

# The theme of alienation in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and *Bleak House*

Liliana Angelica Radu



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**Liliana Angelica Radu**

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<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

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# Abstract

The aim of my thesis is to look at the way in which the theme of alienation is described by the two authors. Dickens and Melville are keen observers of the society they lived in. Both authors give their protagonists no chance to escape their doomed fate, and society seems to be responsible for their hopeless human situation that leads the protagonists to estrangement. Dickens' characters together with Melville's character try to escape from a diseased society, but none can. Even though Dickens and Melville used aspects of their own lives as material for their heroes' lives, their works are different in theme and form.

I will also look at the way in which characters are influenced by alienation, the way they cope with it and what happens with them in the end. As the consequences are negative, Dickens seems to criticize the society's corrupt system and its power capable of making people passive and destroying their lives. I will pay attention to some similarities between the two works, as well as to some dissimilar aspects that make these two works worth analysing.

When it comes to isolation, space represents an important aspect. Melville isolates Bartleby from the world by placing him facing the walls; he actually isolates him before he seeks isolation. When it comes to Dickens, society isolates people and none is given the opportunity to escape because they are trapped in the web of a corrupt system. Due to corruption, the endless legal cases lead to the death of those involved in Chancery, by leaving them broke after spending all their fortune in their fight with the system. Here we can sense Dickens's frustration and his view of mid-Victorian society characterized by pessimism and unrelieved gloom.

Melville portrays Bartleby as the workaholic type of employee, the one who is doing his job, at least at the beginning, the type of person dedicated to his work in order to please his boss. Bartleby symbolises the hard-working man in a capitalist society. Herman Melville created the perfect example of the alienated worker in his tale, the alienated worker who realises, step by step, that his work is meaningless and without a future, and death is the only option left.

Bartleby is the reflection of the class conflicts and capitalist pressure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American society. The conflict that exists between Bartleby and the lawyer is often seen as a labour dispute.

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” represents the true example of the effects that industrial society can have on individual; it simply dehumanizes the individual and forces him to accept his fate and give up his ambitions; there is no point struggling against it after all, death seems to be the only way out.

As far as Dickens is concerned, my focus will be on *Bleak House*, the first of Dickens’ novels whose real protagonist is an entire society, a society in which people are imprisoned by forces coming from the past, a fragmented society where human beings are self-divided, isolated and alienated. Richard Carstone seems to be the image of the victim of a greedy and corrupted society which tries to destroy the youth and beauty of its inhabitants, and which denies the possibility of freedom from it or from the self as well.

Dickens and Melville created alienated characters in their stories. Bartleby, in his quest for recognition of a good and devoted worker, becomes estranged and involves himself in the alienation process of the labouring society. On the other hand, Dickens’ characters are entrapped in a corrupted society and they often witness the process of corruption of the past which extends into the present and destroys their future.

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# INTRODUCTION

The theme of alienation is quite vast in literature. Both Melville and Dickens portrayed people who felt an intense sense of isolation from the world they live in. Certain works of Dickens and Melville reflect the alienated universe where their heroes live and struggle to survive.

Herman Melville (1819-1891), American novelist, short story writer and poet of the American Renaissance period, is best known for his novels of the sea. His youthful experiences and legacy were important in creating his artistic vision. Besides his experience at sea, his novels talk about his engagement in the contradictions of American society in a period of change, and the exploration of philosophy and literature. Like Dickens, Melville's family went through economic decline after his father's death. Quitting school and embracing different jobs like commercial sailor and whaler, made him develop a personal sense of the discrepancy between the nation's economic practices and the democratic ideals that he explored in his tale, "Bartleby, the Scrivener."

In 1850 New York went through a broad range of working-class political turmoil. The efforts of workers to gain economic and political power led to demonstrations, rallies, meetings and strikes. Melville, who lived in New York at that time, was familiar with the ideological discourse and political struggles that characterized relations between New York workers and their employers. In his story, Melville combined his painful personal experience with traditional features in order to produce an original analysis of the relationship between employer and employee.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) is considered the greatest English novelist of the Victorian period. His works deal with attacks on social injustice and hypocrisy, as well as with attack on a corrupted society. *Bleak House* refers to contemporary events and it is organized around specific issues, like the iniquities of the Court of Chancery, sanitation reform, slum conditions, the education of the poor and orphaned children, etc., all symptoms of the condition of mid-Victorian England.

Dickens was a keen observer of the human condition and his novels mirror the bad conditions of a society troubled by corruption and injustice. His concern in *Bleak House* was the everyday social world, and the novel attacks the Court of Chancery which leads individuals to despair. *Bleak House* represents an atomized society, a society in which human beings are isolated and alienated from one another, but also a society in which individuals are

linked together by the web power represented by the legal establishment, the Court of Chancery.

Belonging to the lower middle-class, Dickens had a lot of sympathy for the poor and neglected people who aspired to education, rank and wealth in a gloomy society. Even though Britain was the major economic and political power of the world, Dickens never ceased to point at the life of the poor and at the conditions under which the working-class people lived. He often focused on the repression and exploitation of the poor and condemned the institutions and public officials for encouraging abuses. As a boy, Dickens was deprived of guidance or any assistance from the family. At the age of twelve, due to financial difficulties, he was sent to work at Warren's Blacking, a factory that produced boot blacking from a rat-infested warehouse near the Thames. This demeaning and tearful episode left its mark and legacy in Charles Dickens' mind, life and books.

Dickens was interested in preserving the morality of the older world as well as seizing whatever the new world could offer in order to use his power in the service of society. Everything he had taken from his culture in terms of ideals and restrictions connected to the relationship of the individual to society played an important part in forming his own conscience.

Melville could not identify himself with the society he lived in because he did not resonate with the dominant economic and technological culture of his period. His tales try to go as deeply as possible into the moral, psychological, social and metaphysical truths; his heroes would leap over the present and head for the future in order to reach their salvation and find their identities.

# Alienation

Alienation, as term or concept, is connected to the social and psychological sciences. It derives from classical Latin “alienare” into Middle English where it meant “renouncement of ownership, mental disorder and interpersonal estrangement.”<sup>1</sup> The verb “alienate” like its German equivalents, is a transitive verb, meaning “to make strange, to make another’s”, as Walter Kaufmann describes it in the chapter called “The Inevitability of Alienation.” He also states that the noun “alienation” and its German equivalent *Entfremdung*, does not necessarily refer to an activity, except in special contexts where the term functions as a technical one. But we usually tend to associate “alienation” with estrangement from something or somebody: “Our primary association with “alienation” and *Entfremdung* is a human state of being – the state of *being* alienated or estranged from something or somebody.”<sup>2</sup>

The term alienation tends to keep its former definition and it still seems connected to the notion of mental illness and the separation of the individual from work, realities or even from his different selves. Even though some psychiatrists tend to see alienation as a neurological illness that can be treated, there are other opinions that tend to see alienation in connection with the social and cultural environment. Hardin has coined the term “panchreston” and he defines it as “those words which, in attempting to explain all, essentially explain nothing.”<sup>3</sup> His term is particularly used in physical science for the analysis of archaic constructs, where a concept evolves into a generic expression over a period of time, where the expression implies much but signifies little.

The concept of alienation is developed by several classical and contemporary theorists, the most important being Emile Durkheim, Erich Fromm and Karl Marx. Marx perceives “alienation” in terms of dehumanization of man. As Walter Kaufmann points out in his introductory essay of the book *Alienation*, “Man’s loss of independence, his impoverishment, his estrangement from his fellow men, and his involvement in labor that is devoid of any originality, spontaneity or creativity are so many aspects of man’s estrangement from his true nature.” (xxiii)

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<sup>1</sup> Roy S. Bryce-Laporte and Claudell S. Thomas, eds., “Introduction” in *Alienation in Contemporary Society: A Multidisciplinary Examination* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976), xv.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Kaufmann, “The Inevitability of Alienation” in *Alienation*. Ed. Richard Schacht (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1971), xxii.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Johnson, “Alienation: Overview and Introduction” in *Alienation: Concept, Term and Meanings* (New York and London: Seminar Press, 1973), 4.

As Kaufmann further states, Marx was interested in both forms of alienation, the alienation from one's activity, labour or work, or the alienation from things, the products of one's labour, where the most important was man's alienation from his true nature: "The young Marx stressed both of these forms of alienation along with man's alienation from his essence or true nature—a concept that was central in his thought in 1844.<sup>4</sup> As long as alienation is concerned, Marx also concerns himself with the economic process that led to alienation and believes that the worst feature of modern life is that it dehumanizes man and makes him self-alienated through his contact with what modernity brings. What man might perceive being good at the beginning, might turn out to be bad in the end. It is also important to examine the relationship between good and bad and what has determined that what used to be good at the beginning turned out to be bad at last. There is also a price to pay for every change man is able to make. The most important thing is that man has to detach himself from his environment and to become responsible and independent, even though he is going through a developing process:

Estrangement from nature, society, one's fellow men, and oneself is part of growing up. One has to detach oneself from the womb of one's environment in order to become a person, an individual, an independent being. Self-consciousness involves such detachment. One has to come to look upon oneself and others and the world as strange and perplexing. (Kaufmann, xlv-xlv)

As Karl Marx argues, workers tend to be subjected to the alienation of labour due to the division of labour in industrial capitalism. In the process of work, the worker is dominated and controlled by the machine system, and little by little he is subjected to alienation of labour. The industrial revolution with highly mechanized systems started to replace traditional methods of production in which the worker had been the master of his tools and products. The capitalist modern world becomes a threat to the working class because it reduces ideas, social relations, people to things and the process of alienation is intensified. Being replaced by machines, the workers were given monotonous jobs and restricted their free movements. The worker is left aside, his responsibility diminishes together with his goal. Left without any purpose in the process of labour or control over the process of work, employment gains no meaning anymore and becomes synonym with the end of making a living.

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<sup>4</sup> Kaufmann, xxii.

In “The Diversity of Industrial Environments,” Robert Blauner stretches out Marx’s idea that self-estrangement is the very heart of alienation and that modern factory technology and capitalist institutions have deprived the employee of a real human relation to his work:

Loss of control means loss of freedom, initiative, and creativity. Specialization is so elaborate that the goals of the enterprise become remote, and the work itself is deprived of any co-operative meaning. The worker does not identify with the productive organization, but feels himself apart, or alienated from its purpose. When work activity does not permit control, evoke a sense of purpose, or encourage larger identifications, employment becomes simply a means to the end of making a living.<sup>5</sup>

In a modern society, alienation is perceived as a general syndrome which is made up of “different objective conditions and subjective feeling-states which emerge from a certain relationships between workers and the sociotechnical settings of employment.”<sup>6</sup> When workers lose control of their work process, are excluded from the industrial communities where they belong to and are not able to develop and maintain a connection between their jobs and the organization of production, alienation takes place and workers fail to get involved in the activity of work. A person without control, aim, social integration and self-involvement tends to be alienated. By losing all these traits, a person loses power, meaning, isolates himself from his environment and becomes self-estranged.

Looking closely at all these traits, both Melville and Dickens have portrayed characters in an alienated society. Bartleby stands for the alienated worker who isolates himself, loses power and social integration, and becomes estranged. Dickens’ Court of Chancery stands for the entire alienated society whose victims never cease to give up their hope in their fight against injustice and corruption.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Blauner, “The Diversity of Industrial Environments” in *Alienation and Freedom: The Factory Worker and His Industry* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

# Theory

This master thesis will draw on Marxist literary criticism. This section will give a short definition of what Marxism is, and discuss how and why this literary criticism is the most relevant for the analysis of my topic.

Marxism developed in the mid-nineteenth century as a method of societal analysis that focused on attention to class-relations and societal conflict. It has its roots in the ideas of two German philosophers, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Marx embraced a materialist perspective and considered that world is made up of natural and physical things like food and shelter which seem to be more important than spiritual or idealistic abstractions. His perspective is opposed to that of the idealist perspective of traditional European philosophy embraced by Hegel, which was primarily religious, based on a rational theology. As Marx states, the very essence of the Hegelian philosophy is based on the opposition between spirit and matter, God and the world which Hegel had tried to transcend in order to make them part of an ongoing process:

Hegel had tried to transcend all dualism between form and content, mind and matter, self and community, conscience and law by interpreting them as relatively objective aspects of a continuing process. If there was any creation in the Hegelian system, it was an *immanent* creation.<sup>7</sup>

As opposed to Hegel, Marx considered that the material world was the base, and that the superstructure produced by the base was made up by the rest of the world. While people had to produce material things with the help of different jobs, a new division appeared in society, the division of labour which led to different classes with competing interests.

According to Marxist analysis, class conflict appears due to contradictions between the new class of capitalist merchants, the bourgeoisie, and the exploited class of workers, the proletariat. There was a huge division between the class of people who worked to produce goods and to sell them to people who had a lot of capital to purchase and exploit labour in order to accumulate wealth for themselves. Marx sees capital as a way to purchase goods or labour in order to make profit and not as a way to exchange goods or labour. As opposed to capitalists who privileged capital over labour, Marx privileged labour over capital. For Marx,

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<sup>7</sup> Sidney Hook, "Hegel and Marx in Opposition: The Religious Motif in Hegel and the Activistic Atheism of Marx" in *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (New York: The Humanity Press, 1958), 17.

the exploitation of the workers was a huge concern and he considered it robbery, especially when the worker did not get any payment at the end of the day for the work he has done.

In every society there is a class division that gives rise to conflicts, new ideas and values while trying to fulfil the common interests of the society. Each class has its own ideology and tries to dictate and fight according to their weapons. The class who has got the economic power tends to be the most powerful, but probably not the most effective. As Sidney Hook points out, “Classes do not make any individual “great”. But they give him both the opportunities of greatness and the means to make the greatness effective.” (40)

I found this theory relevant for my thesis because *Bartleby* symbolises that kind of worker who lives in a capitalist world and who has to give a great amount of work in exchange for some payment. He gets also involved in a societal conflict when he refuses to work, and this conflict leads to his starvation and eventually death.

