

## **“His blood is infected”: Transmission of Disease and Wealth in Dickens’s *Bleak House***

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In the critical body of work on Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, a certain synecdoche has long been accepted: the city of London is analogous to the human bodies that live within it. The corruption that infects the city’s financial, legal, and class-based institutions clearly manifests itself in the bodily infections suffered by several characters, notably the fever that afflicts Jo, Charley, and Esther, generally thought to be smallpox. Much overlooked, however, are the parallels between the transmission of disease and the transmission of wealth in the novel and the roles of air and blood as unifiers of social, legal, and biological corruption. By aligning the transmission of disease with that of wealth through the device of literal and metaphorical bloodlines, Dickens sets up a dichotomy between Esther, a survivor of an illness, and Richard, a victim of the court of Chancery. Dickens’s stance on disease and poverty, as suggested by historical evidence, indicates his belief in a strong link between the ability to transcend dependence on inheritance and the legal reform and social improvements that will in turn help eradicate disease and the environments that harbor it. Dickens’s reformist views – both optimistic and pessimistic to varying degrees – on the obstructionist nature of the government come into view in the novel most clearly when blood is at the center of an analysis based on social reform.

Throughout his career, Dickens frequently engaged in social reform through his writing and political actions. He became a respected figure in his lifetime and beyond for his advocacy of sanitary reform and medical improvements in all English classes: his depiction “of the power of the representation of contagion has continued to be a presiding model in Victorian studies for thinking about the intersection of narrative, medicine, and effective social reform” (Burgan 837). Michael S. Gurney purports that Dickens was well-read in medical literature and even ahead of his time in recognizing peculiar symptoms – the character Phil in *Bleak House* presents with an affliction that many doctors today would diagnose as Ménière’s disease but that would not be named for several years after Dickens’s description (80-81). It is natural to assume a convergence in Dickens’s views on medicine, sanitation, and social reform, as he was not alone in Victorian England in considering there to be a link – both literal and metaphorical – between actual illness and social corruption. He blamed stagnation in the political and legal processes for delaying and often preventing sanitation and medical improvements, among many other attempted reforms. As a novelist, Dickens did not “neglect the use of his literary talents to expose the continuing existence of filth, crowding, poverty, and disease in all their interrelationships” (Litsios 198), and *Bleak House* is especially condemnatory. Dickens’s oft-

quoted description of Tom-all-Alone's personifies the slum while invoking illness, class, and a scientific basis for both:

Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analysis would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house, and his Grace shall not be able to say nay to the infamous alliance. 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. (553)

Every "drop of Tom's corrupted blood" is transmitted by the "winds" (the source of airborne diseases) as well as water (it would soon be officially recognized that cholera was transmitted through the city's water supply), and not any "order of society up to the proudest of the proud" is safe from it. Elana Gomel echoes most critics who view Tom's as a microcosm of London, describing how "the grotesque body of London functions as a common matrix for the bodies of its disparate dwellers. . . . Contagious disease becomes a metaphor for bonds of corporeal humanity [as] it moves through the city, giving a lie both to social barriers and to individual autonomy" (305). The transmission of these corrupting influences is a useful lens for viewing Dickens's methods of communicating his views on various kinds of reform. There are two kinds of transmission that align and interchange in *Bleak House*: the physical, airborne transmission of disease and the intangible, class-based transmission of wealth through inheritance, both of which corrupt interpersonal relationships in the process.

Many diseases plagued the bodies and minds of the Victorian English, notably cholera and typhus, but the disease Dickens selects for Jo, Charley, and Esther is widely assumed to be smallpox, an affliction whose specific elements are necessary to the story for many reasons. The prolonged fever that marks smallpox, as many scholars point out, leaves much more time for necessary plot to occur than would cholera, which is a fast-acting, fast-killing, and unromantic disease. But Dickens's use of infection does not end at pure plot. As F.S. Schwarzbach notes, unlike William Thackeray's *The History of Henry Esmond*, *Bleak House* uses smallpox explicitly as a thematic and character-development device as well as a social tool: it is "more than just a physical disease: it is a type of the moral sickness which has infected English society" ("Fever" 26). Its most significant element is its communicability, which among other things is used to highlight the need for graveyard reform and vaccination (Gurney 79). The most important aspect of its communicability, however, is related to Victorian germ theory and transmission of disease between people: the significance for Dickens is that smallpox, unlike money and perhaps cholera, constantly threatens to transcend classes.

