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Jarndyce and Jarndyce

*Charles Dickens's Bleak House revolves around an exceptionally long-running lawsuit, which Dickens uses to portray the damage done to innocent lives by the English legal system. Reproduced below is his description of the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce.*

Jarndyce and Jarndyce drones on. This scarecrow of a suit has, in course of time, become so complicated that no man alive knows what it means. The parties to it understand it least, but it has been observed that no two Chancery lawyers can talk about it for five minutes without coming to a total disagreement as to all the premises. 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

# Great Events from History: The Nineteenth Century

## Dickens Publishes Bleak House

by Laurence W. Mazzeno

**DATE** March, 1852-September, 1853

*A serial novel by Charles Dickens, Bleak House attacked the deficiencies of the law and government while highlighting the plight of the poor. His panoramic view of mid-Victorian society illustrated the interconnectedness of the various social classes, but it was not well received by many readers who lamented the lack of humor and the satiric tone that pervaded much of the narrative.*

**LOCALE** London, England

**CATEGORY** Literature

## Summary of Event

The publication of the first monthly installment of *Bleak House* (1852-1853) in March of 1852 was welcomed by thousands of Charles Dickens's fans throughout the English-speaking world. It had been eighteen months since his last novel, the autobiographical *David Copperfield* (1849-1850, originally published as *The Personal History of David Copperfield*), was completed, and his fans rushed to read the thirty-two-page pamphlet published by the firm of Bradbury and Evans. Indeed, all of the early issues of the new work sold quite well, achieving the best sales of any serialized Dickens novel. Within a few months, however, reviewers began railing against England's most popular author for disappointing them. It was bad enough that Dickens's new tale lacked the pervasive humor characteristic of his earlier work. *Bleak House* seemed to be totally devoid of comic relief, presenting instead a dark, depressing saga of London life.

Not only was the subject of Dickens's novel discomfiting, but his method of narration also confused many readers. Half of the novel consisted of the first-person narrative of Esther Summerson. Esther was the housekeeper at Bleak House, home of one of the principals in the lawsuit of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, a decades-old dispute over the Jarndyce family fortune. Her story provided a firsthand look at the tragic consequences suffered by those whose lives were affected by the bureaucratic and convoluted British legal system. The other half of the novel consisted of an account by an unnamed narrator who, like Esther, explained how the suit of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* touched the lives of individuals from various social classes. Unlike the naïve and good-hearted housekeeper, however, Dickens's omniscient narrator offers stinging satiric observations about the people and institutions of London. Joining two such disparate points of view in a single novel was a bold narrative strategy, but a number of readers found it disconcerting.

Furthermore, the monthly installments of the novel—published through September, 1853—seemed to move at dizzying pace among the stories of dozens of characters from various walks of life. Victorian readers had come to expect from Dickens a multiplot novel, but not one with so many apparently unrelated stories running simultaneously through the work. Underneath this seeming disconnectedness, however, Dickens was weaving an inevitable web of connections, frequently unseen but inexorably drawing all of the various characters together. Through careful plotting, Dickens stressed the interconnectedness of high society and the lower classes, all of whom inhabited the single metaphorical "bleak house" that was modern England.

The primary object of Dickens's satire was the outmoded Court of Chancery—the court responsible for estate law—which seemed to exist only to give work to the lawyers who brought cases before it. In writing about Chancery, Dickens was reflecting the public's interest in the branch of British law that seemed to be not only the most arcane but also most ineffective. The Court of Chancery was emblematic of the entire legal system, however, and in Dickens's hands, the law itself was emblematic of all of British society, wherein the people in power seemed to show more interest in perpetuating systems that favored them than in solving human problems.

Title page of the first edition of *Bleak House*.

hatreds with the suit. The little plaintiff or defendant who was promised a new rocking-horse when Jarndyce and Jarndyce should be settled has grown up, possessed himself of a real horse, and trotted away into the other world. Fair wards of court have faded into mothers and grandmothers; a long procession of Chancellors has come in and gone out; the legion 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 brains out at a coffee-house in Chancery Lane; but Jarndyce and Jarndyce still drags its dreary length before the court, perennially hopeless.

Source: Charles Dickens. *Bleak House* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1852-1853), chapter 1.

