of Mary Washington

Spring 2018

Table of Contents

Abstract..... 3

Paper One: Challenging Society in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (Author: Adrienne Oliver)

Paper Two: Crime and Family: A Close Analysis of Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist* (Authors:  
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### Abstract

The purpose of this honors project is to explore the challenging social system of Dickens's Victorian London, specifically through the perspective of Dickens's social philosophy characterized by the need for reformative action in the fractured society represented in both *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House*. Divided into two documents, the first component, an annotated bibliography, focuses on the scholarly discussion of negligent and criminal institutions in *Oliver Twist*. The second section, an analytical paper, concentrates on *Bleak House* and Dickens's representation of the city as a divided space between the gentility and isolated, vulnerable groups demonstrated by at risk orphans, silenced women, and the impoverished. The attempts of society's elite to conceal these detrimental consequences through segregation and the implementation of neglectful institutions only increases the contaminated space of nineteenth century London. In both novels, Dickens critically evaluates the repercussions caused by the damaging effects of the city's authoritative social system in order to caution future generations on the loss of individual social responsibility.

## Challenging Society in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

(Author: Adrienne Oliver)

The opening chapters of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* illustrate the contaminated cityscape of Victorian London, establishing an atmosphere composed of the traumatic effects of a broken society. The ruinous conditions of the tainted city depicts the corrupted state of the natural world under the dismissive care of Victorian society's upper class. This disrupted form of nature is used to represent contagions of the London space, emphasizing the detrimental cause and effect of the man-made social world. The debasement further reinforces the tragic consequences for the repetitive, harmful actions of a civilized community. In the London of Dickens's perspective, to stray from the assigned station applied by society means to become one of two possible alternatives: forgotten or a failed attempt at reform. As reaffirmed by the generational pattern of England's condition, filth and neglect is compounded by the contaminated spaces and people of the city. In *Bleak House*, Dickens cautions us about the sacrifice of vulnerable groups, specifically the youth, impoverished, and those restricted by gender expectations to the consequences of a heavily flawed social system in order to warn against the continued negligence of societal institutions towards the susceptible classes. Dickens supports the need for social reform by representing the problematic repercussions of Victorian society brought about by the neglected responsibilities of institutions such as philanthropic organizations and the education system as well as constraining nineteenth century gender roles reinforced by a hierarchal and indifferent class mentality. Such troubling social complications can be seen in a modern society through the disregard of individuality in the education system

and the demanded performance of social expectations through the pressure of technology and media.

The endeavor to normalize behavior and maintain social status in Dickens's assessment of Victorian London results in an education characterized by isolation and a failed reformatory system. Dickens exemplifies the concealment of the undesirable groups such as the impoverished and silenced women, demonstrated by the brickmaker's family, and abandoned orphans such as Jo through the segregation of the city from the rundown, contaminated section of Tom-all-Alone's. Dickens uses the separation of London, specifically the exclusion of the restricted, vulnerable lower classes in order to show the destructive consequences of class division and disregard for the social system's failure. Highlighting the struggles of class and the afflicted condition of the city Dickens writes, "...In a general infection of ill-temper...foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke...adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud..." (13). Dickens demonstrates the expansion of contagion from Tom-all-Alone's and similar abandoned places and people to the disassociated spaces of the upper class to further evidence the growing problem of society's dismissiveness for London's increasing social issues. Like the partitioning of the city, Dickens's critique on the division between the upper and lower statuses in Victorian society emphasizes a dysfunctional form of class education following either the isolation of these unwanted groups or neglectful institutions. Dickens uses the continuation of such ineffective instruction for both the vulnerable and their forsaken environment to represent the perpetuated state of hardship for London's people, which due to the social constraints and disinterest of the governing upper class only advances further into the city. Mrs. Pardiggle's attempts at correcting the behavior and mindset of the brickmakers improves nothing about their present impoverished condition, highlighting the re-education through philanthropy as one of the

many forms of ineffectual institutions in nineteenth century London. Because of such unsuccessful attempts at transforming the declining state of the social atmosphere, the disregarded contamination can only spread to the surrounding city. Dickens's social philosophy emphasizes the unfortunate repetitiveness of such mistreatment through the decaying conditions of the city as a whole, meaning that a change in ideology, specifically class must take place in the social system in order to develop a reformed condition of London and the city's people.

