

“The Tough Subject”: Jo’s Dual Nature in *Bleak House*

In *Bleak House*, Dickens takes on the problem of London’s innumerable poor class. Inspiring empathy for a huge demographic becomes difficult; the reader is confronted with too many faces to make a human connection. Enter Jo, the honest little crossing-sweeper who stands in for his entire class. My paper examines the thin line Jo walks between individual and symbol, examining works of criticism and Dickens’s own encounters with the poor to determine how Dickens created a character who, despite the small role he plays in the novel, managed to inspire public outcry and social change after his fictional death.

In *Bleak House*, Dickens does not shy away from the enormity and complexity of the problem of the London poor. He never quantifies the amount of people in his miserable slum, Tom-all-Alone's, leaving it instead as a massive crowd too big to comprehend. It is too overwhelming an issue on which to comment and about which to make the reader care when the subject is innumerable and, by consequence of its enormity, faceless. To resolve this difficulty and to give himself a vehicle for commentary, Dickens breaks the problem down and condenses the mass into one person: Jo. The little street-sweeper, appearing out of nowhere and, as he himself says, knowing “nothink” (218), from his first appearance to his death seems to be an ideal figure through whom Dickens may channel his commentary regarding the London poor and his criticisms on the society that has allowed such poverty to persist. However, it is as difficult to inspire empathy for a puppet as it is for a faceless crowd, and any feeling that can be aroused for a hollow man is, in itself, hollow. The final blow Dickens deals in Jo's death is one of the book's most wrenching moments, but it could not be so if Jo were all symbol and synecdoche; he must be an individual as well, imbued with the kind of defining characteristics that undermine the generality needed to make him the face of the masses. In him Dickens creates an elastic tension between Jo's roles as a singular individual and one who is meant to represent the whole of his class.

Dickens was not the first or the last journalist to be concerned with the plight of London's massive body of poor people. The critic Emily Steinlight writes that Victorian publications were saturated with “investigative journalism, sociological analysis, ethnographic narratives, and medical studies of England's urban poor” (243). James Greenwood, John Hollingshead, and Henry Mayhew, among others, wrote considerably on the subject. Greenwood, who wrote

several years after Dickens's *Bleak House* had already been published, found the number of street-dwellers to be somewhat overwhelming. In talking about “street prowlers”—his term for London's street children—Greenwood initially puts their number at about one hundred thousand (2), but later says that “to tell their number is out of the question. It is as incomprehensible as is their nature” (12). Henry Mayhew estimates the number of “costermongers”—that is, street-sellers—to be around 30,000 people—which is 28,000 more than the latest census had recorded (Volume I, 5). He explains this by noting that “not one in twenty” of the costermongers had filled out the form, being either unable to read it or merely distrustful of its eventual use (*ibid.*). Of crossing-sweepers alone, Henry Mayhew observes that “it is difficult to reckon up the number of crossing-sweepers in London...in the principal thoroughfares, nearly every street has its crossing and attendant” (Volume III, 467). Attempting to take a census of a class whose members often lack a consistent address is ineffectual, and counting them is nearly impossible because the urban “Arabs” are so named because they do not stay in the same place (Greenwood 9). Estimates were made by some, but the popular journalistic opinion seems to be that the crowd of the London poor was too big to quantify.

Dickens's own works convey a sense of this unquantifiable quality of London's lowest class. Steinlight points out that Dickens fills *Bleak House* and his other novels with “supernumeraries” to create a feeling of overcrowding, one in which the very background is densely populated by people the reader cannot see (230). While these supernumeraries do not wholly belong to the poor class, the poor are certainly among that body: Dickens gives no scope of their number. His essay “On Duty with Inspector Field,” a forerunner to *Bleak House* containing the character off of whom Inspector Bucket is supposedly modeled, follows the

inspector through London's seedy underbelly, which is teeming with eyes and bodies. Even within closed spaces, such as St. Giles's Church, Dickens cannot number the assembled crowd: "Ten, twenty, thirty—who can count them!" ("On Duty"). The masses are overflowing the building and the streets; one cannot even attempt to count them.

