

“ENGLAND HATH NEED OF THEE”: THE OMNISCIENT NARRATOR OF *BLEAK HOUSE*
AND CHARLES DICKENS’S MILTONIC ASCENDANCE TO CULTURAL ICON

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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July 2017

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members and director for their assistance and encouragement. In particular, I thank Dr. Brent Kinser for his willingness to oversee this project and for his generosity in sharing his knowledge. I thank Dr. Mimi Fenton for always making herself available to meet to discuss my ideas. And I thank Dr. Brain Railsback for his helpful feedback on each draft of this thesis.

I also extend sincere thanks to my friends and family for their support through this process. I am especially thankful to my parent, Lee and Melissa Davidson, without whom the completion of this thesis would have been impossible.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BCP	The Book of Common Prayer
CD	<i>Christian Doctrine</i>
Complete Poetry	<i>The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton</i>
Letters	<i>The Letters of Charles Dickens</i>
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
PL	<i>Paradise Lost</i>

ABSTRACT

“ENGLAND HATH NEED OF THEE”: THE OMNISCIENT NARRATOR OF *BLEAK HOUSE* AND CHARLES DICKENS’S MILTONIC ASCENDANCE TO CULTURAL ICON

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Western Carolina University (July 2017)

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As a proponent for social change few authors have had the continuing impact or critical influence of Charles Dickens (1812-70), who used his writings to critique and, he wished, to change his culture. In this respect, Dickens was similar to John Milton (1608-74), who also attempted to shape the identity and values of his early modern culture through his literary endeavor. While Milton’s influence on Dickens can be seen in many of his novels, few scholars have directly addressed the Miltonic elements that Dickens implements in his writing. This thesis examines Dickens’s novel *Bleak House* (1852-53), and more specifically its omniscient narrator as a Miltonically-inspired voice used to narrate this complex story and what can be described as its prophetic message about the possibility of revolutionary disintegration in the midst of a drastically changing era.

In this thesis, I explore, what I call, the prophetic message running throughout *Bleak House* and the three different personas that the omniscient narrator adopts to convey his prophetic message. I argue that the omniscient narrator becomes a type of muse for the reader—similar to the ways Milton invokes his Muse in *Paradise Lost*—in an attempt to help them better understand the novel’s prophecy through the use of direct references to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. I

also address Dickens's use of passages from the Book of Common Prayer throughout the novel. Through these passages, the omniscient narrator becomes an intercessory figure for readers calling their attention to familiar prayerful language. I argue that the narrator's prayers inspire readers to recite prayers over the novel's characters and further emphasizes the plight of real people in Victorian London similar to the characters in *Bleak House*. The narrator's third persona, the revolutionary historian, is perhaps the most crucial to better understand the revolutionary prophetic warning threaded through *Bleak House*. Essentially, the omniscient narrator refers to historical revolutionary action and reminds readers of the national and international consequences of revolution.

This intertextual study, conducted through the lens of New Historical criticism, illuminates the way that Dickens implemented his ascent as a literary icon in response to Milton through the medium of the omniscient narrator. This study offers insight into the significant ways that Dickens utilized Milton in order to achieve a similar identity as a culturally defining and transformative priest and prophet especially through his novel's omniscient narrator. Essentially, the omniscient narrator can be seen as a defining figure for *Bleak House*, and his three characteristics combined into one figure add to the novel's impactful message and its ability to connect with its readers. Dickens answers his Romantic predecessor William Wordsworth's call for another Milton who will bring England back to her national essence of "manners, virtue, freedom, power."

INTRODUCTION

As a proponent for social change, few other writers have had the continuing impact or critical influence of Charles Dickens (1812-70), who used his writings to critique and, he wished, to change his culture. In this respect, Dickens was similar to John Milton (1608-74), who also attempted to shape the identity and values of his early modern culture through his writings. This thesis examines Dickens's novel *Bleak House* (1852-53), and more specifically the ways in which its omniscient narrator can be seen as a Miltonically-inspired voice used to narrate this complex story and what can be described as its prophetic message—the real possibility of harmful revolutionary implosion in a country already in the midst of a drastically changing era. Dickens scholars have frequently overlooked the connections between Dickens and Milton, and the parallel themes drawn in this thesis help to fill this void in scholarship concerning Milton's presence in Dickens. Each chapter examines a specific element of both the omniscient male¹ and the autobiographical female narrator as they present their message through the implementation of a Miltonic lens initially established by Dickens's use of direct quotes from Milton's *Paradise Lost* at crucial moments in the novel.

In chapter one I focus on Dickens's use of direct quotes from *Paradise Lost* in *Bleak House*, particularly at the ends of serialized installments. These quotes help establish the novel's omniscient narrator as a prophetic muse with an urgent message for the novel's characters and readers. The narrator uses this status to inspire readers to view the text as a prophetic warning for the Victorian era. The narrator's quotes of Milton in sections about the doomed aristocratic protagonist, Lady Dedlock, allows readers to consider her character as a vehicle for this

¹ Bert G. Hornback claims that the omniscient narrator is conventionally male (3).

prophetic warning. My chapter begins with an overview of the novel's composition and publication followed by an examination of the ways Dickens coopts the idea of a muse that Milton frequently invoked in *Paradise Lost*. It ends with a close reading of Dickens's use of Milton and analyzes his presence in the novel.

Chapter two examines Dickens's use of passages from the Book of Common Prayer—and its status as a nationally grounding text—throughout the novel. While Milton did not approve of the Book of Common Prayer, he still accepted it as part of his society's vocabulary, just as Dickens implemented it to convey meaning in his novels. I argue that the omniscient narrator establishes himself as an intercessory figure grounding readers in familiar corporate prayer as they are presented with the grave message of the novel. Beginning with an overview of Dickens's religious sentiments, I then examine the narrator's implementation of the Book of Common Prayer throughout the novel. The chapter provides an analysis of each reference culminating in the most poignant moment of its use: Jo's death and the narrator's subsequent condemnation of Victorian society in the ultimate act of intercessory prayer.

Chapter three catalogues the instances of revolutionary language that Dickens used throughout *Bleak House*, further blending literary entertainment with cultural anxiety at a time marked by revolutionary fervor. By using revolutionary references to the past that effectively shaped England into the Victorian nation it was, the omniscient narrator emerges as a kind of revolutionary historian intent on reminding and warning readers of the national and international consequences of revolutions. As a result, readers can see the benefits of types of cultural revolutions—the Industrial Revolution and educational reform that opened the classroom to even more people—as well as the horrors of political revolutions—the French Revolution and the English Civil War. By associating the novel with historical events common to readers'

knowledge of the country and world, the narrator is able to emphasize further the connections between his novel and a reading public with real anxieties about the dangers of revolutionary upheaval. I also examine the intricacies of perception and language surrounding revolutionary events that are caused by the alternate positions taken in the conflicts. The chapter begins with revolutionary references used in Esther's narrative chapters followed by an analysis of Dickens's use of the "Wat Tyler" rebellion that plagues Sir Leicester Dedlock, and concludes with an analysis of the omniscient narrator's most poignant remembrances of revolutionary actions and their implications.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SERIALIZATION OF PROPHECY: LADY DEDLOCK'S LESSON
AND THE NARRATOR-MUSE

Dickens's *Bleak* Prophecy

As the writer of many popular novels that provided him with unparalleled status as a literary figure, Charles Dickens received the most recognition for *Bleak House*, his biggest seller.² Published in 19 serialized sections from March 1852 to September 1853, *Bleak House* provides its readers with the author's own critique of Victorian London's classist practices as each serialized section builds toward the climax of the novel's main message. While effectively portraying Dickens's frequent assertion that society must change its practices or face the doom of revolutionary self-combustion similar to the revolutionary terror of France, *Bleak House* functions as a kind of prophecy for the Victorian age. Using the omniscient narrator to inspire his reader, Dickens makes significant direct references to the texts of another English literary prophet, John Milton. Throughout *Bleak House*, Dickens uses Milton to help establish the novel's prophetic nature and intent. *Bleak House* can, in fact, be described as Miltonic, and Dickens as a novelist-prophet with designs on altering culture itself.

By examining the serialized sections of the novel, one begins to understand the ways Dickens has structured his prophecy by focusing his message around the novel's most compelling characters. As one would expect, each serialized installment ends with important plot revelations that surround crucial characters, which effectively cultivates the reader's continued enthusiasm for the plot and its central prophetic tone. As a result, some of the most prophetic

² In Dickens's correspondence surrounding *Bleak House*, he frequently mentions the success of the novel: "It is a most enormous success . . . raising its circulation above all my other books" and "I never had so many readers." According to Ford and Monod, "Sales of monthly numbers held above 30,000 copies, and Dickens' earnings therefrom totaled about £500 a number" (*Bleak House* 888, note 9).

moments occur in the chapters that end the installments. These endings are not merely a matter of dramatic effect. Rather, the gravity of these moments combined with the dramatic anticipation of resolution in upcoming installments provides a vehicle for Dickens's prophecy to resonate for longer periods of time as readers grapple with his message. Dickens admits in a letter to Mrs. Richard Watson of 27 August 1853 that the story seems to have had a life of its own while he wrote it and that he often did not grasp his own intended meanings in the moment of composition: "The story has taken extraordinarily—especially during the last five or six months, when its purpose has been gradually working itself out" (*Letters* 7:134). The idea of the novel and its purpose "gradually working itself out" as Dickens writes suggests the idea of a muse-like inspiration. Dickens becomes himself prophetic in a process of constructing a novel with a purpose larger than his desire to profit from entertaining. Dickens's admission of the novel's semi-automatic creation places him in a similar prophetic realm as Milton, who frequently invokes his muse in *Paradise Lost* and is visited by it nightly in his dreams:

If answerable style I can obtain
Of my celestial patroness, who deigns
Her nightly visitation unimplored,
And dictates to me slumb'ring, or inspires
Easy my unpremeditated verse; (*PL* 9:20-4)

By claiming inspiration from a Muse who "deigns" to visit him, Milton³ establishes himself as a willing and humble vessel for the prophetic message he conveys. While Milton deliberately seeks to write in the prophetic tradition, Dickens does not. Though his novels deliver a message to his contemporaries through the medium of his writing—an intent that transcends his pecuniary

³ Milton consciously seeks out this Muse in three previous sections of *Paradise Lost*—Books 1, 3, and 7.

interest in making money—Dickens seems to evolve into his prophetic role through the very process of writing. His tone in the letter above shows his surprise in the success and progress of his story and message, and that it has revealed a kind of prophetic “purpose”—the prophetic warning for Victorian society against harmful political revolutions emerging from a reluctance to reform. As with the nature of most prophets, Dickens does not seem to comprehend fully the entire scope of his message, nor does he seem to intend consciously to be prophetic, but nevertheless he understands very well the importance of conveying a message that is more than entertainment to his readership.

Dickens relayed his sense of the novel’s message and prophetic warning in a letter to Lord John Russell on 21 September, 1853: “I was so very much interested in it myself when I wrote it . . . that I have a fond sort of faith in its interesting its reader” (*Letters* 7: 153). Dickens believes that the novel’s dramatic format can transcend its serious message while also effectively presenting his prophecy of the necessity of drastic change. He connects the message with his desire to entertain, and his faith in his audience relates to his use of the narrator-muse to inspire his readers to correctly read and interpret the novel’s meaning while also effectively entertaining them.

If Dickens recognized the importance of “purpose,” he also recognized the importance of interacting with his reader. Perhaps no other novelist has the same invasive narrative style as Dickens, especially when he invokes the attention of his “Dear Reader.” It is also true that the very act of serialization leads readers along the journey of his composition. Even when read in the non-serialized version, a certain intensity guides the novel, pushing readers forward toward the next big reveal. William Kerrigan notes a similar effect threaded throughout Milton’s invocations in *Paradise Lost*. He argues that the invocations “dramatize the composition of the

poem and ‘pretend’ that the poem is being composed as the reader proceeds” (7). As a serial author, Dickens also relied on this dramatization, and although Dickens did not pretend he was composing as his audience read, the idea of reading in tandem with the act of composition bolsters the meaning behind, what Linda M. Lewis calls, a “prophecy of judgment” (127). Dickens is there with his audience as they read, especially in the bitter indictments and judgments of the first-person narrator. Indeed, the fates of many of the characters in *Bleak House* point to a doom-like judgment designed to grasp the attention of readers and effectively warn them against stagnation⁴ and the possibility of a devastating revolution in an ever-changing era.

Narrator as Muse for the Reader

By using an urgently commanding voice for his omniscient narrator, Dickens establishes this narrator as a muse for the reader. The use of muses also provides a connection between Dickens and Milton as authors. Milton invokes a heavenly muse to inspire his epic poem and instruct him as he writes, further establishing himself as a contender with Old Testament prophets and classical poets:

Sing heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,
In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of Chaos: or if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God, I thence
Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song,

⁴ In “London, 1802,” Wordsworth describes England as “a fen / Of stagnant waters” (line 2-3).

That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. (*PL* 1: 6-16)

In this passage, Milton establishes his retelling of Genesis and grounds his invocation in biblically significant places like Sinai and Sion. By doing so, he establishes himself as an extension of the biblical prophets—primarily Moses: “That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,” and the familial line of King David: “Siloa’s brook that flowed / Fast by the oracle of God.” But Milton also establishes an important connection with classical prophetic terms evident in his imagery of his “advent’rous song” soaring high above the “Aonian mount” in this invocation. Dickens, on the other hand, instills himself in the text as a kind of narrator-muse.

Adding to the connection to the Miltonic prophecy, each of the installments containing Miltonic references are narrated by the omniscient, more Dickensian narrator⁵ of the novel rather than the more personal narrator, Lady Dedlock’s secret daughter, Esther Summerson.⁶ This omniscient narrator provides a darker tone throughout the novel echoing the warnings of past prophets and of Dickens himself. Kerrigan posits that prophecy “appears throughout history as a kind of invulnerable authority. It is most noticeable as a tone of voice, an attitude toward men derived from a necessarily hidden attitude toward God; no one experiences prophecy except the

⁵ In his article “Subdued by the Dyer’s Hand: Dickens at Work in *Bleak House*,” David Paroissien argues that Dickens’s narrative technique exists as “literary art of the highest order” as the dual narrators hold the audience’s attention for 67 chapters. However, Paroissien misses the role that Milton plays in helping Dickens establish the narrator-muse that drives his story and its prophecy. Paroissien posits that *Bleak House* is a “work that combines the needs of the sweet-toothed reader with those of the journalist determined to reveal inconvenient truths rather than to suppress or ignore them” (288). The journalistic tone that Paroissien mentions is arguably Dickens’s prophetic voice shining through in a less divine explanation.

⁶ Linda M. Lewis argues that Dickens uses Esther Summerson as a “wisdom figure and discerning judge” (122), but she admits that the judgments of the “third-person narrator qualify as the most devastating” (127). Esther does not function on the same level as the prophetic narrator who provides a muse for the audience to form their own conclusions concerning the overarching consequences of the novel. Lewis admits that Dickens’s omniscient narrator “takes the tone of ‘Victorian sage’” (127), placing the narrator in line with Old Testament prophets, but again, she misses the direct connections to Milton that further strengthen the Dickensian narrator’s prophetic mettle.

prophet” (10). Prophecy, in this case, can best be defined as a divine warning given to a messenger about the consequences of disobedience, including a refusal to follow instruction in pursuit of change. In *Bleak House*, Dickens’s omniscient narrator fulfills this prophetic role, receiving the message not from God, but from the author. Dickens, as the creator of the novel, fulfills the role of the divine figure who communicates a specific warning to a messenger. In the case of *Bleak House*, the omniscient narrator receives the prophetic message from Dickens—the narrator’s god. By presenting the prophecy throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator allows the reader to experience the prophecy⁷ as it unfolds, and, further, allows the audience to receive the prophetic message of the novel provided through the narrator’s connection with the author.

The omniscient narrator⁸ of *Bleak House* conceals little from the reader, describing scenes with poetic imagery and critiquing the inner workings of Victorian London. Dickens implements this omniscient narrator as the vehicle for his prophecy using this invasive mode of narration throughout the novel, and makes his prophecy resonate deeply with his audience. Throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator provides significant Dickensian invasions, the most memorable occurring at the conclusion of Jo’s death scene. The omniscient narrator of *Bleak House* berates the country’s authority figures for their lack of concern for its citizens. In perhaps the most dramatic and pathos-heavy moment of the novel, the narrator breaks the fourth wall, speaking directly and harshly to every kind of reader about Jo’s pitiful life and death:

⁷ Classical tradition assumes that prophecies are seldom clear. Saint Paul writes to the Corinthians: “For we know in part, and we prophesy in part . . . For now we see through a glass darkly” (I Cor. 13: 9, 12). Even if the prophet understands the prophetic message, it is rarely clear to the recipient.

⁸ W. J. Harvey treats the dual narrators of *Bleak House* with equal respect. Both serve important roles in the plot of the novel. And Harvey believes that Dickens disguises his style in an attempt to convince readers to focus on the character rather than the creator. Harvey explains that there is an “impersonality about the omniscient narrative. The general impression is of a vast, collective choric voice brilliantly mimicking the varied life it describes, yet able to generalize and comment without lapsing into the idiom of one man, of Dickens himself” (964). What Harvey approaches but does not explain is that the omniscient narrator adopts the tone of a prophetic muse approaching the reader with fresh inspiration beyond Dickens’s voice.

“Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born to Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day” (*Bleak House* 572). In this moment particularly, the narrator provides inspiration for readers, but he also instructs them by encouraging them to read this chapter and its final lines as an indictment against the status quo of the Victorian era. This instruction from the narrator-muse should then inspire them to take action and promote change. This narrator⁹ suggests Dickens’s prophecy throughout the novel while also maintaining, according to W. J. Harvey, “all the liveliness, fantasciation and poetic density of texture that we typically associate with Dickens” (91). So while the omniscient narrator conveys a solemn prophecy, he maintains the ability to keep readers’ attention through his narrative style, unlike biblical prophets who were often scorned by the subjects of their prophecies.

The Dedlock Thread

Though *Bleak House* contains several major characters that illustrate the techniques of Dickensian prophecy, the central thread in the novel, Lady Dedlock, serves as best exemplar. As an apparently aristocratic lady, in the first part of *Bleak House*, she demonstrates class conflict in Victorian London; she is, stereotypically arrogant and distracted. As the novel progresses, however, Dickens reveals that Lady Dedlock has not come from an aristocratic family and is not a typical member of the upper-class intent on living a high society life. Readers learn that the emotionally embowered Lady Dedlock has a secret past comprised of a forbidden love affair, a secret child born out of wedlock, and although she is a shining member of that world, that she is

⁹ In his article, “The Narrator of *Bleak House*,” Bert G. Hornback claims the omniscient narrator has no “reservation[s] about his authority (3) and posits that the omniscient narrator is “Dickens’s most critical observer” of the world in *Bleak House* (5). Hornback believes that the narrator is “*just* an omniscient narrator” (6, emphasis mine). However, he completely overlooks the prophetic and muse-like tone that the narrator implements throughout the novel to inspire the audience to accept and heed his warnings.

no aristocrat. She directly faces what Lewis calls an unrestricted prophecy with consequences effecting her entire being: “wickedness, brutality, degradation, and ignorance” (127). While traditional prophecy is often restricted to the physical consequences of disobedience, Dickens’s prophecy also affects the character of its subjects. They must not worry only about their bodies, but about their morality and even their souls while they grapple with the meaning behind the prophecy.

It is Dickens’s prophetic narrator-muse who implements this brand of unrestricted prophecy by slowly revealing Lady Dedlock’s past over the course of the novel. She faces her own form of degradation and ignorance as she embodies Dickens’s prophecy of a desperate need for change before society collapses upon itself in an attempt to evolve. Over the course of the novel, Lady Dedlock transforms from a lady “at the centre of the fashionable intelligence, and at the top of the fashionable tree” (12), to a “lonely figure with the sad world to itself, pelted by the snow and driven by the wind, and cast out, it would seem, from all companionship” (674). The drastic differences between the two descriptions of Lady Dedlock provide the audience with an example of the threat of societal destruction on a microscopic level. Essentially, Lady Dedlock’s grandeur serves as a metaphor for the condition of the wealthy aristocracy. Because of their positions in society, they can survive daily life with ease, unlike the lower classes. The fulfillment Dickens’s prophecy on a macroscopic scale would result in the destruction of the nation’s status quo—the threat of a new governmental establishment holding no control over the unruly masses who have had no proper representation or assistance.

Of the 19 serialized installments of *Bleak House*, six end with chapters related directly to Lady Dedlock’s character and events in her portions of the plot. Further, all three of the references to Milton in *Bleak House* occur in chapters focused on Lady Dedlock. These allusions

connect her directly to the Miltonic tone of Dickens's brand of prophecy. Because of her Miltonic context, her tragic and untimely death just as she is in a position to experience true happiness suggests that Dickens viewed her character as the primary courier for his prophecy. He writes in a letter to W. W. F. De Cerjat, 21 September 1853: "It was necessary to kill Lady Dedlock, and to kill her so. I had intended it from the first, and everything worked to that end" (*Letters* 7: 152). In one sense, Dickens's eagerness to admit that he had planned Lady Dedlock's demise from the beginning negates his earlier statement about the novel gradually working itself out in an extraordinary way. The use of the omniscient narrator as muse for the reader, however, emphasizes Dickens's awareness of the prophecy and the instruction readers must receive to understand its meaning. This awareness allows him to claim a semi-automatic form of writing furthermore connecting the novel's prophecy to a Miltonic tone.

Toward the novel's conclusion, the narrator describes the condition of Chesney Wold after Lady Dedlock's death. The narrator describes the scene in detail, which leaves readers with the feeling that they are looking down upon a fallen Chesney Wold and its surroundings. Chesney Wold sits in darkness, enduring the fulfillment of the narrator's prophecy of doom for the great family through its Lady: "It is known for certain that the handsome Lady Dedlock lies in a mausoleum in the park, where the trees arch darkly overhead, and the owl is heard at night making the woods ring" (763). The darkness of Lady Dedlock's pitiful resting place is echoed by the dark gothic images of the owl and the arching trees surrounding the mausoleum. The darkness that surrounds her tomb also suggests that the curse upon the Dedlock family will not lift. As the novel comes to a close, the narrator addresses the continuation of his initial prophecy—calamity will be associated with Chesney Wold because of the former patron, Sir Morbury Dedlock's, violence against his wife. In her last moments, Lady Morbury Dedlock

exclaims: “I will die here where I have walked. And I will walk here, though I am in my grave. I will walk here, until the pride of this house is humbled. And when calamity, or when disgrace is coming to it, let the Dedlocks listen for my step!” (84). This prophecy of calamity follows the Dedlocks throughout the novel and the narrator clearly addresses the demise of the direct Dedlock family line in his final chapter: “Closed in by night with broad screens, and illumines only in that part, the light of the drawing-room seems gradually contracting and dwindling until it shall be no more” (765). This dwindling light connects directly to Sir Leicester’s poor health, while the suggestion of dwindling light also suggests dwindling life for the direct descendants of the once powerful Dedlock family and their ancestral home.

The omniscient narrator establishes Chesney Wold as a metaphor for the despondency of the Dedlock family and by extension the greater collapse of the aristocracy for the Victorian age. The final picture of Chesney Wold shows definite bleakness and despondency:

With so much of itself abandoned to darkness and vacancy; with so little change under the summer shining or the wintry lowering; so sombre and motionless always—no flag flying now by day, no rows of light sparkling by night; with no family to come and go, no visitors to be the souls of pale cold shapes of rooms, no stir of life about it;—passion and pride, even to the stranger’s eye, have died away from the place in Lincolnshire, and yielded it to dull repose. (767)

The narrator emphasizes the desolation of Chesney Wold by using descriptive negative imagery: “sombre and motionless” and through use of anaphora by repeating “no” five times in just three lines of text effectively negating any hope for the future of Chesney Wold and its patrons. By addressing Chesney Wold in his final statement, the narrator-muse shows the fruition of his prophecy on a much smaller scale than the whole of society. The darkness and vacancy of

Chesney Wold, the former home of the fallen Lady Dedlock, contains a clear figurative statement of Dickens's warning that Victorian society could endure the same tragic demise if it fails to embrace the necessary change to avoid revolution and ruin. The crumbling of the magnificent Dedlock family suggests that "passion and pride" can be taken from the strongest structures, even the structure of an entire nation. Dickens places certain revelatory scenes—like the ones concerning the Dedlocks—at the ends of serialized sections. The process of serialization further helps establish the novel's prophecy by adding emphasis to important moments for readers to consider further as they await the next installment.

"And Solitude with Dusky Wings"

Of the three direct Miltonic references provided by the omniscient narrator in the chapters related to Lady Dedlock, only two of them occur at the crucial moments of the serialized installments. Chapter 7, "The Ghost's Walk" first introduces the reader to the extended Dedlock family and their residence. The Miltonic reference occurs in the chapter's first paragraph connecting Lady Dedlock and Chesney Wold directly to Milton and Dickens's prophecy: "and solitude, with dusky wings, sits brooding upon Chesney Wold" (76). In this allusion, Dickens alters a quote from the opening lines in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*: "thou from the first / Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread / Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss" (*PL* 1:19-21). While Milton refers to the Holy Spirit¹⁰ brooding as he creates the world from the "vast abyss," Dickens's quote refers to solitude watching over Chesney Wold while its masters are away from home. While Milton's quote suggests hopeful generative beauty created

¹⁰ In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton refers to the Holy Spirit as "the force or voice of God, in whatever way it was breathed into the prophets" (*CD* 1.6, p. 1194). By establishing this definition of the Holy Spirit and by connecting his poetic inspiration to the Spirit-Muse, Milton further confirms his status as a poet-prophet.

by a muse—the Holy Spirit is the source of generation in the allegory of the dove,¹¹—the tone of Dickens’s quote presents something more sinister. Dickens’s use of “solitude” suggests the beginning of loneliness and an undoing for several characters—Lady Dedlock as the most prominent—that will unfold as the novel progresses.

Considering the ways Dickens changes the quote further establishes his authorial connection to Milton. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton addresses his Muse, whom he also calls “O Spirit,” asking for instruction as he writes, “from the first / Wast present” (*PL* 1:19-20). The Spirit-Muse broods like a dove over the “vast abyss” (*PL* 1: 21) and impregnates it acting as the generative source of creation from the very beginning of time. In *Bleak House*, solitude acts as the brooding metaphoric figure presiding over Chesney Wold, the replacement for the “vast abyss.” Like the dove, solitude waits over Chesney Wold and imbues it with a sense of fated loneliness and a fear of the unknown that will transform throughout the novel as change permeates Victorian London. By diminishing the scale of the quote, the omniscient narrator-muse emphasizes the importance of microscopic details and their ability to create macroscopic changes bringing further instruction to readers concerning the fulfillment of the novel’s prophecy.

The omniscient narrator introduces the idea that Chesney Wold has problems related primarily to its patrons. In fact, Lady Dedlock’s introduction suggests the socially problematic deterioration of her status: “My Lady Dedlock says she has been ‘bored to death’” (11).

¹¹ In her article “Dove,” Karen Edwards posits that the doves of Milton’s later works are mighty because “they embody the spirit of the Almighty” (116). She examines the paradoxical language surrounding the dove that traditionally is considered gentle and peaceful: “The explicit paradox of a dove that both broods and inseminates is complemented by the implicit paradox of a dove with ‘mighty wings’ (116). Neil Forsyth also addresses the imagery of the dove in his article “At the Sign of the Dove and Serpent.” He posits that this dove is “above and beyond the natural world, both temporally, in that it precedes creation and symbolically, in that it transcends the normal process of reproduction within this vale of making” (57). He argues that Milton uses the image of the dove and the serpent to show the contrast between the realms of Heaven and Hell—of God and Satan.

Throughout Lady Dedlock's introductory chapter she mentions several times that she is "bored to death" and that she feels faint "like the faintness of death" (16). Rather than maintaining her nonchalance, she becomes quite animated after looking at some copied writing. Toward the end of the novel, readers uncover Lady Dedlock's connection to the hand that copied the writing—Captain Hawdon, Esther's father and Lady Dedlock's former lover. The small detail of Captain Hawdon's writing begins a stream of catastrophic revelations—Lady Dedlock's past, Mr. Tulkinghorn's blackmail, Madame Hortense's homicidal rage—that drives her story to its gloomy end. Dickens's use and alteration of the Miltonic quote further establishes the idea that everything will deteriorate while generating new information. As Lady Dedlock's story unfolds, the revelation of information causes her decline just as Adam and Eve lose their positions in Eden after they eat from the "Tree of Knowledge" (*PL* 4: 221)—they know more, but their status has been altered completely.

The use of the quote from Book 1 of *Paradise Lost* at the beginning of the novel establishes a unique relationship between it and the poem. The first lines of *Paradise Lost* clearly establish the narrative purpose of Milton's epic:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, (*PL* 1: 1-4).

Though Milton establishes his narrative thread through this simplistic overview, he understands the importance of beginning his story at the moment of inspiration and provides the preface to a story that begins *in media res*. Similarly, Dickens's narrator provides the necessary images and allusions to connect the narrative thread of *Bleak House* to *Paradise Lost* successfully. The

reference to the brooding dove over a location begins a parallel path between the novel and the poem.¹² Both works show the deterioration of status and ultimate degradation, but they also show the establishment of a new world. Just as readers witness the downfall of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, they also witness the undoing of Lady Dedlock. Adam and Eve become callous and lecherous after they eat the forbidden fruit: “he on Eve / Began to cast lascivious eyes, she him / As wantonly repaid; in lust they burn” (*PL* 9: 1013-15), degrading them from the purity they experienced as “Our two first parents . . . Reaping immortal fruits of joy and love” (*PL* 3: 65, 67). Lady Dedlock on the other hand becomes more sensitive as she loses her status under the constant threat of exposure. She transforms from “the best-groomed woman in the whole stud” (13) to an ashamed shell of herself who “flutters away in the shrill frosty wind” (667). Clearly the deterioration of status suggested so early in the novel effectively breaks the seal of Lady Dedlock’s emotional unavailability. Milton invites his readers to participate in Adam and Eve’s fall through the act of reading. Dickens creates the same opportunity for his readers through the medium of serialization—they are able to participate in the unfolding drama at the invitation of the omniscient narrator who also seems to discover the story along with the reader made evident by his use of present tense.

Dickens further changes the original quote by replacing the adjective describing the image of wings in the quote. Whereas Milton’s dove¹³ exists presently with outspread “mighty” wings, Dickens’s solitude broods with “dusky” wings. Milton’s use of “mighty” suggests that the dove possesses potency and strength (*OED*) in an act of creation. Dickens’s use of “dusky”

¹² Dickens’s implementation of Miltonic passages in the novel allows him to elevate the novel to epic status characterized by the prophetic scheme and the scope of the characters and their conflicts. The novel’s likeness to an epic further elevates it as a serious message for the audience but also confirms it as a traditional form of entertainment.

¹³ In Book 7, Milton reiterates his description of the dove brooding over the abyss: “darkness profound / Covered th’ abyss: but on the wat’ry calm / His brooding wings the Spirit of God outspread” (*PL* 7: 233-35).

suggests darkness, obscurity, and gloomy uncertainty (*OED*) through a form of anti-creation leading to the birth of a new, industrial world already emphasized by the novel's use of fog imagery.¹⁴ Whereas the storyline of Milton's epic is certain—he knows the biblical plot; Dickens's is not for first time readers, which elevates the sense of fear that he wishes to attach to the prophecy of doom. As a whole, the chapter is gloomy and haunting in its content, describing the legend of the Ghost's Walk at Chesney Wold. The housekeeper, Mrs. Rouncewell, believes that the Dedlock family has a right to have a ghost because of their "antiquity and importance" (83). The omniscient narrator informs the reader that Mrs. Rouncewell "regards a ghost as one of the privileges of the upper classes; a genteel distinction to which the common people have not claim" (83), which establishes the tenuousness of Lady Dedlock's upper-class status. The legend of the Ghost's Walk affects the inhabitants of Chesney Wold frequently: "the name has come down—The Ghost's Walk. If the tread is an echo, it is an echo that is only heard after dark, and is often unheard for a long while together. But it comes back, from time to time; and so sure as there is sickness or death in the family it will be heard then" (84), and Mrs. Rouncewell deliberately encourages the legend by sharing it with her grandson and the new maid. Though the legend could be considered a silly wives-tale for readers, its dark connection to disgrace and calamity for Chesney Wold—the tread on the Ghost Walk becomes "constant and solemn" (662), echoing nightly through Lady Dedlock's rooms as the truth about her past is revealed. Its relation to the grimly altered Miltonic reference establishes it as a crucial synecdoche for the greater prophetic warning of *Bleak House*.

¹⁴ The second paragraph of *Bleak House* establishes the frequency of fog and pollution present throughout the novel: "Fog everywhere. Fog up the river . . . fog down the river, where it rolls defiled . . . Fog creeping . . . fog lying out . . . fog hovering in . . . Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners . . . fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'pprentice boy on deck" (5).

“Augur Yourself Unknown”

The second relevant Miltonic reference in *Bleak House* occurs near the end of the novel once readers have discovered that Lady Dedlock gave birth to Esther. Chapter 58, “A Wintry Day and Night” follows the omniscient narrator through the frantic search for Lady Dedlock as she runs away from the newly revealed shame of her past indiscretions. The narrator describes the uproar at Chesney Wold over Lady Dedlock’s disappearance: “Not to know that there is something wrong at the Dedlocks’ is to augur yourself unknown” (690). Dickens once again refers to *Paradise Lost* at a crucial moment in the novel and in the scope of the fulfillment of the novel’s prophecy. Dickens takes the quote from Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*:

Ye knew me once no mate
For you, there sitting where ye durst not soar;
Not to know me argues yourselves unknown,
The lowest of your throng; (*PL* 4:829-31)

In this passage, Satan addresses the angels who apprehended him without recognition while he ruined Eve’s dreams in the garden of Eden. Once again, Dickens alters the quote slightly. The use of the word “augur” relates directly to prophecy and provides a direct nod to the prophetic nature of the novel’s message.

Consider the way Dickens has manipulated the original quote: “Not to know that there is something wrong at the Dedlocks’ is to augur¹⁵ yourself unknown” (690). Dickens’s use of

¹⁵ There are debated textual variants in this reference. Stephen Gill believes that augur should be argue, making Dickens’s reference a direct quote from *Paradise Lost*. Ford and Monod note, however, that the “manuscript and proofs clearly indicate that Dickens wrote *augur*” (*Bleak House* 690, note 3). Based on the earlier Miltonic references in the novel, it is not out of character for Dickens to have deliberately changed the quote to emphasize a point. However, if Dickens did intend to use the word argue—meaning: “to bring evidence, convict, prove, indicate” (*OED*)—the Miltonic connection remains, and the quote also stands up contextually. If the audience and characters of the novel, for that matter, do not notice the catastrophe unfolding at Chesney Wold, they argue themselves unknown in the abilities of observation and logic.

“augur” meaning “To prognosticate from signs or omens; to divine, forebode, anticipate” (*OED*) further promotes the prophetic elements of the novel. The narrator has recently addressed the audience as “my dear child” (690) harkening back to the important instructive muse-like relationship between narrator and reader. The use of such a prophetic word in a direct address to the audience suggests that they have the ability to discern the microscopic prophecy that surrounds the Dedlock’s along with the macroscopic message of the novel as a whole. If they cannot understand the ever-growing tension in the novel as the coming fulfillment of the prophecy, they will never, as the narrator suggests, know the art of anticipating consequences. Once again, Dickens’s narrator harkens back to his confidence in the novel’s ability to “interes[t] its reader” (*Letters 7*: 153). But the narrator exceeds just interesting readers; he also instructs, inspires, and warns them through the implementation of Miltonic prophecy.

This reference connects *Bleak House*, once again, to the events unfolding in *Paradise Lost*. Satan directs his speech to his former heavenly acquaintances berating them for their inability to recognize him in his altered state while he successfully deflects attention from his devious plot to corrupt humanity. While the omniscient narrator of *Bleak House*, rather, draws attention to the main issues at Chesney Wold: “[Rumour] persists in flitting and chattering about town. It knows that the poor unfortunate man, Sir Leicester, has been sadly used. It hears, my dear child, all sort of shocking things” (690). By personifying Rumour, the narrator makes the problems at Chesney Wold accessible to all, and therefore reveals the deeper meaning behind his prophecy to the audience.

The original words, taken from Satan’s dialogue with the angels in *Paradise Lost*, question the abilities and intelligence of the angels who “accost him soon” at the ear of Eve (*PL* 4: 822). The angels realize that he is a “rebel spiri[t] adjudged to Hell” (*PL* 4: 823), but they do

not realize that he, in his fallen state, is Satan, formerly Lucifer, “of the first, / If not the first Archangel, great in power, / in favor and pre-eminence” (*PL* 5: 659-61). He scorns their ignorance and ultimately insults them by proposing that, if they do not know him, they cannot know who they truly are, and therefore, they “argue¹⁶ [them]selves unknown.” The quote suggests the self-revelation of a selfish character intent on not only corrupting the newly born Earth and its inhabitants but also rejecting the possibility of repentance. Satan receives satisfaction from the frequent public shaming of others hinted at also in the passage from *Bleak House*: “She is discussed by her dear friends with all the genteelest slang in vogue, with the last new word, the last new manner, the last new drawl, and the perfection of polite indifference” (691). Though Lady Dedlock moved in the upper echelons of society, she cannot escape the horrors of ignorance and a tarnished reputation, just as the angels cannot escape Satan’s vengeful accusations of ignorance.

While, “A Wintry Day and Night” maintains an individual prominence as a specific Miltonic prophetic reference in the novel, it also draws direct connections to Chapter 7, “The Ghost’s Walk,” in which Mrs. Rouncewell calls attention to the legend of the Ghost’s Walk by telling her son George that Lady Dedlock looked worn down beyond repair: ““When I saw my Lady yesterday, George, she looked to me—and I may say at me too—as if the step on the Ghost’s Walk had almost walked her down”” (693). In this moment, Mrs. Rouncewell has successfully discerned the coming fulfillment of the prophecy, showing that she could very well embrace the roll of an augur just as the narrator has hoped for the inhabitants of the novel and the audience itself. She dreads that Lady Dedlock ““will never more set foot within [Chesney Wold]”” and laments the fate of her employers: ““It’s going on for sixty year that I have been in

¹⁶Kerrigan notes that in this context, “argues: is reason to think” (*Complete Poetry* 411, note 830).

this family, and I never had any fear for it before. But it's breaking up my dear; the great old Dedlock family is breaking up" (693). The narrator reports Mrs. Rouncewell's explicit statement detailing the fulfillment of the prophecy, and offers the audience perhaps the most obvious explanation of the microscopic prophecy that represents a macroscopic threat of revolutionary self-combustion that Dickens envisions looming over Victorian England. For Dickens, if society does not implement the necessary changes, there will be no way to prevent a "breaking up" of the nation. By implementing a muse-like narrator to convey Lady Dedlock's tragic demise, Dickens allows the audience to receive unbridled exposure to important prophetic language. The omniscient narrator's use of Miltonic references and his ability to tailor them perfectly to his brand of prophecy further grounds the novel as a prophetic work designed with a narrator necessary to instruct readers to understand and to take crucial preventative action.

CHAPTER TWO: “SPARE US, GOOD LORD”: DICKENS’S INTERCEDING OMNISICENT NARRATOR

The Function of Prayer

Dickens also relies upon the Book of Common Prayer (1662) throughout *Bleak House* to implement the novel’s prophetic message. Many of the allusions to the Book of Common Prayer occur in chapters narrated by the omniscient narrator. In significant ways, these references maintain the novel’s Miltonic echoes and they help to ground readers through the implementation of national corporate prayer so that they may consider themselves, their country, and their place in it. The omniscient narrator can be considered as an intercessor for the characters, at times, but more often for readers who, as a result, become the target of his grim prophecy for the Victorian era. It is in the register of prayer that Dickens addresses the shortcomings of his professedly “Christian” society.

Although scholars have argued whether Dickens admired or scorned the constructs of religion,¹⁷ he clearly expressed his belief in the power of prayer and the message of the gospel in letters to his friends and children. For example, in a 15 October 1868 letter to his son Henry,

¹⁷ Dennis Walder argues in *Dickens and Religion* (1981) that Dickens was more interested in using the moral tropes of Christianity to connect with his reader through a common understanding (2). He also argues that Dickens’s involvement with Unitarians was his attempt to find “reasonableness and plain thinking” (13). According to Walder, Dickens orients his religion around “society and social action” (141). Walder describes Dickens’s religion as a “broad, humanist form of Christianity, crossing sectarian and class boundaries, and drawing both on liberal and Romantic sources” (179). Walder is, nevertheless, reluctant to explicitly describe Dickens as a Unitarian but also believes that Dickens’s beliefs were not strictly orthodox. In *The Scriptures of Charles Dickens* (2004), Vincent Newey affirms Dickens’s status as a Protestant but emphasizes the value that Dickens places on people rather than religious institutions (2). In *Dickens, Christianity, and The Life of Our Lord* (2009), Gary Colledge argues that Dickens was “a thoughtful and serious layperson” who thought “carefully about his faith” (vii) implying that Dickens was devoutly committed to his religious experiences. Though he questioned his religious involvement, Colledge posits that Dickens’s foray into Unitarianism was a “passing interest” (ix) that is not nearly as radical as it seems because Dickens still maintained his fundamental understanding of the Christian faith. In *Dickens: A Biography* (1988), Fred Kaplan affirms Dickens’s Anglican upbringing, and he states that Dickens “associated organized religion with stale custom at best, with repressive fanaticism at worst” (175). But Kaplan also believes that Dickens found Anglicanism “benign enough to provide him an institutional way of expressing his admiration for the moral and religious example set by the life of Jesus” (175).

Dickens explicitly states the importance of prayer and scripture reading in his life: “Deeply respecting [the New Testament], and bowing down before the character of Our Saviour, . . . you cannot go very wrong and will always preserve at heart a true spirit of veneration and humility. Similarly, I impress upon you the habit of saying a Christian prayer every night and morning. These things have stood by me all my life” (*Letters* 12:202).¹⁸ Dickens’s admission of religious habit clarifies his frequent use of religious references in his novels, and Fred Kaplan claims that Dickens’s novels frequently use phrases from the Bible and particularly the Book of Common Prayer because their “ritual affirmations of eternal life moved him deeply” (175). As Linda M. Lewis has suggested, Dickens frequently refers to these sacred texts in his novels—in *Bleak House*, the Book of Common Prayer especially—as an effective way to communicate his prophetic message.¹⁹

Dickens’s use of passages from the Book of Common Prayer serves a deeper purpose than just allowing him to use culturally relevant references in his novels. He allows the omniscient narrator to speak unsolicited prayers over spiritually and socially impoverished characters, which provides them contact, though limited, with god. Through this action, the omniscient narrator offers a possible promise of absolution and even redemption for these characters whom the narrator describes as: “[d]irty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets, only in soul a heathen” (*Bleak House* 564). Lewis observes that liturgical allusions such as the ones Dickens implements cause readers to “[fill] in

¹⁸ See Dickens’s letter to W. W. F. Cerjat on 25 October, 1864 for more on his opinion of instituted religion in comparison to a faithful relationship with Christ (*Letters* 10:444). See also his letter to Reverend James White on 4 May, 1848 after the death of one of the Reverend’s children to understand Dickens’s faith in the reassurance of an afterlife (*Letters* 5:297).

¹⁹ Lewis discusses the relationship between religion and Dickens’s readers by noting the establishment of a mutual understanding between them: “For Dickens and his reader, that understanding—as Dickens saw it—was a shared Christian faith, conservative morality, and adherence to family values” (5). She also argues that Dickens’s readers “if conservative Christian[s], would probably have been predisposed to find any religious meaning possible in a secular text” (10).

the gaps by mentally completing references to The Book of Common Prayer,” which allows them to enact prayer themselves (19). By establishing a mental relationship with the reader through the omniscient narrator, Dickens enticed his readers to recite prayers for these characters and sub-textually encouraged them to recite similar prayers for members of society who were similar to the dirty and ugly characters in the novel. The omniscient narrator acts as an intercessor for the reader when he draws attention to significant moments in the novel through the implementation of prayer, which further grounds the novel in time and place. These passages from the Book of Common Prayer²⁰ help to establish Dickens’s prophecy warning Victorian society about the consequences of failing to provide Christian outreach for the poor in England instead of abroad, and thereby placing him in the prophetic realm of the authorial prophets who came before him, including Milton.

While Milton objected to the Book of Common Prayer,²¹ by the middle of the seventeenth century, its language was very much imbedded in English culture, having been in use for almost a century. Milton did, however, rely on the Bible as a common text to interpret, evaluate, and assess his society. He places himself squarely in the Biblical prophetic tradition by aligning himself with the prophets—some of the key characters of biblical texts. Dickens uses both the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer throughout his novels indicating that these texts were deeply embedded in the common cultural sense by the nineteenth century.

²⁰ Lewis addresses Dickens’s use of the Book of Common Prayer in *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857), and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), but she does not account for important Book of Common Prayer references in *Bleak House*. She dedicates an entire chapter to the use of judgmental biblical language in the novel.

²¹ First published in 1549, the Book of Common Prayer was revised and republished in 1552, 1559, and 1662. The 1662 version was used in Anglican worship until the twentieth century (Cannon), and it would have been the one that Dickens used.

The Book of Common Prayer in *Bleak House*

Throughout *Bleak House*, Dickens uses a total of 11 direct references to the Book of Common Prayer.²² The first reference, narrated by Esther, occurs in Chapter 9 “Signs and Tokens.” Much to Esther’s chagrin, she endures an unexpected proposal from Mr. Guppy: ““As I love and honour, so likewise I obey. Would that I could make Thee the subject of that vow, before the shrine!”” (114). As the main point in his proposal Mr. Guppy quotes the bride’s vow in the Book of Common Prayer and insinuates that he believes in Esther’s total willingness to make the vow: “Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love honour, and keep him in sickness and in health;” (BCP 172). Esther’s refusal of Mr. Guppy’s ridiculous proposal implies that she not only considers marriage as a sacred union, but that she desires more in life than a simple marriage to anyone who offers. And while this reference to the Book of Common Prayer is not narrated by the omniscient narrator, it begins to ground the novel, not only in place, but as a novel with a serious message suggested by the sanctity of a vow. In the marriage ceremony, the priest tests the solemnity of the couple before they speak their vows: “I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgement when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it” (BCP 171). The “dreadful day of judgement” in phrase alone emphasizes the holy sanctity of marriage, but also begins to suggest the theme of judgment²³ running through the novel. Mr. Guppy’s use of such a solemn vow,

²² Ford and Monod cite a twelfth reference in *Bleak House* Chapter 39 “Attorney and Client”: “See the ‘Baptism’ service in *The Book of Common Prayer*: ‘I command thee, unclean spirit . . . that thou come out, and depart from these infants’” (*Bleak House* 485, note 8). This reference does not appear in the 1662 version of the Book of Common Prayer that Dickens knew.

²³ Esther’s guardian warns her of the judgment mentioned in Numbers 14: 18 because of her mother’s sins: “For yourself, unfortunate girl, orphaned and degraded from the first of these evil anniversaries, pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head, according to what is written” (*Bleak House* 19). For more on judgment in

however, in what Esther describes as a ridiculous moment encourages readers to question Mr. Guppy's judgment as well as his logic. He does not deserve Esther's goodness; nor will he ever possess it. Although ridiculous, this moment establishes a kind of relationship between the novel and its readers through the familiarity of the marital vow from the Book of Common Prayer, in a way, assuring readers that the novel will ground them in familiarity while it also entertains them.

The narrator draws the reader's attention to Lady Dedlock, the main vehicle for Dickens's prophecy, with his third²⁴ reference to the Book of Common Prayer. In the chapter "On the Watch," the narrator focuses primarily on Lady Dedlock's character as Mrs. Rouncewell and her grandson, Watt, sit discussing the pride of the Dedlock family: "I beg your pardon, grandmother. But she *is* proud, is she not?" "If she is, she has reason to be. The Dedlock family have always reason to be." "Well!" says Watt, "it's to be hoped they line out of their Prayer Books a certain passage for the common people about pride and vainglory" (142). Watt refers to the Litany or General Supplication in the Book of Common Prayer: "From all blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness: Spare us, good Lord" (BCP 68). The narrator refers to a passage from the Book of Common Prayer to establish the failings of Victorian people in relation to the less fortunate. Lady Dedlock embodies the characteristics of pride, vanity, and hypocrisy—"Beautiful, elegant, accomplished, and powerful . . . however haughty and indifferent" (349)—in her role as Sir Leicester Dedlock's wife. The continuation of this section of the Litany mentions hatred, malice, and uncharitableness, all traits that the narrator, and Dickens, see as the failures of all responsible parties in their interactions with the destitute, especially the aristocrats. Dicken's use of this

Bleak House see Linda M. Lewis's "Casting the First Stone: Judgment Day in *Bleak House*" from *Dickens, His Parables, and His Reader*.

²⁴ The narrator's second and final references to the Book of Common Prayer contain parallel threads and will be discussed together in their own section.

section of the Litany intercedes for his readers, and encourages them to reflect on their own place in a society that too often directed hatred, malice, and a lack of charity to those who desperately needed help and compassion. His prophecy rests on the reader's awareness of Victorian societal failings. While readers should see the failings around them, their lack of action, particularly from the country's leaders, is what spurs the prophecy against a careless revolution—while revolutionary action may take place, the danger occurs when no one remains to lead the masses through drastic societal changes.

The fourth and fifth references to the Book of Common prayer occur during Lady Dedlock's first encounter with Esther, who narrates a chapter in which she attends church with Lawrence Boythorn. Esther describes the church congregation by alluding to the Book of Common Prayer: "There were some stately footmen; and there was a perfect picture of an old coachman, who looked as if he were the official representative of all the pomps and vanities that had ever been put into his coach" (224). The reference comes from "A Catechism" questioning the role of Godmothers and Godfathers in the lives of the Church:

They did promise and vow three things in my name. First, that I should renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh. Secondly, that I should believe all the Articles of the Christian Faith. And thirdly, that I should keep God's holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of my life. (BCP 165)

Esther establishes the "pomps and vanities" as metonymies for "the great people" (224)—Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock, in this scene—who have arrived for church. By drawing the reader's attention to the common practice of watching the great people enter a church with "pomps and vanities," Esther also participates in the way Dickens allows his narrators to serve as

intercessor for the reader through the institution of prayer. The statement shows an uncharacteristic moment of explicit social criticism from Esther,²⁵ whose opinions are more often contained by her creator. The implication becomes, then, that those of the upper-class contribute to, and perhaps even cause, the heartache of the destitute in Victorian society despite the promise at their baptism that they would “renounce the pomps and vanities of this wicked world.”

The fifth reference to the Book of Common Prayer and the second in this chapter occurs at the beginning of the church service with a congregational recitation from the Psalms²⁶: ““Enter not into judgment with thy servant, O Lord, for in thy sight——”” (224). Though this recitation does not occur explicitly in the order of Sunday service in the Book of Common Prayer, priests may use any Psalm from the Psalter for Morning or Evening Prayer. In this case, he uses Psalm 143: “And enter not into judgement with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified” (BCP 264). Dickens’s decision to use this verse at the beginning of the church service grounds the moment in worshipful prayer. Though he does not use the latter part of the verse in the novel, the beginning of such a recitation implies the completion of the recitation in the mind of readers allowing them to participate prayerfully in the church service with Esther.

Continuing his intercession for readers, the omniscient narrator encourages them to hover over the memories of Captain Hawdon/Nemo with the sixth reference to the Book of Common Prayer. As Mr. Smallweed searches for a sample of Captain Hawdon/Nemo’s handwriting, in pursuit of payment from Mr. Tulkinghorn, he curses because he does not have any samples other

²⁵ For more on Esther as narrator in *Bleak House*, see W. J. Harvey’s “The Double Narrative of *Bleak House*,” Bert G. Hornback’s “The Narrator of *Bleak House*,” and David Paroissien’s “Subdued by the Dyer’s Hand: Dickens at Work in *Bleak House*.”

²⁶ Ford and Monod note that this recitation from the Psalter is commonly used as an opening recitation for Sunday services (224, note 7).

than his signature: “‘I had no such thing. I have nothing but his signature. Plague pestilence and famine, battle murder and sudden death upon him,’ says the old man, making a curse out of one of his few remembrances of a prayer” (334). Though Mr. Smallweed uses this reference as a curse, in its true form, it is a prayer for deliverance from the Book of Common Prayer: “From lightning and tempest; from earthquake, fire, and flood; from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death: spare us, good Lord” (BCP 68). The narrator’s use of this supplication from the Litany shows the reader that Captain Hawdon/Nemo did not have the benefit of protection from “plague, pestilence, and famine . . . and from sudden death” because he was denied the benefits of organized religion. The omniscient narrator’s brief forays into the Book of Common Prayer sadly provide Captain Hawdon/Nemo’s only connection to God while his ability to draw readers’ attention to recognizable prayers further establishes their place as praying people in Victorian Christian society.

The omniscient narrator turns the seventh reference to the Book of Common Prayer back toward the Dedlocks. In a private meeting with Sir Leicester, Mr. Rouncewell questions the teachings of the village school when negotiating his son’s marriage with Lady Dedlock’s ward, Rosa. Sir Leicester’s thoughts concerning Mr. Rouncewell’s opinion follows with mention to catechism from the Book of Common Prayer:

From the village school of Chesney Wold, intact as it is this minute, to the whole framework of society: from the whole framework of society, to the aforesaid framework receiving tremendous cracks in consequence of people (ironmasters, lead-mistresses, and what not) not minding their catechism, and getting out of the station unto which they are called—necessarily and for ever, according to Sir Leicester’s rapid logic, the first station in which they happen to find themselves;

and from that, to their educating other people out of *their* stations, and so obliterating the landmarks, and opening the floodgates, and all the rest of it; this is the swift progress of the Dedlock mind” (354).

Sir Leicester believes that the hierarchy of society should hold the utmost importance to its members, and his thought echoes the answer to the catechism: “What is thy duty toward thy Neighbour?” The answer follows, outlining the actions of a godly neighbor: “My duty towards Neighbour, is to love him as myself, and to do to all men, as I would they should do unto me . . . to submit myself to all my governours, teachers, spiritual pastors, and masters . . . and to do my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me” (BCP 166). While the use of this passage shows Sir Leicester’s disdain for improving the lives of the less fortunate, it also shows the ways that the narrator expects society to act. As a member of the upper-class, Sir Leicester should show compassion and charity to those less fortunate than himself. Instead, he expects deference. Once again, the narrator raises the specter of change to readers, or at least, encourages them to consider the irony of the lack of compassion and charity in their society. Essentially, Sir Leicester’s internal thoughts contribute to the creation of emotional connection to the prophetic message of the novel. If leaders can understand their place in the world as one of privilege, then they can assist those around them, like Captain Hawdon/Nemo and Jo, who do not have the means change their lives on their own. Dickens directly addresses readers with the power to change society in *Bleak House*, especially in his commanding statements after Jo’s death. Without the narrator’s ability to create a firm connection with the reader, the emotional message of the novel would lack important emphasis.

The next passage where the omniscient narrator alludes the Book of Common Prayer comes not at the end of Richard’s life as one might expect but rather when the narrator begins to

describe Richard's obsession with the Chancery suit that leads to his death: "'Yes, sir,' says Mr. Vholes, gently shaking his head and rapping the hollow desk, with a sound as if ashes were falling on ashes, and dust on dust, a rock" (486). The reference invokes the image of throwing earth upon a coffin and allows the reader to recall the burial service from the Book of Common Prayer: "we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ" (BCP 184). The imagery echoes the biblical tradition of God creating man from dust.²⁷ This reference, associated so closely to Richard, falls ominously at this point in the novel when it seems that he will never be free from the Chancery suit, and it suggests to the reader that it will eventually cause his untimely death. Here the narrator communicates the dangers of greed and obsession that his early forays into the Book of Common Prayer have implied. The narrator has been grounding the reader in the themes of charity and compassion through his implementation of these references, and as the novel progresses, his purpose becomes more explicit as wealthy characters, who do not embody those traits, experience individual downfalls effectively fulfilling the novel's established prophecy of revolutionary doom.

The omniscient narrator moves back to the Dedlocks for his next implementation of the Book of Common Prayer. He addresses the disarray of the country over recent elections establishing, for the first time, a kind of revolutionary tone in the midst of prayer. The national disgust with the government is made clear by the concerns that Sir Leicester relays to Volumnia Dedlock, his cousin:

Sir Leicester feels it incumbent on him to observe a crushing aspect towards
Volumnia . . . because some graceless jokers have consequently suggested the

²⁷ See Genesis 2: 7. Milton also refers to this instance in *Paradise Lost*: "he formed thee, Adam, thee O man / Dust of the ground, and in thy nostrils breathed / The breath of life" (*PL* 7: 524-26).

omission from the Church service of the ordinary supplication in behalf of the High Court of Parliament, and have recommended instead that the prayers of the congregation be requested for six hundred and fifty-eight gentlemen in a very unhealthy state.²⁸ (502)

The Book of Common Prayer includes “A Prayer for the High Court of Parliament, to be read during their Sessions”:

Most gracious God, we humbly beseech thee . . . [t]hat thou wouldest be pleased to direct and prosper all [the High Court of Parliament’s] consultations, to the advancement of thy glory, the good of thy Church, the safety, honour, and welfare of our Sovereign and her Dominions; that all things may be so ordered and settled by their endeavours, upon the best and surest foundations. (BCP 73)

The suggestion of a change in the prayer designated for the national government, whether a joke or not, further indicates the looming threat of a revolution that Dickens continues to warn against. This reference and the next are the most explicitly nationalistic²⁹ moments that the narrator uses from the Book of Common Prayer further emphasizing his ability to ground readers and effectively establish their place in Victorian society through the institution of prayer in the novel.

Continuing the nationalistic thread established by the previous reference to the Book of Common Prayer, Dickens allows Esther to reiterate the grounding of the novel through corporate

²⁸ Ford and Monod note that the “six hundred and fifty-eight gentlemen in a very unhealthy state” are “members of the House of Commons such as Sir Leicester” (*Bleak House*, note 6).

²⁹ Mary C. Fenton notes in *Milton’s Places of Hope: Spiritual and Political Connections of Hope with Land* that prayer in Milton’s early-modern society “enabled individuals to contribute to the improvement of their own civic life, to the stability and integrity of the *civitas* in general, and the emerging universal Church. Because prayer had everything to do with hope, hope had everything to do with one’s place with God, as well as the nation’s place with God” (103). She also notes that prayer “could express faith in and hope for the nation and for one’s place in that nation” (104) making it a grounding experience.

prayer. In one of her last conversations with him before his death, Richard relates his professional struggles to Esther. He claims that he has had every profession possible and still cannot find contentment. When Esther assures him that it cannot be that hopeless, he replies: “it is indeed. I am just so near disgrace as that those who are put in authority over me (as the catechism goes) would far rather be without me than with me” (545). The catechism that Richard refers to is again related to the treatment of neighbors: “My duty . . . is . . . [t]o honour and obey the Queen, and all that are put in authority under her” (545). This passage specifically invites a consideration of how readers relate to their country and their place in it. While Richard refers to Jarndyce, the narrator seems to use this moment to remind readers of their place in Victorian England by drawing attention to their insignificance in contrast to Queen Victoria. The Queen resides over the country and all of its territories, and there are many “in authority under her” who rank above the common reader. The narrator also seems to draw readers closer to Victorian authority figures through the inclusion of this prayer in order to directly address them during his final reference to the Book of Common Prayer.

The Burial of the Dead

Considered as a whole, Dickens’s most poignant use of the Book of Common Prayer can be found during the death-scenes of destitute but important characters in the novel. These passages can be seen as a way to provide irreligious and socially destitute characters with the means to connect to God in a society that has not provided them with that opportunity. Of the 11 references—spanning topics from “The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” (BCP 171) and the “Ministration of Holy Baptism” (161) to prayers for Parliament and the Monarchy—three of the references occur in “The Order for The Burial of the Dead” (182). Two of these references revolve around characters who are close to death or have already died in the novel: Captain

Hawdon/Nemo, the deceased law writer, and Jo, the urchin street-sweeper. These characters maintain direct connections to Lady Dedlock,—Captain Hawdon/Nemo was her lover and the father of her child, while Jo led her to Hawdon’s grave so she could pay her last respects—though the reader does not discover these connections until late in the novel.

Beyond the character of Lady Dedlock, these characters to illustrate the novel’s prophecy on a smaller scale. While Lady and Sir Leicester Dedlock function as symbols of a decadent aristocracy, Captain Hawdon/Nemo and Jo provide readers with pathos that requires a response. The omniscient narrator encourages this reaction by speaking prayers over these characters and acts as an intercessor for the reader while also providing the grounds for association between the novel and the reader’s actual experiences. Ultimately, the narrator provides these characters with a connection to God at the time of their deaths, a privilege denied them by their “Christian” society.

Captain Hawdon/Nemo and Jo are not given the benefit of communing directly with God or even with the Son because of their ostracized states. Instead, the omniscient narrator acts as a priest for these characters, bringing the prayers for the destitute to the reader.³⁰ The narrator presents these prayers in fragmented form to allow the reader to complete the recitation in an intercessory act. Without the participation of the Victorian reader, Captain Hawdon/Nemo and Jo do not receive the benefits of prayer or organized religion at all, and therefore, do not hold a grounded place in the Victorian nation.

“Our Dear Brother”

The second reference in *Bleak House* to the Book of Common Prayer, narrated by the omniscient narrator, occurs in the chapter “Our Dear Brother.” In this chapter, the narrator

³⁰Just as the Son brings the prayers of Adam and Eve to the Father in Book 11 of *Paradise Lost*: “And prayer, which in this golden censer, mixed / With incense, I thy priest before thee bring” (*PL* 11: 24-25).

conveys the chaos surrounding Nemo's death. The narrator describes the removal of Nemo's body to the poor burying grounds by referring to the service of the Burial of the Dead from the Book of Common Prayer: "Then the active and intelligent, who has got into the morning papers as such, comes with his pauper company to Mr. Krook's, and bears off the body of our dear brother here departed" (137). The reference originates from the service for the dead in the Book of Common Prayer: "Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground" (BCP 184). Dickens relies upon his reader's knowledge of the full passage from the burial service. By calling the reader's attention to sad moments, the narrator establishes the necessary emotional connection with the reader that he later uses in his most fervent moments of prayer. Though Nemo has been overlooked and mistreated in the final years of his life, he does receive, from the narrator only, the benefits of death rites.

The narrator's use of the phrase "our dear brother" in relation to Nemo shows bitter irony and sarcasm concerning the treatment he endured from Victorian society. Dickens's clear subtext is that if Nemo was indeed a "dear brother" to Victorian society, then he should not have endured such a painful existence. At the time of his death, he lived in squalor, his poverty hanging onto him even in death: "He lies there, dressed in shirt and trousers, with bare feet. He has a yellow look in the spectral darkness of a candle that has guttered down . . . His hair is ragged, mingling with his whiskers and his beard—the latter, ragged too, and grown like the scum and mist around him, in neglect" (124). The narrator's description paints an unapproachable man grimed with hideous signs of misfortune. The contrast between Nemo's physical description at the time of his death and the narrator's mention of the supposedly "dear" relationship he enjoyed with Victorian Christian society allows the narrator to remind readers to consider seriously what the words of

the Book of Common Prayer mean in their “Christian” society. Such references also encourage readers to believe that Nemo will receive the benefits that emerge from the burial rites including “certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ” (BCP 184)—a happier state than the one he has endured in life. Here, Dickens allows his narrator to intercede for readers emboldening them to complete the prayers he begins in the novel, suggesting a dual intention of creating empathy for a character and causing self-reflection in the reader.

Throughout the novel, the narrator reiterates the lack of identity that Captain Hawdon/Nemo and Jo possess in Victorian England—they hold no place because they are not grounded in prayer. After disgracing his reputation through his affair with Lady Dedlock, Captain Hawdon adopts the name “Nemo.” Mr. Tulkinghorn indicates the absurdity of such a name: ““Nemo is Latin for no one.”” (121). Mr. Snagsby counters that the name has meaning: ““It must be English for someone, sir, I think. . . . That’s the person’s name”” (122). Captain Hawdon has tried to erase the shame of his affair and subsequent loss of Lady Dedlock’s affections by entirely erasing his former identity. The fact that Nemo is “English for someone” does little to affirm his identity. Instead, it further erases his importance making him one of many—an insignificant part of a whole.

Nemo is described by the young doctor who examines him after his death as having ““something in his manner, uncouth as it was, that denoted a fall in life”” (127). Here, readers observe the narrative distance between the narrator and the character—the narrator is describing the doctor as he describes Nemo. The narrative distance acts as a reminder of the distance between Nemo and God. Because of the narrator, however, and his role as prayerful intercessor, readers are brought to the brink of awareness about Nemo and his circumstances encouraging

them to sympathetically consider Nemo's character as "our dear brother here departed" (BCP 184) while also closely examining themselves and their position in Victorian society.

Although Nemo has been scorned by society and slandered because of his circumstances, the narrator does reveal his true character through the description of his interactions with Jo. In the midst of his destitution, Nemo always had a kind word to offer Jo along with any money he could spare providing the child with one of his only friends in a desperate and lonely life. Jo laments Nemo's death providing an image of the man under the grime: "'He was very good to me,' says the boy, wiping his eyes with his wretched sleeve. 'Wen I see him a-layin' so stritched out just now, I wished he could have heerd me tell him so. He wos very good to me, he wos!'" (135). Clearly, Captain Hawdon/Nemo understood the true meaning of charity so frequently mentioned in the Book of Common Prayer: "amend your lives and be in perfect charity with all men" (BCP 148). The narrator's report of Nemo's true character help combat the scandal of his probable suicide allowing him to receive a "Christian burial" (137) that would have been denied him had they proven he had "laid violent hands upon [himself]" (BCP 182).

Nemo receives a "Christian burial," but the resting place does not evoke images of a peaceful afterlife. Instead he is buried in a place of disease and contagion.³¹ The undertakers bear him to a "hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed; . . . Into a beastly scrap of ground which a Turk would reject as a savage abomination, and a Caffre would shudder at, they bring our dear brother here departed, to receive Christian burial" (137). The description of the burial ground implies that even adherents of religions "below" Christianity would find it unacceptable. Because of his poverty and lack of identity, however, Nemo does not

³¹ See Graham Benton's article "'And Dying Thus around Us Every Day': Pathology, Ontology and the Discourse of the Diseased Body. A Study of Illness and Contagion in *Bleak House*."

receive the luxury of a peaceful final resting place. Instead, he is effectively thrown away like a piece of garbage. The narrator performs scant religious rites for Nemo because society has not provided him with that connection. By performing these religious rites, the omniscient narrator reiterates his prophecy that change is crucial for the “Christian” nation’s survival. Nemo’s response to Jo’s suffering, however, allows him access to an afterlife reiterated by the unspoken conclusion of the burial rites from the Book of Common Prayer implied by the narrator. By using incomplete recitations, the narrator encourages readers to continue the prayer in earnest providing Nemo with the connection he deserves to not only the nation, but to the heavenly realm as well.

“Jo’s Will”

In a similar fashion to Captain Hawdon/Nemo, Jo, the street-sweeper, receives compassion from his society, though he is a central character in the novel. Without family to help identify and nurture him he roams the streets looking for work. The narrator makes clear, however, that Jo³² has no fixed place in the world: “‘I’m always a-moving on, sir,’ cries the boy, wiping away his grimy tears with his arm. ‘I’ve always been a-moving and a-moving on, ever since I was born’” (238). This command to move on, handed down by a constable³³ further reiterates Jo’s insignificance and implies that he is a nuisance—a child constantly underfoot and in the way. Jo’s despair at having no place to go does not affect the constable—he must uphold

³² In *Humanities Insights: Reading Dickens’s Bleak House* Richard Grivil notes that Jo “embodies injustice” illustrating “most fully . . . the wickedness of ‘telescopic philanthropy’” (39-40)—the evangelical condition of sending aid to the “natives” of foreign countries while ignoring the plight of the poor at home. See also Rodger L. Tarr ‘s “The ‘Foreign Philanthropy Question’ in *Bleak House: A Carlylean Influence*.” He also notes Dickens’s bitterness “harbored toward foreign philanthropy” (276), and he attributes Dickens’s outspoken attitude to Thomas Carlyle’s influence and Dickens’s disdain for “missionaries, who, he felt, by their very disinterestedness were condoning the deaths of boys like Jo and the sufferings of families like the Brickmaker’s” (279).

³³ Ford and Monod cite the Metropolitan Police Acts of 1829 and 1839 empowering police constables “to require loiters to ‘move on.’” (*Bleak House* 238, note 4).

the law despite its injustice. The narrator speaks directly to Jo at this moment establishing his disgust of the practice of requiring children like Jo to “move on”:

Do you hear, Jo? It is nothing to you or to any one else, that the great lights of the parliamentary sky have failed for some few years, in this business, to set you the example of moving on. The one grand recipe remains for you—the profound philosophical prescription—the be-all and end-all of your strange existence upon earth. Move on! You are by no means to move off, Jo, for the great lights can’t at all agree about that. Move on! (238).

This direct address reiterates the narrator’s omniscient knowledge. He knows how Parliament—the literal authorizing body of the Book of Common Prayer—has debated and bungled the law. The “great lights of the parliamentary sky”—the MPs—care little for the plight of the destitute living out their “strange existence upon the earth.” But despite how little they care, according to Dickens’s narrator, they cannot fully agree that these lives have no meaning. Jo could “move off” completely, dying off from the cruel world and its unfeeling lawmakers who steal what little significance he has, but they “can’t at all agree about that.” Instead Jo must be resigned to live a life of destitution identified only by his dismal circumstances because he cannot be grounded in a society that does not offer him their prayers. Only in death can Jo achieve some kind of prayerful significance.

The final reference to the Book of Common Prayer occurs at an emotional and prophetic crisis point in the novel. The omniscient narrator addresses readers directly after Allan Woodcourt’s call and answer recitation of the Lord’s Prayer with Jo at the moment of his death. In doing so Woodcourt attempts to establish Jo’s connection with God after a life of never knowing “[n]othink at all” about religion (571). Woodcourt’s Christ-like attempt to teach Jo how

to pray is also reminiscent of Adam and Eve's call on God to teach them how to pray because they are "[u]nskillful with what words to pray" (*PL* 11:32):

'Jo, can you say what I say?' 'I'll say anythink as you say, sir, for I knows it's good.' 'OUR FATHER.' 'Our Father!—yes, that's wery good, sir.' 'WHICH ART IN HEAVEN.' 'Art in Heaven—is the light a comin, sir?' 'It is close at hand. HALLOWED BE THY NAME!' 'Hallowed be—thy——' The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead! Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day (572).

Jo only survives through the first line and a half of the Lord's prayer—recited after the *Kyrie eleison*³⁴ in the burial service (BCP 184)—before succumbing to his illness. The beginning of the prayer, however, establishes a prayerful tone, and though the narrator abruptly ends his recitation of the prayer, readers feel compelled to imagine the ending of it for Jo's sake in an ultimate act of intercession. Readers see the whole scene with the narrator's gestalt abandonment of the prayer grounding them in the moment. No matter their desire to look away from the tragic scene, the incomplete prayer binds them to the scene by urging them to complete the recitation of the prayer for Jo's sake and their own. The abrupt ending of the prayer, however, serves a deeper purpose. The narrator allows the sudden end of the prayer to mirror the abrupt ending of Jo's young life. The narrator then turns to his reader, addressing all members of society,—“Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying

³⁴ “Lord, have mercy upon us; Christ, have mercy upon us; Lord have mercy upon us” (BCP 184).

thus around us every day” (572)— and scathingly makes them look at Jo as a metaphor for the streets of London and the condition of England. In this scene, Dickens connects the leaders he has previously addressed with the rest of his audience. He chastises the entire nation for the circumstances they have just witnessed in the novel further communicating his prophetic message—change, or be doomed to revolution, or damned by an angry god.

Through the narrator’s direct address, the audience remains mired in the scene. The men and women of Victorian society who claim collectively to have been born “with Heavenly compassion in [their] hearts,” but the narrator negates that claim in Jo’s death scene by directly addressing their lack of compassionate action for people like Jo “dying thus around [them] every day.” Though he does not quote a specific passage, the narrator’s use of the phrase “Heavenly compassion” draws the reader’s mind once again to the Book of Common Prayer. Used 18 times in the Book of Common Prayer, compassion—“the feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it; pity that inclines one to spare or to succor” (*OED*)—is a defining characteristic of the Christian god as he appears in the Book of Common Prayer, and the trait applies to both God and humanity: “Be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous” (BCP 117); “O most mighty God, and merciful Father, who hast compassion upon all men, and hatest nothing that thou hast made” (BCP 190); “For thou art a merciful God, full of compassion, Longsuffering, and of great pity” (BCP 191); “The Lord is gracious and full of compassion” (BCP 272). The narrator’s inclusion of the phrase “born with Heavenly compassion” is one of the most significant moments of narrator as intercessor. He understands how Christians should act when they do not understand. The narrator constructs the emotional connection with the reader through prayer. He alludes to elements from the Book of Common Prayer that expand in

readers' minds because of their familiarity with the entirety of the sacred text. The sense of emotional connection, societal critique, and prophetic awareness causes the scene to transcend simple maudlin sentimentality. The audience, therefore, has the opportunity to respond to the extreme pathos that the narrator establishes in this scene. Their response, however, relates to a fictional character not the plight of the miserable people who walk the streets of Victorian London every day. Because of Victorian society's inaction concerning those who are "dying thus around us every day," the narrator, as intercessor, must have compassion for all of the people that Jo represents. This reference to the Book of Common Prayer acts as the only serious use of it in the novel. Because Dickens considered rote religious practice like the recitation of pre-written prayers as meaningless, he used the passages as a familiar vocabulary for his readers. This scene and the prayer Dickens uses in it is significant because of its original location—it is a prayer that Christ taught his disciples when they asked to be taught how to pray. The use of this particular prayer at the moment of Jo's death can be considered as the only true moment of prayer in the novel, further emphasizing Dickens's indictment of Victorian society.

The omniscient narrator, and to a lesser extent Esther, act in *Bleak House* not only as muses but also as prayerful intercessors providing Victorian readers with the opportunity to ground themselves in prayer as consumers of the novel's prophetic message to change society or face revolutionary doom. Through frequent forays into the Book of Common Prayer, Dickens maintains his emotional grip on his readers while he preaches to them through the voice of his omniscient narrator. By referencing passages from different sections of the Book of Common Prayer, Dickens elicits emotional responses from his readers while also calling attention to their portion of responsibility for the condition of the poor. Neither the aristocracy, the Members of Lords and Commons, the clergy, nor the readers escape Dickens's stern indictment. The Book of

Common Prayer, as a national book, therefore acts as a grounding element for readers of *Bleak House* as Dickens provided them with a form of entertainment that was mixed with a strong dose of prophetic warning.

CHAPTER THREE: “TO ENCOURAGE SOME PERSON IN THE LOWER CLASSES TO RISE UP”: DICKENS’S OMNISCIENT NARRATOR AS REVOLUTIONARY HISTORIAN

In addition to using direct Miltonic references and intercessory quotations from the Book of Common Prayer, Dickens also coopts the role of historical revolutionary for his narrator as a way to convey the novel’s prophetic message. Throughout *Bleak House*, Dickens draws several parallels to well-known historical revolutionary acts, many of which are particularly related to England, allowing readers to focus on his warning about the future through the lens of events that shaped the nation. Essentially, the omniscient narrator offers nuanced interpretations of the historical events he has alluded to in ways that reveal deep divisions remaining in British society. The narrator’s use of revolutionary history connects him to Milton, who encouraged revolutionary fervor by supporting the idea of a Commonwealth instead of a Monarchy while also maintaining a sense of ambivalence concerning revolutionary action. Milton³⁵ was a vocal about his ideas concerning revolution as he frequently addressed the issues of freedom and civic liberty in his writing. Furthermore, *Paradise Lost* adopts a revolutionary tone through the frequent discussions of free-will and the vivid imagery of the war in heaven between the angels—a literal civil war itself. Dickens uses his narrator to warn against a national revolution,³⁶

³⁵ Milton wrote several controversial political tracts questioning the validity of monarchical Parliamentary rule in England including: *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1650), *A Defense of the English People* (1651), *Second Defense of the English People* (1654), and “The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth” (1660). As a proponent for liberty and humanity’s free will, he frequently discusses the governmental role in establishing reason and truth for the nation, especially prevalent in *Areopagitica* (1644): “It is liberty, Lords and Commons, which your own valorous and happy counsels have purchased us, liberty which is the nurse of all great wits. This is that which hath rarified and enlightened our spirits like the influence of heaven; this is that which hath enfranchised, enlarged, and lifted up our apprehensions degrees above themselves. Ye cannot make us now less capable, less knowing, less eagerly pursuing of truth” (960). He echoes similar sentiments in *Paradise Lost* speaking through the angel Abdiel: “Shalt thou give law to God, shalt thou dispute / With him the points of liberty, who made / Thee what thou art, and formed the pow’rs of Heav’n / Such as he please, and circumscribed their being?” (*PL* 5: 822-25).

³⁶ In 1848, revolutions against monarchies and aristocracies sprung up all over Europe. The Victorians could not help but take notice. Walter E. Houghton discusses the national fear of revolution: “For all its solid and imposing strength, Victorian society, particularly in the period before 1850, was shot through, from top to bottom, with the

similar to the one that Milton dealt with, brought on by disagreements between different parties and a lack of proper leadership. Instead, through *Bleak House*, he seems to support the idea of cultural revolutions that produce a better society through a change of heart.³⁷ He leverages a fear of revolution commonly held in Britain throughout the novel. At the same time he encourages cultural revolutions like the Industrial revolution and educational reform, he warns against revolutions that collapse upon themselves resulting in a dire loss of life and societal order. He resists declaring his opinions on these events, but Dickens establishes a catalogue of 11 revolutionary references³⁸ throughout *Bleak House*. Three of them occur in Esther's narrative section and contribute to the revolutionary cloud hanging over the novel; seven of the references are narrated by the omniscient narrator, further connecting him to Milton through revolutionary language. As a kind of revolutionary historian, the narrator highlights deeply divided class structures and simultaneously warns readers against the revolution they may face if they do not implement necessary changes in their society.

dread of some wild outbreak of the masses that would overthrow the established order and confiscate private property" (55). In *The Victorians*, A. N. Wilson calls 1848 "the Year of Revolutions on the European continent" and notes that "crowns and aristocracies were sent packing" (27), leaving Victorians to wonder if a similar incidents approached their society. The lack of revolution in Britain and Ireland in 1848, he believes, is a direct result of two reasons: that "there would have been some such uprising had not the British state learnt to exercise an iron authority over the masses, by means of law, policing, and military strength" (113). And that there were simply "not enough people would have been found to make a Chartist Parliament, still less a British socialist state" (113). Antony H. Harrison also discusses the revolutionary fervor of 1848 calling it a year filled with "tumultuous historical events that shattered the relative calm of Europe at mid-century." (19). In *Dickens: A Biography*, Fred Kaplan notes that Dickens "was unambivalently against revolution. He did not have . . . the anger of the prophetic anarchist, for whom conditions are so intolerable that even total destruction sometimes seems better than the perpetuation of the current situation" (308). He cites Dickens's involvement with the Administrative Reform Association as a national crusade without which "revolution was inevitable" (330).

³⁷ Jonathan Arac disputes this idea arguing that "*Bleak House* charts not a change of heart, no Scrooges or Dombey's, but a change in the structure of social and economic power" (59). I would argue, however, that though a change of heart does not occur in a central character, a change in the structure of social and economic power must require a change of heart as well to inspire the legislative action required for of reform. Dickens famously attacks Parliament in *Bleak House* ridiculing the MPs with absurd names: "Lord Boodle;" "Lord Coodle and Sir Thomas Doodle" (145) moving through the alphabet with the mention of each member of Parliament. His inclusion of passages like these, however, suggest an awareness of their necessity in successfully reforming the country.

³⁸ I have grouped these references based on critical similarities, and they are not discussed in the chronological order of the text.

Esther's Historical Observations

While Esther does not seem to purposefully allude to revolutionary moments, she does contribute to 3 references out of the 11 throughout the novel. These revolutionary references and allusions contribute to the idea that Victorian society was bombarded with the idea of revolution from both their national history and current events. The first instance of revolutionary language in one of Esther's chapters occurs when Esther, Richard, and Ada meet Mr. Krook, the owner of the "Rag and Bottle Warehouse" (48) and Miss Flite's landlord. As Mr. Krook expounds upon his Chancery influenced nickname³⁹—"they call me the Lord Chancellor, and call my shop Chancery" (50)—Esther turns her focus to Mr. Krook's cat: "Hi, Lady Jane! A large grey cat leaped from some neighbouring shelf on his shoulder, and startled us all. 'Hi! show 'em how you scratch. Hi! Tear, my lady!'" (51). Ford and Monod note that the cat is presumably named after Lady Jane Grey (1537-54), "whose execution for suspected treason is described in Dickens' *A Child's History of England*" (*Bleak House* 51, note 8). Dickens described Lady Jane Grey⁴⁰ as "amiable, learned, and clever" (*A Child's History of England*, Chapter 30, par. 3), and she claimed that her supposed treason was committed with "no bad intent" (par. 15). By many, Lady Jane was considered a martyr—a young Protestant woman murdered by the Catholic Queen Mary I (1516-58). Depending on the position, however, she was also a traitor to the true monarch. Her status as martyr or traitor rests entirely on perspective—she was the true heir to the throne named by her cousin King Edward VI, or she usurped the throne from Mary I in an

³⁹ Dickens creates an inversion of the Chancery institution with Mr. Krook, a man clearly below the distinction of the title, paralleled directly to the ultimate authority on law. Milton also establishes an essential inversion of institution in *Paradise Lost* presenting Satan as a corrupt version of the divine.

⁴⁰ Lady Jane Grey served as Queen for nine days after the death of King Edward VI who had named her his heir. Lady Jane was removed from the throne and executed for treason by Edward's older half-sister, Mary I (Plowden). Dickens notes, in *A Child's History of England* (1851) that her death at the hand of the executioner "had never struck so cruel and so vile a blow" (Chapter 30, par. 15).

ultimate act of treason. If she maintains her status as a humble martyr, then the connection between the humble Lady Jane Grey and Mr. Krook's ferocious cat is strange at best.

Esther details the cat's actions after Mr. Krook's commands: "The cat leaped down, and ripped at a bundle of rags with her tigerish claws, with a sound that set my teeth on edge to hear" (51). Though the cat may be learned and clever for obeying Mr. Krook's command, it does not seem to possess amiable qualities. Perhaps the cat's name and attitude represent vindication for, what some may see, the unfairness of Lady Jane's death. Lady Jane Grey is honored by her namesake, a cat who defends her rightful claim to protect Mr. Krook's shop. Nevertheless, the allusion to Lady Jane draws the reader's mind to the consequences of treason and rebellion—alienation, imprisonment, and death. The ambiguity of Lady Jane's story rests on the problem of treason and revolution and when, if ever, they become acceptable. Though a reference to a cat may be overlooked, it retains significance when readers consider Dickens's deliberate decision to name the cat after an English woman who was executed for supposed treason.

Esther's narrative continues in the following chapter, where she once again alludes to a kind of revolutionary moment in England's history. As Esther, Richard and Ada are on their way to meet Mr. Jarndyce, their wealthy benefactor, for the first time, their carriage stops to rest on an old battle-field: "At Barnet there were other horses waiting for us; but as they had only just been fed, we had to wait for them too, and got a long fresh walk, over a common and an old battle-field,⁴¹ before the carriage came up" (58). The "old battle-field" was the sight of the Battle of Barnet in the Wars of the Roses (1455-87). This allusion emphasizes England's tumultuous

⁴¹ Ford and Monod note that the old-battle field Esther mentions was the "[s]ight of the Battle of Barnet during the Wars of the Roses where, in 1471, the Yorkists under Edward IV defeated the Lancastrians (*Bleak House* 59, note 2). A. J. Pollard notes that the minor conflict between rival factions for control of the kingdom became a "war for the possession of the crown in 1460" (par. 2). Eventually the Lancastrian side prevailed leading Henry Tudor to become Henry VII.

history by highlighting turbulent times brought about by struggles for power between royal families. With each family holding a claim to the throne, the ambiguity of revolutionary action defines this conflict, and the multiple claims make understanding the history of this conflict more difficult. This allusion highlights the difference between upheaval and revolution. While the Wars of the Roses was characterized by upheaval created by the conflicts between two powerful families, the revolutionary fervor of 1789, 1830, and 1848 was characterized by fighting between common rabble and the old order of power. Once again, the moment seems like an easy detail to dispose of in the greater scheme of the novel, but the reference and Esther's admission that the battlefield is "common" shows her familiarity with the location and its history as an English woman. Her statements indicate that the battlefield and the war were discussed frequently enough to be well-known by readers further establishing the novel's conflict-driven tone, as it reminds readers that upheavals of society had occurred and could occur again in Britain.

In Chapter 43, "Esther's Narrative," Richard and Esther travel to see Mr. Skimpole, the irresponsible, child-like friend of Mr. Jarndyce. Esther recalls: "He lived in a place called the Polygon, in Somers Town, where there were at that time a number of poor Spanish refugees walking about in cloaks, smoking little paper cigars" (523).⁴² Ford and Monod note that these refugees were "A band of exiles seeking to overthrow the Spanish government who settled in this section of London in the late 1820s" (*Bleak House* 523, note 2). Newspaper records from that time show that General Torrijos was frequently in the news showing Britain's fascination with revolutionary activity and crusading figures. By calling them "poor Spanish refugees,"

⁴² Ford and Monod cite that "[t]his group, under General Torrijos perished in 1831 during an unsuccessful landing in Spain" (*Bleak House* 523, note 2). General Torrijos was frequently in the newspapers during the 1830s. See "The Late Attempt of Torrijos," "Fate of General Torrijos," "General Torrijos and his Party," and "Execution of the Brave Torrijos & His Companions at Malaga." Ford and Monod also refute some scholarly attempts to date the action of the novel by this reference: "Since [General Torrijos and his companions] were succeed by late waves of political exiles from Spain and other countries who settled in London, it is not justifiable to date the action of the novel only by the appearance of the Torrijos exiles" (*Bleak House* 523, note 2).

