



RE-ENVISIONING 'BLEAK HOUSE': A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON DICKENS'S STYLISTIC TOPOI

Mounir Ben Zidi

Assistant Professor,
English Department,
Sultan Qaboos University,
Muscat, Oman

Abstract:

The premise of this paper is to re-examine Dickens' *Bleak House* and reveal that, while considerable thought and lengthy discussions were devoted to highlight the theme of law in Dickens' novel, scant attention has been given to show how the novelist uses stylistic topoi to inject hidden political assumptions in the novel and voice his own ironical conception of law and justice in the Mid-Victorian society. With this end in view, the study suggests to explore Dickens' literary style and the motifs he uses to achieve his goal with a particular focus on imagery, sarcasm and irony.

Keywords: Dickens, *Bleak House*, stylistic topoi, imagery, sarcasm

1. Introduction

A considerable number of scholars have explored the theme of law and its inadequacy to achieve desired social or moral ends in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. There is a clear consensus among critics that the novel provides an overview of the author's perspective on the law of nineteenth century England, showcases how the law fails to advance justice and is perceived as "a system of coercive and socially-imposed rules" (Wertheim, 1994, p. 113). In "The Wound and the Bow", for instance, George Orwell addresses Dickens's treatment of law and lawyers and points out that, whenever the novelist deals with law and legal institutions, he makes them cruel and ridiculous:

"The truth is that Dickens's criticism of society is almost exclusively moral. Hence, the utter lack of any constructive suggestion anywhere in his work. He attacks the law without ever clearly suggesting what he would put in their places ... There is no clear sign that he wants the existing order to be overthrown, or that he believes it would make very much difference if it were overthrown. For in reality his target is not so much society a "human nature." His whole message is one that at first glance looks like an enormous platitude: If men would behave decently the world would be decent." (Cited in Davison, 1998, p. 4)

ⁱ Correspondence: email mounir@squ.edu.om

Sharing the same position, Larry M. Wertheim also maintains that the most important part of the novel centers on the theme of law, depicts Dickens's attack on lawyers and portrays the legal profession as "*a sort of organized, legitimated irresponsibility*" (cited in Robbins, 1988, p. 144). In the beginning of the novel, Wertheim continues, the novel portrays the Chancery case and practice of Jarndyce. Comparing the Chancery to the dense fog of London in the first chapter of *Bleak House*, Dickens blames lawyers and the legal system, and announces that "*the one great principle of the English law is, to make business for itself*" (Dickens, 1996, p. 467).

Drawing upon lawyers and the law as a substance for his novel, Dickens depicts abuses in the Chancery practice and introduces readers to some lawyers involved in the hopeless Jarndyce legal case. Providing us with a carbon copy of a real courtroom, Dickens depicts the hero of the novel John Jarndyce and a few lawyers and describes the lawsuit as follows:

"A certain Jarndyce, in an evil hour, made a great fortune, and made a great Will. In the question how the trusts under that Will are to be administered, the fortune left by the Will is squandered away; the legatees under the Will are reduced to such a miserable condition that they would be sufficiently punished, if they had committed an enormous crime in having money left them; and the Will itself is made a dead letter...Equity sends questions to law, law sends questions back to equity;...When my great uncle poor Tom Jarndyce, began to think of it, it was the beginning of the end." (*Bleak House*, Chapter 8, *Bleak House* will henceforth be cited as BH).

In a similar vein, Robert A. Donovan (1962) argues that Dickens's key concern in *Bleak House* is to criticize corruption in the English society, attack abuses of the law and the British legal system, despise lawyers for drawing their living from human misery, and that he found in the law and the court of Chancery "*the true embodiment of everything that was pernicious*" (p. 178). There is substantial agreement in Donovan's article with most scholars on Dickens's belief that "*the law was to become for him a means by which as an artist he could most faithfully and effectively image a world gone wrong*" (p. 179).

Despite a growing plethora of research on Dickens's perception of law in *Bleak House*, very few attempts were made to examine the stylistic topoi the author uses to display the corruption of law and the legal injustice which have characterized the Mid-Victorian society. With this end in view, the paper sheds more light on Dickens's stylistic motifs in *Bleak House* with a special focus on imagery, symbolism and irony.

2. Dickens's Stylistic Topoi in *Bleak House*

From the very outset, the opening pages of *Bleak House* are replete with irony, symbolism and imagery. Dickens's depiction of the fog in Chapter one ironically displays the fog as a token of obscurity and haziness that inhabits the judges and lawyers of the Chancery Court, isolates them from the "others" and impedes at every point the attempts of men and women to live a natural and decent life. The fog here is both literal and allegorical, it is the sooty London fog which covers the entire country and is symbolic of all obstructive procedures, outmoded institutions, selfish interests and obscured thinking:

"The dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest near that leaden headed-old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar in Lincoln's Inn Hall, in the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High chancellor in his high Court of Chancery." (BH, Chapter 1).