Such an enormous crowd exceeds the bounds of comprehension just as it surpasses one's field of vision; one cannot hold it all in one's sights or consideration at once, especially if no number can be ascribed to it. When asked to take in a mass that resists quantification, the best one can do is reach a vague acceptance: Dickens might say a sort of dreamy acknowledgment. Two of his notable slum scenes place crowds and dreams together. The first, in "On Duty with Inspector Field," a "dream of baleful faces attends to the door" of the tramps' lodging-house the inspector's party must visit. In the fictional counterpart of this episode, the party led by Inspector Bucket encounters a similar experience. As Inspector Bucket, Constable Darby, and Mr. Snagsby search through the slums for Jo, they stand aside as "the fever"—a victim of disease—passes in the street followed by a swarm of slum-dwellers. Dickens's description communicates just how hard it is to put a finger on the mass that is Tom-all-Alone's:

As the unseen wretch goes by, the crowd, leaving that object of attraction, hovers round the three visitors, like a dream of horrible faces, and fades away up alleys and into ruins, and behind walls; and with occasional cries and shrill whistles of warning, thenceforth flits about them until they leave the place. (Dickens 307)

It is a nightmarish, ethereal description. The crowd moves as a single, confusing entity. Rather like a ghost, indistinct and capable of dispersing and disappearing as quickly as it comes, it leaves the reader with no clear image of what has just been described. On the three visitors, it

leaves no more impression than an unpleasant “dream”—or nightmare. Though there are “faces” among the masses in the slums, none of them stand out as distinct from any other; rather than individuals, they seem like forms that have emerged from the larger body only to get sucked back into the crowd again.

Enter Jo. He appears first at the death inquest of Captain Hawdon, known as “Nemo” or “No One,” and he appears so abruptly that he seems to have been created on the spot:

Name, Jo. Nothing else he knows on. Don't know that everybody has two names. Never heard of sich a think...Spell it? No. *He* can't spell it. No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. What's home? Knows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom, or about the lie, but knows both. Can't exactly say what'll be done to him arter he's dead if he tells a lie to the gentlemen here, but believes it'll be something wery bad to punish him, and serve him right—so he'll tell the truth. (147)

He has no name, no family, no background, and he professes to “know nothink” (218). He scrounges his daily bread by means of sweeping the crossings, one of the common methods of begging for the London poor (Blount 338), and his only friend is “No One” (Dickens 147). Dickens's description of Jo is a list of negations, strongly contrasting with the crammed and detailed biography Mrs. Piper gives of herself just before Jo is brought forth. Nothing in Jo's account of himself, besides a simple and instinctual inclination to honesty, is revealed about him as something that he *has* rather than what he has not. He seems to have emerged from the milieu of Tom-all-Alone's not as *a* face, but *the* face of his class. Indeed, Dickens begins to provide social commentary for the class right from Jo's introduction, making the pointed assertion that Jo

is the only person “No One” befriended (147).

However, he is not simply a generalized embodiment of his class. While Jo's role as a face for the masses is an important and effective one, some critics overlook his simultaneous role as a singular character. In her essay about Dickens's supernumeraries, Steinlight argues that Jo is a “walking synecdoche” or an “avatar” for the crowd of Tom-all-Alone's (236). In regards to his role in the novel's plot, Steinlight says that Jo “fulfills his transformative function” not as a character, but as a “means of contagion” (238). Trevor Blount grants Jo a little more individuality by labeling him a “multifunctional unit” of “victim, scourge, and indictment,” but he ultimately asserts that Jo is more symbol than character (236-237). In doing so, however, the critics fall into the same line of thinking that Dickens criticizes in the characters of *Bleak House*. In order for Jo's death to carry the weight it does, the reader must be made to care for him as an individual, rather than as a synecdochical stand-in for his class. This is not to say that Jo is not a symbol of his class; it is only to say that Jo cannot be *purely* symbol. Theorist R. Radhakrishnan, in contemplating the role of literary theory, puts the question in a different way: How does one “access our general human condition despite our perspectival differences” (792)? In other words, is it possible to convey generalities through the experience of individuals? Dickens accomplishes this in Jo. Jo must be general enough to allow for commentary on behalf of his entire class while remaining enough of an individual to win the affection and empathy of the reader.

