

Recurring purposes within dickens' novels



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Charles Dickens was a famous critic of his time. He took on Victorian ideals and issues that he viewed as social injustices and criticized them, both in public speeches and in his writing. In his novels, these were primarily subjects like poverty and what he viewed as problems with the English government: *Oliver Twist* points out poverty and crime; *Bleak House* comments on the Court of Chancery and the social activism of the time; *A Tale of Two Cities* marginally focuses on both poverty and comparing and criticizing the French and English governments. With these three novels, Dickens was able to make strong statements about the problems within English society.

All three of these novels are strongly critical of society, though in different ways. The major way that they're critical is by pointing out the problem of poverty, with both *Oliver Twist* and *A Tale of Two Cities* making a strong effort to do this. *Bleak House* and *A Tale of Two Cities* both highlight some problem within the governments, whether that's the Court of Chancery being useless and more trouble than it's worth, or showing the problems with the aristocracy. Dickens felt so strongly about the poor because he came from a poor background. As a youth while his father was sent to debtor's prison, he was forced to work by himself to survive, and thus got a small taste of poverty. Though he was soon able to go back to school when his father was released, it obviously left a large impression on his life. He also later worked as a court reporter, and thus became familiar with court workings and the ways that they affected people. This, along with the death of his father and daughter very close together, which lead to a darker period in his life and his writing, made him more critical of English society and its customs.

In *Oliver Twist* Dickens illustrates the horrible living conditions of the poor. He does this by starting Oliver out in the poorhouse, where he gets very little food and is constantly mistreated. While Oliver is mistreated more than others in the poorhouse, the conditions there are miserable for everyone. Throughout the book references are made as to how the people living at the very literal bottom of the barrel are mistreated. For example, the poor in the parish are often cast off to some other place because they're seen as a burden. "we find it would come two pound cheaper to move 'em than to bury 'em—that is, if we can throw 'em upon another parish, which I think we shall be able to do" (*Oliver Twist* 149) In this instance, the poor people in question are being moved because they're on the verge of death. Rather than pay what it costs to bury them, the parish would rather move them before they die so that they die somewhere else. The parish is doing this solely because it's cheaper, and they care more about how much money they spend, rather than the conditions that the people live in or making sure that these people live decent lives. When people are poor sometimes they have no choice but to turn to crime, which is why Fagin is able to so easily find and control boys. They have nowhere else to go and they need money and a place to stay, or they won't survive, so being a pickpocket or a robber is an easy answer. Oliver isn't so easily swayed because he has a 'purer' soul than the others, but he could have easily ended up in the same situation as them.

In *Bleak House*, the Court of Chancery is the main focus of the novel, and it's cast in a very negative light. The various suits that the Court of Chancery sees are not only shown as bad and damaging to those involved, but the

court itself is shown as harmful. For example, Mr. Jarndyce constantly advises Richard not to get involved in the suits, but he doesn't listen and in the end he almost loses everything: his love, his family, and he does indeed lose his money as a result. Miss Flite is portrayed as crazy, having become obsessed with the Jarndyce case, and various other characters are also affected in negative ways by other Chancery suits. The first example alone sends a very strong message about the risks of getting involved with the Court- the case will be settled in the end but it won't be worth the effort it takes to get there. If you end up crazy, dead, or destitute along the way, what is the point of even taking a suit to the Court of Chancery? Dickens message seems to be that the Court of Chancery is a detrimental relic within English society, and should be gotten away with. Many characters in this book also talk about making change in other parts of the world but fail to recognize or do anything about the problems in their own country. The Jellybys' are some such people and they're shown in an almost comical way, because Dickens' seems to be mocking those who were so obsessed with 'activism' overseas. In becoming so concerned with Africa and establishing colonialism over there, Mrs. Jellyby loses touch with and neglects her entire family, preferring to dictate useless letters to anyone and everyone rather than stop and listen to her daughter for a moment. The message about this is that Dickens wants so-called social activists, and really everyone in general, to wake up and notice the problems right there at home.

A Tale of Two Cities begins with a comparison of France and England in the past and present times. This makes it clear that though the majority of the novel is chastising the French government during the revolution- both the

monarchy and the rebels- there are dreadful similarities between the situation of the revolution and of Dickens-era Victorian England. There are also multiple instances where Dickens points out the terrible conditions that the poor of France live in, while comparing it to the outrageous extravagance of the wealthy. Take, for instance, the time when the wine cask is dropped in the street outside of the Defarges' wine shop and all the poor do anything they can to drink the wine off the street, then return to their doorsteps to starve. Compare that to the description of Monseigneur's morning ritual, with the four men to bring him his chocolate, and the grandiose obscenity of his mansion in the country while the village he's responsible for lives in poverty. While Dickens is quick to condemn the actions of the poor when they go overboard during the Revolution and murder anyone they deem to be the cause of their misfortunes, he's equally as quick to point out the problems with the aristocracy and their constant lack of concern for the lower classes. This last part is even further illustrated again with Monseigneur, when he runs over the child in town with his carriage and blames the people for the death: "" It is extraordinary to me," said he, " that you people cannot take care of yourselves and your children. One or the other of you is for ever in the way."" (A Tale of Two Cities 115). He callously tries to bribe the man for the death of his child, and refuses to take responsibility for his actions. This shows the attitude that most of the aristocracy have towards the poor, blaming them for their own misfortunes even when someone else was at fault.

Dickens was so critical of these things because he wanted to make some form of change in English society. He went to a great deal of effort to

emphasize these points, and would talk about them outside of his novels, on his speaking tours. Because Dickens had actually lived through situations similar to what he was writing about in his life, he was able to accurately capture how people really lived. In the end, people were very receptive of Dickens writings despite the fact that they were examining so many things in such a cynical light, and they were and are much loved. The approach he took to analyzing society was an incredibly successful one, and some of his arguments are still relevant even in today's society.