See Also

Scott Publishes *Waverley*  
(10.3331/GE19\_1067)

British Parliament Passes  
New Poor Law  
(10.3331/GE19\_1651030  
022)

Tennyson Publishes  
"Morte d'Arthur"  
(10.3331/GE19\_1196)

Carlyle Publishes *Past  
and Present*  
(10.3331/GE19\_1201)

Melville Publishes *Moby  
Dick*  
(10.3331/GE19\_1253)

Flaubert Publishes  
*Madame Bovary*  
(10.3331/GE19\_1285)

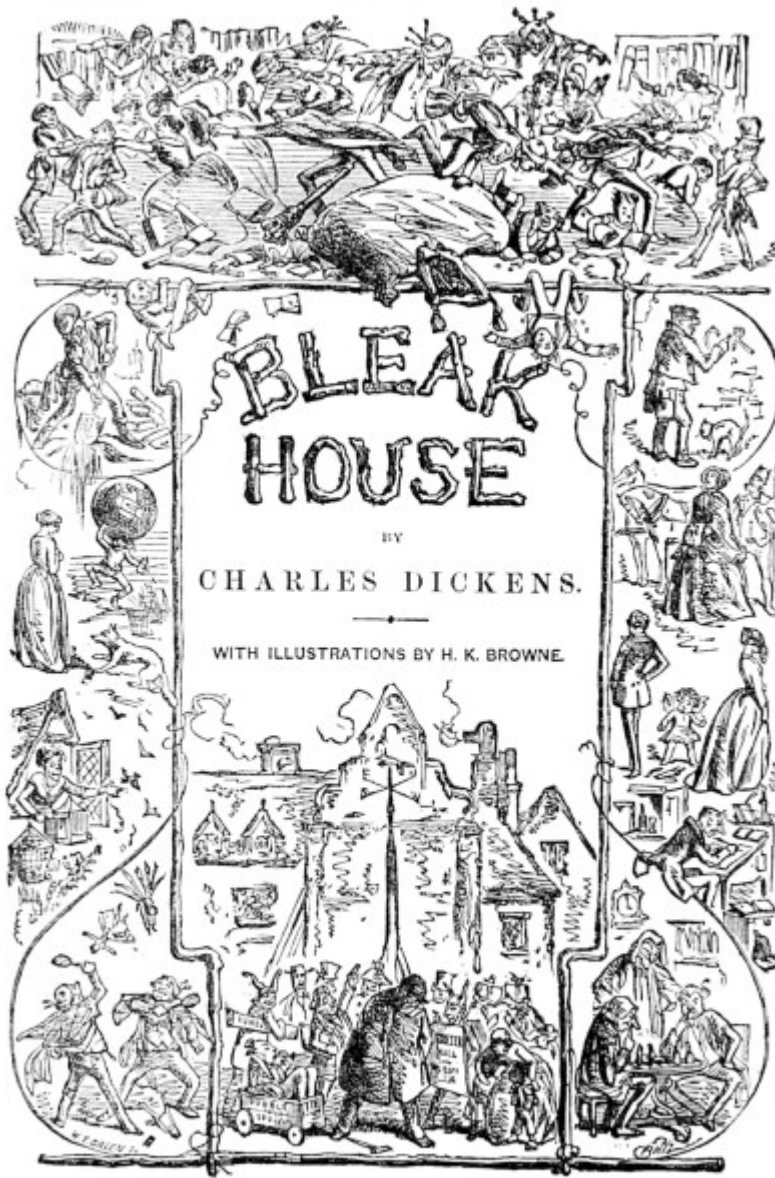
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Begins  
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The Author of this Work notifies that it is his intention to reserve the right of translating it.

Thus, while Dickens's primary target for criticism may have been the legal system, he was also interested in exposing the horrors of London slum life, the hypocrisy of charitable organizations, and the ineffectual political establishment that did little to promote the common good. His depiction of London in *Bleak House* stressed the conflicts between the powerful and powerless. The poor in England were effectively faceless and voiceless; Dickens became their spokesperson, making known the gross injustices brought about by the nation's materialistic pursuit of progress. Hence, Mrs. Jellyby's enthusiastic attempts in the novel to bring relief and religion to the "unenlightened" peoples of Africa were contrasted with the pervasive neglect exhibited toward the suffering poor at home in London. Through characters such as Chadband and Mrs. Pardiggle, Dickens satirized the role of religion in modern society: Many of the characters who espoused Christian principles most stridently were pompous hypocrites concerned mainly with personal preferment rather than the salvation of souls or care for the less fortunate.