In the broken state of London's contaminated social system, Dickens reinforces the atmosphere of poverty and abandonment through the endangerment of "at risk" individuals such as the orphaned child, Jo, whose lack of knowledge regarding social responsibilities results in fatal consequences. Dickens reiterates Jo's representation as the image of the forgotten:

It must be a strange state to be like Jo...To see people read, and to see people write...and not, to have the least idea of all that language...what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business, here, or there, or anywhere...(257-258)

Dickens uses such contaminated spaces and vulnerable individuals in order to reiterate Victorian institutions' inadequate attempts at reform. Concerning Dickens's evaluation on the insufficiency of education through class, Jo's training, or lack thereof, develops through the condemnation and desertion of society, specifically the controlling elite. In a literal sense, Jo is unable to read and write, demonstrating a lack of a developed, institutional schooling. Yet, Dickens's form of education in *Bleak House* extends further than the traditional application, meaning that Jo is unable to "read" society. Because of his inability to comprehend the rules of the social climate, he becomes a nomadic figure who has no place in this environment. Dickens utilizes Jo's status

as an orphan, or “at risk” youth who can only be “...moved on...” (308) from the sight of the aristocracy to accentuate the failure of London society in the attempts to hide, rather than resolve, the present lamentable condition. The understanding of Jo’s failed education provided by such a heedless society results in the failed reformative actions by characters such as Mr. Chadband, whose lengthy sermons provide Jo with no knowledge or aid in the troubling and incomprehensible social environment. Dickens connects the inadequate treatment of such “at risk” groups and places with the perspective of ineffectual rehabilitation in philanthropic groups, as seen in the comparison of the Snagsby household with the efforts of Mr. Woodcourt. Dickens uses this illustration as the component parts of inaction versus action, in which the intellectual experimentation of Mr. Chadband changes nothing about Jo’s present condition; whereas, Mr. Woodcourt’s charitable reaction to the orphan’s pitiable state alters his contaminated environment. Dickens displays active charity as an effective means of change through the efforts of characters such as Mr. Woodcourt and Mr. Jarndyce in order to more fully represent the failure of institutional power. In Dickens’s London, institutions are a direct product of the upper class society’s attempts to hide the system’s generated problems such as “at risk” orphans and women. Dickens exemplifies the failed construction of class in order to expose the unprofitable nature of reform in institutions through useless education and ineffective charity.

The inadequacy of philanthropy in *Bleak House* often follows two possibilities: charity is based upon incomprehensible books and literature that provide no active alternative to the present destitute conditions, or philanthropic ventures overlook the troubles of home. Dickens’s protagonist, Esther experiences the unproductive efforts of Mrs. Pardiggle at the brickmaker’s home: “We both felt intrusive and out of place; and we both thought that Mrs Pardiggle would have got on infinitely better, if she had not had such a mechanical way of taking possession of



people...We both felt painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier..." (132-133). Dickens reiterates the inability of institutions to amend the consequential state of society because such groups, specifically philanthropic organizations, are the motivations of class preservation and selfishness. In *Bleak House*, Mrs. Pardiggle represents the philanthropy of inaction, in which language both written and spoken makes up the entirety of her reformative efforts. Her "possession" of this family dismisses the degraded condition of the domestic space and overlooks the represented needs of their current circumstance. Instead, Mrs. Pardiggle brings to the minimally educated household futile attempts at reform through inadequate literature and lectures towards improvement. Dickens utilizes such disinterested characters and dysfunctional charitable moments to demonstrate motivations in philanthropy as a genteel pastime of self-interest rather than genuine apprehension for the susceptible individuals. Mrs. Pardiggle's version of charity is motivated by a personal concern in self-betterment rather than any deeper incentives to help this vulnerable group. In fact, her complete disregard of the woman and child's plight in the brickmaker's house, which is openly visible to the visiting group, corroborates the inactive, solipsistic approach to philanthropy. Furthermore, the inattention to her own domestic sphere creates violently dissatisfied children, representing the creation of "homemade savagery." Philanthropy then, in Dickens's illustration, becomes a repeated system of inactive negligence that only complicates the social difficulties.