In making Jo general enough to be the face of his class, Dickens chooses a well-known London archetype for his character. The figure of the crossing-sweeper was as familiar in London as the fog in the air and the mud in the streets. As Mr. Mayhew observed, “There are few squares without a couple of these pathway scavengers; and in the more respectable squares, such

as Cavendish or Portman, every corner has been seized upon” (Volume III, 467). Although the position of a crossing sweeper was not restricted to any gender or age demographic, as early as 1804 the depictions of crossing-sweepers in Victorian media had assumed an archetypal form: a boy—on the younger side, not past his early teens—barefoot, dirty, and clutching a broom (Bills 301). This is the figure Jo cuts: with “his broom under his arm, [Jo] leads the way; passing deftly, with his bare feet, over the hard stones, and through the mud and mire” (Dickens 222). By the time Dickens chose crossing sweeping as the occupation for Jo, the crossing sweeper had become a satirical figure of which he was the sometimes the butt of the joke and sometimes the agent of ridicule. Crossing sweepers appeared in comic journals like *Punch* as “recurrent figures of fun” (303). When he takes the floor at the Inquest, Jo is already a well-known figure in popular London art and literature. Even Jo's personality is archetypal: his simple inclination to honesty is a marked trait of the crossing sweeper class as a whole. Mayhew says they are “among the most honest of the London poor” (Volume III, 467).

As an archetype, Jo's character is boiled down to the few basic traits that are associated with the crossing sweepers. Dickens, however, complicates this simple portrayal of Jo by subverting the archetype. Mayhew divides the crossing sweepers into two categories: the “casual” and the “regular” (Volume III, 467). While the “regulars” have crossings that they frequent and occupy for years on end, the “casuals” include the sweepers who appear only sporadically and “the boys who, broom in hand, travel about the streets, sweeping before the foot-passengers or stopping an hour at one place, and then, if not fortunate, moving on to another” (467). Jo, interestingly, has been both. He could not have struck up his friendship with Captain Hawdon had he not had a regular crossing at which Hawdon could have run into him

frequently. Jo is known in his neighborhood to sweep “the crossing down the lane over the way round the corner” (Dickens 147). It is his established spot, but by the time the novel catches up with him next Jo is a wanderer. As a wanderer, culturally Jo would be likely to join up with a group of sweeps his own age, with whom he would work the crossings (Volume III, 467). Jo, however, is friends with Nobody; he sweeps the crossings alone. The picture Mayhew conveys of the juvenile crossing-sweepers is of plucky scamps who, despite their hardship, are able to work in fun by banding together and “tumbling” for coins at the opera (499). This is not Jo's reality at all. There are no opportunities for fun for Dickens's little crossing sweeper. Rather than allow Jo to continue the tradition of slightly comic crossing-sweepers, which would not do well to inspire empathy for Jo's class, Dickens tweaks his portrayal and makes Jo piteous rather than laughable. By straying away from the other patterns of crossing sweepers, Dickens makes Jo general enough to stand in not just for the crossing-sweeper demographic but for the rest of the crowd in Tom-All-Along's.

While the subverting of the crossing sweeper archetype takes a step toward making Jo more specific than general, it is important to note, that Jo is not purely a product of Dickens's imagination. He is, in fact, based off of boys that Dickens observed and wrote about in his journalistic endeavors. Certain passages of *Bleak House* seem to have been lifted right out of Dickens's prior writings in order to be reapplied to Jo. Trevor Blount, in his article “Poor Jo, Education, and the Problem of Juvenile Delinquency,” points out the similarities between Jo, once he has contracted smallpox, and a sick lad that Dickens encounters in a “Ragged School” on London's Farringdon Street (Blount 337; “A Sleep to Startle Us”). The “burning cheeks” and “bright glazed eyes” of the orphan boy at the Ragged School resonate strongly in Jo's “lustrous

eyes” as he shakes with fever (“A Sleep to Startle Us”; Dickens 424).

