

LAW AND IRRESPONSIBILITY AS SOURCES OF MISERY IN *BLEAK HOUSE*

Mr. Ravindra Patil

Asst. Professor & Head, Department of English,
Yashwantrao Chavan Law College, Pune

Abstract

Bleak House is one of the most popular novels by Dickens wherein he tries to depict human relation between different individuals gets affected due to a lack of sympathy and genuine concern for each other. One of the reasons behind this is irresponsible nature of a man and the other one is a social institution is law. Bleak House concentrates on this issue and points out how one person suffers misery because of a neglectful behaviour of the other. In the same way, law whose purpose to protect people and provide them security fails to deliver what is expected of it. Hence Bleak House proves to be the best example to understand this situation.

Keywords: Law, Justice, Irresponsibility, Indifference, Misery, Human Nature

Responsibility is a unique concept. It can only reside and inhere in a single individual. You may share it with others, but your portion is not diminished. You may delegate it, but it's still with you. You may disclaim it, but you cannot divest yourself of it.

-Admiral

Hymen Rickover

Charles Dickens, a prolific writer of the Victorian era for wonderful prose writings, uses the complex of plots that forms a novel and the main line of action. At the same time this complex works in relation to the development of characters. The complex of plots is seen to be working together towards one common end, that is, the 'theme'. The theme stands out clear. So Dickens quite carefully combines the incidents of serious and popular social and political concerns with various kinds of characters through plots. *Bleak House* is one of such examples as shows the corrupt system of law as a serious concern of the Victorian society.

In this paper I will concentrate on how the attitude of irresponsibility towards other people destroys social and family relationships in *Bleak House*. This paper also underpins an attempt to show how law fails to serve its purpose and brings about misery in the lives of human beings of varied nature connected with each other in some way or the other shown in the novel. Considering the fabric of Victorian society, these social and legal elements have been

strongly criticised by Dickens in the novel through the depiction of various characters coming from different backgrounds and by making them part of the corrupt system of law.

Human beings do not live in isolation, completely separated from each other. John Donne, a Jacobean poet, states that 'any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind'. This is also true in respect of Dickens who passionately believes that human beings are mutually dependent upon each other for love, support and care, even though the connections between them are remote. It is our responsibility to maximise the happiness of others though he was not influenced by utilitarian philosophy. When human beings begin to behave with each other in an irresponsible manner, they estrange themselves from each other in order to achieve their self-satisfaction through different channels that may not be normally acceptable and they even can cause misery to others.

In *Bleak House* Dickens first shows mysterious connections between apparently unconnected and separate characters whose identities become clearer later. Richard Carstone proves to be a distant relation of Sir Leister; Grandfather Smallweed's wife is discovered to be Krook's sister. Remarkably Esther discovers her own unexpected relation with Lady Deadlock as she is found to be an illegitimate daughter of Lady Dedlock from Captain Hawdon. By the time the connections between characters are revealed gradually through various positive and negative incidents, the lives of such characters have become miserable and some of them even lose their lives.

Neglect and indifference to the network of human relationships is serious and even can be tragic. The author, by interweaving the strands of the plot with characters, depicts how disintegrating relationships between major or minor characters begin to have impact on the families. Richard and Ada love each other. They are the most conventionally romantic couple in the novel but their relationship is doomed. He keeps on changing the field of his study and depends fully on the Chancery settlement too much. He is in the habit of putting off decisions. In addition he fails to face the responsibility of the family he has to take care of. Weevle describes him as a case of 'smouldering combustion' (Chapter 39). Richard mistakenly believes that "either the suit must be ended.... or the suitor" (Ch. 51). When the Chancery case ends, he is bitterly disappointed and sympathetically begs Ada for forgiveness. It clearly shows that he fails to realise the importance of family relationship and his responsibility towards his wife.

The sense of irresponsibility is seen through the character of Mrs Pardiggle. A lady, a busy philanthropist, working on behalf of many charities, lacks sensitivity. She invites Esther and Ada to visit some poor brick makers. When they visit them, Esther discovers that Pardiggle's children are unhappy because of the way their mother ferociously bullies them. This paves way to the growing distance between her and her children. Similarly this is found in case of Mrs Jellyby who devotes her entire life to public concerns corresponding about African affairs, but neglecting her family in the process her home is full of crumbs, dust and waste paper and meals are not prepared properly. However, she is foolishly unaware of all this.

Furthermore she is not mindful about her own children's unhappiness or her husband's bankruptcy. At the same time she receives the news of Caddy's marriage with total indifference. Her preoccupation with the African affairs exposes her other side of being irresponsible towards her family relationships. Dickens has given an ironic title 'Telescopic Philanthropy' to the chapter in which she is described. Dickens has thrown light on the hypocrite nature of Mrs Jellyby.

