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## Bleak House: Urban Poverty Of Dickens

Dickens supplies a realistic depiction of poverty in the Victorian era in his novel *Bleak House*. This essay will argue that Dickens critiques society's neglect of the urban poverty of mid-Victorian Britain through social inequality in *Bleak House*. This novel is therefore a social critique by emphasising how the English legal system is failing in its duties to its citizens. This analyse will be done by assessing how the slums are represented by Dickens in comparison to areas of higher class. Specifically, by comparing Tom-All-Alone's to the Court of Chancery. Secondly, by investigating how the children living in poverty are considered in the novel, specifically by examining the treatment of Jo. Finally, this essay will examine Dickens's presentation of disease in the novel, exclusively how disease and death can be understood in the novel through a literal and metaphorical depiction of social inequality.

Charles Dickens gives a realistic depiction of the severe life of all layers of English society of the Victorian epoch with a particular focus on the most deprived (Gholami and Joodaki). This focus can be identified through his description of the brickmakers' house. The house is described as "one of a cluster of wretched hovels in a brickfield" (Dickens 118). Dickens gives a brutal depiction of the slums by describing their offensive nature and alluding to the high numbers of people living in these circumstances. This portrayal allows for a realistic account of the conditions of those living in urban poverty. Thereby enforcing the belief that these areas, and those living there, were being neglected due to their placement in the social hierarchy. These miserable depictions are supported by Phiz's illustrations which provide a visual of the true horror of the slums (Carter). Nevertheless, while Dickens rouses a feeling of compassion "he refrains from describing the full actuality of slum-dwelling in *Bleak House*" (Carter). This prevents a repulsion from the extreme poverty, which would cause Dickens's critique of social inequality to be overshadowed by the horrors presented, and allows for a connection to be made with those unaccustomed with urban poverty (Carter). This refrain from complete realism suggests that Dickens wrote this novel for those not living in urban poverty. Therefore, this novel was for those in mid-Victorian Britain who were benefiting from and augmenting social inequality. *Bleak House* is critiquing this abuse and making that critique evident to those who must change their ways in order to improve the situation. This permits Dickens's call for action and awareness of urban poverty to be the focal point in his portrayals of the underprivileged.

Furthermore, the novel raises questions on the poor law system and the living conditions of the working class (Gholami and Joodaki). The moral corruption of Chancery is juxtaposed with the physical decay of the slums. This is emphasised by Dickens providing a description of urban poverty by the example of the slum street in a manner similar to the Sanitary Reports (Gholami and Joodaki). The first description of Tom-All-Alone's is followed by "this desirable property is in Chancery, of course" (Dickens 236). The omniscient narrator's use of brooding sarcasm here amplifies the point being made; by following the description of this dilapidated, miserable place with the statement that it is so close to the house of law; the court of Chancery is synonymous with the faulty law system. Separate from the critique of the Chancery court, Dickens also criticizes slum housing (Gholami and Joodaki). This creates the link that the faulty law system is responsible for the social inequality resulting in the neglect of those in urban poverty. Dickens's description of Tom-all-Alone's can be read both as historical evidence and a powerful literary symbol of the Condition of England (Gholami and Joodaki). Uncontrolled

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industrialization contributed, in Dickens's opinion, to misery, decay and disease. Similarly, Chancery is represented as a bitter metaphor of moral corruption which encompasses the upper classes (Gholami and Joodaki). The Court of Chancery is not protecting the weakest members of its society, those living in urban poverty, instead it is providing financial support for its lawyers.

Dickens pays particular attention to the children of poverty suffering from this neglect, in his novel. This is most evident in the portrayal of Jo, the homeless crossing-sweeper. The child is described in the novel as being a "horrible creature" (Dickens 240). This description depicts the disgust of the higher classes towards those less fortunate. Dickens's choice to have this treatment directed towards a child emphasises the cruel disregard that this society condemned on the urban poverty, as children are often associated with innocence. This depiction also emphasises the severity of social inequality as it identifies that some were born into urban poverty and have no other options or chances to move up the social hierarchy. To further establish this point, repulsion is apparent in the meeting of Jo and Lady Dedlock. Despite the child assisting the woman and her approaching him, she treats Jo as a savage whom she must fear and avoid for her own safety. This fear of Lady Dedlock's would be relevant for the Victorian time period as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution would have been just surfacing. The theory of humans evolving from a primitive species terrified people as they believed that this implied that human beings could also devolve. Lady Dedlock is depicting this fear of being associated with a "brute" (Dickens 237) resulting in becoming a brute herself therefore, being negligent of this child due to fear for self. Thus, Dickens is using Lady Dedlock here to represent the Victorian society's treatment of children living in urban poverty and furthermore, the neglect of these children. This neglect is depicted to source from a fear for self. This is apparent when the Lady "recoils" (Dickens 240) from the child and when she states "don't talk to me, and stand farther from me" (Dickens 239). These statements are reactions of panic and dread. A similar yet juxtaposing form of social inequality is depicted by Mr. Chadband. As the minister pretends to be a deeply religious man, he presents himself as being pious by conforming to the Victorian beliefs that the poor's most urgent need was for religious and moral elevation as "poverty was God's just punishment for the culpable" (Fasick). Despite Jo's demands that "you let me alone" (Dickens 377) Mr. Chadband ignores these contests as he does not view Jo as a child or a person but rather as "a precious instrument in my hands" (Dickens 377). While the characters here believe that they are improving the boy it is evident that they are forcing their own ideals onto the child as they perceive themselves to be more divine individuals as they have "the light of Terewth" (Dickens 381), which they deem Jo to be devoid of.

