

ABSTRACT

CHARLES DICKENS' *BLEAK HOUSE*: HOW THE COMPLEXITIES OF DISGUST LEAD TO ELEVATION

The subject of disgust in Dickens' work has been thoroughly explored for decades by literary scholars who discuss everything from disease, abject poverty, and death, to the filthy, unsanitary conditions of Victorian era London. However, more recent research conducted by psychologists has shed light on the ways in which the understanding and expanding definitions of disgust elicitors have evolved, how people are affected by different types of disgust elicitors, how people react to those elicitors, and the importance of understanding elevation, which is the opposite of disgust. While disgust elicitors motivate people to close themselves up, avoid, or expel substances or people who elicit disgust, elevation motivates people to open up, draw closer, and to be associated with places and people who elicit elevation by exhibiting beauty, kindness, charity, compassion, and other prosocial behaviors. This thesis explains the complexities of these universal emotions of disgust and elevation from a psychological perspective, and then uses that lens to analyze the ways in which all of these complexities are manifest in *Bleak House*, and how *Bleak House*—along with other great works of literature—illustrates profound elevation in the midst of disgust, and ultimately serves as an elicitor of elevation for the reader. This thesis is also a defense of great literature in general because of its power to elevate humankind.

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May 2019

CHARLES DICKENS' *BLEAK HOUSE*: HOW THE COMPLEXITIES
OF DISGUST LEAD TO ELEVATION

by
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A thesis
submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
California State University, Fresno
May 2019

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my thesis committee chair, Ruth Jenkins, who provided great support and encouragement, and my other readers, Laurel Hendrix and John Beynon, who provided honest and constructive feedback for revisions, along with several semesters of valuable instruction and support in my graduate studies leading up to this final thesis. I also thank my husband Eric and our three kids who were very understanding and patient with me as I spent many hours away from home or up late into the wee hours of the night to complete this work. Of course, I must also give a shout out to Charles Dickens himself for brilliantly creating complex worlds and characters that have enriched my life and brought me immeasurable joy.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Disease, death, putrefaction, decay, mutilation, abhorrent behavior, moral repugnance, and everything else that makes a person recoil are the subjects of this study; not for their repulsiveness alone, but for their important role in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* where their presence is especially necessary in augmenting all that is joyful, hopeful and elevating. Of course, this is not the first time, and surely will not be the last time, that these subjects have been brought to the forefront of academic literary discussion. Several Dickens scholars, such as Robert Lougy, Tyson Stolte, Laura Fasik, John Mazaheri, and Michael Gurney, explore the specifics of diseases, filth, and poverty in Dickens' canon (Lougy, Stolte, Fasik, Mazaheri, Gurney). Brooke Taylor delves into the specifics of spontaneous combustion and Dickens' deliberate decision to include it in *Bleak House*, and Tamara Ketabgian even teaches an upper-division college class called "Victorian Garbage" (Taylor, Ketabgian). These scholars explore disgusting subjects and their roles as literary devices in the narration, how they relate to the realities of 19th-century life and thinking, and in Dickens' efforts to highlight social injustices in Victorian era England. It is in this context that this study will advance the conversation, arguing that the effects of disgust and especially elevation—or the emotion of feeling uplifted—in *Bleak House* reach far beyond the purposes previously discussed. That is to say, elevation within the novel leads to elevation outside the novel to be experienced by the reader who, in turn, is more motivated to be a force for good in the world.

Like elevation, disgust is a natural, human emotional response that all people experience regardless of ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status. There are foul and offensive aspects of mortality that repulse and nauseate us. There is no escaping disgust. Sooner or later, everyone must confront it because it is a part of being mortally human and inextricably linked to the cycle of life on this earth, connected physically and emotionally to land, air, water, all other living things, and to

each other. Tyson Stolte explains that “our bodies become the bodies of others, if not the bodies of animals or the material out of which plants grow. Even he of the highest station—or his body, anyway—is thus brought low” (Stolte 409). Being alive, regardless of demographic, means that diseases, injuries, illnesses, and ultimately death will inevitably follow.

Anthropological and evolutionary studies have revealed that human instincts have evolved over the centuries to develop signals or triggers that help us avoid those most disgusting aspects of life and death—those that have the potential to harm, infect, inflict suffering, or contaminate our well-being—in order to optimize our chances of survival as individuals and as a society (Olatunji, Sherman). Especially important for this analysis is the work of psychologists, in addition to the work of literary scholars including the ones mentioned previously, whose theories will be applied in subsequent chapters of this thesis. Specifically, the literary scholars provide context and analysis of Victorian era and Dickens literature, while the psychologists provide the connection to human experience. Such studies inform my discussion of the horrific conditions of 19th-century London where Dickens lived and advocated for reforms that would dramatically improve sanitation, housing, and health care for the living, and correct the improper burial of the dead. He was acutely aware of abject poverty, suffering, diseases, the endless work of physicians, and the ineffective platitudes of those in power. And yet, he was not consumed and made hopelessly bitter or cynical by the negative and awful elements of life. Alongside all of the atrocity represented in his writing, Dickens juxtaposes elements of the profoundly beautiful and elevating, highlighting the best of human nature. In this way, Dickens moves the reader from degradation to joy; from putrefaction to beauty; from disgust to elevation.

Dickens acknowledges the aspects of life that are beautiful, awe-inspiring, wonderful, glorious, stirring, and sublime; all are elevating and invoke joy. To fully

appreciate and recognize what is elevating in the world, however, there must be at least some degree of experience and/or understanding of what is the opposite, what deflates and repulses.

In *Bleak House*, the threat and reminders of death and destruction are ever-present. Much has been studied and written about all that is filthy and deathly in this novel. Lougy discusses the liminality of the various sites of filth, the connections with smell, textures, death, feminine roles, and abjection; Stolte discusses putrefaction and bodily matters; Fasik and Gurney discuss diseases, especially smallpox. None of these studies satisfactorily provide the context of the psychological understanding of disgust and elevation, or illustrate how *Bleak House* can be read as a fictional literary work that encompasses the complex spectrum of disgust and elevation, and how readers can be affected by it. This study responds to that scholarly gap, offering readers a more profound connection to the story and a richer experience to feel elevation, by analyzing the novel through the theories of prominent psychologists such as Bunmi Olatunji and Jonathan Haidt, who have thoroughly researched the phenomenon of disgust and elevation.

Psychologists have different purposes in studying disgust and elevation than writers, but both focus on experiences of life and matters of the mind and heart. No one is immune to life's challenges; we all face sickness and health, happiness and depression, successes and failures, anxieties about basic needs being met, and navigating the complexities and sometimes confounding nature of familial, professional, romantic, and other relationships with people all around us. This has been true throughout all of human history. Having a more thorough understanding of the connections between human beings—and the behaviors and emotions associated with them—helps psychologists to improve the lives of their patients, which in turn promotes a healthier society. Bringing this psychological perspective to the discourse can significantly add to our understanding

of why there are literary classics that prove the test of time and remain worthy of study and enjoyment.

To begin, the emotions of disgust and elevation need to be defined and categorized in psychological terms, how they exist on a spectrum, what the elicitors of these emotions are, and what responses they evoke. Then I will analyze not only how all of these levels of disgust and elevation are present in *Bleak House*, but also their importance in complementing and contrasting each other. Doing so will illustrate how Dickens manages to weave and unfurl an intricate tapestry that intertwines disgusting and devastating dark threads with the brightest and most beautiful light threads, creating a rich world in which we can see aspects of ourselves and others, and ultimately find, after the disgust and heartache, relief and inspiration in the elevation. *Bleak House* includes many examples of disgust and elevation throughout the book, and ultimately, as a whole, it is itself an elicitor of elevation.

CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING DISGUST, ELEVATION, AND *BLEAK HOUSE*

Disgust

Since my research centers on reading *Bleak House* through a different lens than other literary scholars have used, it is necessary to give a thorough explanation of this lens. I will begin with defining disgust as studied by psychologists, and work my way up to elevation, thus laying the groundwork for my analysis of how they are manifest in *Bleak House* and their impact on the reader.

Initially, disgust has been understood as a survival response, ensuring health and safety, primarily on an individual level. For psychologists, the study of disgust is important because “the experience of disgust has been implicated in the development of various psychological disorders, particularly contamination-based obsessive-compulsive disorder” (Olatunji “Confirming the 3 Factor” 235). In order to more effectively treat their patients, it is essential for psychologists to have a more thorough understanding of the root causes of their patients’ conditions. It is suggested that “disgust may function primarily as a guardian of the mouth” (Olatunji “Core, Animal Reminder” 1243). Simone Schnall of the University of Cambridge and her colleagues describe the emotion as being “like a ‘gut’ feeling, and because of its link to nausea, disgust may be the most effective emotion at triggering the gastroenteric nervous system” (Schnall et al. “Disgust and Moral Judgement” 1097). And indeed, this gut feeling can sometimes be quite powerful and overwhelming.

In terms of an evolutionary perspective it makes perfect sense that humans have developed a natural reaction to increase chances of survival and long life. Charles Darwin was one of the first scientists to study disgust, and his explanations centered on the idea that it is a revolting feeling in response to smell, touch, and sight. Darwin and subsequent 20th century scientists connected it primarily to the mouth, in that it is a response that

compels avoidance of substances that might be harmful. Foul smells, slimy textures, and discoloration can all be warning signs that food may be spoiled or contaminated, and therefore likely to cause illness or death. Signs such as these elicit an involuntary, negative, and highly unpleasant response to ensure aversion and avoidance. Such substances are not to be consumed, or if they have been consumed, they must be expelled.

In more recent years, however, the study of disgust has led to expanded definitions and a much wider variety of elicitors; psychologists have observed that many of the same physiological responses, facial expressions and active behaviors consistently manifest in reactions to elicitors that range from disgusting objects or substances, to perceived contamination of substances or people, to disgusting social and immoral behaviors. Paul Rozin, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, and his colleagues explain that disgust has certainly evolved and expanded from the temporal domain to now include the moral domain, “because by making things or thoughts disgusting a culture could communicate their negativity and cause withdrawal from them” (Rozin et al. “From Oral to Moral” 1180). There is cultural value, he suggests, in avoiding anything that threatens to destabilize or harm the stability of a community or society, just as much as there is a health value in avoiding anything that threatens the health and wellness of individuals. As explained by Bunmi Olatunji, psychology professor at Vanderbilt University, and his colleagues, “Contemporary models regard disgust as a multidimensional emotion that functions as an oral defense at its core but has evolved to serve as a reminder of our animal origins, maintain interpersonal boundaries, and influence our sense of morality and social order” (Olatunji “Confirming the 3 Factor” 235). An important factor in widening the range of disgust elicitors is that they all evoke similar responses in those who encounter them.

Psychologists identify three types of the manifestations of disgust; inner physiological, facial expressions, and active escape or avoidance. In the 1970s, 80s and 90s, researchers observed that their subjects' responses to disgust elicitors included a reduction of heart rate, blood pressure, respiration rate, and skin temperature, and an increase of salivation and gastrointestinal activity, which are both precursors to nausea and vomiting (Olatunji and Sawchuk "Disgust: Characteristic" 936). I assume that these physiological responses are not arbitrary, and that they all function in some degree to enable us to avoid or remove potentially harmful substances or circumstances. Perhaps a person is less likely to contract an airborne disease or infection while not breathing deeply or rapidly, and infection would perhaps spread at a slower rate if the heart is pumping more slowly and the body temperature is lower. And of course, vomiting would be an act of rejecting and expelling some kinds of contamination from the body, even if they are only perceived possibilities or threats of contamination.

In addition to the inner physiological disgust responses, there are outer involuntary responses as well. Certain facial expressions are obvious observable natural responses to disgust elicitors. According to Olatunji and Sawchuk's 2005 study, these facial expressions are characterized "by a furrowing of the eyebrows, closure of the eyes and pupil constriction, wrinkling of the nose, upper lip retraction and upward movement of the lower lip and chin, and drawing the corners of the mouth down and back" (Olatunji and Sawchuk "Disgust: Characteristics" 936). It is probably safe to assume that the characteristics of disgust facial expressions serve the same purpose as the inner physiological responses; the squinted or closed eyes, and wrinkled nose seem to be related to "discouraging entry of substances into gustatory and olfactory apertures" (Olatunji and Sawchuk "Disgust: Characteristics" 937). Undoubtedly everyone has witnessed this facial expression and probably has made it themselves from time to time.

The third type of response to disgust elicitors is the most dominant; it is the act of escaping, turning away from, or avoiding disgust elicitors. Naturally, the best way to eliminate or reduce the possibility of contamination or infection is to physically remove oneself from the threat, or at least turn away, or push the offensive substance away (Olatunji and Sawchuk “Disgust: Characteristics” 937). Recoiling and creating distance between oneself and anything that carries the threat of disease or contamination would naturally be actions that would aid in self-preservation. Naturally, when disgust is experienced between people, it pushes them apart.

These three types of manifestations of disgust, or disgust responses—inner physiological, facial expressions, and active escape or avoidance—have been further categorized through a system of classification. The classifications of disgust elicitors have varied and been revised over the years, but there are four main domains—(1) core, (2) animal-reminder, (3) interpersonal, (4) socio-moral—that are generally accepted in the field of psychology today (Olatunji “Core, Animal-Reminder” 1244). These four disgust domains will provide the framework for my discussion of *Bleak House*, in which all four categories of disgust are well-represented and reveal how thoroughly Dickens includes a wide array of disgusting elements, providing many opportunities for various elevation elicitors to be emphasized.