Both Blount's article and Mark Bills's analysis of William Powell Frith's painting, *The crossing sweeper*, gloss the figure of George Ruby as an “original” for Jo (337; 304). Ruby, called to testify in the case of an assault on a police officer, provides what sounds like the forerunner to Jo's interview at the Inquest:

Alderman Humphery: Well, do you know what you are about? Do you know what an oath is? Boy: No. Alderman: Can you read? Boy: No. Alderman: Do you ever say your prayers? Boy: No; never. Alderman: Do you know what prayers are? Boy: No. Alderman: Do you know what God is? Boy: No. Alderman: Do you know what the devil is? Boy: I've heard of the devil, but I don't know him. Alderman: What do you know? Boy: I knows how to sweep the crossings. Alderman: And that's all? Boy: That's all. I sweeps a crossing. The alderman said that in all his experience he had never met with anything like the deplorable ignorance of the poor unfortunate child in the witness-box. (“Household Narrative,” 7)

Ruby's interview results, just like Jo, in his evidence being discounted on the grounds of his ignorance and on the grounds that he is “a creature who [knows] nothing whatever of the obligation to tell the truth” (3); this is the “terrible depravity” of which the Coroner charges Jo (Dickens 147). They are ignorant in similar areas—George Ruby can no more read than Jo can spell out the two letters of his name—and the only thing either boy knows for certain is how to sweep a crossing. Side by side, the boys might be mirror images: one real, one fictional. The close parallels between their speeches and circumstances strongly suggest that Ruby was—at least in part—Jo's real-world model.

Even Jo's creation, then, suggests his dual role in *Bleak House* as symbol and individual. As an archetype Jo stands for the entirety of his class of crossing sweepers. In subverting the archetype of the crossing sweeper and taking away some of the more specific details, Dickens makes it so that Jo can stand for a wider demographic: the whole of Tom-All-Along's. But in basing Jo's character—or at least some of his speech and appearance—off of a handful of real people, Dickens ties Jo to the status of an individual. He is the general and the individual melded together, functioning as the face of the masses even as he channels a single boy in a Ragged School or a young crossing sweeper who is laughed out of court. Jo is rarely equal parts synecdoche and individual—one side must be more dominant than the other in order for Dickens to comment upon the way Victorian society handled its poor class or to coax pity for the crossing sweeper out of his readers—but neither is he purely one or the other.

Many critics note that Jo's role in the novel, aside from acting as a synecdoche for his class, is one of a unifying force. While he is not the main character or by any means the most important, almost every character in each of the social spheres has a run-in with Jo, and the plot is organized in a way that makes Jo the linchpin. This kind of analysis is a short step away from demeaning Jo to the position of a plot device, but what saves him from this is that the plot is dependent upon his relationship with Captain Hawdon, or “Nemo.” Friendships are not conducted between symbols or between collective masses; although people may use the word metaphorically to describe relationships between two bodies—such as a “friendship” between nations—an actual friendship is conducted between two people. Though the word “friend” does not explicitly pass between Jo and Captain Hawdon, it is implied in that neither of them has anyone else to call by that name. Nemo seeks Jo out and gives him money when he can spare it,

and asks Jo personal questions (148). When Nemo dies, Jo weeps and wishes he could thank him for all that Nemo has done for him; later he includes a personal touch in sweeping the archway of the graveyard where Nemo is buried (148, 150). In order for Jo to mourn for Nemo in such a way, he must be an individual. His relationship with Nemo makes Jo very desirable or dangerous for the rest of the book: though he professes to “know nothink,” Jo holds the knowledge that gives Tulkinghorn power over Lady Dedlock and Guppy the clue to Esther's parentage—knowledge so dangerous that Mr. Bucket finds it necessary to remove Jo from a situation in which that knowledge might come to light (Dickens 760). Nemo, in seeking Jo out and speaking to him as an individual, creates a relationship that is dependent upon Jo's individuality.