With his Victorian society, Dickens criticizes a corrupted system that is responsible for the desperate lives of his citizens in their long and exhausting fight with the Court of Chancery. Both Dickens’ protagonists and Melville’s protagonists get entrapped with the system that makes them desperate, mad, estranged and alienated.

# Who is Bartleby?

“Bartleby the Scrivener” was first published in 1852 as a two part series in “Putnam’s Monthly Magazine.” It is said to be one of the most complex stories ever written by Melville, and perhaps by any American writer of the period. When the short story first appeared, the title read “Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street.” As Marvin Fisher states, the shorter form adopted later was the result of typographical considerations in listing the contents of *The Piazza Tales*, where all the titles are brief. The shorter title has become more familiar since *The Piazza Tales* has been the source of most subsequent republications of the story. Fisher argues that, by choosing the shorter title, the social and economic connotations of Wall-Street are played down and that the author’s intention was to emphasize the role of Wall Street setting and its walls that lead to separation and division:

Melville’s intention, it seems likely, was to use the extended title to emphasize the highly dramatic, actually expressionistic, Wall Street setting—a law office where the four employees are literally and figuratively *walled in* by the circumstances of their employment and by the social assumptions embodied in their employer an *walled off* from any hope of mobility of self-fulfillment by the same concept of class structure. These physical arrangements and social assumptions create an atmosphere of separation and division.<sup>8</sup>

Melville had a unique gift for description and contemplation in his writing, and he was a very methodical writer as well, using pacing in his stories in order to provide small details of the scenes or characters.

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” is a piece of fiction as any other short stories, but it has an extraordinary level of technical complexity. As Leo Marx defines it in the “Melville’s Parables of the Walls,” the story is unique by saying almost nothing at the first glimpse, but it is in the depths one should look for the meanings:

The unique quality of this tale, in fact, resides in its ability to say almost nothing on its placid and inscrutable surface, and yet so powerfully to suggest that a great deal is being said. This quality of style is a perfect embodiment of the theme itself: concealed

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<sup>8</sup> Marvin Fisher, “A House Divided” in *Going Under: Melville’s Short Fiction and the American 1850s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1977), 180-181.



beneath the apparently meanings if not mad behaviour of Bartleby is a message of utmost significance to all men.”<sup>9</sup>

The tale had been given a lot of attention since Melville included it in his volume of collected stories in 1856, *The Piazza Tales*. Some of the reviewers gave it special mention and considered it a distinct accomplishment in literature. Some biographers of Melville perceived it in terms of his artistic failure after the public rejections of *Pierre* and *Moby Dick*. But when critics took a second look at “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” another perspective opened their horizons: a tale of unexpected rich connotations, with a remarkable level of technical complexity. As M. Thomas Inge points out in the “Preface” of *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville’s Tale “Bartleby the Scrivener,”* the story is well-known for its puzzlement in solving Bartleby’s behaviour, as well as for Bartleby’s negative statement “I would prefer not,” statement that bewilders, astonishes and frustrates every reader: “It is one of those few stories in English, or any other language, which will continue to defy any definitive or generally satisfactory explanation, and this may finally be its theme, of course—that the inscrutable does not yield one iota to the rational categories of existence.”<sup>10</sup>

According to Egbert S. Oliver, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” came out from an external contemporary source: Thoreau’s withdrawal from society. In “A Second Look at “Bartleby,”” Oliver underlines the influence of Thoreau’s withdrawal from society as a source for the character Bartleby: “the germ of the character Bartleby came not from Melville’s searching of his own relationship to society or from any bitterness in his hardening heart but from an external contemporary source, namely, Thoreau’s withdrawal from society.”<sup>11</sup>

Even though Melville did not mention Thoreau in his literary works, any journal jottings or letters, he did not ignore Thoreau. Melville’s contact with the Transcendentalist group and the influence of Hawthorne’s historical tale “Main Street,” Emerson’s essay “War” and especially Thoreau’s essay “Resistance to Civil Government” (also known as “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”), seemed to serve as a starting point for “Bartleby.” In his essay Thoreau spoke about his own withdrawal from organized society and his lack of cooperation

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<sup>9</sup> Leo Marx, “Melville’s Parable of the Walls” in M. Thomas Inge, ed. *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville’s Tale “Bartleby the Scrivener”* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979), 103.

<sup>10</sup> M. Thomas Inge, “Preface” in *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville’s Tale “Bartleby the Scrivener”* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Egbert S. Oliver, “A Second Look at “Bartleby”” in M. Thomas Inge, ed. *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville’s Tale “Bartleby, the Scrivener”* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979), 63.

threw him in prison. By refusing to pay a tax in order to support the church, he was locked up in jail. Thoreau's declining to pay the tax can be seen in Bartleby's refusal to copy legal documents.

Bartleby gives no reason for his refusal; he does not want to co-operate anymore. He is ready to withdraw from society the way in which Thoreau did. Bartleby's withdrawal from society begins with the moment of his refusal to eat, soon finding his peace "with kings and counsellors." Thoreau's withdrawal from society began with his heroic stubbornness of paying a tax. The difference lies in the fact that, when Thoreau declined to pay, someone else paid off his taxes in order to keep him from jail, fact that he admitted in his essay "Resistance to Civil Government." As long as Bartleby is concerned, his attitude towards life and his stubbornness accelerated his end. Cutting himself off from society and going on with his rejection until he ended up alone, destroyed him.

There seems to be a sort of resemblance between Bartleby and Thoreau: Bartleby was a scrivener and so was Thoreau, scrivener and writer, sometimes a copyist of Emerson. Both Bartleby and Thoreau were placed in an environment that led to isolation; an environment that deprived Bartleby from the sight of his employer but in a way available any moment, and Thoreau, "while close to Concord, yet isolated from it, out of sight behind the screen of green trees, so also Bartleby was installed in a hermitage behind a high green folding screen near his employer's desk."<sup>12</sup>

As we have seen, Oliver has argued about Thoreau's influence on Melville in creating his character, Bartleby. Due to the fact that Melville had the opportunity to come into contact with some of Thoreau's writings, Thoreau's influence can be easily perceived both in Melville's withdrawal from society and his character, withdrawal which is caused by different factors. When Melville became fully aware of the fact that his literary work was no longer given approval, he decided to withdraw from society. In the case of Thoreau, his withdrawal from society and his refusal to pay his taxes are seen more as a preference, a choice that he has made by not belonging to any incorporated society. Even though the reason for their withdrawal is different, I think that Melville found the perfect source for his character, by empathising with Thoreau's fate and by creating an absurd character born from admiration for Thoreau's authoritative statements regarding the society and its norms.

According to George Bluestone, critics have read "Bartleby, the Scrivener" in four different ways. Firstly, it has been seen as a tale of exorcism, in which Bartleby figures as a

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<sup>12</sup> Egbert S. Oliver, 66.

surrogate for the artist (Melville), who protests against the harsh demands of work; secondly, as a tale of psychosis, a classic case of depression, with overtones of homosexuality; thirdly, as a tale of the alter ego, Bartleby seen as a projection of the death-urge in the lawyer; and last, as a tale of social criticism, in which the critique hits industrial America symbolized by Wall Street. In the last reading of the short story, the walls stand for “the deadening mechanism of finance and industry, the same walls that Dickens knew, and Dostoyevsky, who were likewise obsessed with the grubby isolation, the sealed-in madness of urban life.”<sup>13</sup>

There seems also to be a resemblance between Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” as alienation and resignation are major themes in these stories. Both Poe and Melville were drawn to some aspects of American Transcendentalism, and their fiction deal with the world as alienating and forlorn, where characters, through their nature, determine how they end their lives.

In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the whole scenery is described as a gothic one, with “the bleak walls-upon the vacant eye-like windows-upon a few rank sedges-and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees.”<sup>14</sup> Everything seems to be destined to decay, and even the title of the story is a warning to the reader that everything is going to fall in the end.

The setting of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” seems to be different from the other stories. It shares the wall features but it lacks more of the somber, dark and grotesque gothic environment. After a number of narratives in which the main structural device had been a journey, Melville, like Poe, has not placed the story in a confined setting. As A.W. Plumstead has pointed out in his essay “Bartleby: Melville’s Venture into a New Genre,” Melville, like Poe, “makes the confinement functional to the story’s mystery, elusiveness, and impact – on a symbolic level.”<sup>15</sup>

Bartleby is placed within an office, behind a screen, within a building, wedged between grey walls. He is like the walls, difficult to penetrate and impossible to demolish. The wall might stand for the meaningless of life, no purpose or future to be seen. Bartleby has learned that the wall is impregnable, and, acknowledging his defeat, he is ready to surrender, ending his career as hopeless and impotent. Usher’s mansion seems to be placed in a remote area accessible by horse and in the vicinity of a small lake. As soon as the narrator approaches

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<sup>13</sup> George Bluestone, “Bartleby: the Tale, the Film” in Howard P. Vincent, ed. *A Symposium: Bartleby the Scrivener* (Melville Annual, 1965), (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1966), 49.

<sup>14</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (New York, 2008), 689.

<sup>15</sup> A.W. Plumstead, “Bartleby: Melville’s Venture into a New Genre” in Howard P. Vincent, ed. *A Symposium: Bartleby the Scrivener* (Melville Annual, 1965), (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1966), 86.

this mansion of gloom, everything looks odd and scary, giving the feeling of inescapability, decay and entrapment. It looks as though there is no hope for the ones living in such place and death seems the only choice one can get.

The sense of indefiniteness and remoteness places Bartleby in a different environment and removes him from the everyday life. Bartleby, as the prisoner of society, feels entrapped; in spite of the narrator's desire to help Bartleby, our protagonist lacks will, desire and motivation to live. He has reached a one-way road and the only thing that remains is death.

On the other hand, Roderick has been suffering from "a pitiable mental idiosyncrasy" (689); he has the features of a very sensitive human being who cannot actually function in a normal world. He is described as excessively reserved, isolated, with 'a peculiar sensibility of temperament' (690) and being interested in art. As opposed to Roderick, Bartleby seems to function quite well in a normal environment, at least at the beginning, but his condition is decreasing after a while and he cannot function properly. I will not insist too much on this resemblance between the two stories, but I wanted to point out that Poe, Melville, as well as Hawthorne share some aspects of American Transcendentalism in their stories, where Poe generally depicts the organic world as alienated, Hawthorne associates nature and mystery, where the settings are usually ambiguous, and Melville associates the sense of danger with the organic environment.

Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" has generated a great variety of interpretations and has been read in many different ways. Bartleby has been interpreted as an absurd hero, grotesque character, a schizoid, an autistic, a nihilist, a transcendentalist, etc., in terms of biographical, psychological, historical, psychoanalytical, existentialist, Marxist theories and others. Critics have been trying to prove that the real-life model of Bartleby is Melville himself, Henry David Thoreau, or that Bartleby is the lawyer's psychological double, whereas the lawyer is Melville's father in law.

In his essay, Richard Chase is arguing that Bartleby is Melville, the artist, in his attempt to launch himself in the field of literature. As Melville was considering himself an artist, he was trying to understand the way the society perceived the artist. Having this in mind, he created a parable of the artist in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," where Bartleby is a scrivener, a writer after all. From the artistic point of view, Melville's story is similar to Bartleby's story, in the way that, as Chase points out, underlines the writer's refusal to compromise and write on demand in a capitalist society:

Bartleby is a scrivener—that is, a writer. He insists on writing only when moved to do so. Faced by the injunction of capitalist society that he write on demand, he refuses to compromise, and rather than write on demand writes not at all, devoting his energies to the task of surviving in his own way and on his own intransigent terms.<sup>16</sup>

From the point of view of the relationship between Bartleby and his lawyer, Chase points out the similarity between Melville and his father-in-law, a lawyer by profession, and who helped Melville's family financially, while Melville dedicated himself to writing instead of working (Chase, 81). As long as Thoreau is concerned, I have already mentioned a few pages above that Oliver identifies Bartleby with Thoreau due mainly to Thoreau's withdrawal from society, which is similar to Bartleby's withdrawal, but the factors determining the withdrawal are different.

Another interesting interpretation about Bartleby is given by Marcus Mordecai who believes that Bartleby is a psychological double for the story's narrator. In his essay "Melville's Bartleby as a Psychological Double," Mordecai finds evidence for it throughout the story in the concern that the lawyer manifests for Bartleby. Due to the fact that Bartleby has no history, it implies that "he has emerged from the lawyer's mind."<sup>17</sup> Their identification is also seen in the prison yard where Bartleby blames the lawyer for his imprisonment, as well as for his "hopeless human situation." (109) Mordecai points out also Bartleby's role as a psychological double, that is to criticize the sterile, impersonal and mechanical world in which the lawyer lives: "Bartleby's role as a psychological double is to criticize the sterility, impersonality, and mechanical adjustments of the world which the lawyer inhabits."<sup>18</sup> It is a world devoid of liveliness, a monotone world that creates frustration; by entering this world, Bartleby has to obey and function within the limitations imposed by society.

Bartleby, "who was a scrivener the strangest I ever saw or heard of,"<sup>19</sup> symbolizes the hard-working class. A scrivener is a person who can write letters to court or can write legal documents as well, a person who can read to illiterate people or fill out forms for a certain fee, and he usually works in an office. Bartleby, the scrivener, shares the office with other scriveners, Turkey and Nippers. The person they are working for is "a rather elderly man"

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Chase, "A Parable of the Artist" in M. Thomas Inge, ed. *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville's Tale "Bartleby the Scrivener"* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979), 81.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus Mordecai, "Melville's Bartleby as a Psychological Double" in M. Thomas Inge, ed. *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville's Tale "Bartleby the Scrivener"* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979), 108.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>19</sup> Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (New York, 2008), 1093.