The first domain of disgust elicitors is core disgust. This is the category that most closely encompasses Darwin’s observations. These elicitors are primarily offensive due to “real or perceived threat of oral incorporation,” such as spoiled foods, human waste and other body products, garbage, and small pests (e.g. cockroaches, maggots, and rats) that are closely associated with contaminating food (Olatunji “Core, Animal-Reminder” 1244). Core disgust elicitors are responsible for causing the strongest physical reactions. Human beings naturally recoil and are repulsed by the thought of intentionally or unintentionally consuming anything that shows signs of putrefaction, disease, or

contamination, infection, or waste. In short, disgusting substances have the potential to put our health and our lives at risk, so we forcefully reject them.

The second domain of elicitors is animal-reminder disgust. The elicitors in this category include reminders of mortality, our animal nature, “attitudes and practices surrounding sex, injury to the body or violations of its outer envelope, and death” (Olatunju “Core, animal-reminder” 1244). It is difficult to ignore mortality and death when in the presence of a dead body, or even parts of a dead body such as a severed hand in a specimen jar. The sight of mutilation, serious injury, or disease of human bodies can all elicit the disgust emotion. Involuntary body mutilations and abnormalities such as severe burn scarring, amputations, and serious birth defects would be included in this category. And of course, there are voluntary body mutilations as well, such as subdermal and transdermal implants, extreme piercings and stretchings, scarification, tongue-splitting, eye-tattooing, and branding that also fall into this category as violations of the outer envelope. Sexual practices are included here because there are culturally unacceptable behaviors such as incest and bestiality that deviate from established norms. All of these examples point to animalistic nature, and the vulnerability of the mortal body. The disgust responses to the elicitors in this category appear to “serve a defensive function by maintaining the hierarchical division between humans and animals” (Olatunji and Sawchuk “Disgust: Characteristics” 941).

The third domain of elicitors is interpersonal disgust. As the name suggests, these elicitors involve indirect contact with other people, especially those who are “unknown, ill, or tainted by disease, misfortune, or immorality” (Olatunji “Core, Animal-Reminder” 1244). Unlike core disgust which centers primarily on proximity to or contact with objects or substances, interpersonal disgust is centered on connections with people. This is the first category that goes beyond physical elicitors to include unknown, but possible,

risks. Simply because a person is unknown, unfortunate, or immoral, there is a perceived risk of disease, infection, or contamination.

The last domain of elicitors is socio-moral disgust. Unlike the other three categories, this one involves social behaviors that are largely shaped by cultural upbringing through religion and law. It is “a reaction to a subclass of moral violations—those that reveal that a person is morally “sick,” or “twisted,” or, more generally, lacking the normal human motives” (Olatunji “Core, Animal-Reminder” 1244). For example, racism, misogyny, child abuse, betrayal, murder, rape, torture, and unethical dealings with people or animals would all fall into this category. From a religious perspective, this disgust response serves to protect the soul from contamination; and from a non-religious perspective it serves to protect the community and the stability or “health” of society. Either way, preservation of social order is the goal. Elicitors in this category are not as consistent cross-culturally due to the wide variations in peoples’ cultural upbringing and laws around the globe. In many communities there is a perception of a vertical scale with all that is evil at the bottom and all that is divine or God-like at the top, and downward movement toward evil is judged to be disgusting. Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt more thoroughly explains this vertical dimension as ranging:

. . . from God and moral perfection above demons, devils, and moral evil below. Human beings are generally seen as being precariously suspended somewhere in the middle of this vertical dimension, capable of rising to godly sainthood or falling to bestiality or “subhuman” behavior. The medieval *scala natura* and the Hindu notion of reincarnation at higher or lower levels, depending on one’s actions in life, illustrate this vertical dimension. Social disgust can then be understood as the emotional reaction people have to witnessing others moving “down,” or exhibiting

their lower, baser, less Godlike nature. (Haidt “Positive Emotion of Elevation” 2)

This is no trivial matter, because even in a progressively secular society “disgust and divinity concerns still play a powerful role in many political controversies, from abortion and euthanasia to gay marriage and flag burning” (Rozin “Domains of Disgust” 368). Even without religious concerns, communities are complex in regards to what is socially and culturally acceptable, and even though social and cultural attitudes shift throughout time, there are always strong opinions about what is right and wrong to some degree; and there will always be some behaviors that are judged to be disgusting.

All four of these disgust elicitor categories, from core to socio-moral, involve violations that are offensive and repulsive. Core elicitors violate the individual’s physical health and well-being, animal-reminder elicitors violate our sense of the hierarchy of humanity above animal nature, interpersonal elicitors violate personal perceptions of purity and cleanliness, and socio-moral elicitors violate fairness, divinity, autonomy, and justice (Rozin “Oral to Moral” 1180). In other words, the disgust response plays an important role, as a warning system, or threat-assessment of sorts, to prevent, or at least minimize, the breakdown of human well-being on an individual level and community level.

From this broad range of disgust elicitors, psychologists have created a scale of disgust, a spectrum that ranges from core to animal-reminder to interpersonal to socio-moral. One important aspect that is shared across the scale is that our moral judgement and behaviors are often shaped by disgust. Schnall and colleagues conducted experiments which found “a causal relationship between feelings of physical disgust and moral condemnation” (Schnall “Disgust as Embodied Moral Judgement” 1105). When people feel that involuntary emotion of disgust, they have a desire to justify it and therefore apply moral judgement.

One of the consequences of moral condemnation is that it results in dehumanization. It is easier to justify being disgusted by another person if he or she is thought of as less than human. Sherman and Haidt explain that “those who have negative social value would likely be targets of dehumanization” and that “the perception of an agent as possessing a negative social value, perhaps because it shows signs of (a) disease, (b) being a poor exchange partner, or (c) outgroup membership, should actively inhibit desires for social interaction” (“Cuteness and Disgust” 246). In addition to that inhibited desire for social interaction, disgust and dehumanization can lead to otherwise unacceptable mistreatment and abuse of innocent people.

Sherman and Haidt further identify types of dehumanization, writing that there are “two forms of dehumanization—the denial of uniquely human traits (e.g., the products of culture and refinement) and the denial of human nature (e.g., emotionality, personality). Failure to attribute uniquely human traits to an agent (or group) leads to animalistic dehumanization in which the target is perceived as crude, savage, and similar to nonhuman animals. This form of dehumanization has clear ties to disgust” (Sherman “Cuteness and Disgust” 247). This is not especially surprising. It is this mentality that drives bullying and tribalism, and allows people to justify terrible treatment of others who exist (or who have been pushed) outside one’s own socio-moral circle. And this behavior is consistent with the rest of the disgust responses previously discussed; that anything or anyone judged to be disgusting must be avoided or expelled.

Many works of great literature, including *Bleak House*, incorporate these elements of disgust into their narratives for various purposes, by way of places, circumstances, or characters. Disgusting details can add depth, complexity, a gritty sense of reality, drive plot, or provide a rich foundation from which characters and readers can emerge and be lifted.

Elevation

So, what is it that elicits the opposite of disgust? What is the corresponding emotion that is experienced when people move upward toward godliness, goodness, beauty, or purity on the vertical scale? Psychologists have found that elevation is the emotion associated with a sense of uplift. Elevation is a positive emotion, just as joy, happiness, contentment, and interest are positive emotions. But elevation is unique in some key ways. Jonathan Haidt defines elevation in a general sense as “a warm, uplifting feeling that people experience when they see unexpected acts of human goodness, kindness, and compassion” (Haidt “Positive Emotion of Elevation” 1). Although elevation has not been studied and researched as much as disgust has, it has been garnering more attention in the last twenty years. Psychologists are in the business of helping people improve their mental, emotional, and physical well-being, so it makes sense that they would have an interest in focusing on emotions that promote wellness.

Unlike disgust, with its vast array of elicitors, the array of elevation elicitors is rather narrow, and is mostly comprised of social factors. Haidt’s research found that the most common elicitors of elevation involved witnessing acts of service, especially unexpected acts of kindness or compassion from one stranger to another, such as giving “help or aid to a person who was poor or sick, or stranded in a difficult situation” (Haidt “Positive Emotion of Elevation” 2). It is elevating to witness someone shovel snow from an elderly neighbor’s driveway, or help a stranger get up after falling, or deliver donated school supplies to poor inner-city children, etc.

Perhaps the most elevating situations involve a person in need who easily falls into any of the disgust categories. For example, a person who is ill or infected, and may be contagious, elicits core disgust. People who are stranded in difficult situations could include someone who has been horribly injured or burned in an accident, eliciting animal-reminder disgust. Many poor or homeless people may be quite filthy and possibly sick

because of unsanitary living conditions, eliciting interpersonal disgust. These are all examples that illustrate disgust elicitors, but these elicitors can also trigger a sense of urgency that seems to cancel out the disgust response. An example of socio-moral disgust might involve close association with a convicted murderer, but the purpose of the association being to help him learn to read while in prison. Forgiveness is also considered to be a great, and often unexpected, act of kindness that elicits elevation. Acts of forgiveness are often a compassionate and important component of strengthening human bonds, and the reunion of family. In other words, people feel elevation when witnessing others effectively overcome or ignore the disgust response in order to voluntarily help someone in need or to create strong family bonds. The instinct to avoid risk of contamination, whether physical or social, becomes secondary to the instinct or desire to help another human being or to be close to family.

It is important to note that, like disgust elicitors, elevation elicitors do not need to be witnessed in person. Participants in elevation studies were shown various videos that all induce positive emotions, but the videos involving service or acts of goodness and elicited elevation led to a change in attitude and behavior in a way that the other positive videos did not. The feeling of elevation inspired participants, and “they more strongly wanted to perform prosocial and affiliative actions, and they were more likely to actually volunteer to work at a humanitarian charity organization” (Haidt “Positive Emotion of Elevation” 4). This is what truly sets elevation apart from the other positive emotions. Schnall et al. concluded from their study that “by eliciting elevation, even brief exposure to other individuals’ prosocial behavior motivates altruism, individuals are given ‘an avenue for increasing the general level of prosociality in society,’ that ‘elevation inspired helping in spirit, not in kind’” (Schnall “Elevation Leads to Altruistic Behavior” 319). That last phrase simply means that participants were motivated to be more charitable in general, not just to do the same acts portrayed in the videos. Their motivation to help

could be applied in any way they felt compelled, which could be volunteering at a local soup kitchen, or to be a kids' soccer coach, or simply to be more kind and helpful in their communities in general. To sum up the results of the same study, the researchers claim “that witnessing another person’s altruistic behavior elicits elevation, a discrete emotion that, in turn, leads to tangible increases in altruism” (Schnall “Elevation Leads to Altruistic Behavior” 315). This prosocial outcome is, of course, a desirable one that surely all people would support.

Even though the psychologists who have researched elevation only utilized videos with the participants, it is safe to conclude that the same responses would apply to *written* accounts of altruistic behavior. In the book *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived*, edited by Corey Keyes and Jonathan Haidt, there is an excerpt of a letter written by Thomas Jefferson to a friend who had asked him for a list of book recommendations for adding to his personal library. Haidt explains that Jefferson wrote a long list of book titles that included a wide variety of great educational subjects, but also emphasized the importance of fiction. Jefferson wrote:

Everything is useful which contributes to fix us in the principles and practice of virtue. When any . . . act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity and conceive an abhorrence of vice. Now every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions; and dispositions of the mind, like limbs of the body, acquire strength by exercise. . . . [I ask whether] the fidelity of Nelson, and the generosity of Blandford in Marmontel do not dilate [the reader’s] breast, and elevate his sentiments as much as any similar incident which real

history can furnish? Does he not in fact feel himself a better man while reading them, and privately covenant to copy the fair example? (qtd. Haidt “Elevation and the Positive Psychology of Morality” 275-76)

Jefferson’s description of what elevation feels like, and that it motivates positive and benevolent behavior, is entirely consistent with what Haidt describes in his work over two hundred years later (Haidt “Elevation and the Positive. . .” 284). It’s clear that Jefferson found great value in reading fictional literature that contains acts of kindness, generosity, and compassion, and the wonderful ability of such literature to affect readers and their communities in positive ways.

Like literature in general, *Bleak House* includes this spectrum of disgust and elevation. All of these disgust domains and reactions are manifest in the novel in a wide variety of circumstances, from the most wretched and poverty-stricken characters all the way up to the most elite of the upper classes, mirroring the realities of 19th-century London and human nature. Similarly, the novel also includes many examples of elicitors of elevation: characters performing acts of great kindness, help, forgiveness, and compassion for others.

The Spectrum of Disgust and Elevation in *Bleak House*

As I explained earlier, psychologists have organized disgust elicitors on a vertical spectrum, with core elicitors at the bottom, moving up to animal-reminder, interpersonal, and then socio-moral elicitors. Elevation rests at the top, separated from the disgust scale because it is an opposite of disgust rather than part of the spectrum of disgust domains. Table 1, below, provides a visual representation of how I envision and organize the ways in which the elicitor categories correspond to elements within *Bleak House*. In reality, the pairings, or intersections, are more complex than what is shown in the table because there are several different categories of elements in the book which are integral parts of the

disgust/elevation discussion and contribute in unique ways. Characters, settings, and circumstances each need to be considered and discretely evaluated because they each correspond to domains of the disgust scale in discrete ways.

