

The Meaning of READING in *Bleak House*

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*Bleak House can be interpreted as Charles Dickens's attempt to explore the meaning of 'the act of reading', which provides us with key clues for understanding the complicated and unfathomable world of this novel. Richard C. Anderson once wrote: 'Reading is the process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information.'⁽¹⁾ (Here I would like to place special emphasis on the expression 'written texts'.) By this widely agreed definition, it can be said that quite a lot of characters in *Bleak House* are certainly engaged in the act of reading throughout the novel. Strangely enough, the world of *Bleak House* is abundant with scattered fragments of various textual matters, including letters, litigation-related documents, and signboards, and the characters struggle to put those fragments together and find out meanings in order to solve mysteries around them. Unlike one undertaken for leisure, this type of reading poses an extreme challenge for them. Focusing on how their acts of reading proceed and end up in failure, this essay examines the intricate structures of the novel, through which the terrifying nature of the world Dickens depicts is revealed. In the centre of this novel is Dickens's deep concern about the English society of his time.*

I

The world of *Bleak House* is a collection of ruins decorated by eeriness and grotesqueness. Such a description might lead to the misunderstanding that this novel recounts the unusual story of a world in a different dimension; however, in actuality, that is not the case. This book is set in everyday 19th century English society, where we are introduced to landscapes which were not unfamiliar to Victorian readers. There are no supernatural occurrences, nor disfigured monsters. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the world delineated in *Bleak House* is nothing short of dark and uncanny. The author's focus is on indicating that extraordinary aspects can be concealed under ordinary looking surfaces and this idea seems to be

closely related with the well-known sentence in the preface for this novel, 'In *Bleak House*, I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things.'⁽²⁾ And this novel, that is classified as one of Dickens's 'dark novels', is meant to expose dark realities of the society plagued and degraded from the bottom.

As much mud in the street, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a *Megalosaurus*, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. (ch.1)

This opening passage describes gloomy London covered by fog, soot and mud, which is like the appearance of a primitive Earth in a state of utter disorder or confusion.

From Chapter 3 to Chapter 5, the heroine is asked to visit many houses as part of her social orientation after she arrived in London, and each of these houses are deliriously bizarre and messy. Rusty keys, old books, litter, and even human bones collected by merchant Krook have filled up his rag and bottle shop. The Jellyby household is a disorganized mess: young children suffer from neglect and objects overflow in a pandemonium where scraps of paper are littered, curtains are fastened by forks, a kettle is found on a dressing table and dishes are placed in a coal container. In short, these places are characterised as having nothing in its proper place and with some objects suddenly popping up in unexpected places.

These scenes exude humour in the most exceptional way through Dickens's unique grotesqueness, yet their significance does not end there. They should be regarded as episodes carefully orchestrated to provide us with a visual impression of the reality in *Bleak House*, which J. H. Miller once described as 'a kind of junk heap of broken things' or 'a collection of unrelated fragments plunged into an ubiquitous fog'⁽³⁾.

Literally everything loses its original meaning and is scattered like waste. What seems to be preliminarily responsible for such a strange situation is 'time'. Many of the events in this novel had occurred long before the opening of the narrative and the original big pictures that were complete in the past had been falling into pieces as time proceeds, some of which might have vanished or become lost in unthinkable places. Tom-all-Alone's has turned into a hideous slum with rubbish and rubble due to the inaction and inefficiency of The Chancery; the litigation process of the infamous Jarndyce and Jarndyce case has become so prolonged and tangled that it has been producing heaps of documents, until nobody can make sense of them; a lot of orphans and half-orphans such as Esther, Caddy, and Charlie are left in isolation, having lost reliable parents, a home or an identity. Things and people that had been connected to each other to make

meaning are now forever unfathomable. In this way, the novel is brimming with a mixture of mysterious circumstances and characters are forced to live amidst the remaining fragments.