Another prominent character, Lady Dedlock exhibits the lack of sensitivity toward family relationship and causes misery and pain to her husband. She keeps secret about her previous intimate connection with Captain Hawdon. When it is exposed by Bucket's investigations, she causes disgrace and pain to Sir Leicester. When the prospect of her journey becomes narrower and narrower, she sees the complete extinction of the possibility of all choices or movement:

"The dark road I have trodden for so many years will end where it will. I follow it alone to the end, whatever the end be ... (Danger) has closed around me, almost as awfully as if these woods of Chesney Wold has closed around the house; but my course through it is the same..." (Ch. 36).

When she is completely exhausted, she writes a farewell note to Esther begging her forgiveness and she dies on the steps of the burial ground where Captain Hawdon lies buried. These and other characters, though good, are not practical and sensitive towards their relations. They commit follies and are led by false notions of charity in their life. Dickens is of the opinion they need to be well-conceived and of genuinely practical help.

Apart from such issues, Dickens discusses law and the behaviour of lawyers in mid Victorian England. He makes an attack on the system of law which brings a lot of pain and misery in the lives of people who are come to court to seek justice and are involved in it directly and indirectly. The term 'law' is very much inclusive and it means rules, regulations, ordinance, judicial process and so on. It is clearly evident to everyone that laws, by using force, make people conscious of their duties and obligations. Law is meant to save precious and good concepts of the society. But the rigid mechanism of law fails to administer justice to those who are in need of it. Robert Weisberg, an American jurist, points out that literature should be used as a way of critiquing social institutions and legal norms when they cease to operate for what they are meant.

Bleak House is about the *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* case based on the wills related to the property, Bleak House. The Chancery Court where the case goes on affects the lives of many people involved directly and indirectly. The whole property in dispute in the court is shamelessly consumed in legal costs. *Bleak House* exposes how the system of law went corrupt in the Victorian period and fails to deliver justice. The High Court of Chancery which had developed a system settling the disputes about legacies, trusts and disputed wills, is at the center. The High Court of Chancery and the manner of its dealing with the case of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* is simply a profound symbol of irresponsibility and chaos as the author at the

very beginning of the first chapter compares the atmosphere of the court with fog spread in November. It goes like, “Fog everywhere. Fog up the river... Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights... fog lying out on the yards... And hard by the Temple Bar, in Lincoln’s Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chacellor in his High Court of Chancery’ (Ch. 1). This Chancery, which had a special responsibility for the weak and the infirm, does not care about its suitors. Tom Jarndyce, Gridley, Miss Flite and Richard Carstone are all virtually destroyed by it.

It has been narrated by John Jarndyce that Tom Jarndyce lost his life due to the misery caused by the Chancery dispute and he changed the name of the house from the ‘Peaks’ to Bleak House (Ch. 1). Similarly another important character, Richard Carstone destroys himself when he gets completely involved in the Chancery case, expecting the results in his favour. Richard who first decides to make his career as surgeon soon gives this up. Later he turns to the study of law, thinking that this will enable him to keep an eye on his prospects in the Jarndyce case in which he has a claim. Despite the warnings of his guardian, John Jarndyce, not to be so hopeful about it, he spends an increasing amount of time and energy in this suit and begins to get into more debt. Completely preoccupied within this obsession, Richard experiences a steady decomposition of his life and there is a kind of progress toward the eventual disorder and lifelessness of dust and mud. He says, “My whole estate.... has gone in costs. The suit, still undecided, has fallen into rack, and ruin, and despair, with everything else. ..” (Ch. 15).

His obsession with the case leads him to the vanishing point of a beautiful life. So Richard “the good consuming and consumed, the life turned sour”, is slowly transformed into “the one subject that is resolving his existence into itself” (Ch. 39). As it continues, it creates tension in his relationship with caring Ada. When the Chancery case ends, the crash of Richard’s hopes kills him and this young man dies in Ada’s arms begging her forgiveness.

Similarly Miss Flite, a friend of Esther, becomes a victim of Chancery and represents its destructive powers most vividly. She attends the court regularly, telling everyone, “I have the honour to attend the court regularly. With my documents. I expect a judgment. Shortly. On the day of Judgment. I have discovered that the sixth seal mentioned in the Revelations is the Great Seal’ (Ch. 3). It implies that she is expecting of the Chancellor’s seal of his Office that will stamped very soon on the judgment. She speaks of the Court of Chancery not as a first cause, but as a kind of cause leading men and women to their ruin by means of its irresistible magnetic attraction.

There’s a cruel attraction in the place... You *can’t* leave it. And you *must* expect.

But, my dear, I have been there for many years, and I have noticed. It’s the Mace and Seal upon the table.

