

総説

Contagious Diseases as a Key to Comprehending the World of *Bleak House*

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This essay examines the pervasive use of the motif of contagious diseases in *Bleak House* (1852–53) by Charles Dickens. The narrative serves as a reflection of the grim social reality of mid-Victorian England plagued with epidemics. Through vivid portrayals of the filthy and impoverished London environment in which epidemics break out and spread, Dickens effectively underscores the potency of contagion and its tragic consequences, whereas he draws attention to the propagation of a metaphorical epidemic, which forms a parallel to the actual epidemic. The world of *Bleak House* is characterised by chaos and enigma, a consequence of decades of corruption, apathy, and neglect. Therefore, many characters find themselves in a state of ignorance and bewilderment, grappling with a lack of knowledge that compels them to fervently seek the truth. This feverish pursuit of unravelling mysteries becomes prevalent, gripping not only those entangled in the infamous Jarndyce case but also most of the characters in the novel. Contagious diseases, physical or metaphorical, are highly communicable, and few people can escape them. The motif of contagion dominates the novel, serving as a resonating bass note that drives the narrative forward and fosters a cohesive sense of unity within the vast expanse of the novel's world.

Keywords: contagion, smallpox, Victorian era, ignorance, mysteries

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1. Introduction

The early and mid-19th century in Britain is a period marked by rampant contagious diseases. This is before the so-called golden age of medicine and medical treatment, characterised by John Snow's

discovery of a link between cholera outbreaks and contaminated water from a public pump, the discovery of pathogens, medical technology enhancements, dissemination of vaccinations, and the establishment of public health systems. While the emergence of modern medicine is observed, pre-modern and occasionally superstitious medical practices, devoid of scientific foundation, still prevail. The general public remain largely ignorant of diseases. Under these conditions, epidemics such as typhoid, cholera, tuberculosis, and smallpox frequently break out, especially in London, where rapid urbanisation and

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industrialisation force many into overcrowded, harsh living conditions with poor sanitation. Thus, the aforementioned diseases continue to claim victims, exacerbated by limited preventive measures or treatments, as the causes of these diseases remain largely unknown. This has led to a rapid spread of contagious diseases, particularly among the poor.

The mortality rate in early Victorian England was relatively high, with an estimated average life expectancy of approximately 40–45 years,¹⁾ and children were lucky to survive their fifth birthdays. Factors such as poor living conditions, inadequate health-care, and contagious diseases contributed to this low life expectancy.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that 19th-century English literary works, especially in the first half of the century, often depicts diseases and deaths. ‘There is scarcely a Victorian fictional narrative without its ailing protagonist, its depiction of a sojourn in the sickroom.’²⁾ This is true of the novels by Charles Dickens. Dickens skillfully incorporates disease motifs into his works, notably evident in *Bleak House* (1852–53), which focuses on contagious diseases such as smallpox and integrates their characteristics into the narrative.

Many critics have previously drawn attention to the significance of contagious diseases in *Bleak House*. The novelist’s purpose in featuring the diseases that afflict his characters has been interpreted variously: from an indictment and appeal for improvement of Victorian social problems, such as inadequate public health, urban poverty and overcrowding, and the lack of communal graveyards, to an attempt to denounce the legal system, which was infamous for its complexity and inefficiency, by highlighting parallels with contagious diseases. These analyses appear valid. However, the role of contagion extends beyond these dimensions. An

exploration of the world depicted in *Bleak House* reveals that the concept of contagious diseases (particularly smallpox) lies at the heart of the novel and permeates every facet of the novel. This essay examines Dickens’ assertions through his focus on contagion.

2. The source of epidemics

A primary objective in *Bleak House* is to enlighten the reader about the source of disease outbreaks, with consistent focus on the filthiness of London manifested through mud, pervasive dampness, smoke, and fog. The introduction to *Dirty Old London* by Lee Jackson offers the following passage about London, containing words written by a 19th-century Chinese ambassador to the UK:

Throughfares were swamped with black mud, composed principally of horse dung, forming a tenacious, glutinous paste; the air was peppered with soot, flakes of filth rumbling to the ground ‘in black Plutonian show’rs’. The distinctive smell of the city was equally unappealing. Winter fogs brought mephitic sulphurous stinks. The summer months, on the other hand, created their own obnoxious cocktail, ‘that combined odour of stale fruit and vegetables, rotten eggs, foul tobacco, spilt beer, rank cart-grease, dried soot, smoke, triturated road-dust and damp straw’. London was the heart of the greatest empire ever known; a financial and mercantile hub for the world; but it was also infamously filthy.³⁾

