



Exploring Social Inequalities in Charles Dickens' Bleak House

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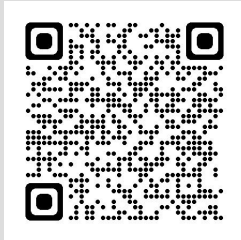
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Article History

Received: 28.08.2025

Accepted: 24.09.2025

Published: 30.09.2025



Abstract: This study examines the depiction of social inequalities in Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*, highlighting how the narrative exposes the deep-rooted disparities within Victorian society. Through a detailed analysis of key characters and their social environments, the work reveals the pervasive influence of class, wealth, and institutional corruption on individuals' lives. Dickens employs vivid imagery and complex characterization to critique the systemic injustices faced by the impoverished and marginalized, emphasizing the moral and social responsibilities of the upper classes. Furthermore, the analysis underscores Dickens' use of symbolic settings and narrative techniques to critique the social hierarchy and advocate for reform. By illustrating the contrast between the opulence of the elite and the squalor of the impoverished, *Bleak House* serves as a powerful commentary on social inequality and its impact on human lives. This exploration provides insight into Dickens' social consciousness and highlights

the enduring relevance of his critique of societal disparities, prompting readers to reflect on contemporary issues of inequality and justice.

Keywords: *inequality, depiction, reveal, impoverished, explore, critique, enduring, justice.*

Objectives: a) To analyse how Dickens depicts various social classes and their disparities in *Bleak House*, with a focus on the representation of poverty, wealth, and social mobility.

b) To examine the narrative techniques Dickens employs to critique the social institutions and structures that perpetuate inequalities within Victorian society, as portrayed in *Bleak House*.

Methodology: The methodology for exploring social inequalities in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* involves a qualitative literary analysis complemented by socio-historical research. First, a comprehensive close reading of the novel will be conducted to identify and analyse themes, character representations, and narrative techniques that highlight social disparities. This will include examining key passages, character interactions, and plot developments that reflect class distinctions, poverty, and social injustice. To contextualize these literary findings, historical research will be undertaken to understand the Victorian era's social structure, economic conditions, and legal system, which underpin the novel's setting and themes. Additionally, comparative analysis with contemporary social issues may be incorporated to enhance understanding of Dickens' critique of societal inequalities. Data collected from literary texts and

historical sources will be analysed thematically to identify patterns and insights, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of how *Bleak House* exposes and critiques social inequalities of the time.

Review of Literature: Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House* (1853) functions as a symbolic critique of Victorian England's legal system and societal inequalities. Through vivid imagery and complex characters, Dickens exposes the malpractice and corruption endemic to the legal institutions of his time, particularly highlighting the inefficiencies of the Court of Chancery. The novel aims to awaken society's conscience by appealing to its emotions, illustrating the profound suffering of the poor, street children, and the vulnerable, thereby emphasizing the social disparities of mid-Victorian England. Dickens's deep sympathy for the impoverished is reflected throughout his body of work, where he vividly depicts issues like inequality, injustice, and systemic corruption (Donovan 44). Critical responses to *Bleak House* have underscored its thematic richness. Robert A. Donovan praises Dickens's structural mastery, noting that the novel's harmony of form and idea elevates it within his oeuvre. Edmund Wilson, meanwhile, regards *Bleak House* as inaugurating a unique genre—a combination of detective story and social fable—that underscores Dickens's innovative narrative techniques (44). The novel's portrayal of the legal system, especially the endless delays exemplified by the case of "Jarndyce and Jarndyce," symbolizes the destructive and often absurd nature of Victorian justice. Dickens's personal experiences—visits to prisons, courts, and prisons—further inform his critique, exposing the injustices faced by the lower classes and the exploitation by lawyers (Dolin 175).

Dickens's own life struggles with poverty profoundly shaped his literary voice. His early hardships—living with minimal food and being neglected—are reflected in the suffering depicted in his novels, especially through characters like Jo and Tom in *Bleak House*. Dickens's detailed observations of urban misery and social neglect reveal his desire to reform societal institutions, particularly the legal system, which he believed failed to protect the vulnerable (Schwarzbach 123). Critics like David Copperfield's narrator have called Dickens a "legal historian," emphasizing his detailed and critical portrayal of law and lawyers, especially those from the lower echelons of the legal hierarchy (175). The novel's opening scenes, shrouded in London fog, symbolize the moral blindness and opacity of Victorian institutions. The fog, smoke, mud, and darkness serve as metaphors for societal corruption and the obscured pursuit of justice. Dickens criticizes the indifference of the aristocracy and the bureaucratic machinery that perpetuates social inequality. Characters such as Jo, the impoverished street sweeper, embody the neglect faced by the lower classes, symbolized by the muddy streets and the filth that threaten to dissolve societal boundaries (Schwarzbach 126). Dickens's use of symbolism—fog as the court's corruption, mud as societal decay—creates a stark visual critique of Victorian social disparities.

Scholars like Pettitt and Schwarzbach highlight Dickens's dual aim of social realism and moral reform. Pettitt notes that Dickens's serial publication of *Bleak House* aimed to reach a broad audience while addressing systemic issues (81). Schwarzbach emphasizes Dickens's responsibility to inform readers about social realities, creating a sense of defamiliarization to deepen the impact of familiar objects and environments (126). Critics also point out that Dickens's depiction of the legal system is not entirely negative; some characters, like Mr. Jarndyce and Dr. Woodcourt, embody virtue and integrity, suggesting that moral goodness can exist within flawed institutions (Hobsbawm 150). The novel's critique extends beyond Victorian England, touching on universal themes of justice and human virtue. The legal delays and corruption symbolize broader societal failures, while Dickens's vivid characterizations—such as the greedy lawyers and the innocent victims—highlight the moral costs of systemic neglect

(Nabokov 64). Deconstructionist Steven Connor interprets *Bleak House* as a work that explores the internal contradictions and deconstruction of societal and legal unity, emphasizing the impossibility of achieving totality or justice within a corrupt system (88). The novel also engages with contemporary legal theories. Thinkers like Rawls and Dworkin provide frameworks for justice based on fairness, equality, and moral interpretation. Rawls's principles of justice—equal liberties and the difference principle—align with Dickens's advocacy for social equity, while Dworkin's law as integrity emphasizes moral reasoning in legal decisions (53, 37). Conversely, critics like Derrida and Foucault highlight the endless, often elusive nature of justice, emphasizing its dependence on responsibility, accountability, and the influence of power structures (28, 155).

In conclusion, Dickens's *Bleak House* is a powerful social critique that combines symbolism, character study, and narrative innovation to expose the failures of Victorian institutions. It advocates for systemic reform rooted in morality, compassion, and justice. Through vivid imagery and nuanced characters, Dickens reveals the interconnectedness of legal corruption and social inequality, urging society to confront its moral responsibilities. His work remains relevant today as a call for justice, equity, and moral integrity in societal systems (Dean 50; Posner 190-191).

Findings: During the Victorian Era, society was marked by deep social inequalities rooted in rigid class structures, gender roles, and racial hierarchies. The wealthy enjoyed privileges, while the working classes faced poverty and limited mobility. Women, especially from upper classes, were confined to domestic roles and denied rights, whereas working-class women experienced exploitation. Britain's imperial expansion also propagated racial superiority, marginalizing non-European peoples and justifying colonial exploitation. Overall, these interconnected economic, gender, racial, and imperial disparities significantly shaped Victorian society and left lasting legacies.

Introduction

The Victorian era, spanning from 1837 to 1901, is characterized by significant social, economic, and legal transformations under Queen Victoria's reign, with some beginning as early as 1830 during William IV's rule. Historians divide this period into three phases: Early Victorian (1830-1848), Mid-Victorian (1848-1870), and Late Victorian (1870-1901). These phases reflect a nation experiencing rapid change, from growing confidence to societal tensions and declining consensus. Central to this era were issues of social inequality, justice, and reform, themes that Charles Dickens vividly explored in his works, especially focusing on the Mid-Victorian period's societal struggles. Dickens's novel *Bleak House* offers a penetrating critique of the Victorian legal system, illustrating how the law often reinforced social disparities rather than alleviating them. Through its portrayal of the Court of Chancery as a labyrinthine and inefficient bureaucracy, Dickens exposes how legal institutions favored the wealthy and powerful, leaving the poor and vulnerable victimized and neglected. The novel vividly depicts characters ensnared in endless legal disputes, symbolizing broader societal injustices rooted in class disparities and systemic corruption. Dickens's critical view underscores the urgent need for reform to make justice accessible and equitable for all social classes.

Despite its bleak portrayal, Dickens's *Bleak House* also hints at the possibility of reform. By exposing the flaws within the legal system and the societal structures that perpetuate inequality, Dickens advocates for change rooted in compassion, equity, and moral responsibility. He criticizes lawyers as greedy and self-serving, exploiting procedural complexities for personal gain, which further entrenches social injustice. Dickens's focus on reform aligns with utilitarian

principles emphasizing the greatest happiness and humanitarian values, suggesting that a fundamental societal shift is necessary to achieve genuine justice. The novel's depiction of social inequalities extends beyond the legal sphere, illustrating the stark contrast between the opulence of the upper classes and the squalor of the impoverished. Dickens vividly portrays the living conditions of the working class, the neglect of children, and the moral decay of society, emphasizing how social disparities are embedded within legal and institutional frameworks. His personal experiences with poverty and observation of urban life in London inform his critique, positioning *Bleak House* as both a social commentary and a call for systemic change. Dickens's work historically contributed to social reform efforts aimed at alleviating poverty and improving legal justice.

Furthermore, Dickens's engagement with contemporary legal philosophies, such as Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, influences his critique. While Bentham's emphasis on maximizing happiness aligns with Dickens's humanitarian ideals, Dickens criticizes the shortcomings of legal institutions that fail to deliver justice consistently. His novels, including *Bleak House*, serve as a moral and social indictment of Victorian society's failure to uphold principles of fairness and equity. Dickens's nuanced portrayal of lawyers, courts, and social classes demonstrates his deep concern for moral integrity and the need for comprehensive reform rooted in humanistic values.

Ultimately, Dickens presents *Bleak House* as a reflection of societal flaws—highlighting how legal and social inequalities are intertwined—and advocates for a reformed system based on justice, compassion, and moral responsibility. His depiction of legal corruption, social disparity, and human virtue underscores the importance of systemic reform to achieve true justice. Dickens's work remains a powerful reminder of the importance of societal conscience and the ongoing struggle for fairness, illustrating that meaningful change requires addressing both institutional failings and deep-seated social inequalities.

Social Inequalities Prevalent in the Victorian Era

The Victorian Era, spanning from 1837 to 1901, was marked by significant social inequalities that defined the period's societal structure. The class hierarchy was rigid, with the aristocracy and wealthy industrialists enjoying immense privileges, while the working classes faced harsh living and working conditions. According to Susan Kingsley Kent, Victorian society was characterized by a stark division between the "privileged elite" and the impoverished masses, with social mobility often limited by birthright and economic circumstances (Kent 45). The industrial revolution further accentuated these disparities, as factory owners amassed great wealth while workers endured long hours, low wages, and dangerous environments.

Gender inequality was another prominent feature of Victorian society, with women largely confined to domestic roles and denied many legal rights. Women of the upper classes were expected to uphold ideals of purity, piety, and submissiveness, often limiting their opportunities for education and employment. As Sandra Stanley Holton notes, Victorian women faced systemic restrictions that reinforced their secondary status in society, emphasizing their roles as caregivers and moral guardians rather than independent individuals (Holton 92). Working-class women, in particular, were vulnerable to exploitation and often worked in textile mills and domestic service under oppressive conditions, highlighting the intersection of gender and class inequalities. Racial and colonial inequalities also persisted during the Victorian era, especially as Britain expanded its empire. Colonial subjects and non-European populations often faced discrimination and exploitation, with the British claiming moral superiority to justify their dominance. Edward Said discusses how imperial ideology was used to reinforce racial hierarchies, portraying non-European peoples as inferior and in need of civilizing missions (Said

112). These social inequalities were deeply embedded within the fabric of Victorian society, shaping policies and attitudes that perpetuated disparities both domestically and across the empire. Overall, the Victorian era was a time of significant social stratification that left lasting legacies in British history.

The Victorian Era, spanning from 1837 to 1901 during Queen Victoria's reign, was a period marked by profound social stratification and disparities. The rapid industrialization and economic growth of Britain created a society sharply divided along class lines. At the top of this hierarchy were the aristocrats, wealthy industrialists, and landowners who enjoyed privileges, wealth, and political influence. Conversely, the working classes, comprising factory workers, labourers, and domestic servants, faced dire living and working conditions. Susan Kingsley Kent describes Victorian society as deeply polarized, with social mobility often hindered by birth and economic status. The industrial revolution further intensified these disparities, as factory owners accumulated considerable wealth, while workers endured long hours, low wages, and unsafe environments (Kent 45). These inequalities were not merely economic but also embedded in social institutions, shaping the daily lives and opportunities available to individuals based on their social standing.

Gender roles in Victorian society further reinforced social inequalities. Women, especially from the upper classes, were expected to adhere to ideals of purity, piety, and submissiveness, limiting their participation in education and employment. Their primary roles centered around domestic duties and moral guardianship, which curtailed their independence and agency. Sandra Stanley Holton emphasizes that Victorian women faced systemic restrictions that reinforced their subordinate position, relegating them to the private sphere and denying them many legal rights enjoyed by men (Holton 92). Working-class women encountered even harsher realities, often working in factories or domestic service under exploitative conditions. These gender-based restrictions intersected with class, creating a layered hierarchy that marginalized women based on both gender and social class. Such societal expectations perpetuated gender inequalities and limited women's opportunities across all segments of Victorian society.

Imperialism and colonial expansion during the Victorian era added another dimension to social inequality, both within Britain and across its colonies. The British Empire justified its dominance through a racial and civilizational rhetoric that depicted non-European peoples as inferior and in need of civilizing. Edward Said discusses how imperial ideology reinforced racial hierarchies and justified the exploitation of colonized populations (Said 112). Colonial subjects faced systemic discrimination, political disenfranchisement, and economic exploitation, which mirrored and reinforced social inequalities back home. The moral justification of empire-building often served to mask the inequalities and injustices inflicted upon colonized peoples, who were viewed as subordinate to the British. This racial and imperial hierarchy contributed to a global system of inequality that was rooted in notions of racial superiority and cultural dominance. Overall, the Victorian era was characterized by multifaceted inequalities—economic, gender-based, racial, and imperial—that shaped the social fabric of Britain and its empire, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to be studied today.

Findings

During the Victorian Era, social inequalities were highly pronounced and deeply embedded in the fabric of society. The period was marked by a rigid class hierarchy, where the wealthy aristocracy and industrialists enjoyed vast privileges, while the working classes faced poverty, poor living conditions, and limited opportunities for social mobility (Kent 45). Gender roles further reinforced inequality, with women, especially from the upper classes, confined to

domestic spheres and denied many legal and educational rights, while working-class women endured exploitation in factories and domestic service (Holton 92). Additionally, racial and imperial hierarchies played a significant role as Britain expanded its empire and justified colonial exploitation through racial superiority narratives. Non-European peoples and colonized populations faced discrimination, marginalization, and economic exploitation, which reflected and reinforced social disparities both domestically and across the empire (Said 112). Overall, the Victorian era was characterized by a complex web of economic, gender, racial, and imperial inequalities that shaped societal structures and had lasting impacts.

Conclusion

In *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens masterfully explores the complexities of social class and the pervasive inequalities that characterize Victorian society. The novel vividly depicts a spectrum of social strata, from the impoverished and destitute to the affluent and powerful, illustrating the stark disparities that define their lives. Dickens's portrayal of poverty is stark and poignant, often emphasizing the suffering and marginalization experienced by the lower classes. For instance, the characters of Jo and the ragged children symbolize the destitution and neglect that many endured, highlighting the social neglect and systemic failures that perpetuate poverty. Conversely, characters like Sir Leicester Deadlock and the wealthy lawyers exemplify the privileges afforded by wealth, yet Dickens exposes the moral emptiness and superficiality that often accompany such affluence. Dickens's depiction of social mobility underscores the rigidity of Victorian social hierarchies. Characters such as Richard Carstone and Esther Summerson navigate attempts at upward mobility, but their journeys are frequently hindered by the entrenched social and institutional barriers.

Dickens illustrates how societal structures—legal, social, and economic—serve to confine individuals within their designated classes, limiting genuine opportunities for advancement. This portrayal underscores a critique of a society where class distinctions are deeply ingrained and resistant to change, reinforcing Dickens's call for social reform. Beyond mere depiction, Dickens employs a range of narrative techniques to critique the social institutions that sustain inequality. His use of vivid imagery and symbolism—such as the fog representing moral and social confusion—serves to critique the opaque and often corrupt legal and social systems. The Court of Chancery, with its endless delays and injustices, functions as a potent symbol of systemic failure, illustrating how legal institutions prioritize procedure over justice, thus exacerbating social disparities. Dickens's use of satire and irony further exposes the hypocrisy and moral failings of the Victorian establishment. For example, the character of Mr. Tulkinghorn, the sinister lawyer, embodies corruption and the abuse of power, highlighting how legal professionals often serve their own interests at the expense of the vulnerable. Furthermore, Dickens's narrative structure—alternating between the grim realities of the lower classes and the superficial concerns of the upper classes—serves to critique societal indifference and the notion of social hierarchy as inherently unjust. His characterization of individuals like Esther, who embodies virtue and moral integrity amidst societal corruption, acts as a moral anchor and a critique of social inequality. Dickens's compassionate portrayal of the marginalized and his critique of social institutions work together to advocate for a more equitable society.

In conclusion, Dickens's *Bleak House* functions as both a mirror and a critique of Victorian social inequalities. Through vivid depiction of class disparities and the use of powerful narrative techniques, Dickens exposes the systemic flaws that sustain social stratification. His work remains a compelling call for social reform, emphasizing the importance of justice, compassion,

and equity. The novel's enduring relevance lies in its ability to illuminate the enduring nature of social inequalities and the necessity of addressing them through societal change.

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