Also, some elements of the book encompass more than one domain of disgust simultaneously; some elements encompass all of the disgust domains at once, and a few elements of the book involve both disgust and elevation together. And, in *Bleak House*, circumstances are fluid and changing as the narrative progresses, and therefore the intersections between the disgust scale and the elements of the book are not always consistent. For example, saint-like Esther temporarily intersects with disgust, and filthy Jo temporarily intersects with elevation. Therefore characters and settings are sometimes repeated in Table 1 and appear in more than one space.

Across the top of Table 1, each column is labeled with a relevant element of the book. The “Character” column shows where each of the important characters is involved with one or more of the disgust domains. “Setting” makes note of the locations where disgust elicitors are present. The “Miscellaneous” column highlights situations because there are events, or circumstances that are disgusting or elevating, that do not fit into the “Character” or “Setting” categories. Down the left side of the chart, each row is labeled with a category of the disgust/elevation spectrum. I combined the core and animal reminder rows because they are so closely related and often overlap in *Bleak House*. I left blank the space where “Interpersonal” and “Miscellaneous” intersect, because interpersonal elicitors are all about relationships and interactions between people; the “Character” column meets that criteria on its own.

I will begin my analysis of disgust and elevation in *Bleak House* from the bottom of the disgust/elevation spectrum, starting with core elicitors, and work my way up to elevation. Between each of the four disgust domains, I will include examples of elements of the book that involve overlapping, or shared domains. In other words, I begin with the

Table 1. The Disgust-Elevation Spectrum Represented in *Bleak House*

<i>Bleak House</i>			
Disgust-Elevation Spectrum	Character	Setting	Misc. Circumstance, or Situation
Elevation	Esther, Woodcourt, Jarndyce, Mrs. Rouncewell George, Snagsby, Bagnet, Jo, Caddy, Jenny & Liz, Charly, (Esther w/pox) Phil	York Bleak House, Countryside, Bagnet home, Cemetery, Brickmaker's home, George's shooting gallery	Marriages: -Alan/Esther -Caddy/Prince Family reunited: -George & Mrs. R -Esther & Lady D Caddy's progression
Disgust -socio-moral	Tulkinghorn, Skimpole, Old Turveydrop, Mrs. Jellyby, Brickmakers, Chadband, Miss Barbary	Tulkinghorn's office, Chancery	Chancery, illiteracy, Jarndyce & Jarndyce
Disgust -interpersonal	Jo, Caddy, Brickmakers, Charly, (Esther w/pox), Jellyby family, Vohles, Phil	Cemetery, Brickmaker's home, Tom-all-Alone's	
Disgust -core -animal-reminder	Krook, Old Smallweed, Mrs. Jellyby, Phil	Tom-All-Alone's, Cemetery, Jellyby home, Krook's shop, Hawdon's apartment, London	Nemo's burial, Spontaneous combustion

examples that only involve core elicitors, then in the next section I provide examples that involve core and animal-reminder simultaneously, then the examples that only involve animal-reminder, followed by examples that involve animal-reminder and interpersonal, etc. After that I will explain the examples that involve all four of the disgust domains at once. Then, I will shift focus to elevation examples, some of which encompass the beauty of disgust and elevation intertwined.

It is worth noting at this stage, that these disgust and elevation emotions function on two levels in literature when elicitors are introduced and described in a narrative: characters respond to them, and so do we as readers. Even though we are not physically present in a fictional setting, our minds recall and can imagine sights and smells, and can understand the socio-moral elicitors as well. As shown in the psychological studies, people experience disgust and elevation responses while viewing representations of

elicitors. Therefore, some examples of disgust and elevation in *Bleak House* elicit disgust or elevation responses in the reader, and some are responses experienced by the characters.

CHAPTER 3: EVIDENCE OF DISGUST IN *BLEAK HOUSE*

Core Disgust

The basest form of disgust elicitors, core disgust, is an apt place to begin my analysis of *Bleak House* because its position at the bottom of the vertical spectrum provides us with a foundational starting point, where the most familiar aspects of disgust are present. The following examples all involve putrescence, filth, contaminated substances, rot of organic material, and bodily waste, all of which carry with them the threat of violating physical health. As the discussion progresses in complexity, it also will move upward in direction towards elevation, touching on the psychological array of human responses that result in driving people apart or drawing people together. Another reason for beginning with core disgust is that it is the domain in which Dickens begins the book.

Dickens does not waste any time introducing disgust in the first chapter of *Bleak House*. The stage is immediately set in a dark, wet, and wintery 19th-century London, first illustrated by the filthy conditions of the streets and animals. The combination of horses, their droppings, and the wet muddy streets afflicted the “[d]ogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another’s umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper. . .” (5). And to emphasize the point that the awful conditions are not new or temporary, and that there is no foreseeable hope of any change for the better, Dickens continues to describe the city streets with, “. . . crust upon crust of mud, sticking to those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest” (5). In addition to the visual image of the unclean setting, Dickens uses many words that amplify the disgusting tone. In the first two pages alone, the reader encounters “infection,” “defiled,” “dirty,” “waterside

pollutions,” “raw,” and “pestilent,” all of which are related to disease and unsanitary conditions.

Esther, who is new to London, recounts that she, Ada, and Richard “drove slowly through the dirtiest and darkest streets that ever were seen in the world (I thought), and in such a distracting state of confusion that I wondered how the people kept their senses . . .” (29). It would have been quite a shock for Esther after being raised in the clean and fresh atmosphere of the country. Robert Lougy argues, “we cannot read much of Dickens without becoming aware of the general foulness and smelliness of the world he describes, and thus readers have paid attention to what he has to say, turning their attention not only towards his excremental vision but also towards the ways in which he is situated within the age’s larger concerns with matters of sanitation and disease” (Lougy 473). Dickens descriptions are not merely imagined.

Dickens was cognizant and mindful of the worst areas of London. He personally visited some of the slums or “rookeries” that festered here and there throughout the city. In 1842, Dickens explored some of these rookeries. He was accompanied by his close friend and biographer John Forster, artist Daniel Maclise, and the poet Longfellow, and they were guided by two police officers. At the first lodging-houses they visited, “the squeamish Maclise was, according to Forster, ‘struck with such a sickness . . . that he had to remain, for the time we were in them, under the guardianship of the police outside’ (“London”). Dickens visited another similar location later and observed “‘intolerable rooms, burrowed out like the holes of rats or the nests of insect-vermin, but fuller of intolerable smells’, holding ‘crowds of sleepers, each on his foul truckle-bed coiled up beneath a rug’” (353). In yet another slum area of London, there were “narrow avenues, leading to thousands of closely packed nests, full to overflowing with dirt, and misery, and rags” (353). Is it any wonder that Dickens is well-known for his gritty and gruesome

descriptions of the most impoverished living conditions? He was acutely aware of the filth, disease, and pestilence that too many people lived in, within his own city.

The setting in *Bleak House* that mirrors those horrific real-life rookeries is known as Tom-all-Alone's. This place is where the unfortunate crossing-sweeper boy, Jo, sometimes retires at night for shelter. At one point in the story, Mr. Snagsby goes to Tom-all-Alone's in search of Jo, and as he enters the area, he

passes along the middle of a villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and corrupt water—though the roads are dry elsewhere—and reeking with such smells and sights that he, who has lived in London all his life, can scarce believe his senses. Branching from this street and its heaps of ruins, are other streets and courts so infamous that Mr. Snagsby sickens in body and mind, and feels as if he were going, every moment deeper down, into the infernal gulf. (*BH* 277)

After making his way through this filthy area, Snagsby finds Jo in a low, blackened room that is “offensive to every sense; even the gross candle burns pale and sickly in the polluted air” (279). Dickens' allusion to the fiery gulf of hell fits perfectly into the disgust spectrum when it is viewed as a vertical spectrum with God and righteousness at the top, and the devil and evil at the bottom. Tom-all-Alone's, As Dickens illustrates it, rests at the bottom, the farthest point possible away from purity and godliness, where darkness is slowly consuming it as the “lamp of Life burns in Tom-all-Alone's, heavily, heavily, in the nauseous air, and winking—as that lamp, too, winks in Tom-all-Alone's—at many horrible things. But they are blotted out. . . . The blackest nightmare in the infernal stables grazes on Tom-all-Alone's, and Tom is fast asleep” (551). It is a place of decay, rot, and disease, consumed by threat of death.

Dickens also meticulously conveys that even the *air* in certain parts of London is disgusting. According to Michael Gurney, “The prevailing medical and scientific theory

was that disease was caused by miasma—bad air, or poisonous gas from rotting organic matter” (Gurney 82). The air is inescapable, surrounding all classes of people. The foul quality of London air is especially atrocious on the night of Krook’s death. Snagsby comments while walking outside that “It’s a tainting sort of weather,” to which Mr Weevle replies, “I find it gives me the horrors” (394). It is left to the imagination of the reader to interpret what he means by “tainting”. Still before we discover the source or nature of this contaminating weather, Mr. Weevle is indoors with Mr. Guppy and the same conversation about the air continues. Guppy asks, “What on earth is going on in this house to-night? Is there a chimney on fire? . . . See how the soot’s falling. See here on my arm! See again, on the table here! Con-found the stuff, it won’t blow off—smears, like black fat!” (398). There is something in the air, more substantial than soot, that is settling and attaching itself to all surfaces and walls as it lingers.

Inside Krook’s place “there is a smouldering suffocating vapour in the room, and a dark greasy coating on the walls and ceiling” (402). Effectively, the air is an infection that spreads and does not discriminate. In the pub next door, an entertainer found his voice to be “seriously affected by the impure state of the atmosphere” and the ladies who live nearby “observed the foetid effluvia, and regarded them as being emitted from the premises in the occupation of Krook, the unfortunate deceased” (404). Further details of Krook’s death and this contaminated air are included in the next chapter because animal-reminder elicitors coexist with the core elicitors.

Core + Animal-Reminder Disgust

While core disgust elicitors primarily center on risk of disease, contamination, infection, and decay, animal-reminder elicitors center on mortal, animal nature, and the frailty of the human body. Each new disgust domain added to the discussion gives us more insight to the various ways in which people experience disgust, and provides new

opportunities for elevation to be revealed and appreciated in the end. The following examples from *Bleak House* are similar to the core examples, but there is an added level of complexity, sometimes because of the details of the scene or character, and sometimes because of Dickens' word choices and use of language.

To continue with the theme of Krook's death, I will begin this section with how Dickens introduces the foul air on the night of his death. He sets the disgusting tone by describing that "It is a fine steaming night to turn the slaughter-houses, the unwholesome trades, the sewerage, bad water, and burial-grounds to account, and give the Registrar of Deaths some extra business", where the allusions to death push it beyond core and into the realm of animal-reminder (393).

And the conversation between Guppy and Weevle grows in complexity as well when Guppy exclaims, "Let us open the window a bit, and get a mouthful of air. It's too close. . . . What in the Devil's name is this! Look at my fingers!" and he is so disgusted by the greasy unknown slime that he goes so far as to say, "Give me some water, or I shall cut my hand off!" (401-402).

Guppy's fingers are defiled and he threatens to cut off his hand, both of which point to violations of the human body. And finally, after all of the talk of putrescence, filthiness, greasy fat, and repulsiveness in the air and all around, Dickens reveals to the reader what has caused it all.

Krook has died in his rag and bottle shop, surrounded by his hoarded heaps of old papers, bags, bottles, bones, hair, and anything else he felt compelled to keep, amidst the dust and grime. But Krook's death is no ordinary death. Dickens explains that no matter who you blame it on or what you call it, his death was "inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself, and that only—Spontaneous Combustion, and none other of all the deaths that can be died" (403). Dickens' use of the words inborn and inbred connote sexual deviation, which is another animal-reminder elicitor, along

with more violations of the human body. Weevle discovers what remains of Krook's body; no more than a burnt and smoldering patch on the floor, and what I assume would be a leg: "and here is— is it the cinder of a small charred and broken log of wood sprinkled with white ashes" (403). In the days and weeks following Krook's demise, the room "is ghostly with traces of its dead inhabitant" (492).

The subject of spontaneous combustion has been hotly debated because many people believe it isn't plausible, and therefore Dickens should not have used it as a cause of death in *Bleak House*. One such naysayer was literary critic George Henry Lewes who was also a scientist and philosopher, and contemporary of Dickens. Lewes entered such a debate with Dickens himself. Dickens never backed down from defending his decision to use spontaneous combustion, insisting that Lewes "must have 'assumed that I knew nothing at all about the question—had no kind of sense of my responsibility—and had taken no trouble to discriminate between truth and falsehood.'" On the contrary, Dickens continues, 'I looked into a number of books with great care, expressly to learn what the truth was'" (Taylor 172). Regardless of the plausibility debate, Dickens was emphatic about the necessity of this cause of death for Krook. According to Taylor, "Dickens had to insist science was on his side in order to make his case for the imagination. The necessity of employing both head and heart is central to *Bleak House*. . . . For Dickens, the world of material facts must correspond with the world of intuitive understanding because the latter is what connects people to one another and gives facts their meaning and significance" (172-173). I will continue this subject of meaning-making and significance in the last chapter.

Krook's is not the only death that is discovered within his establishment. Earlier in the book, Captain Hawdon—known only as "Nemo" by those in contact with him before he died— had rented a room on an upper floor above Krook's rag and bottle shop. This small room was "nearly black with soot, and grease, and dirt. In the rusty skeleton of

a grate, pinched at the middle as if Poverty had gripped it,” (124). This dark filthy room is where Hawdon quietly and poorly lived, worked, and smoked opium until he died. No one knew of his past or family connections, and he had no money, and therefore was buried in a pauper’s grave.