Dickens's use of imagery and irony is also dominant in Dickens's depiction of the night and darkness when evil characters like Lord Chancellor, Guppy, Tulkinghorn or Tony Weevle are evoked. These characters are ironically pictured as vampires or rapacious night birds exerting their savagery and criminality under the veil of the night. The narrator's symbolic description of the night and darkness in Chapter Thirty Two of the novel, for instance, discloses Dickens's strange combination of irony and imagery, comedy and horror. In the following passage, the narrator refers to the vigil of Guppy and Tony Weevle in Nemo's room as they wait for their midnight assassination as an example of criminality and unnatural and hidden deeds which are made visible through the power of irony and imagery:

"It is night in Lincoln's Inn, perplexed and troublous valley of the shadow of the law, where suitors generally find but little day... the bell that rings at nine o'clock, has ceased its doleful clangour about nothing and the night porter, a solemn warder with a mighty power of sleep, keeps guard in his lodge." (BH, Chapter 2)

It is through Dickens's use of imagery and irony that we are enabled to notice the connectedness and correlativeness of the triangle night/law and suitors and the absence of day which echoes "*the death of the sun*" as described in Chapter Two of *Bleak House*. Although this passage denotes fear and horror, it also reveals a comic image present in the portrayal of Lincoln Inn, the suitors and the night porter alluding to the vulnerability and rigidity of the legal system of Mid-Victorian England.

Dickens's choice of his characters' names, moreover, is the most outstanding illustration of how Dickens employs irony and imagery to unmask the corruption of lawyers and the judicial system. Every single name in *Bleak House* exemplifies a particular trait and represents a moral virtue or vice. Since character in the novel outnumber fifty, it would be more convenient to focus on the most relevant. The name Jarndyce, for instance, is likely to imply the disease 'jaundice' which struck the Victorian society. Another example is the name of Lady Dedlock 's sister Miss Barbary or barbarism and which holds the name of a devout church-goer of the Evangelical type, sternly puritanical and cruelly misguided in attributing hereditary guilt to a child she represents.

Even more interesting and striking is the choice of names for politicians like Boodle, Doodle, Curry or Guffy which are highly significant for mainstream critics like V.S. Pritchett who contends that "the famous analysis of parliamentary government in *Bleak House* is an indignant lark" and that "*Dickens understood the art of calling people funny names and his ear for funny sounds is splendid*" (1949, p. 141).

In order to appreciate Dickens's sarcastic talent with regard to the public men of England, it is worth quoting the following passage of the novel:

"Then there is my Lord Boodle, of considerable reputation with his party, who has known what office is and who tells Sir Leicester Dedlock with much gravity, after dinner, that he really does not see to what the present age is tending. A debate is not what a debate used to be; the House is not what the House used to be; even a Cabinet is not what it formerly was. He perceives with astonishment that supposing the present government to be overthrown, the limited choice of the Crown, in the formation of a new ministry, would lie between Lord Coodle and Sir Thomas Doodle — supposing it to be impossible for the Duke of Foodle to act with Goodle, which may be assumed to be the case in consequence of the breach arising out of that affair with Hoodle. Then, giving the Home Department and the leadership of the House of Commons to Joodle, the Exchequer to Koodle, the Colonies to Loodle, and the Foreign Office to Moodle, what are you to do with Noodle? You can't offer him the Presidency of the Council; that is reserved for Poodle. You can't put him in the Woods and Forests; that is hardly good enough for Quoodle. What follows? That the country is shipwrecked, lost, and gone to pieces (as is made manifest to the patriotism of Sir Leicester Dedlock) because you can't provide for Noodle!" (BH, Chapter 12).

Beyond their witty parody and the language of political manipulation, the above extract from *Bleak House* ingeniously exploits the mere ridiculous rhyming sound of their alphabetical succession of names and the derogatory implications of many of those names. Doodle and Noodle, in fact, were names of characters in Fielding's burlesque "Tom Thumb". The name Doodle can also refer to the notoriously incompetent Lord Duddy, the secretary of state for foreign affairs under the Duke of Wellington in 1828, who was widely known as Lord Doodle. In the same manner, the names Guffy, Huffy and Muffy also suggest derisive associations and implicit connotations.

No less significant in *Bleak House*, furthermore, is the use of imagery and irony to underline the meaning of its pattern. One of the distinctive features of Dickens's style, in this regard, is his ability to associate colloquial and idiomatic expressions by making great use of the phrase "*as the crow flies*" as a transitory short-hand method to the different worlds of the novel. Dickens uses such a motif in his depiction of the Court of Chancery and the world of fashion, as in the following example:

"The day is closing in and the gas is lighted, but is not yet fully effective, for it is not quite dark. Mr. Snagsby standing at his shop-door looking up at the clouds sees a crow who is out late skim westward over the slice of sky belonging to Cook's Court. The crow flies straight across Chancery Lane and Lincoln's Inn Garden into Lincoln's Inn Fields." (BH, Chapter 10).

