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Social Criticism in *Bleak House*

Charles Dickens’s acclaimed novel *Bleak House* is a scathing critique of Victorian England. Published in 1852, a time of continuing industrialization and changing social structure, the book emphasizes the futile struggle of the middle class to climb the social ladder in pursuit of money and status. Although the members of the bourgeoisie covet an elevated status because they have no idea that their social lives are more enjoyable than those of the aristocracy, Dickens asserts that nobility cannot be earned; it is something one must be born with.

Dickens mocks those who are indifferent to the welfare of others but who affect benevolence to improve their social standing. Mrs. Jellyby is a character who tries to prove her virtue and solidify her prestigious status through charity. In the mid to late nineteenth century, middle and upper class English women were expected to devote their time to charity work. They were encouraged to invest themselves in the interests of the poor, raising money and creating societies to support those in need. Mrs. Jellyby’s charity “involves the devotion of all [her] energies” (35) and she is forever immersed in planning new methods of improving the lives of the “natives of Borrioboola-Gha.” However, her obsession with the natives leaves her utterly unaware of the deplorable condition of her own home. Her children “wish Africa was dead” (41) since its existence distracts their mother from caring for them. Mrs. Jellyby’s desire to conform to society’s standards creates discord in her family. Dickens mocks middle class women’s preoccupation with charity, creating the bizarre situation of a woman who resolutely keeps her eyes on Africa.
while her children wallow in squalor.

Mr. Turveydrop is another victim of the allure of social status. He siphons money from his son’s pocket to fund his excessive purchases, leaving just enough money for his son to survive. Mr. Turveydrop “[finds] it necessary to frequent all public places of fashionable and lounging resort . . . and to lead an idle life in the very best clothes” (178). However, he is unwilling to put forth any effort to generate money as it is beneath himself, as a gentleman, to do so. After working his wife to death, he moves on to exploiting his son. Mr. Turveydrop hides his greed behind a façade of “deportment,” and affects a congenial attitude, magnanimously offering to share his house with his son and his wife. In reality, “the power of his deportment was such,” that it seemed as if “rather than quartering himself upon them for the rest of his life, he were making some munificent sacrifice in their favor” (305). His false generosity creates the image of a wealthy, benevolent aristocrat condescending to endow a peasant with his glorious presence. Dickens vividly depicts Mr. Turveydrop as a pathetic character who desperately emulates the upper class. He trails around behind them, visiting their favorite haunts and imitating their style. Despite his efforts, Mr. Turveydrop is never elevated into the ranks of the aristocracy; noble blood cannot be purchased by any amount of money.

Dickens emphasizes the repugnancy and absurdity of these characters by juxtaposing them with Esther Summerson, the book’s protagonist. Esther is an idealized woman, a beautiful, generous and benevolent orphan. She is the antithesis of Mrs. Jellyby and Mr. Turveydrop, mending as many broken homes as they create, without ever drawing attention to her good deeds. Esther’s dearest friend, Ada, remarks, “You are so thoughtful, Esther, and yet so cheerful! and you do so much, so unpretendingly!” (40).
Esther discreetly takes over the welfare of Mrs. Jellyby’s children, providing the loving care that they’ve never received from their mother. She visits an impoverished family, giving them the sympathy and understanding that they desperately seek, all without touting her goodwill. Dickens holds Esther up as an example to all women; she embodies the qualities a Victorian woman should possess: humility, generosity, and benevolence. Esther’s sterling personality accentuates the vile and wretched attitudes of other unsavory characters in Bleak House such as Mrs. Jellyby and Mr. Turveydrop.

The lawyers in Bleak House reflect Dickens’s intense dislike for those who resent the upper classes for their positions. Mr. Tulkinghorn, Sir Leicester Dedlock’s lawyer, is “very jealous of the profit, privilege, and reputation of being master of the mysteries of great houses” (475). Mr. Tulkinghorn has a very strange position in the Dedlock household: he holds great influence with the family, but a lack of aristocratic blood leaves him unable to reach the highest rungs of society. This inability embitters him, leading him to despise Sir Leicester and attempt to sabotage his good fortune. Tulkinghorn’s desire to cause the downfall of the Dedlocks inadvertently brings about his own doom. He is killed by Lady Dedlock’s former maid, whom he has used to prove his disquieting theories about the Lady’s past. Mr. Tulkinghorn’s murder expresses Dickens’s belief that those who are willing to cause calamity for their own selfish gains are of the lowest kind, deserving harsh punishment such as death. Dickens derides Mr. Tulkinghorn’s attempts to gain access to the upper class by revealing to his audience something that the lawyer himself does not realize; such desperation to ascend the social ladder only exists in those who are oblivious to the price that comes with an elevated status. By attempting to advance himself socially, Mr. Tulkinghorn demonstrates his
naïve fantasy that an aristocratic existence will satisfy his hunger for power.

Dickens portrays the other end of the social spectrum with the Dedlocks. This couple is considered to be the cream of the crop: “there is no mightier baronet than [Sir Leicester],” and his wife “has been at the center of the fashionable intelligence,” for years (8-9). Despite this evidence of an enviable social position, the Dedlocks are not particularly satisfied with their lives. Lady Dedlock is in a constant state of boredom, discontent with the monotony of her aristocratic life. Even the name “Dedlock” creates the image of the couple at a standstill, making no progress towards a better understanding of each other or improving their relationship. Chesney Wold, the Dedlock estate, is dreary, its grounds forever shrouded in mist with a perpetual rain pattering down on the dark, lonely house. Dickens uses the inhabitants of Chesney Wold to prove that social status does not necessarily guarantee happiness. Sir Leicester is plagued by gout, which is the trademark of his illustrious family, while Lady Dedlock is forced to reject her only daughter to prevent the loss of the society’s respect for her husband. Even their relationship seems strained; Sir Leicester is unaware of Lady Dedlock’s obscure past, and the two are overly formal with each other, showing none of the love lower class couples like Ada and Richard share. The portrayal of the Dedlocks’ dissatisfying marital relationship proves Dickens’s assertion that the middle class, in its envy and awe of the aristocracy, fails to see the cost of the upper class’s efforts to maintain a flawless public appearance. Dickens shows how the emotional restraint exercised by the cultured and well bred has an adverse effect on their most intimate personal relationships, the basis for happiness for most people.

Dickens satirizes the middle class’s desire to ascend into the aristocracy by
displaying fruitless attempts to appear refined and magnanimous. He expresses the belief that the lower social classes lead more gratifying lives than their wealthier counterparts. Dickens’s contempt of the constant struggle for social advancement is conveyed through his various caricatures of the dissatisfied middle class. In his novel *Bleak House*, Dickens appeals to the middle class to make the most of its role in society, rather than fritter away its time coveting an unattainable social status, convinced that it is their highest goal in life.