The continual representation of charity through self-interest is further corroborated by the organizations supported by Mrs. Jellyby, whose "...eyes...could see nothing nearer than Africa" (52) and whose home in London dissolves into chaos through neglect. By self-inspired motives, both Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle reject the responsibilities of home and disregard the deprivation of the vulnerable groups, reinforcing Dickens's social philosophy of reform through

the contrasting actions of Mr. Jarndyce, whose compassionate nature and desire for anonymity in his philanthropic endeavors displays the selfless, active path of charity that has the capacity for change. Dickens uses the combination of disinterested philanthropic endeavors compounded by the constraining role of education to reflect the cyclical nature of the problematic Victorian society. The system of education in *Bleak House* follows the rules provided by social standards, meaning characters such as Jo and the brickmaker's family, whose educational limitations, both at the institutional and social level, deprives them of the ability to interpret or act out these regulations, are left confined to the control of class authority. Dickens layers the connection of philanthropy to the social ideology of education through the restricted advancement between classes or the sustained, unenlightened state of the abandoned. The charity of these ineffective organizations perpetuate the condition of vulnerable groups, reinforcing an education of class or distancing the social sphere from the undesirables. Through the relationship of education and philanthropy, Dickens stresses the prolonged state of London's hidden, susceptible groups and the failed, inactive reform of institutions as the direct results of class division in the increasingly decaying condition of the city.

Similar to the connection of education and class in *Bleak House*, institutions in a modern society frequently correlate social prestige or potential advancement with the student's choice of major and career. Society's perception on the "correct" decision reinforces the burden that, in order to be most successful, students should pursue the desired careers important to the framework of the social structure. Following Dickens's representation of the Victorian class system as hierarchal, today's education system, specifically colleges and universities, observes the same pattern in the ranking of a student's occupational decisions depending on the level of importance society places on the career path. For instance, many higher education institutions are

in the process of eliminating Humanities programs in order to focus on the more socially dominant careers such as Engineering, Law, and Medicine. The pressure of choosing the more socially appropriate profession often limits a student's options, but most importantly this ideology restricts individual growth by hindering the exploration of knowledge and even new ways of perceiving the world. Yet this type of confining education goes beyond just upper level institutions, as society's control is still clearly visible in American school systems, which have repeatedly demonstrated the sacrifice of student individuality for the interest of the majority. Lack of funding or attention to programs such as Art and Music represents an attempt to standardize education, leading directly to the school's emphasis on teaching towards the material of standardized tests such as the SOL rather than encouraging the expressive imagination of the students. The discouraging state of modern society's regulated education system directly relates and emphasizes Dickens's caution on social control through the demonstrated effects of normalizing rather than inspiring students. Such a standardized mindset created throughout childhood manifests a society in which certain societal behaviors, thought processes, and educational levels are repeatedly demanded, meaning that individuality is primarily lost to social conformity. If all education is a regimented system and all students are being molded into one idea of social perfection, then change and progress for the entire social system is greatly inhibited because the primary inspiration for improvement comes from what once was a child's creative interest.

Dickens's use of gender and class in *Bleak House* often coincide, representing the progressively layered challenges of London's social condition. The most prominent example of gender issues and the repetitive pattern of society's treatment of women can be seen through the relationship of Esther and Lady Dedlock: "...Thinking anew of her, against whom I was a

witness; of the owner of Chesney Wold; of the new and terrible meaning of the old words... ‘Your mother, Esther, was your disgrace, and you are hers. The time will come...when you will understand this better, and will feel it too, as no one save a woman can’” (584).