Death dispassionately comes to all, pauper or nobleman, and the noble Deadlocks are not exempt. Although the conditions are different, there is still an unmistakably repulsive quality to the descriptions of Chesney Wold, the Dedlock’s extensive estate. While Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock have settled in their town house in London for a while, Chesney Wold is closed up. The estate resembles death, and stirs the dead. During this wintery period, “[m]ists hide in the avenues, veil the points of view, and move in funeral-wise across the rising grounds. On all the house there is a cold, blank smell, like the smell of the little church, though something dryer: suggesting that the dead and buried Dedlocks walk there, in the long nights, and leave the flavour of their graves behind them” (*BH* 357). Everything feels and smells as if ghosts have risen from their graves and left residual contamination in their wakes.

Dickens descriptions of Krook’s death and the deceased Dedlocks are careful and deliberate, and his word choices point to putrescence, rot, decay, and infection all of which fall into the core domain, and the images of death fall into animal-reminder.

Animal-Reminder Disgust

Elicitors within the animal-reminder disgust domain remind us of our animal nature, and the mortal frailty of the human body. There are few examples in *Bleak House* that exhibit animal-reminder disgust elicitors alone. Mortality and death certainly are prominent themes in the book, but most of the examples involving these animal-reminder death-related elicitors also involve elicitors in the core and/or the interpersonal domains as well, and I have chosen to place those within the discussion accordingly. Many

characters die in the book—Nemo, Krook, “Coavinses”, Gridley, Jo, Richard, Jenny’s baby, and Lady Dedlock—and each of these deaths can be appropriately included in this domain. Lougy describes *Bleak House* as “one of the most death-haunted novels in British literature” (479).

However, there is one character in *Bleak House* who does clearly present animal-reminder elicitors, and reminders of death is not what makes him stand out here, but rather his representation of violations of the body. Phil Squod, the disabled friend who lives with the “trooper” George and acts as roommate, business partner, and assistant, does not exhibit disease, infection, decay, or bodily waste, and his behavior is nothing but gracious and kind. But he is disabled, doesn’t have a handsome face, and his body shows evidence of having been badly damaged and abused. Dickens describes him as “a little grotesque man, . . . with a face all crushed together, who appears . . . to have been blown up,” one eyebrow missing, and his hands “are notched, and seamed, and crumpled all over,” (271-272). Having lived a dangerous and careless life, he is lucky to be alive and to have George’s companionship.

Phil suffered countless injuries in his past, many of which left permanent damage as physical evidence. He recalls his past in conversation with George, and describes his battered, disfigured, and broken body which elicited disgust responses from potential customers, and he was unable to maintain the tinker business he ran in years past. As he reminisces with George about his troubled history as a tinker and skilled tradesman, he explains, “I was too ill-looking, and their wives complained of me . . . spileing my complexion, and singeing my hair off, . . . and being scorched in a accident at a gas-works; and what with being blowed out of winder, case-filling at the firework business; I am ugly enough to be made a show on!” (327). The wives of former clients were repulsed by his appearance, and it cost him his livelihood. Phil’s self-awareness and cheerful attitude are notable in contrast to his appearance. This hideous appearance alone would

make it easy for people to dehumanize him and keep him at a distance, just as the wives of his past clients had done. However, Dickens gives this unfortunate character some wonderful personality traits that provide the reader with an important contrast from which to judge him as a character who ultimately elicits elevation.

Animal-reminder disgust insists on reminding people of the frailty of themselves and others, and can be overcome with humility, compassion, and gratitude, as Phil proves more than once later in the story. His example of benevolent behavior will be discussed further in chapter 4.

Animal-Reminder + Interpersonal Disgust

The examples in this section involve characters that present disgust elicitors related to violations of the body and reminders of mortality or animal nature, in addition to a sense of being tainted somehow, negatively affecting indirect contact with others. The addition of the interpersonal disgust domain increases the complexity of the reader's experience in that now involves relationships between people instead of simply observed people and/or substances. It brings to mind real life relationships and experiences with people in our own lives who may have invoked this kind of negative emotion. This is another way that Dickens can emphasize the elevation in the end, deepening the experience while overcoming another type of disgust.

The disgusting aftermath of Krook's grotesque death permeates the walls and buildings, and infests the air. But what was he like before having been consumed by flames from the inside? Dickens' illustration of Krook (while alive) fits squarely into both the animal-reminder and interpersonal disgust domains. Krook's old age and deathly appearance, along with Dickens' word choices certainly make Krook out to be a repulsive character. For "he was short, cadaverous, and withered; with his head sunk sideways between his shoulders, and the breath issuing in visible smoke from his mouth,

as if he were on fire within. His throat, chin and eyebrows were so frosted with white hairs, and so gnarled with veins and puckered skin, that he looked, from breast upward, like some old root in a fall of snow” (49). He is incapable of holding his body in a proper or healthy posture, smoke issues from his mouth (foreshadowing his eventual fate), his skin has been affected by something unknown to make it pucker, and thin enough to reveal the gnarled veins inside his cadaverous body. Krook’s disheveled body and facial hair show that hygiene and personal grooming are low priorities.

Another character with a similar appearance, and inability to properly hold his decrepit body in a healthy posture, is old Smallweed. This old cantankerous man is introduced as “a limp and ugly figure carried in a chair . . . the excellent old gentleman’s nails are long and leaden, and his hands lean and veinous, and his eyes green and watery; and, over and above this, as he continues, while he claws, to slide down in his chair and to collapse into a shapeless bundle; he becomes such a ghastly spectacle” (329). Krook and Smallweed have their differences, but both of them exhibit clear signs of violations of the human body, poor hygiene, and seem to be at death’s door.

The young homeless boy, Jo, is another character who exhibits animal-reminder disgust, but in a slightly different way. He involves not only violation of the physical body, but his character violates the human perception of the hierarchy of humans above animals. He is compared to the street animals, as though they belong together, orphaned and hungry, scraping by to survive. The London streets are their home, where “Jo, and the other lower animals, get on in the unintelligible mess as they can” and when it is market day, “the blind oxen, over-goaded, over-driven, never-guided, run into wrong places and are beaten out; and plunge, red-eyed and foaming, at stone walls; and often sorely hurt the innocent, and often sorely hurt themselves. Very like Jo and his order; very, very like!” (199). These destitute filthy animals, who are generally unseen by the upper classes, wander the streets unclean and neglected.

Lady Dedlock discovers Jo and his connection to Nemo, and she secretly seeks him out, meets him while disguised as a servant, and then hires him to show her where Nemo has been buried. Lady Dedlock exists in the world of high fashion and high society, and therefore must temporarily dismiss her usual conventions regarding the social hierarchy in order to get his help without raising suspicion about her movements. However, she is still a lady underneath the servant disguise, and she can't help reacting negatively while in Jo's presence. After following his lead from one location to another, they arrive near the cemetery, and she "skrink[sic] into a corner—into a corner of that hideous archway, with its deadly stains contaminating her dress; and putting out her two hands, and passionately telling him to keep away from her, for he is loathsome to her, so remains for some moments" (202). Dickens chooses to use the word "skrink[sic]" to show Lady Dedlock's behavior, and it is perfect signifier of a disgust response, to shrink away or withdraw. In this setting, Lady Dedlock is disgusted by the cemetery, its surrounding areas, and of course, Jo himself.

Later on in the story, Jo has returned to the streets of London after being forced out, and his condition has worsened; he is seriously ill, malnourished, even more squalid than ever before, and he is clothed in tattered rags. The physician, Allan Woodcourt, discovers in the streets of Tom-all-Alone's, "the figure of a youth, . . . goes shrinking and creeping on, with his anxious hand before him, and his shapeless clothes hanging in shreds. . . . [that] look, in colour and in substance, like a bundle of rank leaves of swampy growth, that rotted long ago" (*BH* 555). Carrying disease and filth, and clothed in decay, Jo embodies animal-reminder and interpersonal disgust elicitors.

However, all that is disgusting about him is only physical; and fortunately, physical attributes and destitution do not determine worth, in real life or fiction. John Mazaheri of Auburn University wrote an article that focuses entirely on the ugliness and beauty of Jo's life in *Bleak House*, and his assessment, like mine, is that Dickens

effectively portrays Jo in a way that disgust and beauty are both emphasized. Mazaheri states “that behind Jo’s dirty/ugly exterior one finds a beautiful soul” (177). Jo’s appearance is disgusting, but he values honesty, work, and gratitude. The attributes of his good character are augmented by their close proximity to disgust.

Interpersonal Disgust

Interpersonal disgust is the first category that moves away from contact with physical elicitors and into the realm of perceived or assumed contamination by indirect contact between one person and another. This presumption of contamination can be based on signs of past illness (e.g. smallpox scars), or misfortune, or immorality. Interpersonal disgust differs from socio-moral in large part because socio-moral disgust is not contingent on contact with other people and it involves willful atrocious behavior regardless of any physical factors. There are many examples of interpersonal disgust that overlap with socio-moral; those will be included in the next chapter.

The clearest and simplest example of interpersonal disgust in *Bleak House* is Guppy’s reaction to seeing Esther’s face after she recovered from smallpox, which left her face severely scarred. Smallpox is so rare now that few people today (happily) know the severity of its effects. Smallpox scars were typically “deep, four to six millimeters in size, and there was a predilection for lesions to develop over bony prominences or tendons. In the facial area, this included the forehead, bridge of the nose, cheekbone, and the chin. Over the first several months following an infection, the scars became hyperpigmented, further accentuating their presence” (Gurney 86). Guppy warmly welcomes Esther into his home after she had sent him a note ahead of time to let him know she would be coming, and Guppy “acknowledged its receipt by taking it out of his breast-pocket, putting it to his lips, and returning it to his pocket with a bow” (477). Earlier in the book, Guppy becomes enamored of Esther, frequently refers to her as “my

angel”, and even after Esther rejects his proposal he declares that his feelings for her will never change. He assures her that if she changes her mind she should call on him, “at any time, however distant, *that’s* no consequence, for my feeling can never alter” (115). Alas, his devotion to her and his promise of unwavering love prove to be rather weak when Esther lifts her veil revealing her changed and scarred face. Esther recalls:

I could hardly have believed that anybody could in a moment have turned so red, or changed so much, as Mr. Guppy did when I now put up my veil. . . . I never saw such faltering, such confusion, such amazement and apprehension. . . . Something seemed to rise in his throat that he could not possibly swallow. He put his hand there, coughed, made faces, tried again to swallow it, coughed again, made faces again, and looked all around the room, . . . backing his chair into the corner behind him. (477-478)

Guppy is repulsed by Esther. He physically moves away from her as his ability to breathe and swallow is impaired. In Guppy’s eyes, she is tainted, contaminated, and his response is to distance himself from her. He even proceeds to rescind his indefinite offer of marriage, and insists that Esther’s friend Caddy witness Esther’s affirmation that there is no promise of marriage between them.

The next example of interpersonal disgust is not as straightforward. In *Bleak House*, Dickens personifies the fictional infamous Chancery suit (legal case, or lawsuit) known as *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, and so for the purposes of this thesis I will include, in this section and the next two sections, examples of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, or Chancery in general, acting as agents as if the lawsuit and the legal system were characters.

John Jarndyce consistently and adamantly keeps his distance from *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* throughout the entire book. Even in the end when the case is finally concluded, he still refuses to go to the courthouse. His long-held opinion is that the lawsuit is infectious and ruinous. The omniscient narrator of *Bleak House* introduces it in the first

chapter of the book by explaining that “Jarndyce and Jarndyce has stretched forth its unwholesome hand to spoil and corrupt” and that in all of its years of debate, “no man’s nature has been made better by it” (8). His own uncle was ruined in pursuit of a favorable settlement of the case; so ruined that he let Bleak House become a wreck, he shattered relationships, and ultimately shot himself in the head. John Jarndyce would never allow himself to be infected by having anymore contact with the case than necessary, to preserve his own wellbeing. He declares, “I have forsworn and abjured the whole business these many years, and my soul is sick of it” (739).

Jarndyce and Jarndyce represents physical disgust elicitors, and for John Jarndyce at least, it is repellant and carries a figurative infection of significant enough magnitude worthy of nothing but avoidance. Dickens also personifies Chancery, and the legal system in general. The following examples that involve Chancery are included in the next section because they involve deliberate nefarious intentions without the physical elicitors, and therefore fall into the domain of socio-moral disgust.

Interpersonal + Socio-Moral Disgust

Here we reach an important mark as we ascend the disgust-elevation spectrum, for now the focus shifts largely away from physical contamination and towards disgusting, socially reprehensible behaviors. Dickens is not subtle in highlighting despicable interactions and treatment of characters, and *Bleak House* is brimming with examples from this disgust domain, increasing the depth of our understanding of disgust in the psychological sense, raising our awareness of human reactions and responses to behaviors we witness in our own lives. The examples in this section generally involve socio-moral issues such as hypocrisy, betrayal of family, and domestic abuse, while still involving interpersonal disgust. Spending time exploring the following examples sets us

up to more fully appreciate the elevation that arises from these situations. A natural place to begin is within the walls of the Jellyby home.