The young boy is depicted as being so "stone blind and dumb" (Dickens 236) that he is incapable of experiencing any pleasure more than that of a beast. This belief is further established when Jo is compared to "the other lower animals" (Dickens 237) in being unable to understand human expressions of reading and writing. He is depicted to enjoy "a band of music" (Dickens 237) along with a dog thus, being associated and perceived as another animal. Social inequality is encouraged in this society as the disadvantaged are not perceived as humans but rather more animal-like. There is a contradiction from the expected Victorian portrayal of poverty, however, as the omniscient narrator states "how far above the human listener is the brute" (Dickens 238). This statement implies that those living in poverty are superior as they are unable to be contaminated by material possessions and human creations thus, allowing them to access and enjoy the simple joys in life, such as listening to music. The novel is therefore shown to not agree with the Victorian ideals that those living in urban poverty are lesser human beings.

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A similar link to nature is made when the novel deals with disease. Many of the deaths in *Bleak House* are due to bodily malfunction and disease. Disease can be seen “as a metaphor for systemic and systematic societal ills such as economic disparity” (Higgs). Through this metaphorical understanding of death and disease Jo’s death can be comprehended in two ways; his demise represents economic disparity, or his decease is resulted from economic disparity (Higgs). Both understandings link death with social inequality. This correlation results in the poor being regarded as filth due to the filth they live in. This further established a reason to enforce social inequality and to be negligent of urban poverty. Thus, a solution was resolved to prevent being ‘tainted’, by policing the bodies of the poor, literally and figuratively (Higgs). Dickens’s depiction of Jo’s suffering and his sentimental death demonstrates the misapplication of these solutions and their tragic results (Higgs). As a crossing-sweeper Jo is responsible for moving away dirt and excrement to better allow pedestrians to pass by. His body, however, is associated with the filth that he helps to contain and dispel (Higgs). Therefore, he is that which must be swept away, or “move on” (Dickens 291), to allow for others’ safe passage through the city (Higgs). Neglect of urban poverty due to social inequality is again evident as the law regards this human boy as a contamination of filth.

While Dickens is operating on a metaphorical level, he also employs disease as a literal literary device. He presents a very realistic depiction of smallpox as experienced in mid-Victorian England. Dickens employs illness in a literal understanding to achieve his goals for social reformation through his fictions (Higgs). The build-up of filth on the streets and threat of contamination were highly relevant fears of the Victorians. This is portrayed in the novel through reeking smells and sights in the slums and those living in such conditions being described as “the fever” (Dickens 331). Mr. Snagsby and Mr. Bucket are depicted as visitors to these horrors, separated from such situations due to their economic well-being. The underprivileged living in urban poverty, however, are forced to be subjected to such environments continuously so that it becomes normalised to them. Disease and death are depicted as being a regular occurrence for those living in urban poverty. This is supported when Jo states “they dies more than they lives, according to what I see” (Dickens 453). The slums are understood to be the diseased part of the social body in Victorian society. Dickens, however, depicts disease as being inconsiderate of a person’s wealth. Disease does not take part in the social inequality. It is therefore a human construct to associate urban poverty with disease as members outside of this category are also depicted to contract diseases, such as Charley and Esther. Dickens provides an excuse for why the society of mid-Victorian Britain should not neglect those in urban poverty.

In conclusion, *Bleak House* represents a profound analysis of the great socio-economic problem of lower classes (Gholami and Joodaki). This novel, therefore, reveals the importance of the material well-being and wealth in the life of English society (Gholami and Joodaki). This essay argued that Dickens critiques society’s neglect of the urban poverty of mid-Victorian Britain through social inequality in *Bleak House*. This novel is therefore a social critique by emphasising how the English legal system is failing in its duties to its citizens. This was argued by first assessing how the slums are represented by Dickens in comparison to areas of higher class. Specifically, by comparing areas such as Tom-All-Along’s, and the brickmakers’ house to the Court of Chancery. Secondly, by investigating how the children living in poverty are considered in the novel, specifically by examining the treatment of Jo. Finally, this essay examined Dickens’s presentation of disease in the novel, exclusively how disease and death can be understood in the novel through a literal and metaphorical depiction of social inequality. Therefore, *Bleak House* critiques inequality in Victorian society, it displays the abuses of the

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court of Chancery and administrative incompetence (Gholami and Joodaki), simultaneously revealing the flaws in the mid-Victorian legal system resulting in the neglect of the impoverished.