

# The Cause and Significance of Legal Elements in *Bleak House*

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Received: March 29, 2022

Accepted: April 23, 2022

Online Published: April 28, 2022

doi:10.20849/ajsss.v7i4.1095

URL: <https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v7i4.1095>

## Abstract

*Bleak House*, as Dickens' outstanding "legal novel", is often regarded as an important research text by many jurists and litterateurs. With the rise of the Law and Literature movement, scholars pay more attention to the interaction between the legal description in *Bleak House* and the law in reality.

The legal elements of the novel revolve around three main cases. Firstly, through combing, it is found that the criticism of the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House* is more metaphorical and literal language expressed through literary devices, rather than pointing out the specific legal procedures or provisions that lead to the delay and pedantry of the Court of Chancery. As a novelist, however, Dickens was not obliged to pass judgment on specific laws. Then, we find that the way he writes is related to his life experience. Through the study of Dickens' relationship with law and the Court of Chancery, this paper reveals the relationship between Dickens and the Court of Chancery, and shows the emotional root of the novel's serious denial of the judicial system and the Court of Chancery. Finally, this paper deeply analyzes the realistic significance of *Bleak House*, expounds the influence of law on the novel, and analyzes the influence on society and the rule of law from the positive side and the negative side.

**Keywords:** *Bleak House*, law and literature, Dickens' novels, significance of law description

## 1. Introduction

*Bleak House* is longest novel of Charles Dickens, and the plot is rich very well, including morality, love and the social reality of England at that time. Since the case of *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce* is the main narrative line, the law is the focus of the novel, and leading many critics to label *Bleak House* a "legal novel". The characters in the whole work are full of personality and the plot changes are reasonable. Moreover, the scope of the description of the characters also spans multiple classes, namely the lower class, the middle class and the aristocracy, which is a good display to the audience of the British society in the 19th century.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was the greatest English writer of the 19th century. His works were often set in real life. Dickens, known for his critical realism, usually insights into the whole society with a critical perspective. Due to his experience in his young age, many of his works are to praise the little people and oppose the capitalist class and the ruling class. Most of his writing is in Victorian English literature, in addition to *Bleak House*, there are a series of well-known novels known to people, such as *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times*, *a Tale of Two Cities* and so on.

In fact, there are many other works of Dickens that contain a lot of legal elements. *The Pickwick Papers* deals with the contents of bankruptcy law and inheritance law, and *Little Dorrit* contains much description of judicial prison and legal issues of debt. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, there are a lot of details about the injustice of the law, and therefore lead to the tragedy of the family. As for why *Bleak House* is so much more compelling than *The Pickwick Papers*, in Posner's words: "Pickwick Papers...is a case at law rather than in equity ... this may be connected with the attenuation of adversary procedure in an inquisitorial system." (Posner, 187-188)

As such a famous "legal novel", *Bleak House* has been studied deeply by many scholars at home and abroad. In the following paragraphs, we will respectively elaborate the domestic and international academic works related to this topic. This paper will focus on the legal element in *Bleak House*, combined with the background of legal reform in The UK at that time, to deeply explore the repercussions of the novel in the society, and its role in the construction of the rule of law in later period.

## 2. Literature Review

There has been a great deal of international research on *Bleak House*. However, a large amount of research content is aimed at literature but not at law. Due to the need of the theme of this paper, we pay more attention to the study of the novel in the field of law and literature. At the early time, the controversy of Dickens and Stephen also provided a fuse for the relevant research undoubtedly. In addition to exploring whether the plot of *Bleak House* is in accordance with the facts, some scholars pay more attention to the values revealed behind the novel. Finally, the focus of the debate converges to the conflict between procedural justice and substantive justice. There are also some scholars in China who have done research on this, however, the novel was gradually introduced into China in the 1980s, coupled with the influence of early political ideology, most Chinese scholars focus on attacking the corruption of capitalism as the main context. In the early 1990s, as a large number of western jurisprudence works gradually entered China, Chinese scholars would reflect on the important position of procedure in judicial system while also criticizing the procrastination and corruption of the Chancery Court. As Posner's Theoretical successor, Su Li, after translating a lot of Posner's work, analyzed the legal factors in Chinese classical literature and obtained considerable achievements.