Schwarzbach is among the first critics to do a comprehensive literary and biological study of

the novel with regard to the widely held pythogenic theory of the Victorian era, which proposed that exposure to rotting organic matter was the cause of contraction of certain diseases, such as cholera, and would not extend far from the source of the rot, meaning that only people who lived in the slums were in danger of becoming ill (“Fever” 22-23). If Dickens merely desired to condemn the filth of the slums, cholera would have suited his purpose in *Bleak House*, but his aim was rather to engage all classes in a common affliction to highlight the common bonds of all people and classes. Smallpox, in contrast to cholera, was known to be contagious (spreadable from person to person) rather than pythogenic (although it is implied Jo first catches it from the filthy graveyard); thus smallpox is useful for thematic purposes in that people can infect one another regardless of location (Gurney 82). The orphan Jo brings the disease to Bleak House and infects Charley, who infects the middle-class Esther, who, had she not barred her door, probably would have infected the upper-class Ada and Jarndyce; thus, the “physical corruption that so disgusted Lady Dedlock on her first visit to Tom-all-Alone’s becomes the link between the rich and the poor. . . . Rooted in the body, contagion promotes the social solidarity, which abstract discourse of reform cannot accomplish” (Gomel 305). The implication that a poor street-sweeper could cause the deaths of upper-class members of society is physical proof that the sanitary and economic problems of the slums are not to be dismissed as a lower-class issue.

In *Bleak House*, the transmission of infection is clearly analogous to the transmission of wealth. The person-to-person transmission of smallpox infects seemingly at random, while the transmission of wealth through family bloodlines is predetermined, but they cause the same anxieties and frequently analogous results. Miriam Bailin discusses a psychosomatic aspect of illness, highlighting the “feverish” nature of the anxiety of class and explaining that the mental effect produced by delirium “expresses with great acuity what the cultural mandate to make [class] distinctions exacted – the feverish restlessness required to stay ahead, or at least to hold one’s place, and the continued sense of being haunted or pursued by the denials by which the social self is constructed” (84). Victorian doctors often considered financial and class-based fears to be a cause of nervous disorders and depression in men, especially middle-class men who needed to constantly negotiate and maintain their social status (84). Esther’s anxieties about her own family history and reliance on others to retain her place in society exemplify Bailin’s argument; as Heady posits, “smallpox serves as a reading device, a lens through which we see Esther’s murky family lines with clarity” (324). The preoccupation with inheritance, wealth, birth, and station permeates *Bleak House*: the novel represents “the contagion of the past as an hereditary disease, for which the vehicle of transmission is not infected air or rats but – figuratively, at least – infected blood” (Christensen 33). Blood, though not a literal transmitter of smallpox, is a vital motif in the novel, appearing figuratively in the “corrupted blood” of Tom-all-Alone’s as well as physically in the sores that are the manifestation of smallpox-infected blood cells. Smallpox and preoccupation with bloodlines come together neatly in the figure of Esther.

Though she does not acknowledge it outright, Esther as an illegitimate orphan is anxious about Mrs. Woodcourt’s obsession with her own family’s bloodlines and the way she “constantly harps upon her son’s lineage and legitimacy, intimating the loss of a genetic endowment if he

were to marry Esther” (Burgan 842). Throughout her illness and delirium, it seems Esther comes close to acknowledging her resemblance to Lady Dedlock and how she has missed out on being born legitimately into a wealthy family; however, she seems to wish never to be burdened with that information. During her fever, she sees herself as a chain in a family, speaking of “that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing?” (Dickens 432). This passage is almost an exact repetition of one about the “dreadful thing” of the Dedlock family slightly earlier in the novel, when the narrator talks of the Dedlock “cousins who are so poor that one might almost dare to think it would have been the happier for them never to have been plated links upon the Dedlock chain of gold, but to have been made of common iron at first and done base service” (347). Dickens intimates two things: one, that having enduring links to a wealthy family without the benefit of inheriting its money (a problem also seen in the Jarndyce inheritance case) is even worse than being independently poor, and two (since the sardonic narrator is speaking here), that the wealthy members of the family would wish to eradicate any lower-class members lest they infect the gene pool. But for Esther, her disease and resulting scars immediately *tie* her to her family and her lack of inheritance, as she likely catches smallpox, through Jo and Charley, from the graveyard where her own father is buried: “Passed up the social ladder from the tomb where Esther’s father lies, . . . smallpox is the ‘inheritance’ Esther never received from her father” (Heady 324). While Esther laments her illegitimate birth and the unsanitary/poor residuals of her parentage, she also has no desire to take on the complications of being a Dedlock. As *Bleak House* suggests, being part of any family carries with it undesirable expectations and anxieties related to inheritance.