The characters within *Bleak House* who treat Jo only as a representation of his class are typically representative themselves of the ineffectual institutions Dickens targets in his narrative. The pointlessly loquacious Chadband, Dickens's satirical figure through whom Dickens critiques members of the clergy, makes Jo a synecdoche for all “human boys” in a sermon delivered on Jo's behalf (268). As Jo points out later, Chadband only preaches to hear his own voice, and he fails to give Jo any sort of physical or spiritual help (635). The middle-class Mrs. Snagsby calls Jo “a limb of the arch-fiend,” correctly identifying Jo's role as synecdoche but utterly misinterpreting what he is supposed to be representing (268). The upper class, too, is identified with this failure to see members of Jo's class as individuals rather than the problem as a whole. Lady Dedlock seeks Jo out as an individual for the knowledge he possesses about her former lover, Captain Hawdon, but once in his company she refuses to even acknowledge him as a human. Instead, she calls him a “horrible creature” (221). These characters demonstrate the class interactions with the poor and demonstrate their difficulties and failings to make a positive

difference for the impoverished, but Dickens includes a concession in his criticism. He points out that even the most kindhearted of altruists are hindered in their efforts to help the poor when they are separated from them by class, because true empathy for their station in life can only be achieved by having lived through it themselves. “What the poor are to the poor is little known, excepting to themselves and GOD,” Dickens observes through Esther (110). In this light it is no wonder that a significant number of the characters in *Bleak House* are unable to see or treat Jo as an individual rather than as one of the faceless multitude.

The only characters who treat Jo as an individual instead of as a figurehead for his class are characters who can closely identify with the poverty of Tom-all-Alone's. Charley, Guster, and Phil all show a keen interest in helping Jo because his situation resonates with their own pasts. Their recognition of Jo is communicated by the most personal of human interactions: physical touch. Lady Dedlock denies this recognition of Jo's individuality (and, indeed, his humanity) when she pays Jo for showing her Hawdon's grave: “She drops a piece of money in his hand, without touching it, and shuddering as their hands approach” (223). Guster's hand is actually the first to ever touch Jo kindly, and Phil takes pains to get Jo bathed, re-clothed, and comfortably situated in a bed (357, 629, 631). Even Esther, who kindly does her best to care for everyone on an individual basis, does not connect with Jo on this most fundamental level. This is not necessarily Esther's fault. When she meets Jo, the boy is initially too frightened of her to let her near him, thinking that she is either Lady Dedlock or the maid Hortense since Esther, like them, appears veiled (422). Charley, who recognizes that but for a few different circumstances her own brother might be in Jo's position (420), steps up to take charge of him. Prompted by empathy, Charley physically leads Jo to chairs and adjust his clothes to warm him (422). Even as he gets

used to Esther's presence, Jo and Esther have no physical contact from the time they leave the hovel to the time the Bleak House servants carry the boy to his room by the stable (428). It is the personal medium of touch through which Charley—and not Esther—contracts Jo's disease directly from the source. Though Esther makes an effort to take care of Jo and is genuinely concerned about him, she is still one degree removed.

Complicating this reading of Jo's situation—that the only people who can truly recognize him as an individual are fellow members of his class—are the characters of Mr. Snagsby and Allan Woodcourt. Mr. Snagsby has a sort of relationship with Jo, and although this mostly consists of Mr. Snagsby giving Jo half-crowns—Snagsby's “panacea for an immense variety of afflictions”—Snagsby cares about Jo and, when the boy is brought to him by a constable, speaks on Jo's behalf and sends him away with an armful of table scraps to keep him fed (264-269). He cares about Jo enough to go see him on the boy's deathbed, even though his “little woman” would be furious if she knew (632). Mr. Snagsby, however, is not able to save Jo in the end or even to provide him much temporary aid. His efforts to help him are well-intended, but the food only lasts so long and the money provides refuge in the unhealthy slums that Jo would be better off without. Small amounts of money and scraps do little to change the fact that Jo must return nightly to the festering slum of Tom-all-Alone's. Snagsby, like Esther, is somewhat removed from Jo as well; though the constable asks Mr. Snagsby if he knows Jo, Mr. Snagsby replies that he knows “something of” him—which is not quite the same thing (263-264). Knowing “something of” a person implies that one is familiar with a few of their traits rather than being familiar with the person himself. Mr. Snagsby interacts with Jo, but he is still unable to help him on the individual basis that Jo needs.