### 2.1 Review of Western Literature

The analysis of the legal elements in *Bleak House* must be studied between the two fields of law and literature. In the early 20th century, Benjamin N. Cardozo was the forerunner of the Law and Literary movement. And after *The Legal Imagination: Studies in The Nature of Legal Thought and Expression* of James B. White was published, Law and Literature were formally introduced into the classroom of Legal education. The core of this movement is to appreciate and analyse some classic literary works which with legal elements, and Dickens' works clearly deserve to be included in the research scope. Since then, with the development of the Law and Literature movement, gradually this field is not only the study of classic works, but also extends to the constraints of law on the development of literature, the literal rhetoric of legal texts, and new legal interpretation methods.

There is no unified research method in Law and Literature movement, and the ideas and perspectives are also different due to the different knowledge background and writing techniques of each author. However, such analysis is based on a certain language environment. If it is simply criticized without such language environment, it will be beside the point and irrational somewhat. Therefore, it is a relatively objective approach to understand *Bleak House* in the western context.

*Charles Dickens as a Legal Historian* by William S. Holdsworth is an indispensable masterpiece to study Dickens. There is a great deal about Dickens's life and two major works are discussed, *Bleak House* and *The Pickwick Papers*. Some details about this will be covered in the following article. Although *The Lawyers of Dickens and Their Clerks* of Robert D. Neely and *Dickens and Crime* of Philip Collins two works are close to *Bleak House* in name, they actually only cite some details of the novel to support their own views, and there is not much research content on this novel.

There are many forms in the study of Law and literature. According to Thomas Morawetz's opinion, they can be divided into Law in literature, Law as literature, Law of literature, Literature and legal reform four parts. When it comes to Law in literature, Morawetz emphasized that the expression of law in literature could play a role as a social regulating institution, he argues: "Authors as different as Dickens (*Bleak House*), Kafka (parables), and Samuel Butler (Erewhon) appeal to law as a surrogate for the many institutions by which persons seek - for better or worse - to give life coherence." (Morawetz, 447)

Richard A. Posner's assessment of *Bleak House* is nuanced and comprehensive, praising Dickens's insights as a novelist and then harshly criticizing the plot and the legal knowledge Dickens had amassed. As a Chief Justice of the United States, Posner's comments on Dickens are pertinent, but also with some official opinions, that is, he pays more attention to the circumstances of judicial operation. Based on his profound legal knowledge, the emphasis on procedure or formal logic thinking is obviously stronger than non-legal people. It's not hard to read between the lines:

"The irony exploited by Dickens in *Bleak House* is that the court of conscience became the nation's worst example of legal abuses. This made it an irresistible target for a moralist who believed (very much in the spirit of the Romantic movement) that institutions pervert the in-born goodness of people.

A lawyer would point out that equity had the weakness of its strengths, just as law had the strength of its weaknesses. It is the old dilemma of rule versus discretion." (Posner, 190-191)

## 2.2 *The Background of the Novel*

This novel mainly narrates two stories, a love story and a legal story. Love, undoubtedly, is an eternal human theme and the main setting of countless historical novels. But for legal stories, the creation background is worth studying, which is also one of the reasons for the rise of Law and Literature movement in the later period.

In fact, fiction alone is an inadequate way to view the Chancery Court. For the pedantry and procrastination of the Chancery Court was not the case when it was founded. Why was there a need for a chancery in the fifteenth century? Mainly because the Common Law at that time could not adapt to the social development quickly, many legal rules could not solve practical problems. In civil cases the remedies available are largely limited to the award of damages and the restoration of possession of land and chattels. In addition, the Common Law system at that time was huge and could not be transformed in time to meet the needs of the real society, which caused great dissatisfaction.

In addition, the Common Law trial system was influenced by local influence, and bribery and juror intimidation made it difficult for the Common Law courts to resolve disputes fairly. The litigants could eventually appeal to the King, and cases naturally fell to the Chancery. As the number of cases has increased, the power of the justices has grown and has threatened the authority of the Common Law courts.