The problem of wealth unites both the pythogenic and airborne theories of disease transmission, since Chancery, as a symbol of the social method for transmitting wealth via inheritance, is such a permeating force (like the fog); it also infects those such as Richard who have not grown up in the poisonous environment. It is significant that Tom-all-Alone’s (the origin of so much disease) “is in Chancery, of course. . . . Whether ‘Tom’ is the popular representative of the original plaintiff or defendant in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, or whether Tom lived here when the suit had laid the street waste, all alone, until other settlers came to join him, or whether the traditional title is a comprehensive name for a retreat cut off from honest company and put out of the pale of hope, perhaps nobody knows” (Dickens 198). “Tom” (only one letter off from “tomb,” appropriately, as the slum and Chancery both are associated with the death of people and their hopes for a prosperous future) seems to be the Tom Jarndyce who killed himself over the Jarndyce suit as well the general name for the loss of hope represented by poverty as well as lawsuits.

There is some lack of scholarly agreement on the role of Chancery in the role of corruptive transmission. Allan Christensen sees a lack of causation, in that “Chancery does not cause the fog but rather suffers, like the rest of England, from the effects of a fog that it cannot help but transmit further. This is to say that the fog is simply and inescapably there and everywhere,

deriving from an absent cause and pointing to nothing beyond its own presence. As its message or ideological implication, it points to the absence of providence” (33). However, there is a stronger case for the willful corrupting influence of Chancery than for its own victimhood. Schwarzbach makes a careful distinction in saying that the parallels between Chancery and the “fog” are not merely allegory but literal. Chancery, “insofar as it stands for all obfuscatory and inactive authorities, literally *is* ‘at the very heart of the fog.’ . . . It is government inaction that leaves raw sewage uncollected to mix with the street mud, that permits its discharge into the river, and that thereby is to blame for the deadly effluvia of this fog that poisons the city’s air” (“Social Pathology” 96). Indeed, Dickens seems to be in the camp that blames Chancery for pollution, both the figurative poison of inheritance cases and the literal poison of the slums. His choice of Chancery as the embodiment of the corruption in the city is fitting, and the sluggishness of the Jarndyce & Jarndyce case stands in only slightly metaphorically for the very real cases of sanitation reform and vaccination. Schwarzbach again points out that the issue of smallpox “is typical of many that Dickens attacks in *Bleak House*: a pressing public need goes unremedied through complacency and neglect, resulting in grave social and physical damage to the nation as a whole” (“Fever” 24). Such a message exemplified Dickens’s attitude toward reform. As Litsios recounts, Dickens was very much involved in reformatory legal and academic actions; he and the public were not in favor of the Poor Law created in part by the research of Edwin Chadwick, which worked under the assumption that the poor were merely unwilling to work and which made admittance to workhouses the only acceptable means of receiving charity (185). Dickens saw new laws as the best solution to widespread social issues but considered the law itself to be an issue that needed reform. The movement for sanitary reform “depended upon a series of systematic studies leading to commission reports that then struggled toward parliamentary action” and was therefore constantly bogged down in bureaucracy (Burgan 839).