Dickens was certainly not the first to expose the ills of the British legal system. In 1850, Prime Minister John Russell had promised legislative reform for the Court of Chancery; his efforts, however, had come to nothing. Neither was Dickens's exposure of the plight of the poor in London a revelation. The British reading public had been learning about the inhabitants of the city's slums through a series of articles by the journalist Henry Mayhew. The first collection of

Stevenson Publishes  
*Treasure Island*  
(10.3331/GE19\_1492)

Conan Doyle Introduces  
Sherlock Holmes  
(10.3331/GE19\_1537)

this series had just been published the previous year as *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work, and Those That Will Not Work* (1851, 1861-1862). Mayhew's team of researchers and reporters had made the middle class and nobility aware that there was an underprivileged "nation" living in their midst. Additionally, stories of women devoted to faraway charities whose own children were left unattended had circulated long before Dickens chose to satirize such people.

It was not, therefore, his exposition of social injustice that set Dickens at odds with his readers. Rather, it was because the work was so different from what the public had come to expect from Dickens that the novel received mixed reviews. John Forster, Dickens's most trusted literary confidante, thought it was his best work to date. A majority of reviewers were disappointed, however, and some were downright angry. For example, John Stuart Mill criticized Dickens for appearing to denounce women's rights. Churchmen complained about his portrait of religion. John Ruskin complained about what he saw as a needless accumulation of deaths. G. H. Lewes took him to task for his poor understanding of science.

None of Dickens's contemporaries seemed willing to accept the fact that Dickens had chosen to abandon the comic mode, nor did they appreciate his reasons for moving beyond the kind of commentary on society that had engaged him in earlier novels. Dickens was now at war with his country's institutions, seeing in them the reasons for the many ills suffered by those powerless to improve their lot in life. *Bleak House* was his strident protest against the very idea of progress, which had convinced the English nobility and middle class that their society was the epitome of culture, refinement, and scientific achievement.

## Significance

The publication of *Bleak House* had a notable effect on Dickens's reputation among his contemporaries and a decidedly different impact on readers of future generations. Many Victorians thought the novel a dismal failure. They were largely unwilling to face the problems Dickens highlighted in the novel, preferring instead to leave it to government and various private agencies to deal with both the ineffective legal system and problems such as poverty and substandard living conditions. Many Victorians, flushed with chauvinistic pride over the accomplishments highlighted for them in the Great Exhibition that had opened in 1851, simply were not ready to concede that reform was needed in their society—the best society, in their view, that the world had ever witnessed.

Many Victorians considered *Bleak House* merely the first of a series of dismal productions that included *Hard Times* (1854, originally published as *Hard Times for These Times*), *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865). Only George Bernard Shaw, in a late century review, praised the novelist for his indictment of a society too blinded by its successes to recognize its many failures. Twentieth century critics would reverse the general appraisal. Following Shaw's lead, literary scholars, historians, sociologists, and cultural studies specialists read the novel as both a brilliant artistic achievement and a stinging social critique.

*Bleak House* has come to be regarded as one of Dickens's finest novels. Its portrait of London society is judged to be an accurate reflection of the hypocrisy that existed at the core of Britain's legal, religious, and social systems. Future generations would come to accept Dickens's view of his age as largely accurate, and those looking back on the Victorians have offered a more critical judgment of an age that saw itself as the epitome of cultural refinement, scientific achievement, and social justice.

## Further Reading

- 1 Bigelow, Gordon. *Fiction, Famine, and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Emphasizes the economic aspects of Dickens's narrative, demonstrating that the individuals of the various social classes are linked inextricably within an economic system that values individuals only as commodities. Notes how various bureaucracies satirized in the work take on a life of their own, independent of the people who inhabit them.
- 2 Morris, Pam. *Bleak House*. Philadelphia: Milton Keynes, 1991. Morris's guide to the novel includes a chapter on the work as social criticism. She explains how Dickens uses rhetorical techniques to attack various institutions, principally the law.
- 3 Page, Norman. *Bleak House: A Novel of Connections*. Boston: Twayne, 1990. Offers an excellent summary of the historical events from which Dickens drew in creating the novel; outlines briefly the critical reception it received as it appeared serially. Includes a detailed chronology of Dickens's career.
- 4 Welsh, Alexander. *Dickens Redressed: The Art of "Bleak House" and "Hard Times."*

New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000. In several chapters, Welsh outlines not only Dickens's artistic techniques but also his satiric intent in exposing the ills of the law and government.

### **Related Articles in *Great Lives from History: The Nineteenth Century, 1801-1900***

Charles Dickens; John Stuart Mill; John Ruskin; John Russell.

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