The original intention of the Chancery construction is also to better solve disputes, but with the expansion of power and the passage of time, the Chancery Court has gradually become pedantic and procrastination. Dickens' *Bleak House* is based on such a historical background. However, at the same time as the novel was written, judicial reform was also under way. Under the Judicial Organization Act, England's the Common Law and Equity courts were merged and procrastination, expense and injustice were abolished.

## 3. Details of the Legal Description in *Bleak House*

The overall narrative structure of *Bleak House* is tight and logical. Good at using metaphor to highlight the characteristics of the object to be expressed. The novel is a mammoth work of more than 600,000 words, which involves basically all aspects of British society at that time. The novel is also the most important work in Dickens's "City trilogy". After an in-depth study of the novel, this chapter tries to eliminate the elements outside the law and provide a convenient path for the later study of law and literature.

As mentioned above, most scholars are based on the research thinking of British and American literature, which is characterized by more attention to the description of language, the setting of environment and the expression of emotion. It is quite different from legal scholars, who prefer subjects' rights, objective evidence and judicial procedure in cases. As a matter of fact, some scholars show the darkness and pedantry of the Chancery Court through the "fog" and "mud" in the novel, which in essence are necessary descriptions made by Dickens to complete the persuasiveness of the work. Even Julius thinks that:

"But *Bleak House* is perhaps exceptional in the way it encourages both referential and symbolic readings. Critics have not been slow to respond to such encouragement. Edgar Johnson's gloss is typical: /both law and fog are fundamentally symbols of all the murky forces that suffocate the creative energies of mankind." (Julius, 1998) [Julius, A. (1998), Dickens the lawbreaker. *Critical Quarterly*, 40: 43-66.]

Most of these comments are made from a literary point of view. In addition, some scholars appreciate the fact that most of the characters in *Bleak House* are law-abiding. I think this is a typical fallacy. The plot of this novel is designed to show the darkness of the Chancery court. If the characters in the novel are not law-abiding, the plot is completely impossible, so such an analysis is unconvincing. This chapter will show readers the state of the rule of law at that time in the form of cases.

### 3.1 *The Case of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*

As an important clue throughout the novel, The Jarndyce case is often mentioned or criticized by different characters in the novel. But in fact, the novel does not tell the process of the case, the litigants, evidence analysis and so on deeply and carefully. The source of the Jarndyce case is introduced only in the preface of the novel:

"At the present moment (August, 1853) there is a suit before the court which was commenced nearly twenty years ago, in which from thirty to forty counsel have been known to appear at one time, in which costs have been incurred to the amount of seventy thousand pounds, which is a friendly suit; and which is (I am assured) no nearer to its termination now than when it was begun. There is another well-known suit in Chancery, not yet decided, which was commenced before the close of the last century and in which more than double the amount of seventy thousand pounds has been swallowed up in costs. If I wanted other authorities for Jarndyce and Jarndyce, I could rain them on these pages, to the shame of-a parsimonious public." (Dickens, xxvi-xxvii)

[Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1985.]

In the first half of the novel, John Jarndyce, who is also one of the beneficiaries of the Jarndyce case, talks with Esther about that his uncle Tom Jarndyce committed suicide because he cared too much about the case. And later complained that the Chancery Court only charged legal fees without doing anything. As John said: "It's about nothing but costs now. We are always appearing, and disappearing, and swearing, and interrogating, and filing, and cross-filing, and arguing, and sealing, and motioning, and referring, and reporting, and revolving about the Lord Chancellor and all his satellites, and equitably waltzing ourselves off to dusty death, about costs." (Dickens, 89) These details are enough to make it abundantly clear to the readers that the court's procedures are extremely complex and expensive. But if the reader is a legal person or one who knows something about the law, he will probably continue to wonder why the case has dragged on until the end of the novel.

The other two important beneficiaries of the Jarndyce case, Ada Clare and Richard Carstone. They met each other through the case and finally fell in love and married. The obsession with the Jarndyce case made Carstone's body and financial resources exhausted. As a reader, following this pattern of plot, I also hope that the Jarndyce case will come to a satisfactory ending. When Mr. Smallweed found the key evidence to advance the case. The case ended. When Carstone's friend Alan asked, the answer has been given in the such easy conversation:

"Is this will considered a genuine document, sir?" said Allan. "Will you tell us that?"