(1093) who has worked in this business for thirty years. He is very successful in his business and he has provided himself a good income in order to enjoy a good life: "I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is best." (1093)

The lawyer runs a law practice that seems to be quite successful. He is prosperous and he is quite proud of his realisation when he talks about his business that had a blooming period many years ago: "My avocations had been largely increased. The good old office, now extinct in the State of New-York, of a master in Chancery, had been conferred upon me. It was not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative." (1093) He spends a lot of time in the tranquillity of his office which he calls a "retreat". His job is to trace titles for deeds and to perform some unchallenging work among "rich men's bonds and mortgages." He keeps Cicero's bust, the symbol of the great lawyer, title that he surely aspired to once in his life. He is also a great admirer of John Jacob Astor who is considered to be one of America's greatest examples of self-made man. He is very proud of the fact that he once worked for him and he seemed to be appreciated for his abilities. He is a modest man and he thinks of himself as an "eminently *safe* man," which means that he is a trustworthy person and discreet as far as his business is concerned. He is a very cautious man because he does not want to take chances.

From a Marxist perspective, he is one of the capitalists who is good at doing business, ambitious and industrious. He has four employees in total, three copyists and a promising lad working as an office-boy. Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut seem to do quite a good job for the lawyer, Turkey even consider himself being the lawyer's right hand: "I consider myself your right-hand man." (1095)

Bartleby, who has been employed in order to make the business more efficient, makes a very good impression from the beginning. He is described as "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn" (1097). He seems to be very quiet as opposed to the others, a very introvert character type, and with his quietness he is supposed to calm the others down so that the work becomes more productive in a way:

At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sunlight and by candle-light. [...]. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically. (1098)

Bartleby seems to be the workaholic type of employee, the one who is doing his job, at least at the beginning, in our case, the type of person dedicated to his work in order to please his boss.

Bartleby symbolizes the hard-working man in a capitalist society. Herman Melville created the perfect example of the alienated worker in his tale, the alienated worker who realizes, step by step that his work is meaningless and without a future. As Louise K. Barnett points out in her article “Bartleby as Alienated Worker”, Karl Marx’s statement regarding the worker’s alienation is determined by the following reasons:

First that the worker is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature, that consequently he does not fulfil himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery, not of well-being, does not develop freely a physical and mental energy, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. ...Finally, the alienated character of work for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person.<sup>20</sup>

All the three scribes can be identified with this description, but only Bartleby comes to understand the real situation and rejects it. As Barnett points out,

Physically as well as mentally, the scribes illustrate Marx’s diagnosis of malaise. Turkey’s inflamed face witnesses his over-indulgence; Nippers is given to teeth grinding and nervous attacks; Bartleby is pale and thin. Nursing their vain expectations, Turkey and Nippers take what solace they can in cakes and ale and fits of temper. Bartleby chooses not to continue working. (382)

Even though at the beginning he looks like the perfect scribe, once he understands his condition, he refuses to work by saying: “I would prefer not to.” By refusing to do his job and working according to his own individual rule, Bartleby represents a challenge to capitalist ideologies. He stands for the middle-class people whose job creates dissatisfaction and alienation at the same time. Yet, it is also a deeply symbolic work which should be appreciated. There seems to be a few, if any, real-life Bartlebys, daring to tell their employers they would “prefer not” to do something, yet remaining at the place of work.

The phrase “prefer not to” appears throughout the story and its repetition is making everyone furious and irritated. Bartleby’s quiet, polite but firm refusal to do even the most routine tasks asked of him has always been the main source of puzzlement for the lawyer. This can be interpreted as a critique of the growing materialism of American culture. His

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<sup>20</sup> Louise K. Barnett, “Bartleby as Alienated Worker” in *Studies in Short Fiction*, 11 (Newberry, 1974), 379.

unwillingness to perform the tasks that have been asked by his boss reflects his unwillingness to fulfil the expectations imposed by Wall Street. The fact that the lawyer's office is in Wall Street has a major significance in the novel; it symbolizes the importance of money and its management in American life. Bartleby's stubborn refusal to perform his tasks can be related to a sort of heroic opposition to economic control.

In the lawyer's attempt to deal with Bartleby, money and food play an important part and all the characters in the story use money in order to buy food. The lawyer tries to offer Bartleby money every time he wants to get rid of him, and it can also show some compassion from the part of the lawyer, even though Bartleby does not accept it. The lawyer even tries to offer money to the person in charged with feeding people in the jail in order to be sure that Bartleby will not starve. Money is not a good motivation for starting writing again, even though Bartleby seemed in need for it. It can be seen as the writer's refusal to produce literature, and this refusal might stand for death.

Death is present in the story and it seems to surround Bartleby from the moment he walks in the office and gets into contact with the narrator. Bartleby's cadaverous appearance and his corpse-like disposition are reflected in his calm manner of doing things. It seems like he is not in a hurry at all because he perceives death as his salvation from this capitalist world. He is absent and already dead because he denies performing his job, while choosing to throw himself "into a standing revery behind his screen" (1102). Everything seems to contribute to his failure as an individual gradually, and there is no escape at all.

Ironically, Bartleby had worked once for the dead letters office and he lost his job there. Taking this into consideration, this fact might have affected his temperament quite a lot, making him become depressed and frustrated. The narrator perceives Bartleby's former employment as a source for Bartleby's depression and negativism, and his questions is merely rhetorical, it represents his answer: "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? (1117-1118).

The dead letters are associated with man's mortality and with the failure of his intentions to accomplish his duties as well as possible. They also stand for Melville's unsuccessful novels which were considered dead from the artistic point of view.

Bartleby is doing his work mechanically in the dehumanized but functional environment. He lacks a strong personality and independent will and these features are seen as



characteristic for a model employee. But his weak-willed character and his misfortunes in life make him fail at the end.

Paradoxically, at the beginning of his employment, he used to show a lot of interest in his work, performing a lot of duties by working carefully, always eager to do more. But his willingness disappeared after a while and he turned into a stubborn person, exercising an enormous power by refusing to accomplish his duty. Surprisingly, the lawyer is accepting his attitude at the beginning because he simply does not know how to deal with Bartleby. He is though surprised that Bartleby refuses him, especially in such a calm manner, that he finds himself unable to scold Bartleby for his unreasonable behaviour.

These five words "I would prefer not to", even though simple and polite, achieve a paradoxical significance in the story. This initial response seems innocent at first, but soon it becomes a slogan that represents an essential part of Bartleby's character.

On the one hand, his polite refusal accompanied by the conditional form "would" might suggest to the reader that there might be a choice and he could allow himself to be obedient to some extent. On the other hand, the choice and his polite way of refusing is no more than an illusion because he is not offering his help. Bartleby's polite refusal stands for the author himself who refuses to copy superficial materials that might compromise his art.

The narrator's epilogue is "of a piece with his imperceptive evaluation of Bartleby throughout - a failure to see which is unconsciously motivated by self-protection." (Barnett, 384) In this respect the narrator relieves himself of Bartleby's responsibility because he likes to think that everything that happens to Bartleby is because he is a man doomed by nature and misfortune. We might also take into consideration that it could have been the lawyer as well, who deeply contributed to Bartleby's ruin as a human being. The way Bartleby has been treated by the lawyer can be seen as sympathetic and pitying, but also as cold and distant. Fascinated by his stubbornness in the beginning, the lawyer comes to pity Bartleby towards the end of the story, believing that his eccentricities are just involuntary, and he does not need to be mistreated.

Bartleby is a pale, bleak creature who refuses to engage himself in the routine of the office. There is no chance in getting behind his dead-wall reveries or his blank self-possession. He is quiet and industrious but nobody can penetrate his silence and his refusal and his passive resistance upsets the lawyer:

My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did that

same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion. So true it is, and so terrible too, that up to a certain point the thought of sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it. What I saw that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach. (1105)

Bartleby is the reflection of the class conflicts and capitalist pressure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American society. The conflict that exists between Bartleby and the lawyer is often seen as a labour dispute. Bartleby has been struck down and exploited by American society, and he has already been wrecked from the beginning of the story. He is one of the losers among others in the great competition for success; he is not a fighter either and becomes an object of compassion in the end.

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” represents the true example of the effects that industrial society can have on the individual; it simply dehumanizes the individual and forces him to accept his fate and give up his ambitions; there is no point struggling against it after all, death seems to be the only way out.

# Bartleby and his entrapment

In the beginning of the story, the narrator who calls himself “a rather elderly man,” finds it important to say that “it is fit I make some mention of myself, my *employées*, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented” (1093). Here we get acquainted with the lawyer and with the fact that he is worried about his age, as his mind has been preoccupied with age and death lately. His anxiety is not caused by the fact that he realizes he is not strong any more, but it is caused by the thought of approaching death.

The lawyer, a very successful person with a very comfortable business, decides to hire another scrivener, for the sake of his business only. He seems to have no idea who this person is, he is the one who answered the ad and the one who seems to be fit for his job. There is not much to say about the new scrivener, Bartleby. “While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature.” (1093)

Even though Bartleby is perceived as one of the strangest scribes ever seen or heard, he comes in opposition with the others two scribes from the office. Turkey is described as “a short, puffy Englishman” of about sixty years old (1094). He seems to be an alcoholic and his work seems to be disturbed in the afternoon as his writing skills tend to diminish after twelve o’clock. Nippers, the second scrivener, “was a whiskered, sallow, and upon the whole, rather pirate-looking young man of about five and twenty” (1095). He seems to suffer from chronic indigestion and ambition.

Turkey is an Englishman, Nippers an American, and together form an allegory “of the English and American national characters, their virtues and their faults,”<sup>21</sup> as Richard Harter Fogle describes them in *Melville’s Shorter Tales*. Their function in the story is to create a contrast between them and Bartleby, between what it seems and looks normal against what is abnormal. The lawyer accepts them the way they are; he accepts their imperfect services and expects no better, as long as his interest is only in making profit. They, in their turn, accept the situation, even though they are not pleased with it.

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Harter Fogle, “Bartleby” in *Melville’s Shorter Tales* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 19.

These two are “partly Dickens caricatures and partly jocular solar myths,”<sup>22</sup> as Richard Harter Fogle further describes them.

In spite of these two characters, the office survives because in the mornings Turkey is sober and Nippers irritable, while in the afternoon Nippers has calmed down and Turkey is already drunk. The lawyer, at some point, seems to realize that the effectiveness of their job is diminishing because of their bad habits. In order to make the business profitable, the solution seems to come from hiring another scrivener, Bartleby. He is described in opposition to Turkey and Nippers, he represents a sort of equilibrium in the office with his quietness and tidiness.

At the moment he starts working, Bartleby has been given a desk in the same room with his boss. The only inconvenience seems to be the fact that his desk is close to a small side-window which gave him some light but no view at all. The office, as a space for human relationships, is a central symbol in Melville’s story. Melville uses the space as a kind of experimental ground where he tests the limits of personal interaction. It is true that we do not see any of the characters outside the office. They all must go somewhere after work but we do not know anything about their home lives. At some point in the story Bartleby is caught sleeping in the office; the lawyer seems to be very shocked about Bartleby’s conditions of living, and on the other hand he seems in a way frustrated and furious because somebody invaded his space without having any right to it.

From the reader’s point of view, the office allows us to witness their ways of communicating with each other at work. The working conditions in the law office are undesirable and produce a feeling of misery rather than well-being:

I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy back-yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above [...]. Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. (1098)

The lawyer isolates Bartleby from the world by placing him facing the walls; the lawyer actually isolates him before he seeks isolation. The lawyer uses the walls in order to protect his own fragile character. The wall is defined as a solid structure which is meant to defend, separate, hold back and divide. Even the side-window is so small and insignificant

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 17.

that cannot help Bartleby escape his total isolation. In order to remove him completely from his sight, the lawyer uses a folding screen, which makes Bartleby isolated, though available at any time. Marvin Fisher argues that the Wall Street office is a “microscopic representation of a simpler but similarly structured segment of American society,”<sup>23</sup> where Bartleby is a sort of Xerox machine working in a place that limits his freedom of choice and hope:

To Bartleby—who secures employment as a legal copyist, a sort of animated Xerox machine duplicating the documents that reinforce and perpetuate the status-quo—the office seems a dead-end existence, denying his unique human individuality, curtailing his freedom of choice, and corroborating his hopelessness. His withdrawal from what his employer would judge to be socially productive activity into his “dead-wall revery” is Bartleby’s resentful confirmation of the gross inequities and subtle inequities of an existence that is servile at best and imprisoning at worst.<sup>24</sup>

Bartleby’s isolation is an illustration of the Marxist concept of alienation due to industrial employment in a burgeoning America, where, for the sake of productive activities, individuals were given too little space and attention, leading to estrangement and isolation. In Bartleby’s case, his entrapment leads to failure of communication, and the walls become more rigid and inescapable.

Even though the narrator isolates Bartleby, Bartleby brings the isolation upon himself and starts living an abnormal life. He even refuses to eat by saying that: “I prefer not to dine to-day. It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners.” (1116) His refusal to eat is actually his refusal to work. The lawyer is simply amazed by Bartleby’s refusal to do anything, even eat or find a place to live. Throughout the story, Bartleby simply exists; he does do some writing, but eventually he even gives it up in favour of staring at the wall and making everyone think that he is unreasonable and impertinent.

Bartleby’s lack of involvement and responsibility at work determine his boss to take radical measures, such as moving his office and giving up Bartleby. So far he has been quite tolerant regarding Bartleby’s attitude, but little by little he will realize that nothing will change his passive resistance. It is obvious that Bartleby shows clear symptoms of depression by refusing to work and to involve himself in the office’s duties. His tendency is to become increasingly more withdrawn and less mobile. When Bartleby is threatened with imprisonment, the lawyer makes the ultimate act of charity towards him, by inviting Bartleby to stay in his own home; but Bartleby refuses it and continues haunting the office. In making

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<sup>23</sup> Marvin Fisher, 181.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

use of the private property—first sleeping in the office and then lodging there—strikes at the heart of the system and makes the narrator feel weak and lose his authority.

Even when imprisoned, his resistance is perceived as a way of rejecting help from the humans and keeps condemning himself to death as a way of escaping the world. Bartleby leaves himself open to isolation by not fitting into society; isolation is dangerous for any human being, it can drive a person mad or even lead to suicide.