This novel is considered a sort of 'urban Gothic', based on a modern civilized society, by some critics, including Allan Pritchard who writes that 'this novel is Dickens's supreme achievement in the Gothic mode and a crucially important novel for the nineteenth-century transformation of Gothic tradition.'⁽⁴⁾ It is true that we can see Gothic imagery on a lot of places and people in every corner of the society from Chesney Wald, the aristocratic Lord Dedlock's estate, to the slum in London and each of them contributes to producing a special unusual atmosphere. Yet the most dire is the phenomenon of fragmentation, to which all the confusion of the world of *Bleak House* can be attributed.

Ruins were appreciated as important elements for the decoration of landscapes which evoke mixed emotions of fear, surprise, and joy in 18-19th century Europe where Picturesque was a popular aesthetic notion, whereas Dickens used them as entrance into a horrifying nightmare in this novel.

II

Characters are forced to float in the sea of fragmented and scattered information that is seemingly devoid of context. It is easy to imagine that such an existence is unfavourable; indeed, they are lost in this situation, feeling anxious, annoyed, unsatisfied, and depressed, etc.

There is a passage in Chapter 16 that deserves our attention:

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not, to

have the least idea of all that language—to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! (ch.16)

This part details Jo, a crossing sweeper, who has no idea about the letters (written texts) he sees on the street. His ignorance and illiteracy is no doubt a great tragedy. However, we should not overlook Dickens's idea of finding a parallel between the miserable boy and other characters of this book; it is most likely that many people in *Bleak House* would be unable to comprehend the meaning of various letters or signs surrounding them and that they could do nothing besides muttering 'I don't know nothink [sic]'. (ch.16)

How should the people forced to live under such circumstances cope with difficulties? There are mainly two choices. One is to strive for stability, by seeking some sort of connection among various fragments and assemble them to reconstruct a story; this work is similar to putting together a jigsaw puzzle. The other is to stay detached from the fragments intentionally, leaving them as they are, and try to newly construct a small well-ordered circle unaffected by the tumultuous outside world. Therefore the majority of characters of the novel can be divided into two groups. Although both of them share the same purpose of bringing some order into the chaos, they attempt to accomplish it in disparate ways.

People who choose the latter way may experience less pain. This is because they would be able to break free from the bondage of mystery and live life according to their own will. In fact, John Jarndyce, tired of the long-running litigation, has decided to disassociate himself from anything related to the Jarndyce case and takes refuge in his Bleak House. His interest and energy are solely directed to supporting other people, including victims of the lawsuit.

However, such actions are generally not so easy in the world of *Bleak House*, because the fragments continue to lure the characters with 'dreadful attraction' (ch.35) until they can no longer resist the temptation. Things that seem to be clues to solving the mystery are found in abundance everywhere, which only further complicates the matter. These clues often appear in surprising places and at

surprising moments (like the household goods found in Mrs Jellyby's house) to suggest the possibility of an underlying meaning, thus inducing a sense of hope that any problem may be solved if one just follows their lead. The characters are handed a kind of incomplete text the moment they are trapped by such temptation and are then tasked with 'reading' or 'deciphering' the message.

Many characters become enslaved by the process of 'reading' for various reasons. For instance, those related to the lawsuit like Richard, in the hope of gaining some potential fortune, launch into sorting through heaps of litigation documents for truths that are supposedly buried somewhere. Another example is Tulkinghorn, who, in order to exercise his inherent power as a legal counsellor, embarks on an investigation into Lady Dedlock's secret. (This search was triggered by her unforeseen interest in the handwriting of a legal document.) And there is Guppy who becomes an avid reader of evidence and clues. An encounter with a portrait of Lady Dedlock leads him to suspect some sort of blood relation between Lady Dedlock and Esther. With the help of minor characters like Smallweed and the Chadband couple, his investigation successfully brings some mysterious facts about Esther's past to light. At the same time, Inspector Bucket also scrambles to accumulate evidences.