"Most certainly, if I could," said Mr. Kenge; "but we have not gone into that, we have not gone into that." (Dickens, 806)

Since the heritage has been completely wiped out by legal costs, the authenticity of key evidence is irrelevant. Using of such narrative device by Dickens creates a sense of utter absurdity in its audience towards the Chancery Court. In the novel, other men attending the trial blocked the door like spectators, to satirize the judicial process and judicial organs are actually the butt of everyone's jokes.

However, as a legal person, it is not complete to give an unconvincing explanation or an explanation without legal basis at the end of the novel. What causes the case to ignore the limitation of litigation system? And what evidence, in the absence of sufficient evidence, suggests that Ada Clare and Richard Carstone may be the ultimate beneficiaries? Why is there no publicity process when the total amount of the heritage approaches the total amount of legal costs? These problems left too much regret to the legal men, the novel is good at mobilizing the mood to criticize the Chancery Court. But it doesn't give the people, or the lawyers, any possibility of solving the real problem.

### 3.2 *The Cases of Nemo's Death and Krook's Death*

There are two accidental deaths throughout the novel, both of which even can't actually be called a case. And many scholars, when studying *Bleak House*, have not taken this detail into account. However, this paper believes that these two accidental deaths can also explain the legal status of Britain at that time.

In the novel, When Mr. Tulkinghorn was investigating Nemo, he found Nemo dead in his house. When the surgeon arrived, he found Nemo dead because he had smoked too much opium. Mr. Krook's death was unique, spontaneous combustion. Mr. Krook's death was only discovered due to an agreement with Mr. Guppy to exchange letters. As can be seen from the description of the novel, after an accidental death, there will be a series of procedures, such as the identification of the manner of death, the identification of the deceased, and even the problem of inheritance. Like what the beadle thinks: "He is understood to be in want of witnesses for the inquest to-morrow who can tell the coroner and jury anything whatever respecting the deceased." (Dickens, 134) Not only that, but the jury ultimately has to make a judgment based on the evidence, the witnesses and the testimony, about who the deceased was, whether he was a homicide or an accident, who has been entrusted with the heritage.

Although wrong or incomplete judgments were sometimes made in accordance with the standards of that time, such procedures ensured the rights of every citizen in the form at least (including even those who, like Nemo, had no way of identifying themselves).

### 3.3 *The Case of Tulkinghorn's Death*

*Bleak House* was once considered the beginning of the urban detective novel. In the case of Tulkinghorn's death, the suspense and detective work is on display. Unlike the previous two cases, Tulkinghorn's death was murder. After Tulkinghorn's is found, inspector Mr. Bucket investigates. Finally, the real murderer was captured after the inspector's clever analysis. There is no particular legal element to the case. Murder is strongly prohibited in any

country or society. In this case, however, Mr. George was the most suspected because of initial evidence, so the inspector put George in prison first. In this episode, when John and Esther visit him and urge him to get him a lawyer, George's response is thought-provoking:

“Suppose I really had discharged into his body any one of those pistols ... Got a lawyer.

I should have got a lawyer ... What would he do, whether or not? Act as if I was-shut my mouth up, tell me not to commit myself, keep circumstances back, chop the evidence small, quibble, and get me off perhaps!” (Dickens, 656-657)

Their dialogue revealed a kind of helplessness to the legal state at that time. People knew the importance of lawyers when hearing cases of Equity, but because lawyers often reversed black and white because of money in the court, people had a kind of resistance to lawyers.

As the greatest novelist of the 19th century, Dickens was sharp in his criticism of certain things. Just because of his sharp view, although it can represent the view of a large number of people at that time, there is undoubtedly a large subjective component. Therefore, this paper selects some special details of the three cases mentioned above, and intends to explore the relatively objective situation. In fact, this article does not give much emphasis to Gridley's case, and there are no more specific legal details other than Mr. Gridley losing his temper in court and stating his injustice. Although the case, as Dickens describes it in his foreword, is a true story, my own view is that it only strengthens the case of *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce* against the Chancery Court.

#### **4. The Cause of Legal Elements in *Bleak House***

As for the details in chapter two, it is not difficult to see that Dickens has a strong personal color in his fierce attack on the Chancery Court. It is also possible that he is simply trying to educate the public about the injustice of the court, rather than trying to correct some legal process. If you want to have a deeper understanding of this work, it is obvious that you can't do without an understanding of Dickens' life experience.

As a matter of fact, Dickens's life experience had a great influence on him. Because of his childhood living environment and the environment in which his brothers and sisters lived together, Dickens painted fragile or parentless children in a more delicate way. So what life experiences or events prompted the idea of *Bleak House*?

##### *4.1 Dickens' Father's Debts and Career in His Youth*

In *Bleak House*, both Mr. Skimpole, the villain, and Mr. George, the positive character, mention debt, and Skimpole's creditors threaten to send him to prison if he don't pay. In fact, this is closely related to Dickens' childhood family experience. Dickens' “father was arrested for debt and confined to the Marshalsea Prison. It was a tearful, demeaning episode that forever left its mark and legacy in the mind, life, and books of Charles Dickens.” (Allen, 2008)

Debt aside, *Bleak House* has plenty of law firm scenes to fill. After Dickens received his formal education, “at the end of which his parents found a position for him as a clerk with solicitors Ellis and Blackmore of Gray's Inn.” (Allen, 2008) However, Dickens was not very interested in legal work and later found a job as a journalist. While working as a legal clerk, he made a lifelong friend and legal adviser, Thomas Mitton.

##### *4.2 Dickens and the Chancery Court*

Despite some early experiences, Dickens had a real life connection with *Bleak House*'s Chancery court. This contact created a strong resistance in Dickens. “Preoccupied with the exploitation of his work as a consequence of piracy overseas, Dickens brought five actions in Chancery in 1844 to restrain breaches of copyright. His financially unsuccessful attempts to protect his own work left Dickens outraged.” (Schramm, 2008) This copyright dispute was called the Carol Case, in which Dickens spent a lot of money and experience, only to get back anxiety and unfair treatment. This is exactly the same as Castone's experience in *Bleak House*.

Although I sympathize with such experiences, which also support my judgment in the previous chapter in a certain way. In his criticism of the Chancery Court, Dickens brought in too much personal emotion. This is why the novel ignores the details of the case of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* and uses a large number of metaphors and character language to foil the pedantry of the Chancery court. In fact, Dickens intended to create a resonance between his misadventures and those of his readers, rather than to change the legal status quo (though he himself thought it would be difficult to change).

In such a state, Dickens naturally attracted a lot of controversy or blame. Dickens is not a legal historian, and even he only focuses on the law's worst behavior from its development. So in the words of Schramm: “In this way, we cannot necessarily look to Dickens's work for an unbiased portrait of nineteenth-century legal process.” (Schramm, 2008) This emotion-based critique can sometimes go too far. “*Jarndyce v. Jarndyce* is a will contest

and would therefore have been tried in the probate court rather than the chancery court.” (Posner, 188) So Posner argues that while there are profound human and social problems behind *Bleak House*, it is inappropriate to present them by attacking the judicial system of that time. Writing in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1857, Fitzjames Stephen argued that Dickens had willfully portrayed abuses which no longer existed in an attempt to bring the law into disrepute.

### 5. The Cause of Legal Elements in *Bleak House*

*Bleak House* is one of Dickens's masterpieces. He began *Bleak House* in 1851, shortly after completing the hugely successful *David Copperfield*. “*Bleak House* was Dickens’s most successful novel to date, outselling even *David Copperfield* as serialization proceeded.” (Tracy, 2008)

Although *Bleak House* contains love stories and detective plots, the constant drama of legal cases or proceedings makes it a "legal novel", and it was incorporated into the Law and Literary. Obviously, the spread effect of this novel for law is remarkable, but the content it expresses may make readers have some negative ideas. But Dickens was just a brilliant novelist, and he had no obligation or responsibility to uphold the authority of the law. Therefore, it is quite normal to have mixed opinions about his works.