The list of examples of harmful government obstruction is almost endless. For instance, the failure of an 1850 act that would have cleaned up graveyards exemplifies the obstructionism that negated years of reform efforts and that Dickens attacks through his depiction of Chancery (Gurney 81). Another major issue was vaccination: while the Vaccination Act of 1840 made smallpox vaccination free, for various reasons it was rarely taken advantage of by parents or the poor. The government’s failure to make vaccination mandatory outraged Dickens to the point where his rhetoric may actually have had a real effect, as an act requiring mandatory vaccination was passed just after *Bleak House* was concluded (Gurney 84). Dickens is adept at highlighting the severe corruption in the legal system, which robs people of basic health and individual freedoms such as the right to choose one’s own career. Chancery itself is likened to both a fever and an inheritance in itself. Richard is inevitably drawn to a life in Chancery because of his family ties, and some solicitors are said to have inherited the case from their own fathers (Dickens 6). Furthermore, inheritance law, like inheritance of the money itself, is naturally in the business of maintaining endless loops of transmission that never resolve in satisfaction: though the endless documents of Chancery “are meant to represent, and thus to guarantee, the circulation of property, the legal papers simply create a circulation of their own, one which moves

chaotically, never progressing toward a solution to the case” (Bigelow 590). Dickens seems to speak directly through Esther as she observes the court:

To see everything going on so smoothly and to think of the roughness of the suitors’ lives and deaths; to see all that full dress and ceremony and to think of the waste, and want, and beggared misery it represented; to consider that while the sickness of hope deferred was raging in so many hearts this polite show went calmly on from day to day, and year to year, in such good order and composure; to behold the Lord Chancellor and the whole array of practitioners under him looking at one another and at the spectators as if nobody had ever heard that all over England the name in which they were assembled was a bitter jest, was held in universal horror, contempt, and indignation, was known for something so flagrant and bad that little short of a miracle could bring any good out of it to any one. (307-8)

There is no clearer language Dickens could have used to vilify the court, but passages such as these also hint at a sense of desperation. “Little short of a miracle” can bring anything good out of Chancery, but neither can anything less tear down the massive, self-perpetuating structure and replace it with something better.

If London were composed entirely of reformers, Chancery might not have had much of a chance to harm individuals and might have improved its methods to focus on the betterment of society instead of its own employees. However, Richard Carstone provides an example of how easy it is to be consumed by the concept of the courts, inheritance, and one’s own bloodline, and in Richard’s succumbing to the corruption of the court Dickens ascribes to him afflictions similar to those of someone sick with smallpox. Other characters refer repeatedly to his blindness (one symptom Esther herself presents with during her fever) and his blood; as Jarndyce opines, “it is in the subtle poison of such [court-related] abuses to breed such diseases. His blood is infected, and objects lose their natural aspects in his sight. It is not *his* fault” (Dickens 435). But just as Chancery must be considered complicit in its own failures, the responsibility for Richard’s condition must be at least partially placed on Richard himself. Not only is he blind, but his unfounded mistrust of Jarndyce (based on Jarndyce’s requests for Richard to save his sanity and life by avoiding the suit) represents the interpersonal corruptions that can be ascribed to fixation on inheritance: “Our poor devoted Richard was deaf and blind to all. . . . Suspicion and misunderstanding were the fault of the suit? Then let him work the suit out and come through it to his right mind. This was his unvarying reply” (Dickens 521). Inheritance and its physical manifestation, Chancery, are the embodiments of social stagnation, and Dickens’s message seems to be that consequences of such stagnation “are exactly the same in the moral sphere as in the physical – poisons are produced which when they spread, as they invariably do, infect all classes equally” (Schwarzbach “Fever” 26). Just as smallpox may infect the bodies of all classes, the nature of Chancery infects their minds: the rich lawyers succumb to the self-perpetuating nature of the court machine, and the poor and middle-class suitors become obsessed with their

perpetually elusive settlements.

Richard's death is a submission to an almost-literal illness, that "feverish and irrational excitement" for speculation, which Bagehot warns against (qtd. in Bigelow 590). A significant lesson to be learned from Richard is "that human beings should free themselves of superstitious and paralyzing dependence upon forms of providence and take responsible control of themselves and their environment. In doing so, they may at least diminish the ravages of the physical and moral pestilence and liberate territory for a realm of Freedom" (Christensen 58). To put it another way, Richard's death by the illness brought on by legal stagnation "indicates Dickens's rejection of hereditary rationalizations for social paralysis" (Burgan 842). Inheritance should not be justification for needlessly disrespecting other people or for the entitled to ignore the unentitled, nor should it allow endless, self-perpetuating systems of corruption and self-interest. Rather, an individual should be free to reject his social or material inheritances and become a self-made man with friends and situations of his own choosing. Proof of the benefits of these opportunities can be found in the social-climbing success of the ironmaster Rouncewell as well as in the character of Esther.