This passage persuades us that the London scenes depicted in several parts of *Bleak House*, including the opening section, are neither hyperbolic nor fabricated, but are an accurate portrayal of the city familiar to contemporaneous readers. Through the novel’s representation of the stench and sludge-ridden urban environment, Dickens aims to raise awareness about the disease-related predicaments

endured by individuals in the Victorian era. He evokes ‘the miasma theory’ stating that the dissemination of particles, especially those from decomposing matter, highly contributes to the spread of diseases—a notion deeply ingrained in society. London is indeed a breeding ground for contagious diseases, and the pall of gloom and smog enshrouding the city is an ominous harbinger of the diseases and deaths that the characters of the novel (and the Victorian readers) would inevitably confront.

As the narrative unfolds, Dickens shifts his focus to the slums of Tom-all-Alone’s, in which the reader encounters a deplorable labyrinth of narrow, filthy streets dotted with dilapidated houses and impoverished residents. Dickens seems to find it his duty to illuminate the plight of the destitute, particularly viewing these slums through the lens of contagions and the fatalities it brings.

In Tom-all-Alone’s, outbreaks of contagious diseases proliferate, leaving residents gripped by the dread of falling victim to these diseases. In 19th-century Britain, those living under harsh conditions are arguably the most vulnerable to contagion. Therefore, as demonstrated in the quoted scene below, in which Inspector Bucket visits the slum, Dickens portrays afflicted residents not as substantial, flesh-and-blood human beings, but as a bunch of ghosts, insinuating that their very existence is tainted with death. Ignored by society, they seem to exist in a realm of neither being fully alive nor entirely deceased.

As the unseen wretch goes by, the crowd, leaving that object of attraction, hovers round the three visitors like a dream of horrible faces, and fades away up alleys and into ruins, and behind walls, and with occasional cries and shrill whistles of warning, thenceforth flits about them until they leave the place.

‘Are those the fever-houses, Darby?’ Mr. Bucket coolly

asks, as he turns his bull’s-eye on a line of stinking ruins.

Darby replies that ‘all them are,’ and further that in all, for months and months, the people ‘have been down by dozens,’ and have been carried out, dead and dying ‘like sheep with the rot.’ (358)⁴⁾

Behind these contagions and the dire living conditions of the slums lies a range of societal issues including poverty, inequality, overpopulation, discrimination, and neglect in urban areas. However, these concerns were often overlooked by the general public, whereas a handful of individuals, including figures such as Charles Booth, Sir Henry Mayhew, and Sir Edwin Chadwick, strived to elevate hygiene standards, although their efforts yielded limited results in the immediate term. For Dickens, who assumed the roles of both a social reformer and a writer, the focus on contagions in *Bleak House* was undoubtedly a significant way to shed light on the challenges faced by the population.

The specter of contagion looms heavily over the characters of *Bleak House*, mirroring the afflictions that gripped Victorian England. Through *Bleak House*, Dickens effectively conveys the resounding message that contagion impacts not solely the impoverished but every stratum of society. He implores society to squarely confront this issue.

3. Communicability of contagious diseases such as smallpox

In the context of *Bleak House*, it is crucial to underscore that the role of contagious diseases extends far beyond mere representation. Instead, they function as pivotal keys to unlock the intricate and multi-faceted world of the novel.

Several diseases feature in *Bleak House*; Dickens focuses most on the disease thought to be smallpox. According to F.S. Schwarzbach, ‘Dickens never

names the particular fever, but he indicates clearly that it is smallpox.⁵⁾ Smallpox was a common cause of death in 19th-century Britain. Three out of ten afflicted died, and '[t]he severe European pandemic of 1837–40, for example, raised smallpox death rates in England to horrifying heights.'⁶⁾ According to CDC, the virus spread primarily through coughing, sneezing, and talking—essentially through 'direct and relatively prolonged face-to-face contact between people.'⁷⁾

These particular attributes of smallpox render it a convenient disease for Dickens to weave into his narrative. One of the vital elements of the disease is its communicability, which is demonstrated primarily through Jo, the crossing sweeper, who roosts at Tom-all-Alone's, earning a pittance by removing sludge and excrement from the street. The first thing the reader is told about this boy is his status as a pathetic victim. Despite his ignorance and throw-away attitude towards his hopeless living situation, he is essentially a good boy; however, his status as a slum dweller renders him an object of repugnance to the outside world. When he contracts a fever, possibly from moving in and out of the cemetery while working, he not only receives no care but is forcibly evicted from Tom-all-Alone's. This reflects the prevailing law of the era, which dictated that vagrants were not permitted to remain in one place.

Hence, his role shifts from that of a vulnerable victim to that of a harm-spreading social threat; as a carrier, roaming aimlessly on the outskirts of London, Jo unwittingly infects Charley and, through her, Esther. Ironically, their benevolence and empathy in nursing the boy leads to their own misfortune. Charley eventually recovers, whereas Esther is tragically left with the distinctive scarring of smallpox on her face, following an agonizing period of sickness. (Although vaccination was discovered in the UK in

1796, it did not become compulsory until 1853.⁸⁾ Dickens, despite being a proponent of vaccination, does not mention it in the novel.)

This chain of infection implies the potential for an epidemic to traverse social boundaries, infecting one person to the next. In the Victorian era, there was a prevailing belief that contagious diseases, such as smallpox, were diseases of the poor; however, Dickens rejects this notion, satirising Sir Leicester Dedlock's elitist perspective that associates disease with social class.

Sir Leicester receives the gout as a troublesome demon, but still a demon of the patrician order. All the Dedlocks, in the direct male line, through a course of time during and beyond which the memory of man goeth not to the contrary, have had the gout. It can be proved, sir. Other men's fathers may have died of the rheumatism or may have taken base contagion from the tainted blood of the sick vulgar; but, the Dedlock family have communicated something exclusive, even to the levelling process of dying, by dying of their own family gout. (255)

Although Dickens lived at a time when the presence of the pathogen was not yet identified, and the miasma theory persisted among the general public, he must have shared the medical expertise of the time that the suggested diseases were spread through physical contact between people. This is illustrated by some scenes in *Bleak House*: Skimpole, sensing that Jo's potential infection with a dangerous fever, advises Jarndyce to remove him from Bleak House or quarantine him. Esther, aware of the contagious nature of the disease, confines herself to her room during her sickness, completely cutting off all contact with others except for Charley. Without Esther's precaution, it is highly likely that Ada, Richard and Jarndyce, who belong to the upper echelons of society, could have been infected. These instances show Dickens' intent to steer his readers towards a differ-

ent understanding of disease transmission, dispelling the necessity of attributing them solely to miasma.

In lines with the miasma theory, which asserted that epidemics originated from areas with contaminated air, the logical approach to curbing epidemics was to eliminate the filthy substances that could be the source of the miasma. However, in reality, the polluted, unhygienic conditions pervading in London and Tom-all-Alone's have reached unmanageable levels, making their removal nearly impossible. Managing contact transmission poses even greater challenges. Although the outbreaks of communicable diseases often result from poor sanitation, such as in slums where patients are more likely to be found, as the movements of people cannot be completely stopped to confine carriers to a single location, it is difficult to predict when and where an epidemic will occur. Anyone in other areas is at risk of becoming both an unwitting victim and a transmitter of the disease.

Dickens metaphorically employs this issue of smallpox transmission to delve into various events that make up the world of *Bleak House*, enhancing the reader's comprehension.

In the novel, Dickens directs his criticism towards the English legal system of the 19th century, which is notorious for its inefficiency, absurdity, and depravity, as epitomized by the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case progressing through the Court of Chancery. In the 19th century, the use of metaphors and analogies associated with illness and disease is a common technique for discussing and critiquing social systems and problems. Dickens follows suit, utilising the features of smallpox as a device for characterisation and thematic development.

The Jarndyce case evolves around the inheritance of a vast estate left by a wealthy man named Tom Jarndyce. Owing to the ambiguity of his will, the

case has become increasingly convoluted with numerous claimants, including distant relatives and supposed heirs of the deceased, asserting their rights to inheritance. They labour under the misguided belief that if they continue to examine historical legal documents, they will surely discover clues leading to a judgement in their favour. Among these litigants is Richard, through whom Dickens intricately depicts how slow legal battles can transform an otherwise healthy young man into someone torn between expectation and disappointment, hope and despair, mental exhaustion and physical debilitation, and ultimately death.

Incompetence and inaction of the legal bureaucracy have resulted in litigation dragging on for generations, with no prospect of resolution, and the original issues and objectives of the trial have been forgotten. Trials are conducted as routine matters, with no regard for the plaintiffs' anguish, while inviting further litigation. As is evident from the fact that both the upper-class Dedlock family and the Tom-all-Alone's are involved in the Jarndyce case, a large number of people of different classes and backgrounds are forced to fall into an abyss of sorts. It is an endless chain of great torment from which no one can break free once ensnared. Thus, using parallels with contagion, Dickens vividly conveys the eerie allure of the Jarndyce case and the tragedy it causes.

4. Ignorance as a form of existence

Dickens not only explores contagion in terms of its strong communicability and deleterious effect but also examines it from different angles, incorporating its features into the narrative. Additional motifs related to contagion also present within *Bleak House*.

The subsequent aspect involves another metaphorical manifestation of an epidemic.

Initiating the discussion, the eccentric figure of Krook, nicknamed the Lord Chancellor by the neighbours, cannot be ignored.

There were a great many ink bottles. There was a little tottering bench of shabby old volumes, outside the door, labelled 'Law Books, all at 9d.' Some of the inscriptions I have enumerated were written in law-hand, . . . There were several second-hand bags, blue and red, hanging up. A little way within the shop door, lay heaps of old crackled parchment scrolls, and discoloured and dog's-eared law-papers. [Esther] could have fancied that all the rusty keys, of which there must have been hundreds huddled together as old iron, had once belonged to doors of rooms or strong chests in lawyers' offices. The litter of rags tumbled partly into and partly out of a one-legged wooden scale, hanging without any counterpoise from a beam, might have been counselors' bands and gowns torn up. One had only to fancy, as Richard whispered to Ada and me while we all stood looking in, that yonder bones in a corner, piled together and picked very clean, were the bones of clients, to make the picture complete. (68)

This is a description of the interior of Krook's rag and bottle warehouse observed by Esther, with Richard and Ada, during the London excursion. The peculiar sight with junk and legal papers stacked and scattered in a jumbled mess is a parody of the Chancery Court and the uproar over the Jarndyce case, as well as a reflection of the proprietor's traits: greediness, meanness, shrewdness, and sinisterness.

Illiterate Krook can distinguish the letters of the alphabet but cannot understand them as words or sentences. His understanding of the numerous legal documents in his shop is limited; however, he keeps documents that he believes contain secrets capable of resolving the legal dispute and shows an insatiable desire to constantly collect new ones. Underlying his behaviour must be curiosity about the secrets of unsolved legal cases and a strong desire to unravel

them. While Krook's main contribution to the novel comes in the form of his involvement in the Jarndyce case, he holds another significant role. References to Krook and his shop, which appear early in the novel, symbolically serve as a warning to the reader of the unusual circumstances common to the characters.

In *Bleak House*, 'ignorance' stands as the fundamental, universal condition of existence. Here is another quotation illustrating this point.

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not, to have the least idea of all that language—to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, and to think (for perhaps Jo *does* think, at odd times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? (257)

Parallels between Jo's situation here and Krook's shop are evident, as both are littered with incomprehensible letters and words. Dickens intends to convey the message that this is nothing but a symbol of the situation in which characters in *Bleak House* find themselves; they are surrounded by countless pieces of information and secrets they cannot comprehend. In summary, people resemble Jo, the most ignorant in the novel, who does not even know his identity or name and mumbles, 'I don't know nothink [sic]'. (257)

Ignorance can breed anxiety and ignite the desire to break free from it. Therefore, riddles or secrets, in general, seduce characters to read meanings into them as if they hold the key to the truth. Exceptionally, some individuals show little interest in actively engaging in the act of solving mysteries. Jo has no

idea how to respond to the mysteries surrounding him, Mrs Jellyby is absorbed in her immediate concern, neglecting other matters, and Skimpole and Turveydrop feign naivety or turn a blind eye to inconveniences to indulging vanity and idleness. However, many strive to uncover the mystery by collecting and examining clues. Resultantly, what might be termed ‘riddle/mystery-solving fever’ has become prevalent in the world of *Bleak House*, and people seek to discover the truth, although their motivations may vary, including curiosity, the pursuit of wealth, a desire for control, and a sense of duty.