Bartleby seems very isolated, he is facing walls and they stand for Bartleby's isolation from society. He isolates himself and permits the others to isolate him from society. Bartleby is meaningless, entrapped in a prison of dull routine and meaningless activity. He is not forced to do the job of a copyist. It is Bartleby himself who asked for the job and we can conclude that he is not capable of greater works. Bartleby's preference for not correcting copies corresponds to Melville's preference for not correcting proof.

As a human being, Bartleby prefers solitude, he shows signs of being mentally unbalanced and he is inclined towards suicide. As a scrivener, he stands for the writer in America and Wall Street for the capitalistic system in which the scrivener tries to survive his pitiful condition. His humble position as a copyist who had nothing to say for himself was meant to stand for the typical American writer who was capable to achieve much more but did not dare to fight for his autonomy in a capitalistic system. In Melville's narrative, the social system has its traditions, laws, penalties and rewards, and everything functions under the guidance of the utilitarian philosophy. The one responsible for this system, in our case, is the tender-hearted lawyer, who has chosen comfort and tranquillity in order to perform his duties. But his peaceful expectations are shaken by the presence of the cadaverous Bartleby who prefers to die rather than to compromise and enjoy whatever life offers him.

The lawyer's middle-class, comfortable lifestyle makes him insensitive to the frustration of his employees Turkey and Nippers, who have to perform a low paid job which is dull and makes them behave strangely. The lawyer does not realize that Turkey's drinking and Nipper's irritability might be the result of the conditions of the working environment. The amount of their work could make them want to find escape in other activities so that they have a good excuse for not performing their duties.

The hierarchical distribution of labour in his office shows us the authority that the lawyer manifests over his employees, authority that the lawyer has got due to the economic system of a capitalistic society. In the essay "Melville's Doctrine of Assumption: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in "Bartleby,"" Kuebrich notes:

[...] the hierarchical distribution of labor in his office, which relegates the clerks to copying his documents and promptly performing his behests, is a social construct deriving from an economic system that invests employers with virtually unlimited power over their wage-dependent employees.<sup>25</sup>

The lawyer, being aware of his power and dominance over his employees, tends to take advantage of his position by using it as the natural order, where the employer is in charge with decisions and everyone around has to fulfil their amount of duties under some kind of pressure that usually makes the working conditions stressful. After Bartleby's refusal to copy, the lawyer, through his official commitment to democratic values, feels entitled to exercise his despotic powers in the working place. It is the lawyer's status that defines his authority over his employees, a pride that makes him powerful and yet weak when it comes to Bartleby. His Christian feelings and the Christian commandment to love one's neighbour makes the lawyer perceive Bartleby in a different way, even though he refuses to cooperate. Guilt and remorse make the lawyer willing to rescue Bartleby from his death, even though, at the risk of diminishing his economic interests, the lawyer is ready to offer Bartleby his home as a place to live, being aware of sharing everything as a good and loving Christian.

The fact that the lawyer constantly tries to care for Bartleby, leads us to the conclusion that he is a virtuous man and a good Christian, whose intentions towards his employee are in a way dictated by his desire to help and not by his capitalist goal. The lawyer's generosity and his virtuous character are reflected in his decision to pay Bartleby's salary and to help him even after he has stopped working. Taking into consideration that the motor of capital is based on the systematic exploitation of the worker to produce surplus, the lawyer fails to be accused of being a typical heartless capitalist. He does not take his decision according to the capitalist rules; his decision has been based on the individual's personal characteristics.

Accepting his role as a provider, the lawyer manifests a virtuous humility: "[...] Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom." (1111) He acknowledges that, after all, his mission in this world is to provide an office-room for Bartleby and to accommodate him as long as he wishes to remain there. The lawyer might have developed a so-called "capitalist compassion" as Kuebrich argues in his essay. His charity might have helped him to increase his personal security, to strike his vanity and to insure efficiency in the office. Kuebrich also stresses that Melville's point is not that the lawyer is seen as a hypocrite as long as hypocrisy

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<sup>25</sup> David Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumption: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in "Bartleby", [http://www.jstor.org/stable/366781?seq=13#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/366781?seq=13#page_scan_tab_contents).

implies conscious deception. Melville perceives the lawyer as self-deceived by the moral categories developed by the nineteenth-century U.S Christian culture, a Christian culture that has tried to accommodate itself to capitalism. In a culture organized in terms of self-interest, the lawyer reflects the assumption of a culture guided by and devoted to traditional values, a culture in the pursuit of self-interest that is based on the exploitation of others.

In American society, where expectations are so high and promise is so great, Bartleby “lapses into lethargy, flouts the obligations of a work-money-property-oriented society, stubbornly asserts the negative aspects of his freedom of will, and in abandoning the world of social affairs and human relationships, seems to will his withdrawal from life itself.”<sup>26</sup> Bartleby finds no fulfilment in life as long as he is trapped within the physical and social division of the Wall Street office. With his refusal to leave, Bartleby seems to terrorize the Wall Street establishment, and his behaviour can be seen as an act of contempt for the norms of a society oriented to property and profit.

Even if the lawyer in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” had proved a genuine compassion, he could not have solved Bartleby’s problem. The same thing happens in *Bleak House*, where John Jarndyce, the master of Bleak House, the kind, warm and generous guardian, is not able to save Richard. Both stories deal with the injuries suffered by a class of people and injuries done to an ideology that masks injustice in a society that lacks structural reform and a new set of assumptions about the normal ordering of society. Those responsible for maintaining order and justice lack intellectual honesty, moral values and the courage to respond to the demands of justice. The moment they stop treating people as commodities and recognize them as human beings is the moment when the heartlessness of capitalism ceases to exist.

Besides the injuries done by a society whose emphasis was on the capitalist working life, the similarity between the existential adventure Melville projects in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and the sense of entrapment in the desire to escape from a flawed condition in *Bleak House*, are worth mentioning.

Bartleby is the symbol of the alienated worker who despairs of the possibility of major change in the wage-labour system. Bartleby, as the product of the 1850s, is the perfect example of Marx’s alienated worker; he is more machine than human and he stands for the American man who lives in modern society characterized by anxiety and depression. Bartleby stands for the man going through male crisis in a capitalist culture, an office-based culture which does not enable too much human contact and emotions. It is an environment deprived

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<sup>26</sup> Fisher, 183.



of feelings, a sterile environment that limits worker's possibilities and needs to be humanized. If all of man's functions, relations, needs and activities are reduced to a non-human level, the individual loses his freedom and the desire to live.

# Bleak House and Its Alienated Universe

Charles Dickens is well-known for his skills in analysing Victorian society and a keen observer of his society. The novel *Bleak House* is meant to attack specific abuses and to understand the nature and structure of a whole society. The greatness of the novel lies in the author's ability to reveal the reality of his society and in his critical approach towards a corrupted and abused society. As Jeremy Hawthorne points out, *Bleak House* is remarkable also because "not only is it critical of evangelical piety and of the Law, but it also shows how human beings were stunted and deformed by this society."<sup>27</sup>

It is still believed that the traditional culture of the English people was disintegrated and broken due to the Industrial Revolution. The result was the appearance of commercial culture on one hand,

a debased synthetic culture—the world of newspapers and popular entertainment; on the other hand an increasingly threatened minority culture—an educated tradition within which the finest literature and thought of the time sought to maintain and extend itself and to keep its connections, its continuities, with the best work of the past.<sup>28</sup>

Dickens tried to reflect the reality of his Victorian society, and whose people, belonging to different levels of society, could be seen in connection with his characters. *Bleak House* shows industrial society as an oppressive system to the individuals within it, and which manages to turn these individuals into machines, objects or things. It is exactly what happens in Dickens's novels: the Victorian society turns human beings into objects and gives human characteristics to abstract institutions or physical objects. It is quite customary that Dickens's characters are often portrayed as products of the profession they follow and they are identified with their trade. The increasing separation of 'home' from 'work' tended to worry many Victorians, and this can be seen as a sign of alienation of man in Victorian society.

Dickens portrays a society in which the law is attacked and criticized, but nobody seems to be punished for abusing and not respecting its rules. Dickens saw abuses and wanted to reform them. His morality and his social criticism are very well pointed out in his novels, together with the haunting isolation of a desperate society trapped in endless cases. This human drama, rooted and acted through, is inescapable.

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<sup>27</sup> Jeremy Hawthorne, *Bleak House* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 16.

<sup>28</sup> Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), 28.

Dickens was familiar with the abuses of the court of Chancery, political misgovernment, the establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England (the year before he began to write *Bleak House*), the “Telescopic philanthropy” and the London slums. They were public issues in 1851 and neither of them were new to Dickens. These public issues formed the true historical background to *Bleak House* which is considered the first of Dickens’s “dark period” novels. As Graham Storey states, Dickens was also intellectually influenced by the writings of Thomas Carlyle, especially by *Chartism* (1840) and *Past and Present* (1843). Carlyle was preoccupied with the industrialisation which he called “Condition-of-England question” in his writings, where he criticized the materialist philosophy of utilitarianism which became the dominant mode of consciousness of the Victorian era.<sup>29</sup>

The way Dickens deals with these issues shows his anger and frustration with the system. He uses irony which is characteristic to the third-person narrator in order to mask his anger and irritation. As Graham Storey points out in the chapter “Bleak House: the background,” the novel is pervaded by irony and “the title *Bleak House* itself is surely a parody of the major English event of 1851, the Great Exhibition: the grim reality beneath the materialistic complacency, the boasted ‘commerce of all nations.’”<sup>30</sup>

The opening chapter, “In Chancery”, introduces us immediately in *media res*: the novel spins around the High Court of Chancery, the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce that has been heard for many years by the Lord Chancellor and the abuses made by Chancery, like “trickery, evasion, procrastination, spoliation, botheration, under false pretences of all sorts” [...] or as Jarndyce puts it,

Shirking and sharking, in all their many varieties, have been sown broadcast by the ill-fated cause; and even those who have contemplated its history from the outmost circle of such evil, have been insensibly 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. (*Bleak House*, 15)

All these abuses had been a target for reformers and it had become a major national issue in 1851. As Graham Storey states, Carlyle had described in *Past and Present* the despair and disappointment of a Chancery client in order to show the futility of the administrative system. What Dickens did was to take the institution and make it the symbol of universal corruption, as well as underlying the abuses the Court of Chancery stands for.

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<sup>29</sup> Graham Storey, “Bleak House: the background” in *Charles Dickens: Bleak House* (Cambridge: University Press, 1987), 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

As the first word of the novel is “London,” we are immediately introduced in the atmosphere of the capital city. The city seems central to the story and it has specific characteristics that are accentuated in order to underline the picture of a rotten and filthy city:

LONDON. [...]. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, [...]. 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. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horse, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if the day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest. (11)

It is the London of the Law where the Lord Chancellor, Britain's highest legal office presides over an incompetent, inert and indifferent bureaucracy. It is the place where Jarndyce estate lies. It is a London full of physical filth and *Bleak House* is a metaphor for the filthy city. The London of *Bleak House* is made up of a variety of characters which represent the whole range of the social system. As F.S. Schwarzbach points out, “the city of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is a cancerous wen, which threatens to engulf the world and perhaps extinguish human life altogether.”<sup>31</sup>

Dickens was very good at using details while describing things. He was very accurate in order to reveal the real atmosphere of the city: the weather, the people and animals, the places together with the fog and the mud are part of the everyday life and symbolises a commonplace for a Londoner of 1851. The mud that covers the city threatens to dissolve everything that comes into contact with; the smoke transforms itself into rain of blackness, making the sun disappear and giving the feeling of the apocalypse. Law and mud are in a way connected in the same way money is connected to legal profession. Mud is described as increasing as well as money is described as dominating the novel. They seem to be related in the way that they both are present and dominate the life of the characters, where mud reflects the dull and filthy atmosphere of the novel.

The mud of the mid-century novel was totally different from what mud means today. Mud was made up of soot and ashes, litter from the streets and often fecal matter of the horses

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<sup>31</sup> F.S. Schwarzbach, “*Bleak House: Homes for Homeless*” in *Dickens and the City* (London: University of London, 1979), 114.

which covered transportation in London at that period. Due to bad drainage in the city, the cause of disease and infection increased constantly. Dickens was aware of it and he became engaged in the public struggle to improve sanitation, even though by the time *Bleak House* was being written, nothing of the kind had been accomplished. His involvement in the sanitary movement was reflected in several articles on social matters, but his frustration at the failure of sanitary reform can be traced in the detailed description of the first chapter, “In Chancery.”

Dickens managed to show a realistic picture of the city by paying attention to details. With its muddy streets and fog everywhere, the scene culminates with the description of the Lord High Chancellor who sits in Lincoln’s Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog,

with a foggy glory round his head, softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains, addressed by a large advocate with great whiskers, a little voice, and an interminable brief, and outwardly directing his contemplation to the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog. (12)

Dickens’s originality lies in his ability to dramatize social institutions which are not part of the ordinary physical observation. He presents them as if they were natural phenomena or persons. In our case, *Bleak House* stands for a portrayal of a system, of the entire society. The first chapter draws on Dickens’ social criticism and makes the reader acquainted with the book’s main theme, the ruin that Chancery Court has caused and will continue to affect people’s lives.

If mud appears in the first paragraph, the second paragraph is dominated by fog.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. [...]; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little ‘prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all around them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds. (11)

The main effect of the passage is that of estrangement: the dull and strange atmosphere of the passage is coloured by fog and its intensity is suffocating for all who come in contact with it. Fog isolates people from the city and makes them feel like they are living in a balloon. Mud

and fog are both dirty, making an unpleasant and uncomfortable atmosphere, causing depression and irritation among inhabitants.

London is described through an image of a dense black cloud that hangs over the city, a cloud that makes impossible any sort of relation between people; people are not supposed to interact with each other, they are meant to live in the darkness, in the obscurity, in the fog. It looks like there is no escape from it and they are destined to live without seeing or paying attention to what happens around or to the needs of the others around them. Blindness is a form of surviving, of living in acceptance with the actual state. Human and moral relationships suffer from being blind and society develops an unnatural environment.