If transcendence of the system is Dickens's ultimate message, Esther may be read as the physical embodiment of the transcendence of Chancery, and in turn its literal and metaphorical embodiment of the consequences of the transmission of disease and money. Wealth may be as debilitating as fever, but the characters who number among its survivors are significant – that is, those who may have access to wealth but are not morally and emotionally destroyed by it, such as Jarndyce and Esther. Physically, Esther survives the literal corruption of the fever and makes a personal sacrifice to end the transmission of smallpox to the higher class, namely Ada; that particular strain of corruption resolves itself in her and dissipates, ending the contagion of disease and also providing Esther with a newfound sense of individuality. Thematically, Esther "is given the status of a Bildungsroman heroine who strives to discover and maintain a personal identity, and through responsible choice and meaningful action attempts to resist the forces of decay that are attacking the rest of society" (Gurney 86). Far from being avaricious, Esther is not corrupted by Jarndyce's generosity and is arguably not thrilled at the idea of marrying him even though doing so would secure her financial status. Esther represents the transcendence of corrupting transmissions through self-sacrifice and hard work and exemplifies the difficult but rewarding hardships of overcoming a social and class-based inheritance that threatens to destroy her. Carolyn Dever "sees Esther's half of *Bleak House* as an effort to recover her 'origins, beginnings, and processes of differentiation' – the polar opposite of Richard's ahistorical attempts at self-definition" (Heady 324-5). While Richard grasps at an elusive and invisible monetary inheritance to define himself, Esther chooses to reconcile with her own sordid family history and makes the decision not to let it define her.

The resolution to these parallels is not perfect. Burgan cites Esther and Allan's marriage as "the happy ending" that defies Mrs. Woodcourt's "effort at eugenics as if by magic, and the novel as a whole indicates Dickens's conviction that reliance upon inheritance – physical or financial – only rationalizes moral indifference to the possibility of amelioration in a diseased

world” (842). This relation of inheritance to moral indifference is accurate, but the real question is how Mrs. Woodcourt fails when so many other so-called eugenicists (in the biological and social senses) succeed and Chancery perpetuates the inheritance problem. Esther’s story still ends up being too good to be true. Esther and Allan’s marriage and migration to the second Bleak House “represent a retreat from the city and its contagion and from any attempt to address its overwhelming symptoms. The novel achieves a surface confidence in closure but only at the cost of engagement with the urban actuality it has so powerfully and negatively dramatized” (Schwarzbach “Social Pathology” 101). Escape from the city, its slums, and its courts is a solution for these two people, but not one that is feasible for the city itself. Throughout his life, Dickens held an attitude that became “increasingly pessimistic, even tragic, about man’s nature and fate,” as reflected in his 7 October 1854 contribution to *Household Words* (Himmelfarb qtd. in Litsios 198), and he “grasped the helplessness of well-meaning individuals in a corrupt society” (Orwell qtd. in Litsios 198). Perhaps the escape of a few individuals from the self-perpetuating, destructive urban system is satisfying in the short term, and for the readers of serial novels, but it is not ideal. Dickens ends up falling short of offering a practical and accessible way to both engage with and transcend these systems.

Through the many interweaving plots in *Bleak House*, Dickens creates a broad alignment between the transmission of disease and that of wealth, using the moral and physical corruption of Chancery as its vehicle. In inextricably linking money and physical health, Dickens advocates a relatively democratic system in which the poor may be given the chance at health and sanitation so that they may transcend the circumstances of their birth, and in which the rich may be given the chance to avoid being shackled to destructive familial and economic obligations. Through his various characters, he indicates that society would be better off if people of all classes could enjoy a basic level of comfort and rely less on inheritance and luck of birth. Through vaccination, sanitation, and inheritance reform, the legal system offered the promise of better medical care and improved living conditions, which would lead to better situations for the poor and rich alike, but as Dickens point out in no uncertain terms, the biggest problem was getting the courts to clean themselves up first.



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