It goes without saying that the actions of those involved in the Jarndyce case are motivated by this mystery-solving fever. Additionally, the subplot, which centres on Esther’s birth and Lady Dedlock’s identity, cannot be told without this fever.

A chronological overview of character actions clarifies how the fever is transmitted from person to person, with one secret leading to additional secrets and puzzles, from which the situation becomes even more complicated. The narrative’s gears start turning when Lady Dedlock almost faints, seeing an affidavit relating to the Jarndyce case brought by her husband’s legal adviser Tulkinghorn; suspicious of her strange attitude, Tulkinghorn sets out to unravel the reason. The story concludes with Bucket and Esther attempting to track Lady Dedlock, who left the mansion in a desperate attempt to hide her identity, and eventually finding her lifeless body in Tom-all-Alone’s cemetery.

In the process, attempts are made to solve many mysteries or secrets tied to Nemo’s whereabouts, Lady Dedlock’s past, and the Tulkinghorn murder case, through which a wide variety of characters are caught up in unrelated matters, lost for unknown reasons, used as a pawn, falsely arrested, stirred up

to greed, or threatened. Mysteries or secrets are rarely solved but rather multiplied, which propels the story forward. Some characters suffer severe setbacks, whereas others remain uninformed and ignorant. In any case, the fever to solve the mystery proves as infectious as a physically contagious disease, often with disastrous consequences. Ultimately, this fever seems to bring no one contentment, leaving a hollow atmosphere in the work.

What causes the world of *Bleak House* to become chaotic and enigmatic in the first place? To uncover an answer, an unexpected yet insightful perspective can be drawn from a medical standpoint—the stages of infection.

The course of the disease consists of an incubation period about 12 days from the time of exposure to the prodrome, which is characterized by fever, headache and muscle pain abating after 3–4 days. Then the skin eruptions appear, mostly on the face and distal extremities, spreading to the trunk. On the third or fourth day after the rash appears, vesicles develop, and fever returns. Scabs form which usually fall off three weeks after the beginning of illness, leaving the characteristic small scars or deep pits.⁹⁾

This passage about symptoms of smallpox indicates that the process involves several phases: the initial exposure to a pathogen, the incubation stage, the prodromal stage, the period of illness. Many occurrences mirror this infection course in *Bleak House*.

The novel captures the prodromal or onset phase, with the preliminary stages and incubation period concluded before the novel’s narrative begins. In general, during the incubation period, pathogens divide, multiply, and thrive beneath the surface, even if they have not yet developed symptoms. Similarly, during the incubation period of this novel, underlying causes and seeds were steadily growing and preparing for the onset phase of activities. Nevertheless,

the seemingly quiet situation must have continued, and from the outside, it was difficult to tell what was going on beneath the calm surface, which would have developed a sense of stagnation and unease.

Conversely, because of the long incubation period, spanning from years to decades, various transformations such as accumulation, devastation, decay, and diffusion occur around the central event or person, making it challenging for those involved in the situation to grasp its original form. This is why the world of *Bleak House* teems with secrets and mysteries.

After such a period, when the curtain rises on the novel, the precursor and onset phases become active, ushering in a series of events, through which, in many parts of the world of *Bleak House*, inhabitants unexpectedly encounter intriguing phenomena, outcomes, or vestiges of the past. The present is haunted by the past.

A prominent illustration of this is the contaminated London scenes. These scenes arise from slow but continuous deterioration over several decades. First, dust and soot from factories, homes, steam engines, and cobblestones gradually disperse into the air and stagnate as smog, shrouding the city in darkness and suffocating its inhabitants. Thereafter, the pollution falls with rain, creating an unsanitary layer of sludge along with the waste and mud on the ground. This cyclical process, from top to bottom and vice versa, continued, resulting in an uncontrollable state of squalor.

Tom-all-Alone's must have followed a similar course. Commencing as a small area occupied by vagrants and the poorest, its population grew, along with poverty, filth, crime, etc. Thus, such places evolve into frightening areas where outsiders are cautioned against treading, often serving as sources of epidemic diseases. The communal cemetery at

Tom-all-Alone's symbolises this reality. The number of births in 19th century Britain was high, whereas the number of deaths was no less, which led to the overcrowding of traditional burial grounds. Owing to limited space to accommodate the number of deaths, a very rough practice emerged: occupied graves were dug up, with new bodies layered on top of old ones, lightly covered with earth.¹⁰⁾ Such careless burial practices facilitate the spread of pollution resulting from the release of various filthy substances into the soil and air. This is the reality in the mid-19th century, as well as the source of Jo's smallpox infection, which leads to the spread of the disease to other individuals.