The Jellyby home is a complex place, dominated by the philanthropic efforts of Mrs. Jellyby. The house, along with everything inside it, is filthy and battered, as are its inhabitants. Mrs. Jellyby neglects and simultaneously heads the family; unseeing and indifferent to the conditions of her children and ramshackle home. Mr. Jellyby is voiceless and powerless, dejected and hopeless. The following examples are included in this section because they involve both physical indirect contact with tainted unfortunate people (and by extension, the house), and Mrs. Jellyby's abominable neglect of her home and family in contrast with her hubris and self-congratulatory virtue in her charity work.

Esther, Ada, and Richard spend their first night in London at the Jellyby home, and they are horrified by what they discover there. Esther describes that what stood out to her the most was a girl who, as she sat at a writing table, "was in such a state of ink. And, from her tumbled hair to her pretty feet, which were disfigured with frayed and broken satin slippers trodden down at heel, she really seemed to have no article of dress upon her, from a pin upwards, that was in its proper condition or its right place" (38). This unfortunate girl, Caddy Jellyby, is embarrassed and ashamed of her home and family. Later that night Caddy is bold enough to be completely honest with Esther, to unload her frustrations, and Esther is kind enough to patiently listen. Caddy complains and confesses that "the whole house is disgraceful. The children are disgraceful. I'm disgraceful. Pa's miserable, and no wonder!" (44). What a terrible position to be in! But the combination of her self-awareness and Esther's example inspire her to make drastic changes in her life for the better. She becomes a great example of elevation, which will be discussed in chapter 4.

Later in the book, Caddy revisits the subject and elaborates on why her father is miserable with his ineffectual presence in the home because "Ma don't care about

anything, . . . his family is nothing but bills, dirt, waste, noise, tumbles down stairs, confusion, and wretchedness” (167). The members of the Jellyby family are certainly filthy, bruised, and in grimy disarray, which is what qualifies it as an example of interpersonal disgust, but the reason this falls into the socio-moral domain is Mrs. Jellyby’s brazen neglect of her own family as she focuses all of her time and energy on families in Africa instead. Chapter IV, in which the Jellyby family is introduced, is quite aptly named “Telescopic Philanthropy” to emphasize the point that Mrs. Jellyby purposefully does not see the desperate needs of those immediately close to her— her own children and husband. Her sight is set only on a far-away place, and she refuses to put down the metaphorical telescope to look around at her own home. The supposed virtue of her philanthropy trumps all else. I will delve deeper into the subject of charity in the next section because there are multiple examples of repulsive behavior on the part of those who thrive on their self-congratulatory philanthropic virtue.

Another filthy dwelling inhabited by filthy, unfortunate people is brought to light because another haughty philanthropist named Mrs. Pardiggle leads her five young sons, Esther, Ada, and Richard there for the purpose of ministering to a brickmaker’s family to save their souls. Dickens scholar Nancy Yousef argues that Mrs. Pardiggle’s attempt is memorable because it is the most “insensitive, ineffective philanthropy” which is comprised only of “judgemental condescension” which contrasts sharply with sensitivity shown by other characters (Yousef 65-67). Compared to the Jellyby family, the brickmaker family is similarly unkept, dirty, bruised and battered, and Esther notes that there is “in this damp offensive room—a woman with a black eye, nursing a poor little grasping baby by the fire; a man all stained with clay and mud . . . a bold girl, doing some kind of washing in the very dirty water” (98). The woman with the black eye is Jenny. Her husband, who has no interest in receiving any of Mrs. Pardiggle’s “charity”, admits, “I’ve been drunk for three days; and I’d a been drunk four, if I’d a had the money. . . .

And how did my wife get that black eye? Why, I giv' it her; and if she says I didn't, she's a Lie!" (99). Jenny never says a word during the visit, only cries when the baby she is cradling dies in her arms.

On top of living in such dreadful conditions, Jenny and her best friend, Liz, both have tyrannical husbands who abuse and control them. One instance that particularly illustrates this point is when Esther and Mr. Bucket are trying to track down Lady Dedlock, and they stop at the brickmakers' house—because Bucket had received a tip that led them there—to ask if Jenny or Liz know anything about Lady Dedlock's whereabouts. Jenny is not there, but Liz begins to answer and timidly says, "If my master would let me speak, and not say a word of harm—" at which point her husband interjects "'Your master,' said her husband, muttering an imprecation with slow emphasis, 'will break your neck, if you meddle with wot don't concern you'" (684). Liz's husband exercises dominance over her, and she submits. There is no doubt that Liz wishes she could help, but she is so fearful of her husband, that she can only look "full at Mr. Bucket as he went out, and he looked full at her," and Bucket remarks to Esther that "they are up to keeping a close eye upon her, and any fool knows that a poor creetur like her, beaten and kicked and scarred and bruised from head to foot, will stand by the husband that ill uses her, through thick and thin" (685). The husband's threat is not an empty one, Liz knows it, and she won't dare disobey him. It is fair to conclude that Mrs. Pardiggle would never witness the desired fruits of her labors within the walls of this squalid home.

Like the brickmaker families, poor Jo finds himself on the receiving end of unwanted "charity." Yousef describes Jo as "the novel's exemplary, recurrent object lesson in poverty and social marginality, . . . [and] of the poverty of charity. His meager existence, really only staving off death, . . . is the pathetic record . . . of an indifferent social and political system" (Yousef 69). A preacher named Reverend Chadband, invited by Mr. Snagsby's wife, lectures Jo in front of a small gathering of people, about the cause

of his poverty and the “truths” of his life. Jo is malnourished, ill, cold, and filthy, but Chadband is a man who thrives on pontificating and blessing others with his wisdom. He sermonizes at great length, to the people gathered there, about Jo’s ungodly and sinful state as “a Gentile and a Heathen,” without parents, relations, wealth, or “the light of Terewth,” and all who are gathered there are captivated by his speech and prayers, except for Jo (320-323). The selfish blindness and disregard for Jo’s welfare on display here is no coincidence. John Mazaheri explains that “hypocritical preachers, like Chadband, are implicitly satirized by Dickens. . . . Jo is intelligent enough to understand that Chadband’s prayer does not help him at all” and that Chadband shames the boy in front of the Snagsbys “as if he were prosecuting him in court” (Mazaheri 186-187). Chadband’s impersonal and condescending approach are unmistakable.

I do acknowledge that, for many people, views on homelessness and poverty were different in the 19th century from what they are today. Mrs. Pardiggle and Rev. Chadband are examples of how 19th century “conservative Christianity emphasized individual responsibility and typically spoke of poverty as God’s just punishment for the culpable. From this perspective, the poor’s most urgent need was for moral and religious elevation” (Fasik 135). Chadband’s mission is to save souls, which in turn would lift them out of poverty. For modern readers and Dickens himself, though, the thought of a religious man of God preaching while ignoring the immediate needs of the poor is repulsive. Dickens is not subtle about ridiculing those who claim to be good Christians.

Drawing attention to this disgusting treatment of Jo and others like him, by men of god and so-called philanthropists, augments the wonderful contrast that Woodcourt exhibits at the time of Jo’s Death. He is neither an official man of God nor a philanthropist, but he sees beyond Jo’s filthy and infected exterior, and acknowledges his worth as a human being. And Jo truly knows his goodness.

Socio-Moral Disgust

Leaving all physical considerations behind at this stage, we delve into the domain of socio-moral disgust which is all about cruel, destructive, merciless, and diabolical behaviors. Within a personal email exchange, Jonathan Haidt clarified for me that socio-moral cases “reveal base or monstrous motives, without involving any physical disgust; e.g. betrayal of family or nation, extreme greed, fawning or unctuousness” (Haidt -email). Innocent people are manipulated, used, emotionally tormented, neglected, and ridiculed. It is important to discuss these examples, not only because *Bleak House* is replete with them, but to add more weight to how characters and readers are affected by them. Justice is often not served in these cases, and in fact some characters are irredeemably ruined by the disgusting behaviors of others. However, elevation is still to be found in the end.

Jarndyce and Jarndyce and Chancery (the legal court system in general), as personified entities, display atrocious acts against countless individuals, and many lives are drawn into it and consequently ruined. The very first chapter of *Bleak House* ends with the summation that “If all the injustice it has committed, and all the misery it has caused, could only be locked up with it, and the whole burnt away in a great funeral pyre—why so much the better for other parties than the parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce!” (10). The characters who are parties in the case are John Jarndyce, Ada, Richard, and Lady Dedlock. As discussed previously, Jarndyce avoids Chancery altogether because he fully understands its contaminating nature. Lady Dedlock also avoids its lure. But Richard becomes a victim of Chancery’s cruel hand, and Ada watches helplessly as Richard is slowly destroyed by it.

Richard, so cheerful and youthful in the beginning, is unable to break away from hopes that he and Ada will be rewarded handsomely for his entanglement with the case, and that a large settlement would certainly come their way. John Jarndyce, Esther, and Ada plead with him to let it go, to be free of its chokehold. But Richard “looks to it,

flushed and fitfully, to do something with his interests, and bring them to some settlement. It procrastinates, disappoints, tries, tortures him; wears out his sanguine hopes and patience, thread by thread; but he still looks to it, and hankers after it, and finds his whole world treacherous and hollow” (435). As Richard’s anxiety and determination grow, his health steadily diminishes as *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* strangles him to death. Esther describes him as “so slow, so eager, so bloodless and gaunt, I felt as if Richard were wasting away” (720). Despite Esther, Ada, and Jarndyce’s diligent care for him, Richard is unable to free himself from Chancery.

Richard’s demise is predicted by the old lady Miss Flite, who has witnessed firsthand the demise of her own family. Although her family was not connected with *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, the effects of Chancery were the same. Her family story paints an awful picture of Chancery’s reprehensible drug-like addiction. It was Miss Flite’s father who was first drawn slowly in by its “dreadful attraction” and became “fierce, sour, angry bankrupt” and died in a debtor’s prison, followed by her brother and sister who were quickly ruined, and then she was caught in its grasp, becoming forever more attached to the courthouse (440). Her chronic presence in court makes her very familiar with the phenomenon of others succumbing to the awful addiction. She warns Esther about Richard, “I know what will happen. I know, far better than they do when the attraction has begun. I know the signs, my dear. I saw them begin in Gridley. And I saw them end. . . . I saw them beginning in our friend [Richard]. Let some one hold him back. Or he’ll be drawn to ruin” (441). Miss Flite may be thought of as the little old mad woman, but her words in this regard are wise and prophetic.

As with the members of the Flite family and their Chancery suit, Richard’s determination to see *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* concluded proves to be stronger than anyone’s efforts to hold him back. Esther observes that “there is a ruin of youth which is not like age; and into such a ruin Richard’s youth and youthful beauty had fallen away”

(722). If only Richard could have heeded the warnings that several people offered in the beginning, he would have been free and thriving.

Krook is the first to warn him when they meet for the first time in Krook's shop, which is nicknamed "the Court of Chancery" as though it is a physical representation of Chancery, with all of its waste, corruption, and stacks of papers. Even though Krook has no claims in Chancery, he is knowledgeable about all that goes on there, and like Miss Flite, has witnessed its stranglehold before. He advises, "keep out of Chancery, for it's being ground to bits in a slow mill; it's being roasted at a slow fire; it's being stung to death by single bees; it's being drowned by drops; it's going mad by grains" (52). Krook was nearby when old Tom Jarndyce shot himself in the head to escape the crushing hand of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*. As John Jarndyce's friend Boythorn sums up, "There never was such an infernal cauldron as that Chancery, on the face of the earth!" (192-193). This terrible opinion of Chancery is not a product of Dickens' imagination.

In fact, Dickens was just as well-acquainted with Chancery as he was with the slums of London, and advocated for reform on this subject as well. In his book, Norman Page gives an account of Dickens' connections with Chancery, his experience as a young man working in a lawyer's office, and working as a shorthand reporter in court where he witnessed the workings of the system (30). In 1844, roughly seven years before writing *Bleak House*, Dickens experienced the frustrations and financial burden of unsuccessfully fighting in Chancery to prevent a publisher from releasing a version of one of his novels without his approval. Dickens, and many others, wrote articles published in the *Times* over the course of many months about the injustices of the system and the ruin it leaves behind. Page quotes another Dickens scholar, John Butt, who explains that "Dickens' indictment of Chancery was more than merely topical. It followed in almost every respect the charges already levelled in the columns of the *Times*. In both we read of houses in Chancery and wards in Chancery, of dilatory and costly procedure, of wasted lives, and

of legal obstructionists” (qtd in Page 31). This historical context provides the reader with insight that lends more credence to the gravity of Chancery, and seriousness of the peril in which characters are entangled. Dickens’ portrayal of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* is merely a distillation of all that is wrong with the system.

One character that is closely connected with *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* is Mr. Tulkinghorn, the attorney representing Lady Dedlock in the case. However, he is no ordinary lawyer; he is a protector of the Dedlock family name, first and foremost. When he learns that Lady Dedlock has a scandalous past involving an illegitimate pregnancy, he takes action to make sure that her secret is never revealed because it would surely ruin the long-standing noble reputation of Sir Leicester Dedlock. But Tulkinghorn approaches the task with contempt for Lady Dedlock, and even seems to enjoy tormenting her and blackmailing her. The narrator explains, “it may be that my Lady fears this Tulkinghorn, and that he knows it. It may be that he pursues her doggedly and steadily, with no touch of compunction, remorse, or pity. . . . it may be that my Lady had better have five thousand pairs of fashionable eyes upon her, in distrustful vigilance, than the two eyes of this rusty old lawyer” (357-358). He watches her like a hawk, knowing he could destroy her at any time. Tulkinghorn tells Lady Dedlock’s scandalous story, (with names changed), to a captivated crowd gathered at Chesney Wold who satisfy Tulkinghorn with gasps of shock and horror, as Lady Dedlock listens while frozen, helpless to stop him (506-507).

