Charles Dickens and *Bleak House*

**Plot**
*Bleak House* is a mystery story in which its heroine, Esther Summerson discovers the truth about her birth. She is brought up as an orphan by her aunt whom she believes to be her godmother; Mr Jarndyce, the middle-aged hero of the novel, becomes her guardian and has her educated. The question of whom she will marry contributes to the plot interest, and her illness (smallpox) which leaves her face disfigured but her moral beauty unimpaired, provides one of the novel’s dramatic and sentimental crises.

This novel is also a story of redemption in which a bleak house is transformed by human love.

**Narrative technique**
In *Bleak House* Dickens experiments with ‘double narrative’: Esther Summerson and the third-person narrator tell almost exactly equal portions of the story, alternating frequently but irregularly. One of the technical problems is to distinguish between the two narrators, and Dickens does this partly by a tense-difference, Esther speaks of the past, the third-person narrator of a dramatic present, and by a sharp contrast in the two narrative styles. Esther’s tone is quiet, conversational, confidential, intimate; the third-person voice, established immediately in the famous description of London fog (Text Bank 64), is rhetorical and emphatic and his tone is declamatory.

It is important to point out that not only is Esther ignorant of the anonymous narrator and his narrative, but the anonymous narrator is ignorant of Esther, too. This lack of omniscience in *Bleak House* is what makes the reader so morally active.

**Themes**
Dickens draws on distant memories for certain parts of this story, but he overlays this evocation of the past with anger with his immediate present: both the Court of Chancery and the slums were, in fact, topical subjects in 1852, when people were dying of litigation and cholera.

*Bleak House* is, in some sense, an anatomy of Victorian society; it is not merely an attack on a number of social abuses, like the inefficient legal system, inadequate concern for the poor and unhealthy conditions, but an indictment of “the whole dark muddle of organised society”, with legal injustices not accidental but “organically related to the very structure of that society” (A. E. Dyson, *Bleak House*, 1969, p. 135)
London. Michaelmas Term\(^1\) lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus\(^2\), forty feet long or so, waddling\(^3\) like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle\(^4\), with flakes of soot\(^5\) in it as big as full-grown snowflakes - gone into mourning\(^6\), one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire\(^7\).

Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers\(^8\). Foot passengers, jostling\(^9\) one another’s umbrellas in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping\(^10\) and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits\(^11\) and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled\(^12\) among the tiers\(^13\) of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes\(^14\), fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses\(^15\) of collier-brigs\(^16\); fog lying out on the yards and hovering\(^17\) in the rigging\(^18\) of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales\(^19\) of barges\(^20\) and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners\(^21\), wheezing\(^22\) by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful\(^23\) skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching\(^24\) the toes and fingers of his shivering little ‘prentice boy on deck. Chance people\(^25\) on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds.

Gas looming\(^26\) through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongey\(^27\) fields, be seen to loom by husbandman\(^28\) and ploughboy\(^29\). Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time – as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard\(^30\) and unwilling look.

The raw\(^31\) afternoon is rawest, and 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\(^32\). And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln’s Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the grooping\(^33\) and floundering\(^34\) condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary\(^35\) sinners, holds this day in the sight of heaven and earth.

On such an afternoon, if ever, the Lord High Chancellor ought to be sitting here – as here he is – with a foggy glory round his head, softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains, addressed by a large advocate.
with great whiskers, a little voice, and an interminable brief, and outwardly
directing his contemplation to the lantern in the roof, where he can see
nothing but fog. On such an afternoon some score of members of the High
Court of Chancery bar ought to be – as here they are – mistily engaged in
one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping\(^{36}\) one another
up on slippery precedents, grooping knee-deep\(^{37}\) in technicalities, running
their goat-hair and horsehair\(^{38}\) warded heads against walls of words and
making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might. On such
an afternoon the various solicitors in the cause, some two or three of
whom have inherited it from their fathers, who made a fortune by it,
ought to be – as are they not? – ranged in a line, in a long matted\(^{39}\) well
(but you might look in vain for truth at the bottom of it) between the
registrar’s red table and the silk gowns, with bills, cross-bills, answers,
rejoinders\(^{40}\), injunctions, affidavits\(^{41}\), issues, references to masters, masters’
reports, mountains of costly nonsense, piled before them. Well the
court be dim, with wasting candles here and there; well may the fog hang
heavy in it, as if it would never get out; well may the stained-glass windows
lose their colour and admit no light of day into the place; well may the
uninitiated from the streets, who peep in through the glass panes in the
door, be deterred\(^{42}\) from entrance by its owlish\(^{43}\) aspect and by the drawl\(^{44}\),
languidly echoing to the roof from the padded dais where the Lord High
Chancellor looks into the lantern that has no light in it and where the
attendant wigs are all stuck in a fog-bank! This is the Court of Chancery\(^{45}\),
which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire, which
has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse and its dead in every
churchyard, which has its ruined suitor with his slipshod heels\(^{46}\) and
threadbare dress\(^{47}\) borrowing and begging through the round of every
man’s acquaintance, which gives to monied\(^{48}\) might the means abundantly
of wearying out the right, which so exhausts finances, patience, courage,
hope, so overthrows\(^{49}\) the brain and breaks the heart, that there is not an
honourable man among its practitioners who would not give – who does
not often give – the warning, “Suffer any wrong that can be done you
rather than come here!”