#### 5.1 Negative Influence: Development of Rejection Psychology

Although the results of the above analysis all believe that the irony of *Bleak House* is only from Dickens' personal subjective feelings, Dickens' feelings may have been accepted by readers when the work was read by a large number of readers, or readers themselves also have such feelings. However, since the city of Athens began to explore the rule of law, until the 19th century, numerous schools of jurisprudence emerged, relying on a rational or formal logic of the exploration. A momentary righteous indignation will not achieve the goal, not only that, but may hinder the development of reason. “The irony exploited by Dickens in *Bleak House* is that the court of conscience became the nation’s worst example of legal abuses. This made it an irresistible target for a moralist who believed (very much in the spirit of the Romantic movement) that institutions pervert the inborn goodness of people.” (Posner, 190-191)

In fact, in 19th century Britain, a sense of the rule of law might have been better promoted by reading books that actively promoted the rule of law, even though few people were willing to read such positive publications. However, even if they criticize the existing system, they should present a case that is more realistic. Otherwise, it will only increase readers' psychological rejection of the law and do nothing to help the actual law. Such books would appeal not just to indignant youth but to all classes of society, possibly including legislators and the law-executors.

#### 5.2 Positive Significance: Increased Attention to the Law

Eugen Ehrlich (1862-1922), an Austrian jurist recognized as one of the main founders of legal sociology, once said: “The centre of gravity of legal development lies not in legislation, nor in juristic science, nor in judicial decision, but in society itself.” (Ehrlich, Preface) The operation of law cannot be separated from the actual situation of the society. People gradually realize that law is the product of the society and cannot be maintained for a long time only by relying on the violence machine behind the law. The novel, as a relatively simple and easy to understand style with free format, has a stronger communication power in the society, and this kind of communication power also expresses the extent to which novels more conform to the society. As mentioned above, when Dickens' personal mood became integrated with the popular mood of the time, it was this mood that legislators or legal promoters needed to take into account. In fact, although law is the product of society, there is a lag between law as superstructure and social reality. *Bleak House*, despite some omissions in its legal description, expresses the most ardent concerns of the people of the time. And these focal points are the key to weaken the lag.

In addition, as a controller of society, law does not always function. In the process of law operation, some people see its injustice, some people see its inefficiency, and some people even do not care about it at all. In the 19th century, although the developed degree of media in Britain was leading the world, the overall level of that era was very limited. Under such a limited level of communication, a novel with excellent plot, characters and language carries a large number of legal cases, which will undoubtedly arouse readers' attention to the legal events around them. The more people pay attention, the more comprehensive the community discourse of law becomes. So *Bleak House*, in a sense, also helped to improve the law.

### 6. Conclusion

*Bleak House* has often been studied as the law in literature, and its research findings continue to inspire future generations. As an important work in the study of Law and Literature, it requires researchers to have a strong

foundation in disciplines of literature and law, and have a clear understanding of the development of history. *Bleak House*, written 170 years ago, is clearly of particular value to many scholars.

Through the most basic text analysis, this paper summarizes the description of relevant laws in *Bleak House* in the form of individual cases, and combines the author's shallow legal knowledge base and the previous research experience of other scholars to reach the point of view of this paper. Although *Bleak House* is called a "legal novel", the description of specific cases is relatively less, and more of the righteous indignation against the Chancery Court. For such a situation, a further study of Dickens' life experience will find that it is not difficult to see from his initial experience that he did not have a deep understanding of law and did not have much interest in it. In addition, the later contact with the Court of Chancery, prompted Dickens to the Court of Discontent.

These emotions are expressed in the novel and have been criticized by many scholars. From a macro point of view, this novel may indeed bring negative effects in some aspects, but its positive significance cannot be ignored. Law is never decided by a small group of people. It is a collection of factors that influence the way a society works, such as the national habits, customs and personalities of a region. Therefore, to attract more people's attention and discussion itself has greatly reflected the value of the novel *Bleak House*.

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