Later that night, after he has retired to his room, “he is sedately satisfied. Perhaps there is a rather increased sense of power upon him” (507). He thrives on causing her grief, and having power over her. The conversation they later have proceeds:

“I am to drag my present life on, holding its pains at your pleasure, day by day. Am I?”

“Yes, I am afraid so, Lady Dedlock.”

“It is necessary, you think, that I should be so tied to the stake?”

“I am sure that what I recommend is necessary.”

“I am to remain on this gaudy platform, on which my miserable deception has been so long acted, and it is to fall beneath me when you give the signal?”

“Not without notice, Lady Dedlock. I shall take no step without forewarning you.” (512)

Tulkinghorn relishes the power he has over her, and like Chancery’s power over Richard, his power leads to Lady Dedlock’s desperation and death.

But Lady Deadlock is not the only person that Tulkinghorn has the pleasure of tormenting. This is what drives the “who-done-it” aspect of *Bleak House* after Tulkinghorn is murdered. George is another character squeezed by Tulkinghorn, and George describes him as “a confoundedly bad kind of man. He is a slow-torturing kind of man. He is no more like flesh and blood, than a rusty old carbine is. He is a kind of man— by George! —that has caused me more restlessness, and more uneasiness and more dissatisfaction with myself, than all other men put together” (566). Tulkinghorn exercises power over many characters with a smarmy contemptuousness, and arrogant smugness, never a hint of compassion or empathy for anyone.

Equally selfish and manipulative, but lacking any kind of significant power is Harold Skimpole, a longtime friend of John Jarndyce. Always claiming to be as innocent and ignorant as a child, he is a perpetual freeloader. Literary scholar Laura Fasik aptly refers to Skimpole as a “parasitic invader of other people’s homes” (Fasik 140). He takes advantage of those who don’t know his character yet, incurs debts that he can never repay, and manipulates others into paying those debts. When debt collectors track him down he is sure to be with someone who would probably pay the debt for him. He is

delighted to report one day that the debt-collector he calls “Coavinses” has died and will no longer be able to bother him. The situation is all quite amusing to him, and he explains while laughing and playing chords on the piano after each short phrase, “Coavinses had left. Three children. No mother. And that Coavinses’ profession. Being unpopular. The rising Coavinses. Were at a considerable disadvantage” (186). Despite his charming and entertaining personality, he proves over and over again that he thinks of nothing and no one except in terms of how he can use them to maintain his quality of life, which includes much more than the necessities. His desire to be pleased and amused is just as important, and according to him, those who labor and add variety to the world should feel privileged to satisfy him, and he is not shy about admitting it. Esther is disgusted when she hears him explain what he means by this. He offers this example to illustrate his point: “Take the slaves on American plantations. I dare say they are worked hard, I dare say they don’t altogether like it, I dare say theirs is an unpleasant experience on the whole; but they people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me, and perhaps that is one of the pleasanter objects of their existence” (227). Skimpole is entirely incapable of any kind of sympathy or concern for the suffering of others.

Skimpole has no patience for anyone whom he cannot use. When Esther brings seriously ill Jo to Bleak House to make sure he is cared for, Skimpole urges Jarndyce to turn Jo out back to the streets. He justifies his opinion by reasoning that “If you put him out in the road, you only put him where he was before. He will be no worse off than he was, you know. Even make him better off, if you like. Give him six-pence, or five shillings, or five pound ten . . . and get rid of him!” and Esther recalls “the amiable face with which he said it, I think I shall never forget” (384-385). His complete disregard for others extends to his own family, too. His wife and three daughters only have value to him insofar as they are pleasant and amusing. He calls the three girls “Beauty, Comedy, and Sentiment”, and he has taught them to be freeloaders as well. They have acquired no

useful skills and he explains that they all “admire the people who possess the practical wisdom we want; but we don’t quarrel with them. Then why should they quarrel with us? Live, and let live, we say to them. Live upon your practical wisdom, and let us live upon you!” (524-525). His despicable behavior is amplified by the fact that he has raised his children to imitate his ways.

On one occasion, Skimpole expects that a man will be coming to his house to collect a debt, so he arranges a visit to Bleak House for himself and leaves his wife and daughters behind to handle the nuisance. Esther recalls, “he rode away with us in perfect harmony of mind. We had an opportunity of seeing through some open doors, as we went downstairs, that his own apartment was a palace to the rest of the house” (528-529). He manages to maintain his style of living at the expense of his own family.

In later chapters it is revealed that Skimpole latches onto Richard and heavily contributes to Richard’s downfall. As Richard pays for everything for him with borrowed money, he racks up more and more debt. And Skimpole feeds Richard’s insatiable appetite for *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, like a drug dealer provides for addicts, perhaps in hopes of taking advantage of the long-anticipated large settlement that Richard expects to inherit. Esther attempts in vain to convince Skimpole to stop taking advantage of Richard as Richard sinks deeper and deeper into ruin. No amount of pleading could convince Skimpole to behave responsibly and think of the welfare of others.

Mrs. Jellyby, on the other hand, is hyperfocused on the welfare of others, but in a land far away, at the expense of her own family’s welfare. Zealous charity work is all that matters; anything else is trivial and a waste of time and energy. As Mrs. Jellyby is tirelessly engaged in correspondences regarding philanthropic pursuits, “the children tumbled about, and notched memoranda of their accidents in their legs, which were perfect little calendars of distress; and Peepy was lost for an hour and a half” (57), “there was no hot water; but they couldn’t find a kettle, and the boiler was out of order” (39),

and the drawing room fire “smoked to that degree in short, that we all sat coughing and crying with the windows open for half an hour; during which Mrs. Jellyby, with the same sweetness of temper, directed letters about Africa” (40). In the middle of the night Esther opens her eyes to discover the eyes of “a dirty-faced little spectre fixed upon me. Peepy had scaled his crib, and crept down in his bedgown and cap, and was so cold that his teeth were chattering as if he had cut them all” (45). Mrs. Jellyby is so neglectful of her own children that the youngest, shivering, seeks warmth and comfort from a stranger he just met that day instead of going to his mother.

When Caddy Jellyby makes efforts to improve her life, begins to learn new skills, and is engaged to be married, her mother only responds with ridicule and disparagement. Mrs. Jellyby exclaims, “O, you ridiculous child! . . . what a goose you are!” and then to Esther, “can I permit the film of a silly proceeding on the part of Caddy (from whom I expect nothing else), to interpose between me and the great African continent? No. No,” and then to Caddy again, “You really are an absurd girl, . . . you are a nonsensical child . . . and a degenerate child . . . and there is no more to be said” (297). Later, when Caddy and Esther are preparing the house for wedding guests, Mrs. Jellyby is irritated by all of the fuss disrupting her Africa work. Caddy sums up her mother perfectly when she tell Esther “Ma and Africa, together, upset the whole house directly. . . . Ma’s ruinous to everything” (373). And Mr. Jellyby is neglected and ignored by her just as much as the children are. He rarely says a word, and he is so unhappy with the state of his family and home that he offers some telling advice to his daughter, “My dear Caddy!” said Mr. Jellyby, looking slowly round from the wall. It was the first time, I think, I ever heard him say three words together. “My dear Caddy, . . . Never have a mission, my dear child” (373-374). In a very real sense, he mourns the loss of his own marriage, and wishes a better life for his daughter.

Jarndyce once remarks to Esther that “there were two classes of charitable people; one, the people who did little and made a great deal of noise; the other, the people who did a great deal and made no noise at all” (93). For all of the evangelizing about charity from Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, and Reverend Chadband, there is little of use that is actually being done to help those who truly suffer. All of Mrs. Jellyby’s efforts to help the African people of Borrioboola-Gha “turned out a failure in consequence of the king of Borrioboola wanting to sell everybody . . . for rum;” but she quickly shifts her attention to a new cause “the rights of women to sit in parliament, and Caddy tells me it is a mission involving more correspondence than the old one”, so undoubtedly there would be no hope of improvement at home (768).

Mrs. Pardiggle, in her efforts to help those in need of saving, is raising her five boys to be resentful, angry, and bitter. Esther recalls that she “had never seen such dissatisfied children. It was not merely that they were weazen and shrivelled—though they were certainly that too—but they looked absolutely ferocious with discontent” (94). Mrs. Pardiggle forces them to donate all of the little allowances they receive to various charitable causes, and forces them to accompany her on every charitable outing. She strongly disapproves of Mrs. Jellyby’s treatment of her children, not because they are in a terrible state, but because Mrs. Jellyby does not force them all to participate in the philanthropy (94). In Esther’s opinion, Mrs. Pardiggle’s boys are “unnaturally constrained children” (97).

Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, Reverend Chandband, Tulkinghorn and Skimpole are all reprehensible in their hubris and selfishness, causing grief and misery in their wakes.

All Disgust Domains

Up to this point, I have shown how all four disgust domains are present in *Bleak House* and how understanding their unique contributions to the story add depth and enrich our experience as readers. Core disgust examples emphasize the most base physical elicitors—the filth, ooze of bodily waste, putrefaction, and disease—that violate or threaten the health of the body, as shown in the slums of London, Tom-all-Alone’s, and the aftermath of Krook’s death. Animal-reminder disgust examples emphasize the factors that remind people of physical frailty, mortality, and animal nature that violate the outer bodily envelope and threaten the hierarchy of humans above animals, as shown by the various deaths and Phil’s injured and scarred body. Interpersonal disgust examples emphasize the perceived threat of contamination through indirect contact with other people, as shown by Guppy’s reaction to signs of smallpox on Esther’s face. And socio-moral disgust emphasizes intentional cruelty, neglect, abuse, and mercilessness as shown by Mrs. Jellyby, Tulkinghorn, *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, and Skimpole. Now that all four disgust domains have been explored, and a solid understanding of them has been established, the next step is to explore the circumstances that encompass all four domains at once. The richness of Dickens’ writing is apparent in his ability to address the wide range of elicitors—from exposure to putrefaction to grave injustices perpetrated against the innocent—simultaneously.

There are two exemplary settings, or scenes, in *Bleak House* which encompass all disgust domains at once. The first is the cemetery where Nemo’s body is buried in a pauper’s grave. No one who knew of his death knew anything of his past or his family; no one to advocate for him or pay for a better graveyard service. This massively overcrowded and neglected cemetery is the only option. Instead of summarizing Dickens’ description of the awful scene, it would be best to use his exact words. This burying-ground is:

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; while our dear brothers and sisters who hang about official backstairs— would to Heaven they had departed! — are very complacent and agreeable. 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. With houses looking on, on every side, save where a reeking little tunnel of a court gives access to the iron gate— with every villainy of life in action close on death, and every poisonous element of death in action close on life— here, they lower our dear brother down a foot or two: here, sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption: to avenging ghost at many a sick-bedside: a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilization and barbarism walked this boastful island together. (*BH* 137)

When Jo shows Lady Dedlock the cemetery, there is an iron gate preventing them from entering, so it is necessary for Jo to explain with great detail exactly where Nemo was buried. He explains to Lady Dedlock who is taken aback by the “scene of horror,” that Nemo is buried “‘There!’ says Jo, pointing. ‘Over yinder. Among them piles of bones, and close to that there kitchen winder! They put him wery nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you with my broom, if the gate was open. That’s why they locks it, I s’pose,’ giving it a shake. ‘It’s always locked. Look at that rat!’ (202).

The core domain is represented by the infectious diseases, the threat of illness, and the rat. Animal-reminder disgust is represented by the dead bodies (even if they are not immediately visible), the bones, all sights and smells related to death, and the disrespect for the human body. Interpersonal disgust is represented in Jo, and Lady

Dedlock's repulsion of him. The socio-moral domain is represented by the systemic neglect of the poor, and the unsanitary, unjust, and unacceptable conditions of the cemetery. As discussed in the Core + Animal-Reminder section of chapter 3, Dickens was passionate about these awful conditions and he advocated for reform in London for many years. The cemetery is revisited at the conclusion of the search for Lady Dedlock. Esther's account mirrors the previous description, as she explains that she "could see heaps of dishonoured graves and stones, hemmed in by filthy houses, with a few dull lights in their windows, and on whose walls a thick humidity broke out like a disease. . . . the fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everywhere (713-714). This awful cemetery, so full of atrocity, disease, decay, neglect, putrefaction, and disrespect provides a backdrop for one of the most beautiful and elevating moments that I will discuss in the next chapter.

The second scene that encompasses all of the disgust domains is Tom-all-Alone's, a place where abandoned ramshackle buildings are inhabited by the poorest of the poor. I included some pieces of Tom-all-Alone's in earlier disgust sections because they specifically pertained to those sections. However, there is one description of the squallor that is much more complex and includes some of everything. Again, I feel it is appropriate to use Dickens' own words:

Jo lives—that is to say, Jo has not died—in a ruinous place, known to the like of him by the name of Tom-all-Alone's. It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants, who, after establishing their own possession, took to letting them out lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and in; and comes and

goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint that Lord Coodle, and Sir Thomas Doodle, and the Duke of Foodle, and all the fine gentlemen in office, down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years—though born expressly to do it. (197)

As with the cemetery, Tom-all-Alone's is a place packed with disgust elicitors of all kinds; from disease and infection, all the way up to the politicians' willful neglect to make effectual changes despite all of their talk of support for the poor. Every detail about this place is undeniably disgusting.