In a foggy environment, people and objects get isolated. Fog separates individuals and stops them to connect. J. Hillis Miller points out the effect of blindness that fog can create: “The fog, a fog is both a physical mist and a spiritual blindness, forms an opaque barrier between any one place and any other.”<sup>32</sup> Fog swallows everything; fog creates blindness, confusion and isolation, three important things that describe the whole atmosphere of the novel. Due to the fact that fog dominates the opening paragraphs, the novel implies the idea of general paralysis. As Miller states, “the novel presents the corpse of a dead society, smothered in fog, immobilized in mud, paralyzed by the injustices of an outmoded social structure frozen in its stratifications, and enmeshed in the nets of inextricably tangled legal procedures.”<sup>33</sup>

If we look at the opening paragraphs, we will notice that they are characterised by an interesting contrast. As Jeremy Hawthorn points out in the chapter “Reading ‘Bleak House,’” there are two levels: a grammatical and a symbolic one. It looks like the sentences contain no verbs on the grammatical level; everything is disconnected and “we are given a statement-like phrases with no explicit grammatical indication of the nature of the connection between them.” (63) The beginning of the novel is made up of a succession of things that have no connection to each other.

If we are to pay attention to the symbolic level, we get a different idea: things are related and they belong to the same common area, where the mud on the streets and the smoke made up of soot belong to the central theme of *Bleak House*: isolation and alienation. Even though things seem separated, at a second analysis everything is related to everything else. I think Dickens was aware of these things and he wanted us to perceive *Bleak House* in

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<sup>32</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), 163.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

terms of isolation and alienation, but at the same time there is this unity that makes everything appear as a whole.

Dickens reveals his frustrations concerning the English legal system in Victorian era. Instead of helping and serving the people, it looked as though the legal system of that period served only itself with the help of bureaucracy. Jarndyce and Jarndyce is the main lawsuit of *Bleak House*, and it has been tied up in the Court of Chancery for years. Dickens also mocks the Court of Chancery by focusing on its inefficiency, uselessness and the kind of institution which wastes time and money and pushes people to commit suicide.

After the foggy and muddy atmosphere that penetrates the city, London's Chancery Court is presented in the beginning of the chapter in connection with its ruined suitors, the Man from Shropshire and Miss Flite, characters meant to be mocked at by the lawyers' clerks and in connection with the Jarndyce case itself:

Innumerable children have been born into the cause; innumerable young people have married into it; innumerable old people have died out of it. Scores of persons have deliriously found themselves made parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, without knowing how or why; whole families have inherited legendary hatreds with the suit. [...]. Fair wards of court have faded into mothers and grandmothers; a long procession of Chancellors has come in and gone out; the legions of bills in the suit have been transformed into mere bills of mortality; there are not three Jarndyces left upon the earth perhaps, since old Tom Jarndyce in despair blew his brain out at a coffee-house in Chancery lane; but Jarndyce and Jarndyce still drags its dreary length before the Court, perennially hopeless. (14)

As F.R. and Q.D. Leavis point out in *Dickens the Novelist*, the novel is a sort of attack on the law's delays and reflects the author's indignation towards the system of that period, being characteristically called a "muddled piece of indignation" (172). It looks like the name "jarndyce" was the old-fashioned pronunciation of "jaundice" (173) and the Jarndyce case stands for the case of man in Victorian society. Lawyer's fees and the Court Chancery's costs have almost ruined Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The case has gone on for years and it has become so complicated "that no man alive knows what it means." (*Bleak House*, 14) Instead of revealing justice and clarity in its workings, the court, together with the low, emanates fog that is meant to create confusion, make people feel depressed and lost in their world. We have the case of the prisoner and the man from Shropshire on one side, and the case of the mad woman on the other side. The way they are presented is just a way to underline and strengthen the idea that The High Court of Chancery represents an institution abusing the law, an institution that consumes the time and money of its petitioners who commit suicide at the end

because they cannot cope anymore with the system. With its endless cases and ruined suitors, The High Court of Chancery takes its victims and goes on without any remorse. People just need to accept their fate and cope with it if they can. Their fate is already destined from the beginning and there is no escape for those coming into contact with the system: ‘Suffer any wrong that can be done to you, rather than come here!’ (*Bleak House*, 13) As F.R. and Q.D. Leavis state,

The novel is to demonstrate its heartlessness, its tragedies, its self-defeating wastefulness, its absurdities and contradictions, to enquire into the possibilities of goodness in such an environment, and whether anything in the nature of free-will is possible for those born in it. (174)

The greatness and the importance of the Court of Chancery dominate the first chapter. Dickens uses long sentences in order to describe its importance and greatness in the Victorian society. It is a strong institution which uses its power to manipulate and abuse the citizens:

This is the Court of Chancery; which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the round of every man’s acquaintance; [...]; which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope; so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart; that there is not an honorable man among its practitioners who would not give—who does not often give the warning, ‘Suffer any wrong that can be done to you, rather than come here!’ (13)

In his essay, Robert E. Lougy underlines the idea of filth in *Bleak House*, taking the form of excrement, mud, ooze and corpses: “Things in *Bleak House* are variously slimy, sticky, runny-oozing through the crevasses and crack of a decaying world whose surface has been pockmarked by escaping gases and viscous liquids of putrefaction.”<sup>34</sup>

The Court of Chancery represented a useful system once, but has perverted all its principles in the meantime. Instead of making light on the cases brought before it, it obscures and ruins lives. Instead of serving people, it destroys their lives through its power and abuses. Chancery is like a labyrinth: difficult to get out of it once you got involved with it; it chases every opportunity to destroy a new life.

*Bleak House* is described as parasitic, both through the institution, the Court of Chancery, and also through the lawyers that are particularly targeted in the novel. As Anders

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<sup>34</sup> Robert E. Lougy. “Filth, Liminality, and Abjection in Charles Dickens’s “*Bleak House*”” *ELH*, 69. 2 (2002): 477. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/30032028?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30032028?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)



M. Gullestad argues in his dissertation, the novel offers several characters “whose only goal seems to bleed their clients dry of all their resources.”<sup>35</sup> Lawyers like Mr. Tulkinghorn and Mr. Vholes represent the Court of Chancery with all its abuses and corruption. Mr. Vholes is responsible for ruining Richard Carstone’s life, making him haunting the court day after day, “worn and haggard” (*Bleak House*, 865), hoping for truth and justice.

The world of *Bleak House* is chaotic, discontinuous, isolated and difficult to penetrate and

It is made up of sudden jumps, without transition, from one self-enclosed space-time, filled up with characters in action, to another unrelated one. Together, all these space-times make up a conglomeration of fragmentary human bric-a-brac which does not cohere into a significant totality.<sup>36</sup>

And together with isolation, the world of *Bleak House* produces dehumanization and alienation. Everything is doomed to physical and spiritual paralysis and the suitors in Chancery are kept in a self-absorbed suffering, putting their hope in the final settlement of their cases. The paralysis that seems to possess the world of *Bleak House* has a tendency to decompose its universe. In contact with Chancery, everything seems to be transformed in dust, like the lives of its suitors in their fight with the system. By making almost all the characters engaged in an endless suit in Chancery, Dickens criticizes a system that has gradually caused exhaustion and death.

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<sup>35</sup> Anders M. Gullestad, “Herman Melville and the Fruits of Parasitism: Feedings on Others in *Typee*, “Bartleby,” and *The Confidence-Man*” (PhD diss., University of Bergen, 2014), 87.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, 180.

# **The Court of Chancery and its victims: Richard, Miss Flite, Mr. Gridley and Jo**

Richard Carstone is characterized by having the qualities of a young, optimistic and enthusiastic person. In spite of these qualities, he seems to lack responsibility and maturity. He is one of the victims of Chancery and he is aware of it even from the beginning, and he admits it in front of his cousin Ada: “We are never to get out of Chancery” (61). He is one of Jarndyce’s pupils who fears the worst: to be caught in a self-destructive system that threatens his youth and his future. In this corrupted society, he becomes a victim due to his vulnerability and it ends by being alienated and eventually dies. At the centre of his alienation lies the Court of Chancery represented by Jarndyce. It is Jarndyce himself who admits that it is not Richard’s fault, but the fault belongs to Jarndyce and Jarndyce: “He is not to blame. Jarndyce and Jarndyce has warped him out of himself, and perverted me in his eyes. I have known it do as bad deeds, and worse, many a time” (517).

Richard, the naïve person at the beginning of the novel, starts understanding the system and begins doubting his guardian’s professionalism. Jarndyce is aware that Richard cannot rely on him anymore and admits that “Rick mistrusts and suspects me. Hears I have conflicting interests; claims clashing against his, and what not.” (517) Jarndyce seems willing to intervene to help Richard pay his debt, even though the case is already lost:

I would rather restore to poor Rick his proper nature, than be endowed with all the money that dead suitors, broken, heart and soul, upon the wheel of Chancery, have left acclaimed with the Accountant-General-and that’s money enough, my dear, to be cast into a pyramid, in memory of Chancery’s transcendant wickedness. (517)

For Esther’s sake, Jarndyce tries to play innocent and pretends to be sympathetic with Richard, who, “with a troop of fine fresh hearts, like his,” (517) must not be blamed:

It is a terrible misfortune, little woman, to be ever drawn within the influences of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. I know none greater. By little and little he has been induced to trust in that rotten reed, and it communicates some portion of its rottenness to everything around him. But again, I say, with all my soul, we must be patient with poor Rick, and not blame him. (517)

As Jarndyce himself admits, he knows nothing more important than the Court of Chancery, with its rotten system that manages to manipulate people and which does not assume the consequences that cost people’s lives most of the time. “In any case we must not

be hard on him”, that is the guardian’s advice to Esther. “There are not many grown and matured men living while we speak, good men too, who, if they were thrown into this same court as suitors, would not be vitally changed and depreciated within three years-within two-within one.” (518) Jarndyce is also wondering how a young man like Richard could have been so unfortunate and naïve concerning the Chancery which everybody knows that “it procrastinates, disappoints, tries, tortures him; wears out his sanguine hopes and patience, thread by thread; but he still looks to it, and hankers after it, and finds his whole world treacherous and hollow.” (518)

In talking about Richard, Beth F. Herst states that Richard’s selfhood tends to be destroyed by the influence of a corrupted society: “What Richard presents is a virtual paradigm of selfhood undermined and, ultimately, destroyed by the influence of a society seen here as corrupting no less than corrupt, and one moreover that is inescapably so.”<sup>37</sup> Richard seems destined to self-destruction and the way he is described in connection with the corrupted society represented by Chancery implies his fatal course. Together with Esther, they represent social victims and the source for their estrangement lies in the irresponsibility and the indifference of the institutions which are responsible for creating a deadly place for their customers. “We are never to get out of Chancery!” (60), says Richard in a cheerful voice to Ada, as if he was aware of his entrapment.

The discussion between Jarndyce and Esther comes to strengthen the idea that there is an inescapable liaison between social causes and personal effect:

How much of this indecision of character, Mr Jarndyce said to me, is chargeable on that incomprehensible heap of uncertainty and procrastination on which he has been thrown from his birth, I don’t pretend to say; but that Chancery, among its other sins, is responsible for some of it, I can plainly see. It has engendered or confirmed in him a habit of putting off-and trusting to this, that, and the other chance, without knowing what chance-and dismissing everything as unsettled, uncertain and confused. The character of much older and steadier people may be even changed by the circumstances surrounding them. It would be too much to expect that a boy’s, in its formation, should be the subject of such influences, and escape them. (180)

There seems to be no chance to escape for Richard as long as he is destined to go through the awful misfortunes of his birth. Even though he is young and he might have a chance to try to escape, he looks too weak in order to fight against the corrupted system.

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<sup>37</sup> Beth F. Herst, “The Dickens Hero and the Social Cause: *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*” in *The Dickens Hero: Selfhood and Alienation in the Dickens World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 71.

Richard's first encounter with the Court of Chancery seems to disturb him, by giving him headaches and heartaches at the same time:

To see that composed Court yesterday jogging on so serenely, and to think of the wretchedness of the pieces on the board, gave me headache and heartache both together. My head ached with wondering how it happened, if men were neither fools nor rascals; and my heart ached to think they could possibly be either. (72)

The discrepancy between what Richard sees and what the reality is, makes him feel suspicious about the professionalism and the integrity of such institution as the Court. He discovers little by little that his youth, innocence and hope are destroyed by the disease of Chancery which contaminates everybody's souls.

Even though the presence of the Court of Chancery is felt almost everywhere and it does not stop making its victims, the ignorance that floats around it shows how easily anyone can become a possible victim any time. John Jarndyce's warning to Richard against trusting the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce underlines his fear of it:

'Rick, Rick!' cried my guardian, with a sudden terror in his manner, and in an altered voice, and putting up his hands as if he would have stopped his ears, 'for the love of God, don't found a hope or expectation on the family curse! Whatever you do on this side the grave, never give one lingering glance towards the horrible phantom that has haunted us so many years. Better to borrow, better to beg, better to die!' (359)

It is indeed a warning worth paying attention to, a warning that Richard seemed to ignore even though his guardian was trying to give him strong words of advice. Mr Jarndyce also thinks that Richard should be more careful while venturing in the race of life, while Richard seems too confident in himself and too proud to listen to his guardian's preaches. He is but a novice in life and his character does not fit the frame shaped by Chancery.

Esther's description of Richard's character comes in contradiction with the sickness of the soul caused by the disease of Chancery that poisons the mind and soul. Richard's generosity, frankness, courage and gentility are underlined by Esther as a sort of admiration for his friend, qualities common for a young and inexperienced man:

I believe Richard's was as frank and generous a nature as there possibly can be. He was ardent and brave, and, in the midst of all his wild restlessness, was so gentle, that I knew him like a brother in a few weeks. His gentleness was so natural to him, and would have shown itself, abundantly, even without Ada's influence; but, with it, he became one of the most winning of companions, always so ready to be interested, and always so happy, sanguine, and light-hearted. (128)

All these qualities, together with his education make him appear smart and ready to cope with the system. He has spent eight years in learning to make Latin verses, and, as Esther describes it, his education proved its futility eventually because Richard's mind had already been poisoned by the mentality of a rotten society, even from a very early phase of his development as a person: "He had been adapted to the Verses, and had learnt the art of making them to such perfection, that if he had remained at school until he was of age, I suppose he could only have gone on making them over again, unless he had enlarged his education by forgetting how to do it." (180) In fact, Richard lacks the ability to understand his role in society and the way the system functions. He has actually never been taught how to deal with the society he lives in and how to protect himself from the damage the system might do to him. He seems so innocent and naïve that he does not appreciate the real value of money and its importance for the world of Chancery. His carelessness about money and the way he justifies himself when he talks about money prove his extravagance: "I have got ten pound more than I expected to have, and consequently I can afford to spend it without being particular." (127).

Richard's deterioration and the weakness of his character are revealed step by step: his carelessness over money and his inability to find himself a profession, they all contribute to his decline. The most obvious and painful sign of Richard's decline is his estrangement from his benefactor, John Jarndyce, that he blames for his suffering as well. In his conversation with Esther, Jarndyce seems to be aware of this fact:

'Dear, unfortunate, mistaken Richard,' [said Esther]. 'When will he awake from his delusion!' 'He is not the way to do so now, my dear,' replied my guardian. 'The more he suffers, the more averse he will be to me: having made me the principal representative of the great occasion of his suffering.' (848-849)

Richard Carstone's case denotes how a man is gradually devoured by Chancery, until he dies. He is one of those who have become entangled in the court procedures and who has wasted his life in the hope for justice. He has spent his youth in court until he ruined himself and lost his hope: "There is a ruin of youth which is not like age: and into such a ruin, Richard's youth and youthful beauty had all fallen away." (856)

As we have seen so far, Richard is the central victim of Chancery. Together with the half-crazed Miss Flite and the maddened and ruined Mr. Gridley, the crossing sweeper Jo, they stand for the victims symbolizing different layers of society, from the rich ones to the poor and hopeless ones. As Richard's deterioration is described both internally and externally, the other two victims are presented differently. Miss Flite is first introduced in chapter three,

“A Progress”, and she seems mad and strange to Richard; she is a strange mixture of realism and fantasy, an omen, and perhaps their first meeting is not at random, she actually foresees Richard’s fate. Her appearance “in a squeezed bonnet, and carrying a reticule,” “with an air of great ceremony” (43), is almost seen like unreel, making her look like a fantasy character who meets some children in the wood. Half-delusional and faithful to the Court of Chancery by waiting for the Jarndyce judgement in the court, she sees in Richard, Ada and Esther the next possible victims of Chancery and she warns them: “‘O!’ said she. ‘The wards in Jarndyce! Ve-ry happy, I am sure, to have the honour! It is good omen for youth, and hope, and beauty, when they find themselves in this place, and don’t know what’s to come of it.’” (43) Her warning is in vain because Richard thinks she is mad, even though she tries to convince them about her experience with Chancery:

‘Right! Mad, young gentleman,’ she returned so quickly that he was quite abashed. ‘I was a ward myself. I was not mad at that time,’ curtsying low, and smiling between every little sentence. ‘I had youth, and hope. I believe, beauty. It matters very little now. Neither of the three served, or saved me. I have the honour to attend court regularly. With my documents. I expect a judgment. Shortly. On the Day of Judgment. I have discovered that the sixth seal mentioned in the Revelations\* is the Great Seal. It has been open a long time! Pray accept my blessing.’ (43)

Miss Flite, who once used to be young, beautiful and optimistic, is now entrapped in Chancery’s web. She was a ward too and she had all the qualities one could have to succeed in life. But none of these qualities seemed to help her when it came to justice. She has now become an old lady, and every time she meets new people, she introduces herself as one of the suitors who has attended court regularly in the hope for justice: “A suitor, my child. At your service. I have the honour to attend court regularly. With my documents.” (60) She has no family and she lives alone above Krook’s rag-and-bottle shop, which is called the Court of Chancery. Krook, the landlord whom Miss Flite calls ‘a little —M—, you know!’ (66), is known as the Lord Chancellor among the neighbours due to his obsession with Chancery documents. The room in which Miss Flite lives is large but sad and bare. From the top of the house, she can have a glimpse of the roof of Lincoln’s Inn Hall, which seems to be “her principal inducement” for residing here. Her only consolation has been living close to Lincoln’s Inn Hall and been able to admire it in the night, especially in the moonshine.

Even though her room was large and clean, it looked very bare. It contained a few pieces of furniture, old prints from books, of Chancellors and barristers and some work-bags containing documents. There was no sign of food, neither coal nor ashes in the grate. Her bare

room reflects her bare life with a simple goal that seemed almost impossible to accomplish: her hope for justice. She seemed to live a very simple life and her only concern seemed attending Chancery, as she confesses to the wards in Jarndyce:

I have lived here many years. I pass my days in court; my evenings and my nights here. I find the nights long, for I sleep but little, and think much. That is, of course, unavoidable; being in Chancery. I am sorry I cannot offer chocolate. I expect a judgment shortly, and shall then place my establishment on a superior footing. At present, I don't mind confessing to the wards in Jarndyce (in strict confidence), that I sometimes find it difficult to keep up a genteel appearance. I have felt the cold here. I have felt something sharper than cold. It matters very little. (66)

She has spent her whole life attending court. She has exhausted herself to the point that she is almost sleepless. She has lost her appetite and she does not pay too much attention to the way she looks, because the looks have never helped her or advantaged her when she needed them. She feels sorry that she cannot be a good hostess because she is too busy with the Court. She is confident about talking to the wards in the way that she identifies a lot with them, young and naïve as she once was. Her intention is perhaps to warn them about the problems they might come across as part of the “youthful parties in Jarndyce” (60), as she calls them. She has wasted her life and she does not want to see people suffering and wasting their lives as well. The cold she has felt describes the whole atmosphere that the Court of Chancery has created. It matters very little to her now because, even though she knows that her chances are reduced, she is not prepared to give up easily. As she admits, she has gone through an exhausting process where she needed to collect her thoughts and have a lot of patience: ‘The business of the day requires a great deal of thought. Chancery justice is so ve-ry difficult to follow.’ (60)

Miss Flite appears to be a strange creature; she has more than twenty bird-cages that she named Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon and Spinach. Some of the words she used to name her birds might symbolize her state of mind at the time she was dealing with Chancery justice. At the beginning she was young and full of hope and she thought she could deal with the situation; then she went from despair to madness, ending in poverty and ruin. Her obsession with Chancery is revealed by the use of names like Wigs and Jargon. The last two words, Gammon and Spinach seem to represent the fact that she has become like Krook, “a little —M—, you know.” The words have a powerful meaning and describe in a way her life up to now. As the birds are kept in

their cages, Miss Flite has her own cage: Chancery. She tells Esther that “there’s a dreadful attraction in the place. [...]. There’s a cruel attraction in the place. You can’t *leave* it. And you *must* expect.” (523) Chancery has driven her mad as it drives others in the novel, from Tom Jarndyce to Gridley, and Richard. But the fact that she is mad is testified by Esther’s comment on witnessing Chancery proceedings, that “there seemed to be no reality in the whole scene, except poor little Miss Flite, the madwoman, standing on a bench, and nodding at it.” (365)

She is alone, has no family and is trapped in the cage of Chancery for the rest of her life. On the contrary, her birds are trapped in cages until “judgment should be given” (67). Her intention is to restore them to liberty as soon as justice is done. By comparing their lives with Chancery proceedings, the conclusion is that Chancery proceedings are endless, while their lives, even her, are approaching the end: “Their lives, poor silly things, are so short in comparison with Chancery proceedings, that, one by one, the whole collection has died over and over again. I doubt, do you know, whether one of these, though they are all young, will live to be free!” (67). She still hopes, though, as they are young enough, that there might be a chance for them to live in order to free themselves from the cage, in the same way she expects to free herself from her own cage. But, at the end, she releases them, not because she has got her judgment at last, but due to the fact that the costs of Jarndyce and Jarndyce have swallowed up its entire estate.

According to Graham Storey, “little Miss Flite, with her fantasies, frames the novel: she is the embodiment, outside the narrative, of what Chancery *does* to people in terms of suffering and insanity.”<sup>38</sup> Miss Flite, as well as Bartleby, represents true examples of what society is capable of doing to people who do not have enough strength to overcome the injustice of a corrupted system. They both seem to go mad at the end and their fight with the system proved to be useless.

Besides Richard and little Miss Flite, Gridley is “a voice of terrible anger and terrible despair.”<sup>39</sup> He is Miss Flite’s counterpart, even though he does not want to identify himself with the little mad woman. Mr. Gridley, the man from Shropshire, used to go to the Court of Chancery for the past twenty-five years and brighten up their day with his jokes, while waiting for his case to be solved:

‘I have been dragged for five-and-twenty years over burning iron, and I have lost the habit of treading upon velvet. Go into the Court of Chancery yonder, and ask what is

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<sup>38</sup> Storey, *Charles Dickens: Bleak House*, 57.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.



one of the standing jokes that brighten up their business sometimes, and they will tell you that the best joke they have, is the man from Shropshire. I,' he said, beating one hand on the other passionately, 'am the man from Shropshire.' (230)

He has become a bitter man since the delay of the Chancery Court has destroyed the inheritance that belonged to him and his brother. Gridley had once explained to Jarndyce that it is not madness that makes him complaining about injustices made by the Court of Chancery, but it is rage that makes him behaving like the little mad woman, Miss Flite:

'Mr Jarndyce,' said Gridley, with a rough sort of salutation, 'you bear your wrongs more quietly than I can bear mine. More than that, I tell you—[...]—that if I took my wrongs in any other way, I should be driven mad! It is only by resenting them, and by revenging them in my mind, and by angrily demanding the justice I never get, that I am able to keep my wits together. It is only that!' (230)

As Garrett Stewart points out in his essay "The New Mortality of *Bleak House*" Gridley's

Monomaniacal railing against the Chancery octopus was not madness so much as a stay against it; it seemed to him all that separated him from his avoided counterpart, Miss Flite, and so he was entrapped by the paradox of a mind-destroying rage used to sustain his wits against idiocy: "There's nothing between doing it, and sinking into the smiling state of the poor little mad woman that haunts the Court."<sup>40</sup>

Even though he does not want to be identified with the mad woman, it seems that they both have spent almost all their lives waiting for the justice to be done. As he himself admits, "I was obliged to go into this accursed Chancery; I was forced there, because the law forced me, and would let me go nowhere else." (230) Dickens would warn them by saying: 'Suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!' (13). None of them would have gone into that if they had had the chance to avoid it. But they have been unjustly treated by "this monstrous system" (231), as Mr Jarndyce admits while trying to show his sympathy for Gridley's situation.

Gridley's explanation to John Jarndyce of what he has suffered shows his rage and despair: "'There again!' said Mr Gridley, with no diminution of rage. 'The system! I am told, on all hands, it's the system.'" (231) The angry repetition underlines his terrible despair and fury; he has finally come to realize that he represents the individual who is fighting against the system embodied by Chancery, and in fighting against it, he feels helpless. He looks desperate and he cannot stand it anymore; he has suffered enough because his whole estate,

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<sup>40</sup> Garrett Stewart, "The New Mortality of "Bleak House"" *ELH*. 45. 3 (1978 ): 460.  
[http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872647?seq=18#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872647?seq=18#page_scan_tab_contents).

left to him by his father, has gone in costs. He has reached the climax of despair because “the suit, still undecided, has fallen into rack, and ruin, and despair, with everything else—and here I stand, this day!” (231). He used to be “a good-enough-tempered man once” (232), but this endless case turned him into a man whose “violent gestures with which he accompanied what he said, were most painful to see” (230).

As some of the other victims of the Court, he lived in despair and fatigue, in a bare room, “partitioned off from the gallery with unpainted wood” (371). Like Miss Flite, his place is full of manuscript papers and with worn pens, denoting that he has been “dwelling on his grievances” (371) for some time. After using all his powers to fight against the system, he is approaching the end of life. The whole atmosphere suggests that his end is near, with the sun which was low, almost setting, “and its light came redly in above, without descending to the ground” (371). It looked like the sun was waiting for him to die in order to say goodbye, throwing its last ray upon him and his room. With no color in his face, dressed much the same as he used to, lay the man from Shropshire upon a plain canvas-covered sofa. The presence of Miss Flite with him in his last moments underlines the pattern of the final reunion of the two Chancery victims, watched by the third one, Richard: “Touching and awfully drawn together, he and the little mad woman were side by side, and, as it were, alone. She sat on a chair holding his hand, and none of us went close to them.” (371) His voice gradually faded and his anger, his strength and his resistance disappeared as well. The only thing that remained of him was “The faintest shadow of an object full of form and color, is such a picture of it, as he was of the man from Shropshire whom we had spoken with before.” (371)

Even when Gridley and Miss Flite share each other’s company and Gridley knows that their destiny is similar, he still refuses her blessing: “‘O no, Gridley!’ she cried, as he fell heavily and calmly back from before her. ‘Not without my blessing. After so many years!’” (373). Gridley is one of the Chancery victims and Dickens, through his character, strengthens his criticism of Chancery.

I cannot go on without mentioning Jo, the crossing-sweeper, who is part of the Chancery group of victims. Jo lives in a place called Tom-All-Alone’s, a place that comes in contrast with that of Chesney Wold. It is said that Dickens used “Tom-All-Alone’s” as a working title for *Bleak House*, due to his concern with the lack of sanitation. He showed great concern for the awful conditions of London’s slums and campaigned for their improvement. He criticized the courts and officials in “Tom-All-Alone’s,” where the never-ending litigations of a chancery case were responsible for its condition as a polluted slum.