**text analysis**

**Comprehension**

1. **Read the first paragraph and answer the following questions.**
   1. Where does the scene take place?
   2. What is the setting in time?
   3. What does the second sentence suggest as regards the capital city?
   4. What specific characteristics of the place are accentuated?
   5. Where are foot passengers walking and what are they breathing?

2. **Read the second paragraph and identify its key word.**

3. **Read up to line 38 and complete the following sentences.**
   1. The legal references in the first paragraph and the mention of fog in the second paragraph
turn out ........................................ .
   2. The fog is ........................................ at Temple Bar.
   3. The muddy streets are ........................................ .
   4. At the very heart of the fog ........................................ .
4. The last two paragraphs of the text reinforce the interconnections between the place and the institutions. Answer the following questions.
   1. What can the Lord High Chancellor see in the roof?
   2. Who have the “various solicitors in the cause being discussed in Chancery” inherited the cause from?
   3. What are we told about the Court of Chancery?
   4. What does “monied might” (line 73) suggest?

Structure and Style

5. What is the predominant narrative mode?

6. Define the type of narrator and find where he openly turns to the reader.

7. The key word of this passage is the fog. Analyse its presence in each part of the extract.
   1. In the first paragraph the narrator establishes a relationship between the fog and another element belonging to the town environment. Underline it and state the sensations evoked by this association.
   2. A poetic device is used in the second paragraph to describe the fog. Recognise it and justify your answer quoting from the text.
   3. How is the fog described in the third paragraph? Choose among from the following adjectives.
      - symbolical
      - realistic
      - subjective
      - emphatic
   4. What role does the fog assume in the fourth and fifth paragraphs? What is it identified with?

8. The general atmosphere of the novel is established right from the start. Which grammatical and lexical features help define the setting? Read carefully the points under each heading in the table below, cross out those you do not agree with and find examples for the others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The setting: London</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mostly defined by:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Sentences that do not have verbs, since everything is disconnected;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. A succession of things with no relationship between them;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Symbols which point out everything is related, because everything is common.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Court of Chancery</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mostly defined by:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. A long and detailed description;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Dynamic verbs;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Static verbs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is the result of your analysis? What does the contrast between disconnection and universal highlight?

9. The description of London gradually takes on an interior quality, since it moves its focus from streets to the Court of Chancery.
   1. Consider the lighting of the streets and that of the interiors and define its quality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outdoor light</th>
<th>Indoor light</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Decide what link exists between these two different qualities of light.
2. The mechanical repetition of phrases and of syntax combine to express the main features of the Chancery. Fill in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repeated phrases</th>
<th>Repeated structures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Which aspects of the Court of Chancery do these linguistic devices underline? Tick as appropriate.
- □ monotony
- □ detachment
- □ alienation
- □ creativity
- □ indifference
- □ frustration

**Contextualization**

10. Refer to 9.1 and 9.2; then summarise what you have learned about the quality of life in Victorian England.

11. Compare this vision of London with other descriptions of this town you have already studied. Consider the descriptive details and the writer’s / poet’s attitude.

12. The title of this picture is *Ludgate Hill from London. A Pilgrimage* (1872) by the French engraver Gustave Doré. Look at this drawing carefully and find connections with the text you have just analysed.

**Personal Response**

13. What feelings does the description of London arouse in you?

14. The experience of living in a large city can still be a source of uneasiness and unhappiness today, and it creates problems with communication, as it did at Dickens’s time. Write a short essay on this subject.

15. What do you think about technological and industrial progress? Do you find it helpful or destructive? Give reasons.