Dickens’s portrayal of Victorian, elite society serves as a form of governing body on the judgement of moral conduct, which regulates the behavior and status of each variant class. Because of this, Esther’s connection as the secret child of Lady Dedlock implicates her as a potential “witness” (584) in the unveiling of the truth to the condemning members of the upper class. Dickens examines the burden of social expectations through the traumatic consequences of the mother-daughter relationship in order to highlight the vulnerability of women and youth in a predominately patriarchal society. The words of Esther’s aunt in the last lines of the quote represent an education of class and create a two-fold meaning through which social ideology becomes visible in Esther’s defining years as a child and her progression into adulthood. This dual interpretation not only represents her mother as deviant to the standards of conduct in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also considers her to be a “fallen woman.” On the surface, the aunt’s words warn Esther about the consequences of being a woman in such a constraining society. Yet, on a more psychologically damaging level for a child, she has also insinuated that because of these social regulations, Esther has inherited the “sins” of her mother. Dickens uses Esther’s early teaching on the troublesome social system to present the repercussions of such class-related beliefs through the lasting, traumatic memories that surface through Esther’s consistent assumption that she must earn love and value.

Similarly, this same psychological consequence is supported in Lady Dedlock’s behavior, as she must constantly perform the expectations of “fashion” while keeping hidden her secret title as a fallen woman. This sense of social responsibility can also be seen in the family setup of

the Bagnets, who claim to the observations of society that, “Discipline must be maintained” (544). Dickens utilizes this comparison of the upper and lower class through the Dedlocks and Bagnets to demonstrate the confinement of social compliance, specifically in relation to the women of the household. Because of her position of power and hidden past, Lady Dedlock must always maintain the performance of her station; whereas, Mrs. Bagnet is given more freedom to speak her mind and preserve independence, but only through the compliance of her husband. This illustration represents Dickens’s warning on the susceptibility of women in the novel and demonstrates the problematic consequences of both social levels, which only reinforces an education of class and the control of individuality in Victorian society. Dickens’s challenge for social change regarding both gender and class is distinctly observable through the transformation of Sir Leicester’s character, whose once rigid social code alters to display compassion after the discovery of Lady Dedlock’s secret. Perhaps, then Dickens is not only advocating for change on a larger, social scale, but in the way humanity is viewed by the individual as well.

The class system of Dickens’s nineteenth century London operates as the foundation for the contaminated social environment, through which the consequences of the system in the form of imprisoning gender roles and ineffective institutions are manipulated. The complex by-products of the hierarchal society include the repetitive pattern of education through class and the regulations of the expected social behaviors as asserted by this panoptic community. In *Bleak House*, the combination of these factors is readily seen through the superiority and “fashion” of the Dedlock household. Dickens’s characterization of Lady Dedlock as a fallen woman establishes the infiltration of corruption in the elite sphere, and her familial connection with Esther Summerson exemplifies the issue of class as a primary repercussion in the division of society and the disadvantages of vulnerable individuals such as the youth and women to this

authority. One such ramification displays Esther's traumatic childhood through memory: "It was all gone now, I remembered, getting up from the fire. It was not for me to muse over by-gones, but to act with a cheerful spirit and a grateful heart. So I said to myself, Esther, Esther, Esther! Duty, my dear!' and gave my little basket of housekeeping keys such a shake" (103). Due to the psychological damage of her youth, Esther attempts to compensate for a past that has been judged socially unacceptable by becoming an angel of the hearth figure. Dickens employs the symbolic "keys" significant of women's roles in the domestic space in order to highlight Esther's compliance with society's evaluation of both gender expectations and her own circumstances of class. In essence, Esther is fulfilling the performance of the ideal Victorian woman in the hopes of gaining a form of redemption and satisfying the expectations of society. Yet, the significance of Esther's adherence to the social authority is derived from Dickens's disruption of class in the contamination of the ideal space. Esther perpetuates the gender roles associated with the Victorian Era through her performance in the domestic sphere of Mr. Jarndyce's home. Despite Esther's willingness to comply with the social code, the contamination of the misguided system infiltrates the perfect space through the physical scars left by her sickness, which challenges the system of class through the visible corruption of her identity as a part of the vulnerable groups.

