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Opening extract from

Bleak House

Written by

Charles Dickens

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CONTENTS

The Characters 4
Bleak House 7
Taking things further 55



THE CHARACTERS



Mr Jarndyce

Mr Jarndyce becomes Esther's legal guardian. Can he keep her safe and happy in his home at Bleak House? Can he protect his young friends from the family curse?

Lady Dedlock

The proud and dignified wife of Sir Leicester Dedlock. Why does she make Esther's heart beat so violently? What secrets is she hiding? Why is she afraid of Tulkinghorn?





Esther Sommerson

As a child, Esther lived with her strict godmother. She has never experienced love or happiness. Will she find either at Bleak House?



Richard Carstone

Richard is a handsome, optimistic young man. Will he escape the grip of the Jarndyce curse?

Ada Clare

Ada is beautiful and trusting. Can she find happiness in spite of the Jarndyce curse?

Mr Tulkinghorn

Tulkinghorn is a cold, calculating lawyer who knows no mercy or pity. Can he gain power over Lady Dedlock by discovering her secrets?





Joe

Poor, orphaned Joe struggles to survive on the streets of London. What will happen to him when he becomes entangled in mysteries he doesn't understand?



BLEAK HOUSE

'It would have been far better, Esther, if you had never been born; far better if you had never had a birthday.'

Many children have happy birthdays, but not Esther. This was her twelfth, and they had always been like this. Esther knew that other children celebrated their birthdays, but as her godmother had never allowed her to accept a party invitation she wasn't sure how. She suspected it wasn't like this.

Poor Esther looked across the silent table at her godmother's stern face. 'Please tell me why I shouldn't have been born,' she asked, close to tears. 'Did my mother die giving birth to me? Did I do something to her?'

'Your mother, Esther, did not die. She is your disgrace, and you are hers. You must forget your mother. Now go to your room, and pray that you can be good enough to overcome the shadow of your birth.'

That was all Esther ever heard about her mother. She crept into bed and held her only friend, Little Dolly, close to her wet cheek. 'I do try to be kind, Dolly. I do try to be good-hearted. Why doesn't anyone love me?'



Two more birthdays passed before anything changed in Esther's lonely life. Shortly after her fourteenth birthday, her godmother fell seriously ill and died. Esther found herself being packed into a stagecoach by her godmother's witch-like servant, Mrs Rachel. Full of sadness for her loveless childhood and fear of an unknown future, Esther at first failed to notice the gentleman with whom she shared the coach.

'Come, come, little Esther. Why weep?'

Looking up, she took in his iron-grey hair and pleasant, gentle smile.

'Why couldn't they love me?' she sobbed.



'Why was Mrs Rachel so pleased to see me go?'

'Confound Mrs Rachel!' said the gentleman with a hint of anger. 'Let her fly away in a high wind on her broomstick.' This brought a smile to Esther's face.

'That's better,' the gentleman smiled back.

'Forgive me for asking, sir', she asked him, 'but who are you, and where are we going?'

He declined to tell her his name, but she learned that her godmother had asked him to look after her, and that he intended to do all he could to provide her with a happy life. Eventually they drew up outside a homely-looking school surrounded by trees. Her companion explained, 'Greenleaf is a first-rate educational establishment. Your education shall be completed here, and your future comfort secured.'

As they parted, Esther promised her guardian, 'I will be industrious, contented and true-hearted. I will do some good for someone and, if I can, win some love.'

'I know you will, dear Esther. I know you will.'



Esther was true to her word. Greenleaf was a small school, and she was soon loved by everybody there. A quick learner herself,



Esther was soon able to teach the younger children. Homesick new youngsters were assigned to Esther's care, where they received gentle comfort and love. Each year, her fellow pupils made simple birthday presents for their beloved Esther, and as each birthday passed she grew more accustomed to the special tea



Her finger, once so soft and white, traced the name ‘Nemo’ into the soil. Her final words, ‘Our daughter, our daughter,’ floated away on the wind.

Nobody heard. Nobody was there when she died.



TAKING THINGS FURTHER

The real read

This *Real Reads* version of *Bleak House* is a retelling of Charles Dickens’ magnificent work. If you would like to read the full novel in all its original splendour, many complete editions are available, from bargain paperbacks to beautifully-bound hardbacks. You may well find a copy in your local charity shop.

Filling in the spaces

The loss of so many of Charles Dickens’ original words is a sad but necessary part of the shortening process. We have had to make some difficult decisions, omitting subplots and details, some important, some less so, but all interesting. We have also, at times, taken the liberty of combining two events into one, or of giving a character words or actions that originally belong to another. The points below will fill in some of the gaps, but nothing can beat the original.

- Esther's godmother, who is really her aunt, has arranged for Mr John Jarndyce to become Esther's legal guardian upon her aunt's death.
- The legal firm of Kenge and Carboy's is supposed to be looking after the interests of Richard and Ada in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case.
- Dickens story includes a family called the Jellbys. He uses Mrs Jellby to highlight a social problem that he names 'telescopic misanthropy' – she is so concerned about the welfare of poor people in Africa that she neglects her own family. Her daughter Caddy becomes a great friend of Esther, and eventually marries a dancer called Prince Turveydrop.
- Nemo's room is rented from a dishonest man appropriately called Krooks. Krooks dies of spontaneous combustion – burning up completely for no apparent reason – which Dickens believed was possible.

- Another character, Miss Flight, watches life pass her by as she follows the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce.
- Tulkinghorn uses Lady Dedlock's French maid, Hortense, to help Joe identify Lady Dedlock. Hortense eventually gets so angry with Tulkinghorn that she shoots and kills him.
- Lady Dedlock is amongst the suspects for Tulkinghorn's murder. This is another reason for her to run away.
- When Esther was born illegitimately, her aunt told her mother that she was stillborn. Her aunt then gave up her own chance of happy marriage in order to raise Esther.
- Richard's period of indecision about what profession to enter is much longer than in this version. His indecision is blamed upon the uncertainty of the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. He secretly marries Ada, who is expecting his child when he dies.

- Esther and her maid nurse Joe through smallpox before both catching it themselves.
- The process by which secrets are gradually revealed is simplified in this version. Dickens allows a young lawyer called Guppy and a private detective called Mr Bucket to discover much of the truth.
- Lady Dedlock dies unaware that her husband has forgiven her, and that she has been cleared of Tulkinghorn's murder.
- The process by which Nemo is identified is considerably more complex than in this version.
- Mr Jarndyce proposes to Esther and she accepts. He releases her from the engagement so that she can marry Woodcourt. Mr Jarndyce buys them a house called Little Bleak House. They live happily and have two children. Ada and her child live happily in Bleak House with Mr Jarndyce.

Back in time

Victorian England was a period of great transition. Many people left their traditional rural lives to seek work and wealth in London. The population of Victorian London therefore increased rapidly. Many, like Joe, were living in terrible poverty. This was a cause of great concern to many people.

The legal profession had great responsibilities, but faced much criticism. In *Bleak House* Dickens shows greedy lawyers becoming rich whilst ruining other people's lives. Dickens based 'Jarndyce and Jarndyce' on a real legal case, which lasted for fifty-three years. As his own father had been imprisoned for debt, Dickens was particularly critical of the legal system.

Queen Victoria represented all that the ideal Victorian woman should be. Women's responsibility was to maintain domestic stability through marriage, family values and motherhood. Having children outside marriage – as Lady Dedlock had Esther – brought great disgrace upon both mother and child.

Smallpox was greatly feared – even today the World Health Organisation calls it 'one of the most devastating diseases known to humanity'. In the eighteenth century, smallpox killed a third of its victims, blinded many, and left most with deep scars on their faces – like Esther's. During Victoria's reign a vaccine was developed which a century later eventually eradicated the disease.

Finding out more

We recommend the following books and websites to gain a greater understanding of Charles Dickens' and Esther's England.

Books

- Terry Deary, *Loathsome London* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 2005.
- Terry Deary, *Vile Victorians* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 1994.
- *Victorian London*, Watling Street Publishing, 2005.

- Ann Kramer, *Victorians* (Eyewitness Guides), Dorling Kindersley, 1998.
- Mandy Ross, *Victorian Schools* (Life in the Past), Heinemann, 2005.
- Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, BBC, 2003.

Websites

- www.victorianweb.org

Scholarly information about all aspects of Victorian life, including literature and culture.

- www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians.

The BBC's interactive site about Victorian Britain, with a wide range of information and activities for all ages.

- www.dickensmuseum.com

Home of the Dickens Museum in London, with details about exhibits, events and helpful links.

- www.dickensworld.co.uk

Dickens World, based in Chatham in Kent, is a themed visitor complex featuring the life, books and times of Charles Dickens.

- www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain

A site offering source materials and guidance in how to use them, as well as a wealth of information. It contains a section on using *Bleak House* as source material.

Food for thought

Here are some things to think about if you are reading *Bleak House* alone, or ideas for discussion if you are reading it with friends.

In retelling *Bleak House* we have tried to recreate, as accurately as possible, Dickens' original plot and characters. We have also tried to imitate aspects of his style. Remember, however, that this is not the original work; thinking about the points below, therefore, can help you begin to understand Charles Dickens' craft. To move forward from here, turn to the full-length version of *Bleak House* and lose yourself in his wonderful storytelling.

Starting points

- Which character interests you the most? Why?
- Why do you think Mr Jarndyce warns Richard about the Jarndyce and Jarndyce legal case?
- What clues does Dickens give us that Tulkinghorn is an unpleasant man?
- How surprised were you to discover the relationships between Nemo, Lady Dedlock and Esther?
- How do you feel towards Joe?

Themes

What do you think Charles Dickens is saying about the following themes in *Bleak House*?

- the legal profession
- poverty
- illness
- secrets
- love

Style

Can you find paragraphs containing examples of the following?

- descriptions of setting and atmosphere
- the use of repetition to enhance description
- different characters speaking in different ways
- the use of imagery, alliteration or assonance to enhance description

Look closely at how these paragraphs are written. What do you notice? Can you write a paragraph in the same style?

Symbols

Writers frequently use symbols in their work to deepen the reader's emotions and understanding. Think about how the symbols in this list match the action in *Bleak House*.

- fog
- hands
- light and shadow
- city and countryside