Esther establishes one side of this conflict—these people have been mistreated by their government in some way. However, the reader does not receive any information about the Spanish government or the reasons the refugees have fled their homeland making the argument about the Spanish refugees entirely one-sided. Once again, perspective becomes crucial to understand this conflict. Though Esther only describes the scene at Mr. Skimpole's, her choice to mention these “poor Spanish refugees” further establishes the reader's awareness of the revolutionary tone in the novel that mirrors the revolutionary fervor that had swept over Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, further reiterating the idea that revolution could also consume Britain.

Wat Tyler and Sir Leicester's Paranoia

The omniscient narrator first refers to a revolutionary act in Chapter 2, “In Fashion,” when introducing readers to the Dedlocks for the first time. The narrator communicates Sir Leicester's thoughts about the Chancery suit—his connection to the suit stems from his marriage to Lady Dedlock, who is distantly connected to the case, like most of the novel's characters:

Sir Leicester has no objection to an interminable Chancery suit. It is a slow, expensive, British, constitutional kind of thing But he regards the Court of Chancery, even if it should involve an occasional delay of justice and a trifling amount of confusion, as a something, devised in conjunction with a variety of other somethings, by the perfection of human wisdom, for the eternal settlement (humanly speaking) of everything. And he is upon the whole of a fixed opinion, that to give the sanction of his countenance to any complaints respecting it, would

be to encourage some person in the lower classes to rise up somewhere—like Wat Tyler.⁴³ (15-16)

Here, the narrator establishes Sir Dedlock as a man steeped in tradition. He admires the perpetual Chancery suit because it is “slow,” “expensive,” and “constitutional,” just like him. His refusal to accept any complaints concerning the injustice of such a long suit directly points toward his desire to maintain the classist Victorian status quo that he enjoys. He would never encourage the idea of a revolution,⁴⁴ much less participate in one. Instead, he considers revolutionaries, especially Wat Tyler, as effectual scourges to society. Readers learn later, however, that Sir Leicester’s inability to embrace change for the sake of the nation is the actual scourge upon society and a scourge upon his individual happiness—children like Jo who are “dying thus around us every day” (572) and Lady Dedlock’s death on the steps of a burial ground, “a dreadful spot in which the night was very slowly stirring” (713).

The first of four references to Wat Tyler, all connected to Sir Leicester, demonstrate the aristocracy’s general fear of revolution and change. The revolutionary ambivalence surrounding the Dedlocks always points toward, and fears, an uprising of the downtrodden. These moments allow the narrator to establish his prophecy about the Victorian era, which he displays through Lady Dedlock’s story, and the real possibility of harmful revolutionary actions and the downfall of the aristocracy at the hands of destitute members of Victorian society, and even more troublesome, the idea that they might deserve it. Because of their inability to change their gaudy lifestyles, these upper-class members of society could lose their status, health, and livelihoods,

⁴³ Wat Tyler (d. 1381) was the most famous leader of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381—“the most serious and widespread insurrection in the entire course of English history” (Dobson 1). He and a mob of peasants attacked London in 1381. Ford and Monod note that he was “reputed to have been prompted to his revolutionary role after a tax-collecting official (whom he later killed) had made advances to his daughter” (*Bleak House* 79, note 7).

⁴⁴ Joel J. Brattin notes that Sir Leicester’s last name “effectively forecasts his reactionary impulse: he is firmly resistant to any kind of change whatsoever” (20).

illustrated by Sir Leicester's "shrunk state" (765) at the end of the novel. Sir Leicester's attitude of striving to discourage "some person in the lower classes to rise up somewhere" suggests that he fears the innovative nature and consequent progress of those lower than him—especially his maid's son who has gained more power and status than him.

The omniscient narrator makes his second reference to Wat Tyler in "The Ghost's Walk," maintaining the novel's focus on the Dedlocks and Chesney Wold. The narrator introduces the reader to Mrs. Rouncewell, the housekeeper at Chesney Wold, and informs them that she "has known trouble" (78). When the narrator describes Mrs. Rouncewell's sons, he mentions that the first became a soldier while the second one could have "been provided for at Chesney Wold," (79) had he not developed a propensity to construct and engineer devices run by steam-engines and hydraulic pressure, a habit that severely concerns Sir Leicester: "This propensity gave Mrs. Rouncewell great uneasiness. She felt it, with a mother's anguish, to be a move in the Wat Tyler direction: well knowing that Sir Leicester had that general impression of an aptitude for any art to which smoke and a tall chimney might be considered essential" (79). Mrs. Rouncewell's concerns for her son are not unfounded considering Sir Leicester's disdain for anything that he deems a threat to tradition, which is to say everything new. Clearly, Sir Leicester considers an affinity for "assisting [birds] with artful contrivance of hydraulic pressure" (79) to be expressly dangerous because it shows an ability to think beyond the typical British traditions that he venerates, such as Chancery, not to mention his very place in society. Essentially, Sir Leicester fears losing the deference that has underpinned his way of living.

The narrator calls Mrs. Rouncewell's son a "doomed young rebel" (79) because of his utilitarian mind. Sir Leicester, unwilling to associate with such a dangerously inclined boy, suggests different arrangements for Mrs. Rouncewell's son: "Mrs. Rouncewell . . . You had

better get rid of your boy; you had better get him into some Works. The iron country father north is, I suppose, the congenial direction for a boy with these tendencies” (79). Apparently, Sir Leicester believes that a mind with propensity for invention causes shame and should be exiled for the safety of all parties involved. The narrator lets us know Sir Leicester’s true feelings about industrialists: “if Sir Leicester Dedlock ever saw him . . . or ever thought of him afterwards, it is certain that he only regarded him as one of a body of some odd thousand conspirators, swarthy and grim, who were in the habit of turning out by torchlight, two or three nights a week, for unlawful purposes” (79). His thoughts alone show his prejudiced attitude toward those he deems lower than himself by profession, and his concerns highlight a new power struggle between the new found wealth of industrialism and the stale decadence of custom. Sir Leicester believes the industrialists and their companions are “conspirators, swarthy and grim” who gather after dark for, what he believes, are “unlawful purposes.”⁴⁵ Sir Leicester’s mental image of Mrs. Rouncewell’s son shows a kind of paranoia concerning the possibility of a revolution that has already begun in Victorian society. He seems to fear, however, more than just a revolutionary overthrow of the government. He fears a revolution of the mind without realizing that it has already begun. Once educated and able to read, then lower classes begin to see their worth in society and Sir Leicester’s status as an aristocrat loses significance making his position nothing more than nominal.

For a third time, the omniscient narrator brings the reader to Sir Leicester Dedlock and his disdain for Wat Tyler. Perhaps because he relates so closely to the common man, or perhaps to show how paranoid Sir Leicester can be about change in Victorian society. In Chapter 28 “The Ironmaster,” Sir Leicester and Mr. Rouncewell—the same son that Sir Leicester encouraged

⁴⁵ Arac notes that Sir Leicester believes that Mr. Rouncewell has gone north to become an “anonymous chartist” rather than an “important ironmaster, who has been asked to stand for a seat in Parliament” (60).

Mrs. Rouncewell to send away because of his affinity for invention and industrialism—discuss terms for the marriage of Lady Dedlock’s ward, Rosa, and Mr. Rouncewell’s son, Watt.⁴⁶ While conveying his intentions for his possible future daughter-in-law, Mr. Rouncewell insults the Dedlocks and their home by insisting that Rosa cut ties with Chesney Wold after her engagement and receive her education elsewhere than the village school: “Not remain at Chesney Wold! Make it a condition! All Sir Leicester’s old misgivings relative to Wat Tyler, and the people in the iron districts who do nothing but turn out by torchlight, come in a shower upon his head: the fine grey hair of which, as well as of his whiskers actually stirs with indignation” (352). Once again, Sir Leicester’s fears of revolution burst forth. His indignation suggests a misunderstanding of what the “people in the iron districts” actually do for the future of the country. They do not, as he believes, “turn out by torchlight,” instead, they focus their energies on gaining the wealth and power they need to lead the country. Sir Leicester’s misunderstanding of progress is evidenced further in his reaction to Mr. Rouncewell’s request that Rosa receive her education⁴⁷ elsewhere than the village school, showing clearly that Sir Leicester does not believe the judgment of the lower class reputable: ““Mr. Rouncewell, our views of duty, and our views of station, and our views of education, and our views of—in short, *all* our views—are so diametrically opposed, that to prolong this discussion must be repellant to your feelings, and repellant to my own”” (354). His indignation towards Mr. Rouncewell feels like an overreaction, although he seems to consider the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 an overreaction. Historians note at least three causes behind the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381: “necessary crisis of feudalism,” “a breach of customary

⁴⁶ Ford and Monod note that Watt is named after “James Watt (1736-1819), the inventor of the steam engine (*Bleak House* 79, note 9), further confirming Mr. Rouncewell’s interest in helpful inventions. Ironically, Sir Leicester misses the connection and assumes that Mr. Rouncewell admires the peasant revolutionary, Wat Tyler.

⁴⁷ The result of the shift in educational quality allowed more people to learn how to read. They, therefore, made more money, joined circulating libraries, and read books further spreading important messages like the one Dickens presents in *Bleak House*. See Richard D. Altick’s *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* for further information the growth of literacy in the nineteenth century.

expectations,” or “the violent but unpremeditated reaction . . . to governmental maladministration and excessive war taxation” (Dodson, par. 1). Each of these causes cite extremely different grievances failing to clarify the reasoning for such a revolution as well as the perspective of the rebels and their king. Sir Leicester seems to hate the rebel side based solely on his status as an aristocratic Royalist. Sir Leicester maintains an inability to see beyond his station, however, and this characteristic is what historically has led to the past revolutionary actions that the narrator so frequently references for the sake of the reader. And while the revolution of the mind that Sir Leicester fears has already begun, the ultimate revolutionary fear generated in the novel concerns a possible collapse of established Victorian society because of the new order’s inability to command the reigns of governance. Mr. Rouncewell, who will enter Parliament by the end of the novel, demonstrates the ability to gain power but not to wield it further establishing the possibility of revolution born from a lack of proper leadership.

For a fourth time the Dedlocks encounter Mr. Rouncewell. At this point, Sir Leicester’s indignation over Rouncewell’s assumed admiration for Wat Tyler begins to sound ridiculous. Mr. Rouncewell informs the Dedlocks that Watt still intends to marry Rosa despite their “diametrically opposed” views mentioned in the previous encounter. He tells the Dedlocks that Watt cannot contain his love for Rosa: ““In our condition of life, we sometimes couple an intention with our—our fancies, which renders them not altogether easy to throw off. I think it is rather our way to be in earnest.’ Sir Leicester has a misgiving that there may be a hidden Wat Tylerish meaning in this expression and fumes a little” (576). Clearly Sir Leicester is sensitive to the phrase “throw off,” and Mr. Rouncewell’s assurance that it is his “way to be in earnest” only serves to exacerbate Sir Leicester’s reaction. At this point, his ability to connect everything Mr. Rouncewell say or does to Wat Tyler shows extreme paranoia and a general lack of logic. The

narrator, perhaps, uses this characteristic to show how absurdly the upper-classes can act in reference to their “station,” but also to show how tenuous they believe their positions are amidst the revolutionary anxieties of the era. The narrator shows Sir Leicester’s obliviousness through his constant references to Wat Tyler. While he fears a complete revolutionary overthrow of all he holds dear, the one that supplants his power has already taken place.

Sir Leicester shows no flexibility whatsoever concerning his beliefs, and the inclusion of such statements add significance to the narrator’s point about the fate of the aristocracy in Victorian society. If Sir Leicester could understand how to consider new ideas and adapt to them, perhaps he would survive in a society that desperately needs to change. His firm resistance to new ideas will effectively result in his downfall. Although he shows compassion to Lady Dedlock when he discovers her indiscretions, his change of heart is too late, and he must spend the remainder of his life as half of his former self, though perhaps more open to differing opinions in a reformation of the heart, if not accepting of the revolution in society that has already left him in the past.

Omniscient Revolutionary Historian

The narrator continues the Dedlock’s connection to revolutionary language by alluding to another revolutionary moment of English history. In the closest revolutionary connection to Milton,⁴⁸ the omniscient narrator refers to the English Civil War (1642-1651) as Mrs. Rouncewell sets the scene for her retelling of the legend of the Ghost’s Walk for Watt and Rosa:

⁴⁸ Milton’s opposition to the Monarchy in favor of a Commonwealth helped to establish his position as a culturally defining writer and radical. He was imprisoned from September to December 1660, and his writings were burned during the Restoration. According to Sharon Achinstein, Milton wanted to teach his readers to interpret literature during this time, and “resist[ed] the Royalists’ appeal to an audience to read history along . . . fixed lines” and that his “repeated strategy of provoking allegorical interpretations, while refusing to supply unequivocal ‘keys’ to the allegory is meant as a lesson, a challenge, and more importantly, as a warning to his revolutionary readers” (222).

“In the wicked days, my dears of King Charles the First⁴⁹—I mean, of course, in the wicked days of the rebels who leagued themselves against that excellent King—Sir Morbury Dedlock was the owner of Chesney Wold Sir Morbury Dedlock was, I have no occasion to say, on the side of the blessed martyr. But it *is* supposed that his Lady, who had none of the family blood in her veins, favoured the bad cause. It is said that she had relations among King Charles’s enemies; that she was in correspondence with them; and that she gave them information. When any of the country gentlemen who followed His Majesty’s cause met here, it is said that my Lady was always nearer to the door of the council-room than they supposed.” (83)

Mrs. Rouncewell mentions one of the most significant moments of English history to ground her tale. She calls the English Civil War “wicked days” and calls King Charles I and “excellent King” establishing herself as a Royalist, which is not surprising given her entire life in service of the Dedlocks. This quote especially addresses the issues of language surrounding revolution—the debate of King Charles I as a “blessed martyr” or a tyrant.⁵⁰ The issue emerges from perception and personal allegiance. King Charles I was a tyrant to most members of the lower classes while he remained a hero for the aristocracy 200 years after his execution. The war

⁴⁹ In their overview his life, Mark A. Kishlansky and John Morrill state that King Charles I (1600-1649) was executed by decree of Parliament for governing “by will and not by law” (para. 4). In *A Child’s History of England* (1851) Dickens writes: “for twelve years King Charles the First reigned in England unlawfully and despotically, seized upon his subjects’ goods and money at his pleasure, and punished according to his unbridled will all who ventured to oppose him. It is fashion with some people to think that this King’s career as cut short; but I must say myself that I think he ran a pretty long one” (Chapter 33, para. 12). Ford and Monod note that King Charles I was “styled a martyr by Royalists after his execution in 1649” (*Bleak House* 83, note 3). The English Civil War parallels strikingly with the war in Heaven from *Paradise Lost* although the specific sides could be debated. Satan and his companions certainly illustrate the consequences of treason: “Nine days they fell . . . Hell at last / Yawning received them whole, and on them closed, / Hell their fit habitation fraught with fire / Unquenchable, the house of woe and pain” (*PL* 6: 871, 874-77).

⁵⁰ Milton addressed and refuted the Royalist attempts to make Charles I a heroic martyr when he published his famous tract, *Eikonoklastes* (1649).

contributes to the origins of the Ghost's Walk, and Mrs. Rouncewell implies that, in the midst of the English Civil War, there was also a type of civil war brewing between Sir Morbury Dedlock and his Lady. Sir Morbury supported "the blessed martyr," King Charles I and his claim to the throne while it was rumored that Lady Dedlock did not.

Mrs. Rouncewell covers the important details of Lady Dedlock's betrayal stating the reason behind her hatred for her husband's cause:

"After her favourite brother, a young gentleman, was killed in the civil wars (by Sir Morbury's near kinsman) her feeling was so violent that she hated the race into which she had married. When the Dedlocks were about to ride out from Chesney Wold in the King's cause, she is supposed to have more than once stolen down into the stables in the dead of night, and lamed their horses." (84)

Mrs. Rouncewell importantly draws attention to the consequences of civil war informing Watt and Rosa that Lady Dedlock's favorite brother was "killed in the civil wars (by Sir Morbury's near kinsman)," establishing the narrator's warning against revolution. Lady Morbury Dedlock's hatred leads to the footsteps upon the Ghost's Walk that haunt the current Dedlocks throughout the novel and foreshadows their downfall. The consequences of civil war are so severe that they can ruin lives for generations to follow. Through one of the most familiar revolutionary references in the novel, the omniscient narrator emphatically warns readers against revolutionary upheaval encouraging the audience to read between the lines⁵¹ of the historical revolutions he presents. The civil war was the result of conflicts between two groups who wanted power. The threat of a similar civil war hangs over the novel as contrast between the old order of

⁵¹ Achinstein notes that Milton was expressly concerned with teaching his readers how to read properly: "Milton urged his readers to become a fit audience, revolutionary readers, and they were to do this by reading between the lines, by becoming adept at detecting and resisting propaganda" (222).

the aristocracy and the new Captains of Industry⁵² in the Victorian era leads to a deeper consideration of the common people—an idea that did not seem to trouble the Cavaliers and the Roundheads.⁵³ The question of who will care for characters like Jo, and who will stop the revolutionary terror that will emerge if they are ignored hovers over the novel as the narrator implements this recent and terrifying revolutionary allusion.

In the next revolutionary reference, the omniscient narrator travels outside of British history focusing, instead, on France’s revolutionary history.⁵⁴ As the Dedlocks travel home from Paris, they pass several distinct buildings:

With a considerable amount of jingling and whip-cracking, and many plunging demonstrations on the part of two barebacked horses . . . they rattle out of the yard of the Hotel Bristol in the Place Vendôme, and canter between the sun-and-shadow-chequered colonnade of the Rue de Rivoli, and the garden of the ill-fated palace of a headless king and queen, off by the Place of Concord, and the Elysian Fields, and the Gate of the Star, out of Paris (139).

The narrator mentions the “garden of the ill-fated palace of a headless king and queen”⁵⁵ as the Dedlocks return to England. The narrator does not have to mention them by name for the reader’s mind to be drawn to the French Revolution and the executions of Louis XVI and Marie

⁵² Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) called upon “Captains of Industry” to lead a new society based upon merit and a “fair day’s-wages, for a fair day’s-work” (21) in his *Past and Present* (1843).

⁵³ Nicknames given respectively to the Royalists and the supporters of Parliament during the English Civil War.

⁵⁴ Mark Willis notes that there was initial enthusiasm for the French Revolution in Britain until the Reign of Terror. The British then felt the threats of revolution: “The impact of the French Revolution was felt in a British context which was itself in a state of transformation, and hence one which appeared unstable to its own establishment. England, and particularly London, was seen as being under threat from those seeking to copy the example of the French, and over-run the old established order” (87).

⁵⁵ Ford and Monod note that the Dedlocks pass the Tuileries, “a palace of Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette, who were guillotined in 1793” (*Bleak House* 139, note 4). They were tried and found guilty of treason against the newly established French Republic at the “prompting of Maximilien Robespierre” beginning the Reign of Terror (1793-94) and effectively throwing France into deeper turmoil (Sankey).

Antoinette at the hands of their subjects followed closely by the Reign of Terror—an implosion between the radical Jacobin and the moderate Girondin parties. The French Revolution provides, perhaps, the most obvious example of the ambiguity of revolution: while the poor saw justice behind the brutal deaths of the aristocracy after centuries of living in horrible conditions, members of the aristocracy were executed without trial based only on their class status. By drawing attention to this event, the narrator reiterates the Victorian fear of a French-like revolution—particularly for those of the upper class who could provide the only relief from possible revolutionary action by enacting legislative change through reform acts passed by Parliament.

The narrator provides a stark contrast through his description of the scene. Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock “canter between the sun-and-shadow-chequered colonnade[s],” seeing palace after palace as they admire the beauty of France. Then the narrator suddenly interjects the image of a “headless king and queen” to jar the reader into remembering the horrors of the French Revolution. The proximity of Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock to such a gruesome description also foreshadows their continuing disintegration throughout the novel. Through his use of stark but simple imagery, the narrator encourages readers to heed his warnings about enacting responsible change in Victorian society. If neither the aristocracy, clergy, Parliament, nor the people are willing to take care of people like Jo who are “dying thus around [them] every day” (572), the country must prepare for the possibility of sansculottism.⁵⁶

The narrator continues his march through English history alluding to another deposed claimant for the English throne in Chapter 21, “The Smallweed Family.” The narrator allows

⁵⁶ According to the *OED*, a sansculotte was “a republican of the poorer classes in Paris” during the French Revolution. More generally, a sansculotte was “an extreme republican or revolutionary.” Therefore, sansculottism is the “principles or practices of sansculottes” or a revolution of the poorer class (*OED*).

childish Mrs. Smallweed to draw the reader's attention to the revolutionary allusion after Judy mentions Charley Neckett's name: "This touches a spring in Grandmother Smallweed, who, chuckling, as usual, at the trivets, cries—'Over the water! Charley over the water, Charley over the water, over the water to Charley, Charley over the water, over the water to Charley!' and becomes quite energetic about it" (260). Mrs. Smallweed's repetitive song refers to Prince Charles Edward Stuart (1720-88),⁵⁷ an exiled Jacobite claimant for the English throne. Ford and Monod note that though Bonnie Prince Charlie was exiled to the continent, his followers would hold private gathering to "sing songs honoring their King across the water, and at public dinners, they would toast him secretly by passing their wine glasses over the water in their finger-bowls" (*Bleak House* 260, note 4). While Mrs. Smallweed's song seems like another miniscule moment in the novel,—a childish song sung by a senile old woman—the allusion to the "Bonnie Prince" signifies a substantial divide in English history—many people were nostalgic about the Stuart line—that remains important to the Victorians living almost a century later. The ultimate question also remains one of loyalty, for rightful King or country, for revolution or peace, for old or new order, and if the new, what could they do to govern effectively?

The omniscient narrator also alludes to one of the greatest treasonous plots in British history: The Gunpowder Plot.⁵⁸ Mr. Smallweed enters Mr. George's shooting gallery, while the narrator describes his appearance: "These steps, advancing nearer and nearer to the gallery, bring into it a group at first sight scarcely reconcilable with any day in the year but the fifth of

⁵⁷ With a desire to reclaim the thrones of England, Scotland, and Ireland, Prince Charles Edward Stuart was the driving force behind the 1745 rebellion and the definitive battle at Culloden. See Murray G. H. Pittock's entry "Charles Edward (1720-1788)" from the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁵⁸ In *A Child's History of England*, Dickens calls the Gunpowder Plot "one of the most terrible designs ever conceived in the mind of man" (Chapter 32, para. 6). He writes of Robert Catesby, the original conspirator: "His object was, when King, lords, and commons, should be assembled at the next opening of Parliament, to blow them up, one and all, with a great mine of gunpowder" (Chapter 32, para. 7). The attack on Parliament was supposed to occur on 5 November, 1605.

November”⁵⁹ (329). The narrator compares Mr. Smallweed to the effigies of Guy Fawkes burned on the fifth of November. Guy Fawkes helped establish The Gunpowder Plot, and he died for his treasonous actions. As the narrator establishes Mr. Smallweed’s appearance, readers should picture the effigies that they use every year to celebrate the prevention of a revolutionary act. Mr. George notes that Mr. Smallweed’s granddaughter looks like someone “who might be expected immediately to recite the popular verses, commemorative of the time when they did contrive to blow Old England up alive” (329). Guy Fawkes day establishes England as a nation willing to unite against revolution as the omniscient narrator wants them to unite against injustice in their society for the sake of its survival—a governing body must take responsibility for the nation’s well-being in the midst of transition or they will face the horrors of anarchy.

Throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator, with Esther’s help, establishes a catalogue of well-known revolutionary references. While Esther’s narrative tone⁶⁰ does not come across as revolutionary, her interactions with certain people and places in the novel show that, even without the urging of the omniscient narrator, the novel implicitly adopts a revolutionary tone. Especially prevalent in Victorian society, these historical moments encourage readers to consider the personal, national, and international consequences of revolution. Spanning topics throughout British and European history—the Peasant’s Rebellion of 1381 lead by Wat Tyler; the Wars of the Roses; the execution of Lady Jane Grey; the Gunpowder Plot; the English Civil War; the exile of Prince Charles Edward Stuart; the French Revolution; and the Spanish War of

⁵⁹ The fifth of November denotes the anniversary date of the opening of the Houses of Parliament and the capture of Guy Fawkes who was supposed to have detonated the gunpowder. The fifth of November became Guy Fawkes Day to allow citizens to celebrate the capture of the conspirators. Ford and Monod note that “[g]rotesque scarecrow-like effigies (guys) are carried through the streets by children who recite the ‘popular verses’: ‘Please to remember / The Fifth of November, / Gunpowder treason and plot; / I see no reason / Why gunpowder treason / Should ever be forgot’” (*Bleak House* 329, note 7).

⁶⁰ Brattin argues that Esther embodies a type of revolution herself: “a gentle and personal revolution of love, social commitment, and social responsibility” (26).

Independence—the narrator uses references that all of Dickens’s readers could understand and further interpret as they read the novel. The omniscient narrator reveals the complexity of these revolutionary events, and therefore, effectively communicates his prophetic warning against paralysis because of that complexity. The narrator encourages changes to Victorian society and holds that society responsible should it fail to act. That failure, according to Dickens’s narrator-revolutionary historian, can only lead to the repetition of past revolutionary horrors.

CONCLUSION

If nothing else, *Bleak House* provides a striking image of the difficulties that England, particularly London, faced in the mid-nineteenth century, as it struggled to deal with the lower classes and its worn out institutions. *Bleak House* also exists on a deeper literary level of prophetic warning and social commentary both of which are made evident through the implementation of the novel's narrators, and especially its omniscient narrator and the Miltonic elements he employs in telling of Dickens's chaotic tale. I have noted three key Miltonic characteristics that the narrator adopts throughout the course of the novel. As the narrator-muse, he works to instruct the reader on the novel's prophetic message, especially through the character of Lady Dedlock and her downfall as a perceived aristocrat. This instruction occurs especially at the ends of serial installments. The use of direct quotes from Milton establishes a crucial connection between the two authors and emphasizes Milton's presence in Dickens's novel. His ability to adopt and manipulate Miltonic quotes for the benefit of his narrative through the medium of the omniscient narrator demonstrates his awareness and knowledge of renowned authors as well as an attention to the general knowledge of the reading public. In Lady Dedlock's story, along with her connection to Miltonic quotes, readers observe the working out of the novel's prophetic message, and her ambiguous downfall provides a clear image of the issues Victorian society faces—an important distinction for the novel as a whole.

The omniscient narrator also functions as an intercessory figure for the reader as he works to ground the novel through the implementation of corporate prayer, as he frequently recites but never finishes familiar phrases from the Book of Common prayer. In this way, the narrator intercedes for readers by bringing their attention back to familiar worshipful language, and therefore, encourages them to recite the prayers with him as he prays over the characters

who represent the destitute in the streets of London. The narrator as intercessor adds a new element to better understanding *Bleak House* as a text that communicates directly with the reader as through the gradual revelation of the plot. The narrator's prayerful intercessions gradually grow throughout the novel and culminate at the moment of Jo's death combining the act of social criticism with corporate prayer, successfully unifying the novel's "Christian" elements with its greater social message.

Further, and perhaps, most important, the omniscient narrator also acts as a kind of revolutionary historian intent on reminding readers of England's history in a time of social upheaval both at home and abroad. The distinction of the revolutionary historian remains crucial to the novel's overarching revolutionary theme, which itself serves as a crucial vehicle for the narrators' muse-like and prophetic qualities. The use of revolutionary language also calls attention to the ambiguity of revolutionary acts and the perception behind them which further demonstrates Dickens's reluctance to take sides other than the necessity of change for the betterment of society. Without this distinction of the narrator's persona, the novel's deliberate references to revolutionary acts and the onus behind them fall flat. The omniscient narrator's three keynote characteristics, therefore, combine to convey the novel's warnings for Victorian England and they establish him as an irreplaceable Miltonic figure in the whole of Dickens's canon. Failing to notice the careful attention Dickens used to create this omniscient narrator leaves a gaping hole in an overall understanding of an important novel containing revolutionary ideas and practices for the sake of Victorian England.

The omniscient narrator's three key characteristics add new depth to *Bleak House* for readers. When one considers the omniscient narrator as a comprehensive unit, the attention given to his creation changes the impact of the novel and further emphasizes its meaningful elements

of fear, hope, and change. His connections to Milton provide the omniscient narrator with literary muster that adds to his credibility. Reading *Bleak House* from this perspective constitutes a comprehensive way to consider the omniscient narrator, one that scholars have overlooked. The use of such a communicative narrator in *Bleak House* opens the door for readers to understand the struggles of Victorian England even though they may be far removed from that time period. Essentially, the omniscient narrator as muse, intercessor, and revolutionary historian changes the impact of *Bleak House* for readers by meeting them on their level, and effectively makes the book a timeless portrayal of the difficulties of change surrounding injustice. In his poem "London, 1802," William Wordsworth called on Milton to return because "England hath need of thee" (line 2). Through his Miltonic omniscient narrator and the overall message of *Bleak House*, Dickens tried to answer that call.

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