The following episode in Chapter 54 seems to be suggestive:

"I found the wadding of the pistol with which the deceased Mr Tulkinghorn was shot. It was a bit of the printed description of your home at Chesney Wold. Not much in that, you'll say, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet. No. But when my foreign friend here is so thoroughly off her guard as to think it a safe time to tear up the rest of that leaf, and when Mrs. Bucket puts the pieces together and finds the wadding wanting, it begins to look like Queer Street." (ch.54)

Here Inspector Bucket speaks proudly of his wife's achievement in the pursuit of Lady Dedlock's former maid who was a suspect in Tulkinghorn's murder. The maid had stuffed a piece of a drawing into a pistol, the

murder weapon, and then tore and disposed the rest of the drawing, but the fragments were found and pieced together by Mrs Bucket, who reported them to her husband as evidence. It is clear that this speech, though consisting of only several lines, is Dickens's device to convey *Bleak House*'s crucial concept of 'reconstructing the original big picture through the collection of details' to us in an offhanded manner.

When characters commence the task of comprehending the text, the story advances to a new phase. That is, the world seems to undergo shape transformation. This novel is characterised by a proliferating tendency. An encounter with a piece of information stimulates someone to continue reading, which is likely to encourage another person to look for new information, and accelerates other acts of reading, in a sort of domino effect. As a result, all things that originally diffused linearly to the future will divert back into convergence through the strong energy that this task emanates. And what we are ushered in is a giant whirlpool, so to speak, through which movements will start to swirl towards the centre. Once it is formed, it continues to move, stretch, and interact in complicated ways.

A whirlpool is an important metaphor with a gothic overtone and Justin D. Edwards puts an emphasis on the paradoxical nature the whirlpool embraces as follows:

. . . the whirlpool is beyond representation. It is symmetrical and yet chaotic; attractive and yet repulsive; beautiful and yet frightful; fixed and yet perpetually in motion; tranquil and yet overpowering; . . .⁽⁵⁾

Such characteristics hold true for the whirlpool in *Bleak House* and cause further confusion to the people inside.

In the constantly swirling cycle, close-knit relationships are formed among isolated characters.

What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him

when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together! (ch.16)

One by one, as if an invisible hand has reached out to capture them, the swirl pulls these unrelated individuals closer together, and therefore, once opaque facts finally become discernible. At last, even people from opposite ends of the social scale are connected to each other in a negative way in most cases, regardless of their feelings, by a newly formed chain of human relations.

Mr. Snagsby cannot make out what it is that he has had to do with. Something is wrong, somewhere; but what something, what may come of it, to whom, when, and from which unthought of and unheard of quarter, is the puzzle of his life. (Ch.25)

"I find myself wrapped round with secrecy and mystery, till my life is a burden to me." (Ch. 47)

Snagsby's apprehension above is shared by many other characters. They are, so to speak, puppets of fate who enjoy little liberty to act according to their individual free will. By having a relation with the mysterious amanuensis Nemo (who is in fact Esther's father), Jo is caught up in Tulkinghorn's investigation and becomes an unwitting accomplice to the persecution of Lady Dedlock; he even transmits smallpox to his saviour Esther when Tom-all-Alone's is plagued by an outbreak of the disease. Completely oblivious to his role as both the perpetrator and the victim, Jo's case perhaps constitutes the greatest tragedy. Esther, confronted with Lady Dedlock's sudden confession that she is Esther's mother, astonishingly finds out that her own existence could be used as a possible tool to hunt down Lady Dedlock.

In the scene where Esther is thrown into a state of delirium by high fever after she becomes infected with

smallpox, we can find a metaphor slightly associated with the shape of a whirlpool:

Dare I [Esther] hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing? (ch.35)

It is easy to see that this quotation not only describes a nightmare without logic, but shows how agonizing her condition (and also other characters' condition) of being intertwined with others could be.

After all, the act of reading only results in plunging people into a difficult and contradictory situation; they are incapable of moving, surrounded by invisible walls which deprive them of freedom, while they are compelled to keep going without rest, just as Jo is constantly evicted by the inexorable voice of the policeman telling him to 'move on'. (ch.19)

III

Does 'text reading' successfully lead to the solution of mysteries and deliverance of the characters from their state of chaos? The answer is 'no'. Dickens's final goal in this novel may be to put emphasis on the limit of the act of reading, with showing that no matter how hard a truth is pursued, it cannot be grasped. Even clever characters fail in their attempts to decipher, to say nothing of poor readers like Krook who 'can make all the letters separately', and 'knows most of them separately when he sees them', but 'can't put them together' (ch.32). Even if some pieces of meaning are found and placed in their rightful positions, the completion of the entire jigsaw puzzle is not always warranted.