Similarly, by focusing on her intrusion into the upper class, and eventual rejection from this society, Dickens's characterization of Lady Dedlock as a fallen woman vulnerable to the whims of class regulation exemplifies the sacrificial readiness of social authority for the benefit of a maintained standard. Dickens's evaluation on the ramifications of class creates a clear connection between the neglect of institutions and the condition of the powerless in London society. The examples of vulnerability in Lady Dedlock, Jo, Esther Summerson, and the brickmaker's family all demonstrate Dickens's prominent argument on the breakdown of human

morality in submission to the extensive social environment. In *Bleak House*, the divisions and regulations of class act as the premise through which all other labels, judgements, and attempts at reform are created. Therefore, Dickens critiques the highly problematic circumstance of class authority's eclipsing of individual growth, which only preserves the damaging methodology, and challenges for the reform of society's complete governing power.

The social domination and panoptic nature of class in Dickens's Victorian London corresponds to the repercussions of technological advancement in a modern environment. As a result of the twenty-first century's development into a hi-tech society, social media has quickly become a means through which personal ideas and beliefs can easily and conveniently be conveyed to the outside world. Yet, a serious complication with this form of communication and self-expression originates through a similar problem of performance represented through social distinction in *Bleak House*. The constant pressure to create this perfected image in order to avoid the judgement and condemnation of society only fabricates identity and compounds the damaging repercussions of social authority. This adherence to the rules of perfection expected by modern social conventions only layers the burden of social obligations and creates a false sense of reality. The normalcy of performance in the twenty-first century suggests the continuation of Dickens's illustration on the troublesome importance of class, and the loss of individual identity to the image of unattainable perfection demanded by society. Yet, not only is this inaccurate representation of existence displayed through the online world of social media, but also in other common forms of media consumed and accepted by countless viewers every day. Movies, television shows, and perhaps the most influential, news organizations all represent Dickens's example of unlimited social control through their ability to regulate behavior patterns and construct social expectations. The youth, especially can be vulnerable to the social pressures of

media, which often depict specific, visual scenarios of life and how certain behaviors should be followed and are expected from society. Such educational TV programs as *Sesame Street* or *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* both demonstrate the standardized form of educational development as well as the correct behavior and attitudes of children in society. Comparable to children's television programs, modern news platforms act as the supervising institution through which the condition of the world and the refashioned representations of our own individual lives are modified to reflect the expectations of social status. Specifically, the effects of the multiple forms of news that infiltrate modern lives constantly and the information supported by such networks present specific images to the public depending on the desired message. From the clothes we wear to the forms of media we consume, the news often portrays an idealized image that demonstrates and follows the status quo of modern society. Similar to Dickens's representation, all media platforms reflect the larger objective and viewpoint of a twenty-first century social authority, which regulates and interprets the idea of perfect conduct from childhood into adulthood.

In *Bleak House*, Dickens criticizes the dominance of social control in Victorian London in order to highlight the troubling detachment of morality in the constant performance of social status. The dismissiveness of the upper class towards the unbalanced system of power against voiceless groups such as women, the poor, and youths most susceptible to the conditions created by social standards reinforces the damaging effects of society's power. Such an emphasis on the consequences of class control reinforces the importance of not only being able to interpret the rules of the social landscape, but also in being able to strictly adhere to the system. This society, however, is deeply flawed and the corrupted nature of the London space and people affects the entirety of the social condition, especially those with the least capability of resistance. Because



of this, Dickens warns against the generational cycle of social authority and advocates social reform in order to establish a voice for the forgotten.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. Penguin Group, 1996.