In addition, the presence of animal imagery in general and of the bird in particular are recurrent in *Bleak House* and have the effect of dehumanizing the world where characters move, an ugly, stagnant and forest-like world where the weak have no place and only rapacious night birds and wild animals can survive. Such animals in the novel are compared to characters like Tulkinghorn, Bucket, Vholes and Leicester who are either "law protectors" or belong to the aristocracy. Mr. Tulkinghorn, for example, is sometimes compared to "*a dingy London bird*" (chapter 13) and to a black bird and "*a larger species of rook*" (chapter 39). This example reminds us of the bird of darkness in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* where "*light thickens, and the crow makes wing*

to the rooky wood" (III: Iii). But if this image denotes mere horror, it mixes horror and laughter in *Bleak House*. In point of fact, Dickens makes fun of his evil characters and depicts them in caricatures to show their greed. Together with the black bird Tulkinghorn, Dickens also refers to the cat Lady Jane as another source of horror and laughter, a character who threatens Miss Flite's caged birds and, like lawyers, avails of an opportunity to seize and tear any that might get free.

In contrast to these criminal and savage personages, there exist their preys and victims of the English law, and more precisely of Jarndyce case. Miss Flite's caged birds hint to the victims of the Chancery and the names she has given to them such as "*Hope, Joy, Ashes, Despair, Madness and Death*" are quite significant. In chapter 14 of the novel, Dickens portrays how the Chancery court, through its agents, kills youth, destroys hope and suffocates the creative energy of mankind. Thus, the Chancery court is depicted as a "perfect" organized system that adopts legal injustice and victimizes through it, as well as a machinery which crushes anybody and anything which comes under its wheels.

Once more we meet another example of sarcastic imagery and caricature in Dickens's satiric account of Sir Leicester who is treated with a courteous ruthlessness:

"He is a gentleman of strict conscience, disdainful of all littleness and meanness, and ready on the shortest notice to die any death you may please to mention rather than give occasion for the least impeachment of his integrity. He is an honourable, obstinate, truthful, high spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man." (BH, chapter 2).

This description is an attack on the aristocracy, its snobbishness and fake through which the narrator displays the contradiction that characterizes Sir Leicester's appearance and inner self.

Dickens's use of satire to attack Sir Leicester is substantiated with another satirical image through which Dickens harshly criticizes the English government and governors who tend to preserve their personal interests and marginalize English people.

A close reference to Chapter 26 of Dickens's *Bleak House* provides another example of the narrator's sarcastic imagery and caricature. In the following passage, the sharp contrast between the governor and the governed is exemplified in the palaces where Sir Leicester, Boythorn and Vholes live, and the rudimentary slime with ruined shelters which "*breed a crowd of fool existence*". Here is an ironic description of Boythorn's house:

"He lived in a pretty house, formerly the parsonage house, with a lawn in front, a bright flower-garden at the side, and a well-stocked orchard and kitchen-garden in the rear, enclosed with a venerable wall that had of itself a ripened ruddy look. But, indeed, everything about the place wore an aspect of maturity and abundance." (BH, Chapter 18).

Dickens's use of sarcastic imagery works throughout the whole novel and is also strengthened by such non-human characters as Tulkinghorn, Bucket or Lord Chancellor who embody the law and its implementation. Tulkinghorn, for instance, is ironically portrayed as "*indifferent to everything but his calling*", going on his business consideration of matters "*like a*

machine". He is also depicted as a lawyer who gets his real payment for feeding and exercising his desire for power. Accordingly, he is perceived by Dickens as an agent of destruction, destroying himself, Lady Dedlock's life and that of her husband by revealing to him her love affair with her ex-lover Nemo. Dickens's exposition of Tulkinghorn, however, is marvelously witty and rendered through an exceptional sarcastic imagery.

In a similar manner, Dickens also portrays Bucket as the guardian of the law who takes possession of people in a way that denies any sense of human responsibility, and compares him to a machine for whom enquiries are a matter of mechanical routine even though they cause human distress to characters like George Rouncewell. Here again, Dickens's sarcastic imagery serves to display how Bucket represents mere duty and a dead letter that destroys any attempt for union, as well as a symbol of deep failure of responsibility. In addition, Lord Chancellor and the court of Chancery that Bucket heads tend to wreck the lives of countless victims one of which is Gridley, the young man from Shropshire "*who can by no means be made to understand that the Chancellor is legally ignorant of his existence, having made it desolate for half a century, has his life destroyed by the indifference of the court*" (BH, Chapter 1).

3. Conclusion

This paper has revisited Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* with an attempt to examine dominant discursual markers and stylistic topoi that helped the narrator to lay bare hidden assumptions in the novel. To achieve this goal, the study provided examples of potential stylistic tools namely irony and sarcastic imagery to shed more light on Dickens's perception of the law and the legal system in the Mid-Victorian society. Despite an abundance of scholarly articles on *Bleak House*, the paper has also addressed the need for revisiting the novel in an effort to make Dickens's stylistic talent more prominent and aimed to stipulate further discussion about the value of Dickens's genius and the tools he uses to satirize the English society of the Nineteenth century.

About the Author

Dr. Mounir Ben Zid received his MA and PhD in English Language and Literature from the Sorbonne University (Paris IV). His area of interest includes literature, stylistics and humanities. He published articles on literary criticism, literary pedagogy, poetry translation and the interface between linguistics and literature. He is currently Assistant Professor at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.

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