‘Draw,’ returned Miss Flite. ‘Draw people on, my dear. Draw peace out of them. Sense out of them. Good looks out of them. Good qualities out of them. I have felt them even drawing my rest away in the night. Cold and glittering devils!’ (Ch. 35)

While anticipating a favourable judgment from Chancery, she despondently falls ill and dies later with a hope of judgment. It clearly shows what Chancery is exactly. Tracy puts it in appropriate words, “Chancery is an obsolete and inefficient machine, a “Monster” (Ch. 35) that draws people to destruction and produces nothing save grief, squalor, and waste, a metaphor for a corrupt and outmoded system” (385).

Since Dickens himself has seen lawyers closely on how they work, he has depicted their treatment of their clients in respect of the *Jarndyce case* in the novel. There are several lawyers handling the case from both sides. If we consider the role of lawyers in a court of law, they are considered to be officers of the court assisting it in coming out with the right decision. However, when we try to understand the role of lawyers in the novel, we find that they are trying to protect their professional interests rather than taking the case to its right conclusion.

Mr Tulkinghorn is a lawyer hired by Sir Leicester to deal with his part in *the Jarndyce case*. Dickens has rightly described him at the beginning about how he gets himself involved in secrets of various families, “He is surrounded by a mysterious halo of family confidences; of which he is known to be the silent depository” (Ch. 2). Mr Tulkinghorn is more interested in tracing the history of the past life of Lady Dedlock than running the case. He tries to find the specimens of Nemo’s handwriting and the letters written by Lady Dedlock to him. In this investigation, he creates a lot of trouble in the life of Lady Dedlock and makes her life difficult. His selfish nature and plan to protect his master, Sir Leicester is ridiculous. It brings terrible misery into her life and eventually this causes her unfortunate death. His legal personality is just a mask behind his inhuman nature. He appears to be a bloodthirsty creation by Dickens in the novel.

Another lawyer who has got the same sort of motives of protecting his interests is Mr Vholes. Mr Skimpole brings Richard in contact with him for his *Jarndyce case*. Mr Vholes represents the true face of the legal profession; he is a respectable lawyer for his so-called qualities and he believes the grand principle of the English law “is to make business for itself at their expense...” (Ch. 39). Furthermore, Dickens describes it ironically, “... the laity sometimes suffer in peace and pocket, with a bad grace and do grumble very much” (Ch. 39). He assures Richard of success in the lawsuit but Richard does not understand that he is getting deeper in debt. He literally tries to suck blood out of Richard. As a result, Richard’s overconfidence in him about the case puts him in absolute miserable condition of life but he does not understand it in time. After the despairing and outrageous verdict of the case, Richard dies. Mr Vholes may not be completely but somewhat responsible for the misery caused to Richard.

When the characters become part of the inefficient system, as that of law, the deterioration of such characters sets in and they suffer misery and frustration in their life. Law infects and brings down all who come into contact with its terrible order. The external forces of society weaken their inner self of its individual and eventually they disintegrate from within. Dickens’ comment is not only clinching but raspingly bitter also:

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..." (Ch. 49).

The action of *Bleak House* is also dominated by images of decay and waste, muddle and neglect. In the first chapter of the novel, neglect and fog in the High Court of Chancery are described; in chapter five Krook's rag and bottle warehouse is another example of dirt and muddle. Similarly Mrs Jellyby's household emphasises the dirtiness of the house and the mother's neglect of her own family for a false sense of charity. This reflects the whole dark muddling side of English society in the Victorian Age which is caused by monstrous apathy, irresponsibility and selfish nature. The court of Chancery is the important symbol of it at the centre of the novel.

To sum up, *Bleak House* ends with a complete disaster for some characters, exhibiting how the individual's irresponsibility and selfishness and how the corrupt system of law can prove to be overwhelmingly destructive for both society and individuals and family. Philip Hobsbaum rightly points out that law itself is overdue for judgment. In the same tone, Jarndyce's own account sarcastically makes it clear:

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... Equity sends questions to Law, Law sends questions back to Equity; law finds it can't do this, Equity finds it can't do that; neither can so much as say it can't do anything... (Ch. 8)

This long quote surely presents to us the picture of law. Dickens has quite meaningfully presented the condition of law and its inhuman nature.

Works Cited:

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. Ed. Nicola Bradbury. London: Penguin, 1996.

Hobsbaum, Philip. *A Reader Guide to Charles Dickens*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1972.

Korg, Jacob. Ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Bleak House*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

Tracy, Robert. "Bleak House." *A Companion to Charles Dickens*. Ed. David Paroissien. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Weisberg, Robert. *The Law-Literature Enterprise*. Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities. vol.1, issue 1, 1989. JSTOR < <http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh/vol1/iss1/4>> Web. 22 March 2013. pp. 1-67.