It is because they tend to reveal and conceal the truth at the same time as Nicola Bradbury wrote that '*Bleak House* entices but frustrates interpretation'.⁽⁵⁾ Every ambitious move in full transparency is counteracted by

another that tries to hinder it, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in this complex web of conflicting interests. Therefore a text may suddenly disappear in the middle of a pursuit, thus inhibiting its reading, or other texts that appear to contain the truth may emerge to mislead the pursuit; in the end, the real truth remains elusive.

That Tulkinghorn finally verifies Nemo's identity as Lady Dedlock's former lover seems a significant step towards solving the whole mystery; however, this lead is abruptly ended by the spontaneous combustion of Krook, the owner of Captain Hawdon's letter, and Nemo's sudden death that occurs before any investigation can take place. Then, just as he has Lady Dedlock cornered by gathering witness accounts through some means, Tulkinghorn himself is shot dead by Lady Dedlock's former maid. Tulkinghorn's murder not only thwarts all his efforts but also results in further complications of the puzzle, as now a new mystery surrounding the identity of his killer is added. Lady Dedlock's new-found peace following Tulkinghorn's death does not last either, for she is now targeted as a suspect in his murder and decides to leave to protect the Dedlock family from her own scandal. Bucket then takes Esther along in search of the vanished Lady. Meanwhile, Lady Dedlock, in a desperate attempt to prevent the revelation of the truth, leaves various red herrings in her trail to deceive her pursuers.

In the battle between the forces of revelation and concealment, victory is perhaps awarded to the latter. Ultimately, Bucket's pursuit is a step behind, as Lady Dedlock is eventually found dead at the slum cemetery where her former lover, Captain Hawdon, is buried. At the moment the curtain is drawn for the intricate plot built around the heroine's birth, and most of the questions remain unanswered (though it is possible for us to deduce the outline of the truth in *Bleak House*). Furthermore, the Jarndyce trial also comes to a sudden conclusion, which drives people involved in it to the depth of despair, as all the estate in question is devoured by legal cost and the trial itself becomes meaningless.

After spending nearly 1000 pages on the description of great turmoil in this novel, Dickens makes us realise that

little has changed in the end. The scene we witness in the final part of the novel is quite similar to the depiction of London scenery in the beginning; it is portrayed as a gloomier and more ominous landscape with heaps of fragments:

The gate was closed. Beyond it, was a burial-ground—a dreadful spot in which the night was very slowly stirring; but where [Esther] could see heaps of dishonoured graves and stones, hemmed in by filthy houses, with a few dull lights in their windows, and on whose walls a thick humidity broke out like a disease. On the step at the gate, drenched in the fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everywhere, . . . (ch.59)

This consequence can be easily expected, given the ironical attribute of centripetal force which allows people to move closer to the centre, while preventing them from reaching it. Consequently, although answers to some smaller mysteries were found, no characters were successful in deciphering riddles at the core and reconstructing the whole story. Therefore a sense of futility and despair is left behind, together with innumerable unsolved fragments.

In this conclusion we should read Dickens's pessimistic message, which prompts us to turn our attention to what is the underlying culprit. When the world of *Bleak House* is examined from a bird's eye view, one design becomes quite clear: the centre of every society is decayed and to restore it is almost impossible.

G.K. Chesterton once remarked '*Bleak House* is not certainly Dickens's best book, but perhaps it is his best novel'⁽⁶⁾. In fact, besides Chesterton, many other literary scholars have ranked this book highly. One of the reasons for this is undoubtedly its distinctive multi-layered design. The book weaves high society, political circles, the law community and middle-class, working-class, poor people and even vagrants together, in two main plots caused by a delayed trial in The Chancery and the mystery surrounding the heroine Esther's birth and various sub-plots. The novel's success in keeping most of its context

free from inconsistencies in spite of such array of elements seems to rely on two factors. One is, needless to say, the act of reading which characters are engaged in throughout the novel. And the other is Dickens's social criticism.

As *Bleak House* moves from one unsatisfactory household to another, its variations of the inversion pattern illustrate the whole muddle of society as symbolized by the compelling fog metaphor in the opening chapter. The exploited children are but the victims of an order born of indifference and selfishness.⁽⁷⁾

As Arthur A. Adrian has pointed out, this book concerns the damage wrought by parents' abandonment of responsibilities and functions to provide care for their children. A number of children are forced to live in a tragic situation as a victim to their parents. The adulterous relationship between Lady Dedlock and Captain Hawdon resulted in Esther's loneliness in childhood and her suffering with identity. The egoist Skimpole, a kind of parasite on Jarndyce, does not hesitate to declare himself an 'innocent child', and demonstrates no awareness as a parent. Turveydrop also takes on the appearance of an affectionate father, when in fact he is the embodiment of parental deceit and feeds off his own children. The Jellyby household fell apart because Mrs Jellyby is so absorbed in philanthropy for aiding African indigenous people that she is negligent towards her own family, which brings her house to the brink of collapse.

Although I mentioned two kinds of possible attitude toward fragments scattering around the characters of *Bleak House* in section II of this essay, there is the third one: to take little to no notice of the reality, in spite of causing the world to fall into pieces. From Dickens's perspective, this pattern of protectors' blindness to the outer world must be the origin of every confusion.

The uniqueness of *Bleak House* lies in the fact that the issue of impaired parent-child relationships, which is one of the significant themes common to almost all Dickens's

novels, prevails in every part of the world. For example, if we regard all parties related to the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case as one large family, then the Chancery Court or the Lord Chancellor, who reigns at its centre, is equivalent to a parental figure, and all tragedies that ensue from the delay in litigation can be interpreted as fatal outcomes of parental negligence. Similarly, as the ruling political circle in England has become dysfunctional, unable to break away from the conventional privileged class and is preoccupied with the preservation of their own power, all their campaigns in self-interest can be thought as one of the main causes to harm the society.

When the core of a society is corrupt and cannot fulfil its given obligations, then that society will be on the brink of collapse, no longer being able to perform its normal functions. All adverse effects that accumulated over time have plunged the characters in *Bleak House* into an even deeper and more grotesque darkness and mayhem. Providing an effective way to reform these systems was beyond the novelist's capability even in a fictional situation. That's why Dickens depicts the scene of the gloomy cemetery toward the end of the novel, by which he metaphorically implies the chaotic reality of the centre of the world with no order. The intense words of Boythorn, a former soldier, that this terrifying situation has no hope of being resolved unless blasted with 'ten thousand hundredweight of gunpowder' may be those of Dickens's. This novel can be read as Dickens's indictment for the real social system in 19th century England.

In such a pessimistic atmosphere, as if compensating a dark and nasty aftertaste of the novel, Dickens offers a ray of hope; it seems to be bestowed upon the new order built by younger generations, as evident from the end of the novel, when Esther marries Allan and starts a family and when the other orphans such as Ada and Caddy construct small but cosy homes. Through them Dickens seems to suggest the necessity of launching into a new life without being bothered by any piece of information around them. Here we can see a new movement:

conversion from the act of reading to the act of writing. What is emphasised at the end of *Bleak house* is the importance of putting the past behind and creating a new story of their own based on domestic responsibility, love and duty.

NOTES

All parenthetical textual citations of the novel are from the 1996 Penguin edition of Dickens's *Bleak House*.

1. Richard C. Anderson et al., *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (The National Institute of Education, 1985), p.17.
2. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Penguin, 1996), p.7.
3. J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1959), p.191.
4. Allan Pritchard, "The Urban Gothic of *Bleak House*," *Nineteenth-century Literature* 45:4 (1991), p.432.
5. Justin D. Edwards, *Gothic Canada: Reading the Spectre of a National Literature* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005), p.38.
6. Nicola Bradbury, Introduction to Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, xiv.
7. G. K. Chesterton, *The Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1911), p.148.
8. Arthur A. Adrian, *Dickens and the Parent-child Relationship* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1984), p.125.