The same pattern unfolds in the Jarndyce case. In addition, the plot concerning Lady Dedlock's past is an example of this process. The story stems from a romance between Captain Hawdon and Honoria, culminating in the birth of their child, Esther. The 'illegitimate child' adopted by her aunt Miss Barbary has been growing secretly beneath the surface for years. Because of the moral standard of the Victorian era, these events are considered scandalous and thus buried, with the lovers being torn apart and following divergent paths. Hawdon fell out and lived a meagre life under a false name at Tom-all-Alone's, while Honoria married Sir Leicester, entering high society. Esther's presence was concealed by her adoptive mother, who perceived her birth disgraceful; Esther grows up uninformed of her true identity, isolated from the world. This has led to a situation in which scarcely anyone possesses knowledge about Esther's parentage or background. Later, John Jarndyce takes her in after the death of her adoptive mother, and she emerges publicly for the first time in Chapter 4. This juncture marks the commencement of the onset phase, in which several characters are stimulated to take an interest in fragments of

information scattered about, attempting to reconstruct the past using them as clues.

5. Conclusion

In *Bleak House*, the contagious diseases, whether physical or metaphorical, can have tragic consequences. The essence of the epidemic that Dickens focuses on the most can be seen in the following passage:

For the same reason I am almost afraid to hint at that time in my disorder—it seemed one long night, but I believe there were both nights and days in it—when I laboured up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and labouring again. I knew perfectly at intervals, and I think vaguely at most times, that I was in my bed; and I talked with Charley, and felt her touch, and knew her very well; yet I would find myself complaining, ‘O more of these never-ending stairs, Charley,—more and more—piled up to the sky, I think!’ and labouring on again.

Dare I hint at 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? (555–556)

Here, Esther is depicted on her sickbed suffering from hallucinations caused by a high fever from smallpox. Using images of endless staircases and a beaded necklace, Dickens conveys the contagion’s horrors. The disease’s infectivity, destructiveness, and the difficulty of escaping its suffering are communicated through these symbols. Esther barely survives, though the scarring characteristic of smallpox alters her appearance, whereas for many, death is the only way to escape the chain of infection.

Recovery demands immense strength after succumbing to the contagion and ravages of such diseases.

Bleak House presents an intricate tapestry of Victorian society woven with a variety of features: a wide range of distinctive and impressive characters from different social classes and professions; a large cast of characters; multiple plotlines; social issues such as poverty, public health, class disparity, and the flaws of the legal and social systems; various settings in London and its suburbs—from the luxurious mansions of the nobility at the top to the squalid slums and communal graveyards at the bottom.

These characteristics collectively create a panoramic world, which is so vast and complicated that the reader cannot easily get a bird’s eye view of it. However, concentrating on the motif of contagious diseases allows the reader to find a cohesive framework in the novel. Dickens employs them as the warp thread that provides the foundation upon which the weft threads are added, creating the design of the intricate patterns and images that define the tapestry of the world of *Bleak House*.

[Smallpox] could so effectively lobby for reform, symbolize a major theme and bring about the transformation of the novel’s heroine. Indeed, smallpox is a central unifying force he is able to accomplish so many artistic and thematic goals while remaining faithful to the properties and symptoms of an actual disease.¹¹⁾

As Michael Gurney points out, Dickens’s medical knowledge, acquired from doctors and scholars, enabled him to blend medicine and literature. While we find medical acumen and knowledge, as well as accurate portrayals of sick people in his novels, a literary arrangement is made, conveniently assigning specific meanings and roles to illnesses to suit his conception of the work. In *Bleak House*, contagious

diseases serve as both a genuine social concern and a symbol of bureaucratic incompetence and corruption. Additionally, they function as a powerful narrative device, adding depth and intensity to the story. Dickens employs intricate plotlines by extensively utilising the contagion motif, offering Victorian-era readers a chance to reflect on the society in which they lived. This might have been facilitated by the context of the mid-19th century when medicine was still in a developmental stage. Dickens, making good use of the situation at the time, which was somewhere between scientific and unscientific, successfully produces his masterpiece.

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