CHAPTER 4: EVIDENCE OF ELEVATION IN *BLEAK HOUSE*

After all of the focus on everything disgusting and depressing within *Bleak House*, it is a pleasure to finally rise to the top of the disgust-elevation spectrum and focus on everything that is positive and elevating. Now, with a greater understanding and appreciation of all of the complex uses disgust, and the ways in which disgust drives people apart, we can more fully understand and appreciate how elevation uplifts and draws people together.

Bleak House would be bleak indeed, if disgust was its main focus. Even though the book is filled with disgust elicitors, there are countless examples of elevation elicitors—many kind deeds, human goodness, and acts of selflessness and compassion throughout. Most of these acts come and go relatively quickly in the book, and Dickens does not dwell or linger on them for too long. I will not include them all, but instead will focus on a few that are particularly exemplary. There are several “good” characters in *Bleak House*—Esther, John Jarndyce, Allan Woodcourt, and George, just to name a few—and they each contribute to the positivity of the book in unique ways. And there are many examples of human goodness and small acts of kindness between minor characters on the periphery of the story as well. For example, in Chapter XV after the debt collector “Coavinses” dies, and Skimpole delights in his death, there are three young orphaned children. Several of the neighbors living in their building make arrangements to make sure the children are looked after and cared for, several donate small amounts of money when they can, Mr. Gridley often takes the younger two to his apartment to “let them play about,” and the landlady lets them stay in their shabby little apartment rent-free. She tells Jarndyce that “it’s not much to forgive ‘em the rent, sir, who could take it from them!” (190-194). This tight-knit poor community shows great compassion and tenderness for these unfortunate children, despite not having much to give.

The poor, abused brickmakers' wives, Jenny and Liz, are also people who prove their generosity and compassion by looking out for each other. Most notable is the moment after Jenny's small baby dies. Mrs. Pardiggle has just left the house with her five young boys (all oblivious of the suffering therein), and Esther tries to comfort Jenny, covers the baby's lifeless body with her handkerchief, and begins to leave when Liz hurries into the house straight to Jenny. Dickens' words and description of the tragic scene emphasize the beauty that resides within the heartache. Esther recalls:

An ugly woman, very poorly clothed, hurried in while I was glancing at them, and coming straight up to the mother, said, "Jenny! Jenny!" The mother rose on being so addressed, and fell upon the woman's neck. She also had upon her face and arms the marks of ill-usage. She had no kind of grace about her, but the grace of sympathy; but when she condoled with the woman, and her own tears fell, she wanted no beauty. I say condoled, but her only words were "Jenny! Jenny!" All the rest was in the tone in which she said them. I thought it very touching to see these two young women, coarse and shabby and beaten, so united; to see what they could be to one another; to see how they felt for one another; how the heart of each to each was softened by the hard trials of their lives. I think the best side of such people is almost hidden from us. (101)

There is a certain reverence and honor paid here, not just to Jenny and Liz, but for the capacity of humanity to emerge in the midst of terrible circumstances. The close bond that these women share is touching, as Dickens beautifully solicits sympathy through his words, and the thoughts and actions of the characters.

Another example of human kindness is brought to light when Phil recounts how he and George met and became close friends. Phil, in his scarred and awful state, was approached on the street by the strong and handsome soldier. He tells the story like this:

“I didn’t say much to you, commander, then, for I was took by surprise, that a person so strong and healthy and bold as you was, should stop to speak to such a limping bag of bones as I was. But you says to me, says you, delivering it out of your chest as hearty as possible, so that it was like a glass of something hot, ‘What accident have you met with? You have been badly hurt. What’s amiss, old boy? Cheer up, and tell us about it!’”
(328)

George recognized Phil’s worth as a human being, approached him with kindness, and displayed a sense of dignity. George and Phil both prove themselves to be consistently benevolent throughout *Bleak House* as they interact with others and help those in need.

I must also acknowledge the kindness of a few nameless characters who care for Esther during the frantic search for her mother. Esther and Bucket had been travelling by carriage for hours and hours through sleet and snow, the trail was getting cold and the night was coming on, so they decide to stop at a spacious inn. The landlady and her three daughters quickly escort Esther from the freezing carriage to the inn, and to a room where she could rest. Almost immediately, Esther faints, and when she wakes discovers the women watching over her. They provide her with warm food and a chair and table by the fireside. Esther recalls that when the carriage returns, ready for continuing the search, “they took me down, warmed, refreshed, comforted by kindness, and safe (I assured them) not to faint anymore. After I had got in and had taken grateful leave of them all, the youngest daughter . . . got upon the carriage step, reached in, and kissed me. I have never seen her, from that hour, but I think of her to this hour as my friend” (688). I have no doubt that Bucket would have paid the landlady for any services rendered during the brief stop at her inn, but she and her daughters offered Esther so much more than what money

can buy. Their compassion and tender attention buoyed her up, and prevented her from sinking into despair.

During this same search for Lady Dedlock, Sir Leicester Dedlock is at home in Chesney Wold, agitated with worry for her. He has learned of his wife's scandalous past, and despite Dickens' disdainful treatment of the upper and ruling classes, Sir Leicester forgives her without hesitation. He desperately desires her safe return, and emphatically insists that everyone know of his unconditional love for her. He assures all who are present that "I am on unaltered terms with Lady Dedlock. That I assert no cause whatever of complaint against her. That I have ever had the strongest affection for her, and that I retain it undiminished" (698). His sincere and unexpected declaration of love for her makes it all the more tragic when she is found dead at the awful cemetery. Sir Leicester's unexpected goodness continues in that he warmly welcomes George back into his home, and offers both George and Phil employment at Chesney Wold.

Esther, despite her overall saccharine presence, is commendable for her consistent desire to always be useful and good to others. In her childhood she becomes a beloved teacher and caregiver of young girls in a boarding school, she cares for the Jellyby children, Charley, and Jo, she looks out for Richard's best interests, graciously cares for Jarndyce and Bleak House, and she is a kind and generous friend to Ada and Caddy. In fact, she is consistently honorable, trustworthy, dutiful, and virtuous (to a fault according to some critics). Therefore, I will not spend too much time on Esther because her acts of kindness and compassion are not unexpected.

One effect of Esther's kindness that I must mention, is her tender care for the Jellyby children who are terribly neglected by their mother. Ada tells Jarndyce all about Esther's care of the children, and says, "Esther was their friend directly. Esther nursed them, coaxed them to sleep, washed and dressed them, told them stories, kept them quiet, bought them keepsakes . . . she softened poor [Caddy], the eldest one, so much" (62).

Esther fills a gaping hole that exists in the lives of these children, goes beyond meeting just a few of their immediate temporal needs, but offers sweet attention to each of the children individually and as a family. All of this is more moving in light of the fact that Mrs. Jellyby is always there in the home, not once thinking of her children, or even acknowledging or thanking Esther for her help. Esther's goodness is elevating to the reader, and has just as strong an effect on Caddy who is inspired to change her life for the better.

Caddy is a wonderful example of a character who is born into a situation that is stifling, discouraging, and belittling, in addition to the filth and malnourishment. Upon meeting Esther, something is sparked within her that motivates her to get out and create a better life for herself and, by extension, her family. In a very real sense, her actions of self-improvement, when viewed collectively, elicit elevation. Caddy, with her little brother Peepy in tow, visits Esther, and with tears in her eyes explains,

We are going on just as bad as ever . . . I have no peace of my life. Talk of Africa! . . . I am quite worn out. . . . I detest the whole thing so, that that alone makes my head ache till I can't see out of my eyes. And look at that poor unfortunate child! Was there ever such a fright as he is! . . . Pa will be a bankrupt before long, . . . and Ma don't care about anything, . . . I am not going to bear it, I am determined. (166-167)

She proves her determination in many significant ways, starting first and foremost by dismissing her mother's disparaging comments, and then beginning dance lessons. She becomes more independent, develops relationships with others, gets married, learns homemaking skills, learns to teach dance lessons and play musical instruments, and helps manage the dance studio with her husband. Her new married life is not without its challenges, but she maintains a gracious attitude and she is happy to frequently welcome her father and Peepy into her home. Because of her diligence and perseverance, she is

able to create the peaceful and loving home that she never had as a child, and finds self-confidence, poise, and joy in her life. As Esther describes Caddy's efforts, "she had struck out a natural, wholesome, loving course of industry and perseverance that was quite as good as a Mission", recalling Mr. Jellyby's sound advice (474). Accounts such as these, even fictional ones, have the power to inspire and give hope to those who witness them.

John Jarndyce is another benevolent character whose kindness and generosity are consistent from beginning to end. Before Esther, Ada, and Richard arrive at Bleak House as orphans, they receive notes from Jarndyce, who assures them that they will be welcomed not as strangers, but as though they have always known each other. His note to Esther reads, "I look forward my dear, to our meeting easily, and without constraint on either side. I therefore have to propose that we meet as old friends, and take the past for granted. It will be a relief to you possibly, and to me certainly, and so my love to you" (58). Since Esther knew very little of Jarndyce except that he lent a generous hand in her childhood affairs and education, this is the first time he contacts her personally, more kind and welcoming than she ever could have imagined. When they finally arrive, with racing heartbeats and confusion, at Jarndyce's door, he exclaims, "I rejoice to see you!" as he leads them into the warm house, kissing the two girls "in a fatherly way" (60). Jarndyce is a long-time bachelor with no obligation to take these three young people into his house and act as a legal guardian, but he happily does so without ulterior motives and no need or desire to be lavished with gratitude and praise from anyone.

Jarndyce proves his kindness again and again throughout the book. In addition to opening his home and taking on the role of guardian to three orphans, he chronically opens his home and his wallet to Mr. Skimpole who inappropriately takes advantage, and he rescues Richard from destitution more than once, he makes arrangements for the three Neckett children (the orphaned "Coavinses" children) to be cared for and educated, and

Dickens hints that Jarndyce is a supporter of Mrs. Jellyby's (and other charity organizers') philanthropic efforts. But his most significant unexpected act of kindness, which provides the book with great resolution and satisfaction, is when he releases Esther from their engagement and presents the Yorkshire Bleak House as a gift to her and Allan Woodcourt. As soon as Esther realizes what Jarndyce has done, she "clasped him round the neck, and hung my head upon his breast, and wept" (752). He tells her how and when he came to know that she truly loved Woodcourt, and that it would only be selfishness on his part keeping her from him. Resolving to be a bachelor again, he sacrifices his own desires for her sake.

There is another type of elevation in *Bleak House* that deserves discussion, although it involves acts of goodness of a different kind than the other examples. This type of elevation elicitor is all about reunion and forgiveness. The first reunion occurs between Esther and her mother, Lady Dedlock. Esther grew up since birth in the care of a godmother who repeatedly said, "Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. . . . Forget your mother" (19). But Esther's desire to know her mother lingers through the years until they finally meet. At first glance, Lady Dedlock sparks a stirring in Esther's soul. She describes the startling encounter by saying, "Shall I ever forget the rapid beating at my heart . . . those handsome proud eyes seemed to spring out of their languor, and to hold mine! I never knew the beautiful face quite well, in that short space of time. And, very strangely, there was something quickened within me, associated with the lonely days at my godmother's" (224). Esther knows that something profound is happening, but she can't describe or figure out what it is exactly. As for Lady Dedlock, she never knew that Esther survived after the birth, and only learns the truth later when Guppy is putting together the pieces of Esther's past and meets with Lady Dedlock for confirmation of their connection.

Of course, Lady Dedlock cannot publicly confess that she is Esther's mother, but she is visibly shaken when Guppy presents her with what he knows already. Guppy "sees a tremor pass across her frame like a ripple over water, sees her lips shake, sees her compose them by a great effort, sees her force herself back to the knowledge of his presence, and of what he has said" (362). As soon as Guppy leaves and she has a moment of privacy, she is at liberty to drop her usually stony façade and let her raw emotions take over, and there is a "cry in the house, going upward from a wild figure on its knees. 'O my child, my child! Not dead in the first hours of her life, as my cruel sister told me; but sternly nurtured by her, and after she had renounced me and my name! O my child, O my child!'" (364). Lady Dedlock is overwhelmed by this revelation.

Not long after this revelation, Esther is sick with smallpox and nearly dies, after which Lady Dedlock takes advantage of an opportunity to speak with her privately to confess that she is Esther's mother and to ask for her forgiveness. And even though Lady Dedlock insists the truth can never be made public and they can never have contact again (for fear of staining the good reputation of the Dedlock family name, and the power that Tulkinghorn held over her), there is a joy and intense bittersweet satisfaction in the moment they are reunited. Esther recalls, "my heart overflowed with love for her, . . . I held her in my embrace, and she held me in hers," and they weep together (449). At last, Esther knows the truth of her birth, and the warmth of her mother's love and Lady Dedlock knows of Esther's love and forgiveness.