Dickens dedicated a chapter to London slums, and as Graham Storey points out, Tom-All-Alone's is the place connected to isolation and alienation: "Tom-All-alone's, the London slum with its suggestive name that conjures up both isolation and alienation, is the physical centre of the disease at the heart of *Bleak House*."<sup>41</sup> A part of the chapter describes Tom-All-Alone's and describes Jo's crossing-sweeping day.

Dickens brings into attention the image of slums that becomes very powerful in the description of streets, "undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and corrupt water—though the roads are dry elsewhere—and reeking with such smell and sights that he, who has lived in London all his life, can scarce believe his senses." (*Bleak House*, 330-331) It is London, the city that is full of mud, the mud that covers both the streets and the souls of inhabitants. During the day, the slums produce an image of hell, while during the night, everything seems quiet and deserted:

Darkness rests upon Tom-all-alone's. Dilating since the sun went down last night, it has gradually swelled until it fills every void in the place. For a time there were some dungeon lights burning, as the lamp of Life burns in Tom-all-alone's, heavily, heavily, in the nauseous air, and winking—as that lamp, too, winks in Tom-all-alone's—at many horrible things. But they are blotted out. The moon has eyed Tom with a dull cold stare, as admitting some puny emulation of herself in his desert region unfit for life and blasted by volcanic fires; but she has passed on, and is gone. The blackest nightmare in the infernal stables gazes on Tom-all-alone's, and Tom is fast asleep. (654)

Jo, the sweeping boy, is part of this world; he stands at the very bottom of society as the representative of Tom-all-alone's, the world of pollution, crime and poverty in nineteenth century London. Tom-all-alone's is an emblem of the dangers of neglect and irresponsibility. Dirt, mud, disease, sewer-gas menace Tom-all-alone's:

There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. Verily, what with tainting, plundering and spoiling, Tom has its revenge. [...]; and in truth, it might be better for the national glory even that the sun should sometimes set upon the British dominions, than that it should ever rise upon so vile a wonder as Tom. (654-657)

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<sup>41</sup> Storey, 58.

Through Jo eyes, Dickens is able to present the quality of life among the poor. Jo is sick, miserable and lacks food. He has no guidance in life and he lives the way he thinks is good for him, most part in ignorance:

Jo sweeps his crossing all day long, unconscious of the link, if any link there be. He sums up his mental condition, when asked a question, by replaying that he 'don't know nothink.' He knows that it's hard to keep the mud off the crossing in dirty weather, and harder still to live by doing it. Nobody taught him, even that much; he found it out. (235)

The place he lives in is a place where decent people would not have been able to live due to precarious conditions; the place swarms with parasites and misery:

Jo lives—that is to say, Jo has not yet died—in a ruinous place, known to the like of him by the name of Tom-all-alone's. It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants, who, after establishing their own possession, took to letting them out in lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; (235-236)

Dickens gives a very detailed description of the place so that we can feel the atmosphere of the ruinous place, where people like Jo, the outcast of society, lives in poverty and starvation. With his gift for details, Dickens manages to make us feel how it would be like to live there, surrounded by parasites and breathing the contaminated air of a corrupted society.

Besides fog and mud, London has its ruined houses that shelter people in need for a place. The smell of death and decay hang over the town. Everything is black and there is no hope for a better life. It is a place where people seem isolated from reality, and the only one responsible for their isolation is the system which was not able to solve the problems due to corruption. Dickens stresses the social isolation that can also be responsible for individual's alienation in a society in which individuals are involved in endless cases with no positive solution, which leads to despair and death. It is a world where there is no hope, just the fear of being involved in an endless case which sucks the life out of you.

Joe is not only a simple sweeping boy, he is also a keen observer of the things and people he sees while doing his job. Even though he lacks education, he is not dumb; he is able to realize that the world he lives in is very different from the world of the middle-class people who attend church on Sundays and enjoy the benefits of a good life. He is also able to realize

the differences society has created, but his frustration is obvious when it comes to give a meaning to life in general:

It must be a strange state to be like Joe! 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! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, and to think (for perhaps Jo *does* think, at odd times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? (236)

Jo, the street urchin, inhabits the world of *Bleak House* within the fields of odor and dirt. He belongs to a group of people usually identified with dirt and rubbish. Jo is often associated with a parasite, living at the outskirts of London, in a ruinous place. He has no education, and society rejects him in a way; his inability to read and write does not allow him to attend church, or to read letters and newspapers. His skills are very limited and his horizon is limited as well. He plays the dumb character, who, unfortunately, did not have the chance to hope for a better life. He is quite aware of his place in the world of *Bleak House*. Rewarded for information with some leftover meat and a penny, he knows that he is valuable for some members of the middle class, only because he possesses some knowledge that they need:

And there he sits, munching and gnawing, and looking up at the great Cross on the summit of St Paul's Cathedral, glittering above a red and violet-tinted cloud of smoke. From the boy's face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city; so golden, so high up, so far out of the reach. There he sits, the sun going down, the river running fast, the crowd flowing by him in two streams—everything moving on to some purpose and to one end—until he is stirred up, and told to 'move on' too. (290-291)

His place in the universe of *Bleak House* makes him confused though; he is aware that his place is limited and he cannot live up to city's expectations. He is always on the move and in search for a new place that can give him some hope for a better day. Jo, the least socially significant of London's inhabitants, is one of the several characters in the story that Dickens uses to embody his compassion for the underprivileged in the Victorian society.

# The short story and the novel: similarities and differences

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” and *Bleak House* seem to share similarities in plot, characterization, and narrative modes. Both stories talk about lawyers, law-copyists, scriveners, plot of the mysterious death of a poor scrivener, and narrative modes characterized by grotesque humour and great wit. Even though Melville was already working on “Bartleby, the Scrivener” when *Bleak House* came out, there is an interesting coincidence in the fact that both authors decided to build their stories around the act of copying legal documents. Since Bartleby is Melville’s scrivener and the story spins around him, the copyists in *Bleak House*, Snagsby and Nemo play an important role as well. Mr. Snagsby, the owner of a law-stationery business, employs law-writers like Nemo in order to copy law documents.

Bartleby and Nemo seem to share almost the same destiny: they are both copyists and they both die in misery and poverty. Nemo (“nobody” in Latin), appears to be asleep but, in fact, he is discovered to be dead upon Tulkinghorn’s only visit to his room above Krook’s shop. Bartleby, as well, appears to be asleep but is discovered to be dead during the lawyer’s final visit in the Tombs. Even the lodgings of the two characters are very well related to each other: the New York City prison with obscuring walls is the extension of the lawyer’s office in Wall Street, whose walls stop communication and create frustration. Nemo lodges with Krook whose selfishness and indifference are the symbol for Chancery. In his turn, Bartleby shares the office with the lawyer who is also the symbol of the system. Both Nemo and Bartleby become victims of a heartless system which will fail to resolve and clarify difficult situations due to the lack of its efficiency. They both die in the end and Nemo is buried in the pauper’s cemetery, his body is lowered down “a foot or two” in a “hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who hang about official backstairs—would to Heaven they had departed!” (*Bleak House*, 165). Melville’s Bartleby, “strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones” (“Bartleby, the Scrivener”, 1117), looked almost asleep, but in fact he was dead. The way they choose to die is different, with Nemo dying of an overdose and Bartleby of starvation. None of them have chosen the easiest way, but I think that Bartleby’s refusal to eat denotes his refusal to live, while Nemo’s overdose might denote that he was not aware of the danger of taking drugs

and that he was not ready to die yet. Bartleby's dim eyes open might also suggest that he was not ready to part yet, but unfortunately he passed away. Both Bartleby and Nemo lack the characteristics of a developed human character, and throughout the story, they remain deplorable souls, isolated and alienated.

Another resemblance between the two stories can be seen in Bartleby's refusal "I would prefer not to" which is seen in Dickens and uttered by Jo in the form of "I don't know nothink." (236) Bartleby's refusal is perceived much stronger and shows his irrational side that can be seen as eccentricity or careless. His constant refusal throughout the story makes the lawyer indifferent, and at last Bartleby's punishment is conducted by the authorities. One can notice that Melville is touching the human side deeper than Dickens who is soft, mild and probably insecure.

Some critics have speculated about Hawthorne's negative influence on Dickens, especially when it comes to the lawyer Tulkinghorn and his motiveless desire to cause Lady Dedlock ill. In the book *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson*, Robert Weisbuch points out that besides the possibility of envy being the author's main goal, there is also the possibility that Dickens wanted to create "an Iago-like absence of motive."<sup>42</sup> Robert Weisbuch also points out that Melville, in "Bartleby", implicitly attacks Dickens's cowardly refusal to dig for disturbing, obscure truth. Melville has also sensed Hawthorne's positive influence on Dickens through the incorporation of Hawthornian elements, "which is friendly, not profound, uncompetitive, more than a footnote to literary history but a great deal less than a major event."<sup>43</sup> Melville, motivated by Dickens's borrowings from Hawthorne, searched deeper into life's sorrows of his characters through a short story, deeper than Dickens did over hundreds of pages in a very long novel.

Both Dickens and Melville attempt to make significant breakthroughs in narrative strategies. Dickens makes use of the double narrative technique in which the first and the third points-of-view alternate to tell the story, to complement each other so that the multiplying effect is achieved. Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" looks like an elaborate version of a single scene taken from Dickens' scenery in *Bleak House*. Melville uses the first-person narration to tell the story of a miserable copyist, who becomes a victim of a heartless system.

In Chapter Two of his book, Robert Weisbuch talks about the source of sorrow which is seen as ontological given in Melville's story, while in Dickens's story is seen as

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Weisbuch, "Melville's "Bartleby" and the Dead Letter of Charles Dickens" in *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., 1986), 40.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

epistemological: “[...], if one source of sorrow in Melville’s story is seen as an ontological given, another resides with human choice: it results from the epistemological cowardice of shallow men at work in a shallow system dependent upon unquestioning, unthinking obedience.”<sup>44</sup>

Through his Court of Chancery, a model of inefficiency and failure, Dickens attacks a system which has failed to resolve questions, giving no hope to citizens. Both in London and New York, Chancery is the court that judges inheritance. When Melville’s lawyer mentions at some time in the story that he had been appointed Master in Chancery in the State of New York, the connection between the two stories is immediately established. Both writers deal with law-copyists and their implications in a system that shows no mercy and creates an alienated environment. Even though the two stories seem to share many features, the difference lies in the fact that, while Melville had the courage to search deep in the social construct, Dickens never goes beneath to question the abyss of existence.

In opposition to *Bleak House* where we know the names of characters, the lawyer in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” sheds his identity. Melville’s lawyer is introduced to the reader mainly through his occupation which characterizes him and with which he identifies himself. The lack of a personal name suggests that he identifies himself with his occupation that he is proud of, and everybody who knows him considers him “an eminently *safe* man” (1093). The view from his Wall Street Office, which is not something to be envious for, characterizes his way of being and perceiving things: limited, dark and cold. We can say that he resembles the vampire-lawyer Mr. Vholes, who is also characterized by his lifeless way of being. Dressed in black, with a cadaverous look, he is

A sallow man with pinched lips that looked as if they were cold, a red eruption here and there upon his face, tall and thin, about fifty-years of age, high-shouldered, and stooping. Dressed in black, black-gloved, and buttoned to the chin, there was nothing so remarkable in him as a lifeless manner, and a slow fixed way [...]. (560)

Vholes is less powerful and less famous, but he resembles Tulkinghorn when it comes to bribery. He is constantly talking about his three daughters and his old father whom he helps: “I am a widower with three daughters—[...]—and my desire is so to discharge the duties of life as to leave them a good name.” (561) His concern is to provide a good life for his daughters, as he the only responsible for his family. He has no scruples and grabs his clients’

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 42.



money until they are broke. His greediness goes beyond his integrity when it comes to making money and fulfilling family's needs.

The office where Vholes works resembles in a way the office where Bartleby works. Vholes' office is "squeezed up in a corner, and blinks at a dead wall." (573) The clients, in order to get in touch with him, need to go through a dark passage that leads them to his office. His jet black door comes in contrast with the natural light of a midsummer morning. His chambers are small and narrow, that "one clerk can open the door without getting off his stool, while the other who elbows him at the same desk has equal facilities for poking the fire." (573) The atmosphere of the place is "stale and close", and it smells like sheep, dust and must due to parchment forms, skins and candles. The description of his working place stands for the Chancery, where everything is dark, somber, and light is not supposed to penetrate the place as long as justice is undone.

Even though Mr Vholes does not have a large business, he is a respectable man. He seems rigid and does not enjoy life; he is reserved and serious, qualities that make him respectable. All these qualities are supposed to make a him a respectable person, but as long as he represents Chancery, he stands for the legal system and its blatant abuses: "[...], the question is never one of a change from Wrong to Right (which is quite an extraneous consideration), but is always one of injury or advantage to that eminently respectable legion, Vholes." (575)

By taking no risks professionally, Melville's lawyer resembles Tulkinghorn. He has no private life and his workplace and home are the same. He does not show any emotions and he does his work accurately but without passion. He is not interested in getting married, probably because he is too dedicated to his work. He even admits that "My experience teaches me, [...], that most of the people I know would do far better to leave marriage alone. It is at the bottom of three-fourths of their troubles." (609) The solicitor, Mr Tulkinhorn, is well-known due to his connection to the nobility. Being well-paid by his clients, he is not interested in money, but he is in search for information that gives him the power to control the others. He is dressed in an old-fashion way, he stands for the rigidity of the system he works for. Tulkinghorn is known "to have made good thrift out of aristocratic marriage settlements and aristocratic wills, and to be very rich" (20). He belongs to the old school and looks very rigid in his attitude:

Mute, close, irresponsive to any glancing light, his dress is like himself. He never converses, when not professionally consulted. He is found sometimes, speechless but

quite at home, at corners of dinner-tables in great country houses, and near doors of drawing-rooms, concerning which the fashionable intelligence is eloquent [...]. (20)

Melville's lawyer becomes the counterpart of Tulkinghorn and he is known to "do a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds." (1093) He is very proud of having the chance to work for the late Jacob Astor who characterized him as being prudent and skilful: "The late Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next method." (1093) But as Weisbuch remarks, Melville's lawyer is not just Vholes or Turkinghorn, he represents Dickens's entire Chancery. And when the story reaches the lawyer's climax of refusal, he is a Dickensian villain and sometimes identified with Dickens. Further, as Weisbuch underlines, a reviewer noted, in 1856, that "for originality of invention and grotesqueness of humor, Melville's 'Bartleby' is equal to anything from the pen of Dickens, whose writing it closely resembles, both as to the character of the sketch and the peculiarity of the style." <sup>45</sup>

There is though one exception in the case where the lawyer identifies himself to Dickens, namely when he becomes honest from the emotional point of view. Dickens was not able to go deeper into the abyss of existence, but Melville managed and succeeded in portraying a character whose will in choosing what he wants led to death.