Allan Woodcourt does his best to attend to Jo's needs, even crossing the line of kindly touch that has only been crossed by other members of Jo's class. Woodcourt, as a doctor, is indiscriminate when it comes to class. Just before he meets Jo—meets him, rather than just seeing him at the Inquest—Allan is walking through Tom-all-Alone's of his own volition, looking with a “compassionate interest” (616). The omniscient narrator remarks that Allan “seems to understand such wretchedness, and to have studied it before” (616). A moment later he administers medical attention to Jenny, whose forehead has been busted open by her abusive husband (617). The medical profession necessitates that a doctor meets his patients on an individual level. Generality is not an effective strategy: each patient has individual needs. Even during an epidemic, when a large number of people have come down with the same disease, each one requires individual attention in order to receive proper medical care. As a doctor—and, Dickens points out, as a good one—Woodcourt has already had experience dealing with patients on an individual level, and his ease with Jenny shows that he has had experience interacting with the poor before. When he takes Jo under his care, Woodcourt seems to be the best person for the job. But even Woodcourt removes himself slightly from Jo's case. Finding out that Jo has caused Esther's disease and disfigurement prompts Woodcourt to “[shrink] back from him [Jo] with a sudden horror” (620). His involvement from Jo hereafter, as Mr. George observes and admits is true of himself, is motivated because “Miss Summerson had taken that unfortunate interest in [Jo]” (630). Both Woodcourt and Mr. George come to care for Jo through the medium of Esther, who herself cannot quite reach Jo on the same level that Charley or Phil or Guster can.

However, Dickens does not allow the division between Jo's person-hood and symbol-hood to be as simple as identifying with one set of characters over another. Every time Jo

appears, he reveals the complex tension between his character and his symbolic nature. The chapter titled “Tom-all-Alone's” relates the incident of Lady Dedlock's pilgrimage to Nemo's grave with Jo as her guide, and in regards to plot Jo is a significant player in this chapter: he, unknowingly, holds the card that Lady Dedlock wants, and in getting that information from him she unwittingly hands him more. This incident is preceded by several pages of buildup that appear wholly irrelevant to the plot as the reader follows Jo through his morning activities. These pages, however, hold the key to understanding Jo's role as symbol in the novel, particularly in those moments where, as in his first appearance, Jo seems more of a hollow vessel than an internally complex character.

Before his encounter with Lady Dedlock, Jo begins his day alone, isolated from the Victorian crowd around him. Dickens grants Jo an internal monologue “(for perhaps Jo *does* think, at odd times)” reflecting upon the way his illiteracy and poverty aligns him, in the eyes of the society around him, more closely with the animals than with “the superior beings of [his] shape, whose delicacy [he] offend[s]” (218). This self-identification with the creatures prefigures the instance soon to follow, when Lady Dedlock herself proclaims him one of their number (and a “horrible” one at that). It also segues into another animal-centric image as the city around Jo wakes and returns to its daily grind:

Jo, and the other lower animals, get on in the unintelligible mess as they can. It is market-day. The blinded 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! (219)

Here the simile of the oxen applies equally to Jo and to “his order.” In his journalistic endeavors, Dickens witnessed firsthand the way law enforcement addressed the overpopulation of the poor by simply telling five hundred people at once to “clear out,” without giving them any suggestion of where they might go (“On Duty”). The sheer number inhibits the reader from connecting with the victims of such callousness; when presented with a crowd, the best he can do is to feel that sort of “dreamy” horror experienced by Mr. Snagsby upon his first entry into Tom-all-Alone's. