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The Social Ills of London:

Seen Through Dickens' Characterization of Space in *Bleak House*

Through the constant mud and fog and the spread of the real and metaphorical disease of the poor, London in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* becomes its own character. At surface level, London adds to his already lengthy character list and is used to tie together the story's winding plot. Through analyzing the way Dickens uses the space of London as a literary tool to characterize many characters and present greater issues of his time, we can learn not only about the social situation of London in the 1850's, but we can also learn how to use space effectively in our own writing. In *Bleak House*, Dickens presents the dire conditions of the fictional London as its own character in the novel through his use of imagery, conscious narration, and interactions between characters and space. This space as a character is, in turn, used as the driving force of his greater critique of the harsh reality of the growing poverty in London and lack of resulting social reform during his time.

In the opening chapter of *Bleak House*, it is clear through Dickens' imagery of the thick fog and mud of London that this is early characterization of London as a dark, dreary, and hopelessly dirty space. This imagery is almost immediately tied to Dickens' greater critique of the Chancery with his description, "never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth" (62).

This early characterization of London, which is then used as a tool in Dickens' social critique of Chancery during his time, is the beginning of London's identity as a character in the novel.

Dickens continues to establish this identity of the city of London through his introduction of Tom-All-Alone's, the fictional heart of poverty and suffering in London. He describes it as a "black debilitated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants, after establishing their own possession..."(239). Dickens explains how the collapsing buildings of Tom-all-alone's, fall in on the poor every day, with only "a paragraph in the newspapers" (239). He continues by establishing the sickness and growing death of the poor later in this paragraph, with the off-putting imagery, "on the human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever..."(239). These dire conditions of the neighborhood of London's poor builds on the already established identity of London by ultimately shaping it into to a sickness we see spread throughout the rest of the novel.

With this introduction and commentary of Tom-all-alone's, we see a greater characterization of Jo, who eventually encompasses the entirety of London's poor that Dickens critiques in the novel. Through the hopelessly gross characterization of Tom-all-alone's, Dickens is able to further characterize Jo and his suffering through his interactions with space and his role as the primary spreader of this disease. In addition to this, the identity of Jo as a child abandoned completely by parents and by society, allows Dickens to draw even deeper connections between Jo and the space he inhabits through something as small as the name "Tom-all-alone's." Throughout the rest of the novel, Jo struggles to keep himself alive in the harsh conditions of the space, gets caught up in the unfolding plot of Lady Dedlock's scandal, is pushed out of his only

home by the police, and infects Esther with smallpox—the greater symbol of the disease of the London poor during the time—until he dies in the same graveyard of his only companion Nemo. The suffering of Jo throughout his time in the novel, shown through his interactions with the space of London among other characters, is used by Dickens to force Jo into his greater role as the symbol of the poverty and sickness of London and build his greater critique for society during his time.

Specifically, Jo's encompassment of the entirety of poverty-stricken London and the "disease" of the poor through his interactions with space allows Dickens' to build his argument about the government and philanthropists' blindness to real need during his time. This critique of the social system ties together the more obvious critique of Chancery, for its useless torment of the lives of many, seen through its ties to the character of London and through the dwindling sanity of characters like Miss. Flite and Richard, to the critique of philanthropists and their ignorance towards the poor, seen through the missions of characters like Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle.

In relation to the government system, Dickens specifically argues the relationship between Tom-all-alone's, and thus Jo, through his active narration of the origin of the space claiming the space is in Chancery and nobody truly knows, "whether 'Tom' is the popular representative of the original plaintiff or defendant... or, whether Tom lived there when the suit had laid the street to waste, all alone, until other settlers came to join him" (239). In this active connection, perhaps Dickens is condemning the judicial system of the time for being tied up in the unnecessary details rather than acknowledging and helping the vagrants of the time, only feeding the greater problem of poverty through ignorance. This, paired with the law

enforcement's constant mission to rid London of Jo, proves the legal system only worsened the situation of Jo and the great poverty of London.

The same can be said about the philanthropists of the time in Dickens' conscious narration throughout the novel, especially in his narration of Jo's death. In the passage, Dickens draws on the connections between space and Jo's suffering, when he calls Jo, "not one of Mrs. Pardiggle's Tockahopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby's lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borrioboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article"(568). Through acknowledging their ignorance in their missions overseas in conscious narration like this, it is clear that Dickens uses Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby as call for social reform in philanthropy during his time. This critique, paired with the character Dickens creates to encompass the suffering of London, forces the reader to reconsider the philanthropists of the novel and acknowledge the frivolity of their missions. Furthering this, in Dickens' dramatic announcement of Jo's death, he ends with "dying thus around us, every day," calling back on society to acknowledge the greater issue of poverty in London that goes beyond the fictional space and death of Jo (575). Dickens uses the fictional character of the struggling, disease stricken London and the death of Jo as a call for the readers' acknowledgement of the real ills of London of the 1850's and for their action in greater social reform.

These connections between the characterization of London as its own character, the simultaneous suffering of Jo, and Dickens' active critique of the social system of his time are too obvious and well developed to be merely accidental. Through analyzing these connections, we can see how Dickens uses space to redefine characters like Jo as the symbol of the "disease" of the poor and Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby as the philanthropists blind to the real need in

London. In *Bleak House*, Dickens shows how we can present our fictional spaces as characters in order to drive our greater intentions for our work through critique and connections between space and other characters. This analysis of space and its connection to *Bleak Houses*' characters and greater arguments is important to consider because it can reveal deeper meaning in Dickens' writing. The analysis helps readers gain a greater understanding of the social ills of London and the occasion for Dickens' heavy-handed critique and call for social reform through the fictional space of London.

Honor Statement:

This essay constitutes my own thinking and writing. Where I have used any other materials, I have clearly identified and properly attributed them.

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Work Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. edited by Patricia Ingham. 1852-53. Broadview Press, 2011.