*Bleak House* is a unique and elaborate experiment in narration and plot composition. It is divided into two stories that intermingle, Esther's story which is a first person narrative and an omniscient narrative told in the historic present. Esther Summerson is one of Dickens' insipid, innocent and flat characters. Her way of telling the story lacks vitality and her function is probably to break imagination in order to control the intensification of the plot.

The contrasting styles of the two narratives offer a kind of variety the reader might need. While Esther's narrative is dull, the omniscient style is full of life and it has all the poetic density that is so often associated with Dickens. As W.J. Harvey points out in his essay "Chance and Design in *Bleak House*", Dickens rarely guides Esther's pen throughout the story. It happens when she observes "Mr. Kenge, standing with his back to the fire, and casting his eyes over the dusty hearthrug as if it were Mrs. Jellyby's biography" (44), or when, as Turveydrops bows to her, she could "almost believe I saw creases come into the white of his eyes." (208) <sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>46</sup> W.J. Harvey, "Chance and Design in 'Bleak House'" in *Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Martin Price (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 137.

If we take into consideration Esther's tale, we notice that the tale is retrospective and was written, as we are told at the very end, seven years after the main events. Esther does not sound like she anticipates the future of the events because she rarely has the "If I had known" feeling. The reason why she seems so distant and superficial in her thoughts is the fact that she seems to be living in present, ignoring the plot's ramifications. Her tale is not meant to enlighten the reader; we cannot rely on her because she advances from child to woman, changing the whole perspective of her story. She is never criticized for her attitude, actions or responses, and that is why she is idealized. She is a very passive character and she is not that kind of person who initiates a chain of actions by herself. She is seen as the patient rather than the agent and things are done to her rather than by her. Esther is then passive, static and consistent and her qualities produce a character who is neutral and insipid, and whose narrative comes into focus when she is pushed by the inhabitants of the Dickens world.

*Bleak House*, in comparison to "Bartleby, the Scrivener," is a thick novel; every character takes a lot of attention and they all are connected by a rather complicated series of actions. Dickens' need for making use of the first person narrative as well as the omniscient narrative is, as H.J. Harvey points out, to produce the effect of pulsation:

The two narratives are the systole and diastole of the novel and between them they produce the distinctive effect of *Bleak House*; something that I can only call, in a crudely impressionistic manner, the effect of pulsation, of constant expansion and contraction, radiation and convergence.<sup>47</sup>

The effect of pulsation is very well illustrated in the first chapter, where the scene contracts to the Court of Chancery at the heart of the fog, but all of a sudden this process is reversed and Chancery totally expands and encompasses the whole country:

This is the Court of Chancery; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the round of every man's acquaintance; (13)

Harvey also underlines the effect of the omniscient eye which is meant to survey the scene in the same way the lens of a film camera does due to its mobility. It gives a better panoramic view and it gives a constant expansion and contraction from the omniscient eye to Esther's single view point, as well as of the whole narrative.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 140

The use of the double narration offers the reader a double vision of the world of *Bleak House*. Esther leads us within the story and guides us through the labyrinth, while the omniscient author leads us outside through extremely complicated tangle of events. The success of the novel is due to Dickens' delicacy to handle mistakes, guesses and suspicions of his characters. Even though there were many opportunities for dramatic irony as well, Dickens, with great tact, refused the chances for irony offered by the interlocking stories. But the irony is there, kept latent and it does not explode in the reader's attention. It is one of Dickens' skills in order to keep irony under control, and, together with the double narrative, the reader can determine the structure of the novel as well as the quality of its irony.

The omniscient narrator is usually cynical and full of humour. As An-chi Wang points out in her essay "Narrative Strategies in "Bleak House" and "Bartleby, the Scrivener": On the Significant Affinity between Dickens and Melville," this omniscient narrator is the typical Dickens narrator and "fulfils successfully the function of assessing the feeling of the characters, the meaning of their actions, and the very significance of the events presented."<sup>48</sup> Dickens' originality is due to the fact that he made use of the dual narrative, where the first person narrative complements the third person omniscient narrative.

The use of first person narrator by Melville, a narrator embodied by an elderly trustworthy lawyer, makes the narrator reliable and the story authentic. The transparency of the way he deals with Bartleby's situation in offering him help and assistance, makes the lawyer a reliable narrator. As Wang states, his benevolent attitude, his generosity towards Bartleby's situation, "fails to penetrate the veil of alienation to reach Bartleby's troubled inner soul."<sup>49</sup>

Fisher points out Melville's artistic achievement when it comes to the author's handling of the point of view, characterized by irony and unprecedented in American literature:

Melville's handling of the point of view in this story is a conscious and sustained artistic achievement, an exercise in irony unprecedented in American literature. Without apparent strain he manipulates his narrator so that this well-heeled, self-satisfied source both reveals and obscures the meaning of his troubling experiences. Not by any means an entirely unreliable narrator, this representative of conservative

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<sup>48</sup> An-chi Wang, "Narrative Strategies in "Bleak House" and "Bartleby the Scrivener": On the Significant Affinity between Dickens and Melville", *Feng Chia Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, No. 8 (May 2004): 248. <http://www.cohss.fcu.edu.tw/wSite/publicfile/Attachment/f1378105592750.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 247.

business interests is a man of realistically limited perception but capable of considerable moral growth.<sup>50</sup>

With the use of the walls, the narrator makes some obstacles Bartleby has found in the office. At the beginning they seem quite useful, assuring privacy and protection. But as the story advances, we understand that these walls lead to trouble and deny him any further prospect. The walls shape his perspective and reduce his existence, making him entrapped, estranged and alienated. As a skilled writer, Melville managed to create a story characterized by contextual richness, a story of the aspiring American artist, an alienated artist in an insensitive society.

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<sup>50</sup> Fisher, 182.

# Conclusion

My thesis has examined the theme of alienation in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and Dickens' *Bleak House*. Both authors are known to deal with alienation in their stories. I have started with reading and analysing Melville's short story because it was this story that gave me the inspiration to write about alienation.

As we have seen, there are identifiable similarities in these stories in many aspects, as for example in characterization, plot, and narrative modes. Both writers describe law-copyists or scriveners, law-stationers and lawyers. The plots spin around the mysterious death of a law-copyist, and the narrative modes are characterized by great wit and humour.

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" has been of a great interest from the critical point of view, producing a large variety of interpretations. Bartleby has been interpreted as a schizoid, an autistic, a transcendentalist, a compulsion-neurotic, a nihilist, etc. As I have pointed out earlier in my thesis, Richard Chase has argued that the model of Bartleby is Melville himself, Egbert S. Oliver has stated that Bartleby parallels Henry David Thoreau, while the lawyer is Melville's father-in-law, and Marcus Mordecai has pointed out that the character of Bartleby is a psychological double for lawyer-narrator of the story. Bartleby as alienated worker, Bartleby as an artist who failed in writing, Bartleby trapped inside Wall Street office and staring at the walls—all these symbols make us understand him and his condition in a world of capitalist profit and alienated labour.

In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the author gives us the version of a single scene that he seemed he had borrowed from *Bleak House* and that he amplified, giving us the feeling of an elaborate story. It looks like Melville tells his own version of a story about a law-copyist, a story where the focus is on a single scene from *Bleak House*. Critics have also seen *Bleak House* as an inspirational source for Melville, since "Bartleby, the Scrivener" was composed and published after *Bleak House*. I think Melville has found an inspirational source in Dickens' novel, rather than trying to copy Dickens. It is true that both stories share similarities, but also differences, and both works are worth analysing due to their richness and authenticity.

Even though the aim of my thesis was alienation, I could not help paying attention to the author's skills in telling their stories. Dickens is known to be a master of story-telling and intriguing humour. In *Bleak House*, Dickens makes use of the double narrative, an innovated technique in which the first person and the third person narration alternate to tell the story,

and complement each other, and finally achieving a multiplying effect. The first person narrator is told in the past, offering a sense of immediacy and emotional involvement, while the third person narrator is often ironic and detached, offering moral insights and judgment, suggesting continuing disorder through the use of the present tense.

In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Melville tells the story of his deplorable character from the lawyer’s first-person point of view. By using the first person narrative, Melville’s lawyer, as an elderly man, provides the narration a sort of reliability that Dickens fails to provide with his double narrative.

Melville’s originality lies in the fact that he has managed to create an absurd hero, one of the first nihilist characters in American literature, who shows a non-violent resistance and who denies himself and everything around him by using his famous reply “I would prefer not to”.

Dickens’ concern with individuals comes from society’s unaccommodating attitude towards individuals, a society that should adjust according to individual needs. Dickens’ protagonists endure paralysis and their involvement in Chancery cases makes them alienated from their society. They feel lonely and are alienated from society because Chancery has made them spend all they have possessed, engaging them in endless cases that made them sink in despair and poverty.

*Bleak House* is considered to be one of Dickens’ greatest works of social criticism, dealing with the anxiety of London surrounding the Court of Chancery and the endless case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. In *Bleak House*, Dickens attacked English institutions that ruined peoples’ lives and swallowed their fortune. At the beginning, the individuals are isolated and alienated, but they become gradually connected through their relationship with Chancery. The socially disadvantaged members of *Bleak House* are lost in Chancery’s webs, where lengthy cases are never solved.

Dickens was a keen observer of the Victorian society. He noticed the impact of industrialization on the Victorian society as it produced massive urban development, leading to a higher class division. As a socially conscious writer, his intention was to mirror the world he lived in, in order to raise awareness and to bring social reforms. In his novel, he depicts the oppressive nature of the nineteenth century society and the harsh reality of the Industrial Revolution. His concern with the injustice and the unbearable conditions of the poor is very well described in his novel, where the slums of Tom-all-alones are evidence. The poverty of the lower class is depicted through disease and starvation, a sign of society’s ignorance and absence of interest. He never ceased to attack society for its failure, a society that neglected

the poor and the orphaned. Esther and Jo are true examples of neglected orphans, outlaws and underprivileged members of society.

As long as Bartleby is concerned, his refusal to work, his repetitive phrases and his behaviour are signs of an alienated person. Even though at the beginning he was very efficient and managed to fulfil his duties, at the end, Bartleby, changed his attitude and behaved strangely. His refusal to do his job and cooperate made him difficult to understand and work with. His passive-aggressive attitude made the lawyer change his impression about him. In his desire to become a good and appreciated worker, Bartleby becomes estranged and gets involved in the alienation process of the working society. Wall Street, the place where he works, stands for the alienated environment of the labouring people. In contact with this environment where he is placed in a corner behind a wall, Bartleby loses human contact and becomes alienated.

By refusing to articulate his demands, Bartleby defies the terms on which Wall Street does business. With Bartleby, the first laid-off worker to occupy Wall Street, Melville underlines the function of the working place and its influence on the employees. Even though the number of the employees is small, they do deliver a big amount of copying material, fact that denotes that the working conditions are under pressure, reflecting the characteristics of factories or larger shops, where modern life dehumanizes man and makes him self-alienated by coming into contact with it.

Throughout the story, Bartleby encounters a lot of physical barriers like the brick walls that surround the law office, the prison walls, the portable screen and the folding glass doors inside the office. All these physical barriers imply social and psychological facts as well: the difficulty to job advancement and the entrapment of the copyists in a capitalist environment, the hierarchical division of labour that separates the capitalist, the middle class and the working-class, the expansion of society as well as of workplace, the economic growth, etc., all these traits characterize industrial capitalism that Karl Marx has described in the mid-nineteenth century, industrial capitalism that is responsible for isolation and self-estrangement, the ones that are the very heart of alienation.

The story spins around the confrontation between Bartleby and the lawyer, where the lawyer embodies Protestant values combined with Christian faith (when thinking to offer Bartleby accommodation in the end), and Bartleby, with his refusal to work that implies a protest against the exploitative working conditions of industrial capitalism that created an alienated environment. Bartleby, the alienated worker, tries to fight against the exploitative working conditions, but his response is seen as a refusal to accomplish his duties, and



therefore his chances to survive are limited. And Bartleby stands for the alienated artist in an insensitive American society, the artist (Melville himself) who has tried to fulfil his dreams as a writer, but his ideals and expectations have been crushed by the profit-oriented society.

With his short story, Melville called our attention to the barriers and frustrations of timely communication, the despair of those dying still looking for answers, stressing upon the inhumanity of a society where business is more important than life. Bartleby's stony behaviour can be characterized as his attempt to avoid the threat of being transformed into an object. Unfortunately, his attempt is not successful and he eventually chooses silence as a defensive strategy, in order to avoid being caught by the wicked whirlpool of Wall Street.

Dickens has always felt compassion for the poor, deprived, sick and ill-treated. Dirt, filth, disease, overcrowding, corruption, isolation and alienation are part of the local nastiness of the world of *Bleak House*. Dickens' use of epithets like "corrupt", "black", "stinking", "villainous", "infamous", "unventilated", "undrained" – they all describe the ills of society. Dickens has managed to give a description of Victorian society and its corrupted system, where people like Miss Flite, Richard, Gridley and Jo, once in Chancery, there is no way out. Just as the fog spreads from the headwaters of Thames to the Essex marshes, contaminating everything it came into contact with, so the Chancery left its mark of blight in every shire. By the use of symbols and epithets, Dickens makes a social and moral generalization.

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