The second reunion involves George, who as a young man left his family to join the army, and for many years never came back or even wrote letters because he felt that he would bring disgrace to the family. Coincidentally, he, like Lady Dedlock, fears tainting his family name while under Tulkinghorn's rigid grip. George is in jail, having been arrested for the murder of Tulkinghorn, and he refuses any legal assistance because he would rather hang than have a lawyer arrange a plea deal in which he claims guilt for a

crime he did not commit. Without George's knowledge, his close friend Mrs. Bagnet seeks his mother's help. His mother happens to be the housekeeper, Mrs. Rouncewell, at Chesney Wold of the Dedlock family. Mrs. Rouncewell is overjoyed to learn of George and to be reunited with him after so many years. When Mrs. Bagnet brings her to the jail, George's mother is overwhelmed as she

stands looking at him as he writes on, all unconscious, and only her fluttering hands give utterance to her emotions. But they are eloquent; very, very eloquent. . . . They speak of gratitude, of joy, of grief, of hope; on inextinguishable affection, cherished with no return since this stalwart man was a stripling; of a better son loved less, and this son loved so fondly and so proudly; and they speak in such touching language, . . . The trooper starts up, clasps his mother round the neck, and falls down on his knees before her. 'Mother, forgive me first of all, for I know my need of it.' Forgive him! She does it with all her heart and soul. She has always done it. She tells him how she has had it written in her will, these many years, that he was her beloved son George. She has never believed any ill of him, never. (657-658)

After so many years of feeling guilty and unworthy of connection with his family, at last George is reunited with his mother, and shortly thereafter he is also reunited with his brother. When the brother sees George he "calls him by name, and grasps him by both hands," to which George responds "I never could have thought you would have been half so glad to see me as all this," and "they shake hands, and embrace each other, over and over again" (743). On both occasions George is welcomed with open arms in love and gratitude, and he discovers how much he is loved and forgiven.

The third reunion is not so much physical one, but a mental, or perhaps emotional one. Throughout *Bleak House*, Richard gradually distances himself from Jarndyce,

Esther, and even Ada as he is drawn deeper and deeper into Chancery. He becomes increasingly distrustful of Jarndyce until he will have almost no contact with him. He never quite dismisses Esther, but he can't talk to her openly or honestly because he knows he is ignoring her advice. Ada remains by his side throughout, but he is so consumed by *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* that he ignores her pleas for him to give it up, and even squanders all of her money. And yet, she faithfully stands by him simply to be *one* thing in his life that he hasn't lost.

In the end, when *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* is finally dissolved and gone, and Richard is dying, the reality of his estrangement becomes clear. As Jarndyce tells him, "My dear Rick, the clouds have cleared away, and it is bright now. We can see now" (762). Richard sincerely apologizes to Ada and asks her for forgiveness, and as Esther recounts, "a smile irradiated his face, as she bent to kiss him. He slowly laid his face down upon her bosom, drew his arms closer round her neck, and with one parting sob began the world. Not this world, O not this! The world that sets this right" (763). The oppressive dark cloud has lifted, Richard returns to his senses, wrongs are acknowledged, forgiveness is given, he returns to the embrace of those who love him, and Esther hints at the justice and rest to be found in the next life.

Even though there is tragedy in the scene, it still evokes a sense of relief since there was ongoing worry and grave concern for Richard's wellbeing for so long. At last he is at rest and free from the chains of Chancery. This account of Richard, and Esther's and George's reunions with their mothers, are unified by forgiveness, which in its own way is an act of deep goodness. As confirmed by Jonathan Haidt, although forgiveness is not a physical act of service per se, it certainly is often unexpected and received with profound gratitude, and therefore acts as a clear elicitor of elevation for those who witness such an occasion.

Allan Woodcourt deserves to be recognized here as well. He is a character who is kind and caring with everyone with whom he comes in contact. He is a physician, especially interested in helping the poor, and he is unafraid to be in contact with disease, filth, infection, and other unsanitary conditions. He is a familiar sight in Tom-all-Alone's, and "in his bright eye there is compassionate interest; and as he looks here and there, he seems to understand such wretchedness, and to have studied it before" (553). He speaks to the poor in a dignified way, and his care is appreciated. His patients include old Miss Flite, Caddy, the brickmaker Jenny, Richard, and poor Jo. When Jo is at his worst, with nowhere to go because his presence is not welcome anywhere, Woodcourt discovers him looking "like a growth of fungus or any unwholesome excrescence produced there in neglect and impurity" and says, "come with me, and I will find you a better place than this to lie down and hide in" (556, 559). In great contrast to Reverend Chadband, Woodcourt's compassion and kindness are genuine and sincerely appreciated.

That better place ends up being George's home. George agrees to let Jo stay and rest. George's friend Phil washes the filthy young boy, dresses him in some decent clean clothes, and Phil and George make sure he is comfortably resting on a shabby bed (567). Instead of dying like a sick dog in a dank dirty alley, Jo is clean and cozy, safe and warm. His only wish before he dies is for Snagsby to make sure everyone knows that he never meant to pass on his illness to Esther, and that he is very sorry and hopes to be forgiven (569-570).

Despite being an illiterate and destitute orphan crossing-sweep, he is one of the most grateful characters in the book, even if his means of showing gratitude are meager. He sits on the steps of a religious organization to eat his breakfast one morning, "and gives it a brush when he is finished, as an acknowledgement of the accommodation" (198). There is another, much more significant, scene where Jo offers a similar gesture. In the beginning of the book, Nemo is introduced as a poor law-writer who is kind to Jo in

the streets. Sometimes Nemo would give Jo a little bit of money, and on other days he would say “I am as poor as you to-day, Jo” (135). Nemo’s kindness means a great deal to Jo, and Jo expresses his gratitude after Nemo is dead and barely buried in that awful cemetery, as discussed previously. This somber scene is the only one in the 770 pages of *Bleak House* that Dickens writes in a manner that could be poetry. Poetic line breaks are not in the original text, but I have added line breaks to emphasize the poetic nature of these lines:

Come night, come darkness, for you cannot come too soon,
Or stay too long, by such a place as this!
Come straggling lights into the windows of the ugly houses;
And you who do iniquity therein,
Do it at least with this dread scene shut out!
Come, flame or gas, burning so sullenly above the iron gate,
On which the poisoned air deposits its witch-ointment slimy to the touch!
It is well that you should call to every passer-by, “Look here!”

With the night, comes a slouching figure
Through the tunnel court, to the outside of the iron gate.
It holds the gate with its hands, and looks between the bars;
Stands looking in for a while.

It then, with an old broom it carries,
Softly sweeps the step, and makes the archway clean.
It does so very busily and trimly;
Looks in again, a little while; and so departs.

Jo, is it thou? Well, well!
 Though a rejected witness, "who can't exactly say"
 What will be done to him in greater hands than men's,
 Thou art not quite in outer darkness.
 There is something like a distant ray of light
 In thy muttered reason for this:
 "He was wery good to me, he wos!" (137-138)

Just as Jo, amidst the disgusting grime of the cemetery, offers a humble tribute, a genuine act of charity, to Nemo in the only way he is able, Dickens honors Jo with words and language worthy of his goodness and innocence. There is intense beauty in Jo's lonely act of kindness, and beauty in Dickens' act of describing it, neither of which are witnessed by anyone but the reader, who is quietly welcomed into a private, wonderful moment.

Acts of selflessness, generosity, compassion, honor, reunions, love, and forgiveness, as beautifully depicted in *Bleak House*, while serving as literary devices to advance plot and add depth to characters, are all elicitors of elevation. And at the same time, they give a sense of hope to the reader; a reminder of the capacity for humankind to rise above physical and/or moral filth, and selfish desires, to reach out for the benefit of others.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The old family home known as Bleak House, belonging to John Jarndyce, was originally known as the Peaks. Tom Jarndyce, the previous occupant, renamed it Bleak House during his downward spiral, drowning in the pernicious addiction of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*. Under Tom's stewardship, "the place became dilapidated, the wind whistled through the cracked walls, the rain fell through the broken roof, the weeds choked the passage to the rotting door. . . . it was so shattered and ruined" (*BH* 89). The very house has a dark history of rot, decay, neglect, addiction, suicide, and ruin. It is symbolic of many aspects of the novel that shares its name; the filth and putrefaction of Tom-all-Alone's and the cemetery, the evidence of tribulation and suffering in mortality, the aftermath of death, the depravity of some characters, and the cruel neglect of others.

Bleak House, the novel, as a whole is an elicitor of elevation, and so is John Jarndyce's Bleak House. On Esther's first full day in the house, after finding it strange and mysterious, she comments that "from rough outsides . . . serene and gentle influences often proceed" (*BH* 85). This same thought is applicable to many elements of the novel. Dickens scholar Robert Tracy argues that "Bleak House is *Bleak House*, with its unexpected twists and turns of plot . . . and its odd, unexpected interludes" (Tracy 383). Indeed, both the house and the novel have much in common, being well acquainted with misery and disgust, Bleak House and *Bleak House* rise above and transcend the degeneracy, and leave the reader elevated.

Dickens and many of his contemporaries wrote and published several great novels during the 1840s and 50s: *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Vanity Fair*, *Mary Barton*, *David Copperfield*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Moby Dick*, just to name a few. Through these novels and many more, writers were able to emphasize various topics (which previously were largely untouched) such as the intricacies of shifting social structures, self-identity, and the suffering of the poor. But *Bleak House* stands apart from the rest in one

significant way. Dickens scholar Norman Page makes the argument that in *Bleak House* Dickens surpasses the other novels of the time in complexity and importance by doing “something that none of the others attempted or even contemplated doing, and that was to give a full picture of English society and a revelation of what it is that keeps people apart and binds them together” (17). This concept motivated and informed my research.

Analysis of disgust and elevation in *Bleak House* is essentially analysis not only of what pushes people apart and what draws them together, but also that it is possible to transcend the influence of disgust and to be profoundly elevated in spite of it, which in turn draws people closer.

A gritty and disgusting realism pervades *Bleak House*—from the filth of London streets and slums, to the diseases and deaths of all classes of people, to the atrocious behaviors of individuals, and systemic injustices of Chancery and the ruling class—and manifests itself in the characters, settings, and circumstances. I agree with Lougy on the subject of such filth, in that “*Bleak House* makes it impossible for us to ignore it, for from its opening pages, it rubs our noses in this quotidien muck. . . Things in *Bleak House* are variously slimy, sticky, runny—oozing through the crevasses and cracks of a decaying world whose surface has been pockmarked by escaping gases and the viscous liquids of putrefaction” (Lougy 477). It provides a stark contrast upon which elevation can be thrust into the spotlight to be fully appreciated. It serves an important purpose beyond that of literary device to advance plot, or for Dickens to demonstrate his intimate knowledge of the conditions and injustices of 19th century London to add credibility and believability to his fiction. Both of those purposes are worthy of discussion and criticism, as Mazaheri, Lougy, Tracy and other literary scholars have shown. However, the significance I bring to light here is that of elevation’s role in affecting readers and society in positive and prosocial ways.

Some of the most uplifting and beautiful moments in *Bleak House* occur when elevation is experienced in the midst of disgust. As Laura Fasick explains how disgust plays an important role in this sense, In these moments, characters suspend their disgust response in order to help someone in need—like Woodcourt caring for Jo, or to honor someone important—like Jo does for Nemo, to be strong in facing challenges and to lift others or even oneself out of harmful or toxic situations—like Jenny or Caddy, or to recognize and acknowledge someone’s worth and dignity—like George does for Phil.

Each of the characters in *Bleak House* handle disgust in different ways and they exhibit varying degrees of sensitivity to it. In his book, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Ian Miller explains that “to feel disgust is human and humanizing. Those who have very high thresholds of disgust and are hence rather insensitive to the disgusting we think of as belonging to somewhat different categories: protohuman like children, subhuman like the mad, or suprahuman like saints” (Miller 11). Jo, living in and around nothing but filth and disease, would be in the protohuman category. Little Miss Flite, the old mad woman of Chancery, resides in the subhuman category. And characters like Esther and Woodcourt, who are able to see past the disgust and offer help and comfort to the people in the first two categories, are saintlike, and therefore suprahuman. However, people are, in reality, much more complex than those three categories suggest. As Dickens demonstrates in *Bleak House*, the more saintlike characters are not the only ones capable of seeing past the disgust and exhibiting elicitors of elevation through their good works. And, as Laura Fasick explains, characters acting benevolently in the midst of disgust is vital because “it proves examples of nobility for others to follow, gives scope for people’s goodness, and reinforces bonds of affection” (Fasick 140). This idea is proven to be true, just as psychologists have shown in their research.

Jonathan Haidt’s article “The Positive Emotion of Elevation” explains that when the participants of their studies “saw unexpected acts of goodness, they commonly

described themselves as being surprised, stunned, and emotionally moved. Their descriptions imply that cognitive structures were changing under the surface — changing their views about humanity in a more optimistic way and triggering more prosocial goals for themselves. When asked “Did the feeling give you any inclination toward doing something?” the most common response was to describe generalized desires to help others and to become a better person.” (3). The broader implications of elevation have also been shown in studies, and the researchers note that “elevation is particularly interesting because of its power to spread, thereby potentially improving entire communities. If elevation increases the likelihood that a witness to good deeds will soon become a doer of good deeds, then elevation sets up the possibility for the same sort of “upward spiral” for a group” that is possible for individuals (4).

This motivation to be better and do better, to reach out into society in positive ways, is desirable for people as individuals and as members of communities. Life is, and always has been, full of various challenges, suffering, and hardships—some of our own making and some through no fault of our own—and elevation is one powerful aspect of human nature that can help lighten burdens, reduce anger and fear, and lift people to a higher standard of living and giving, strengthening bonds of family and friendship, drawing people together.

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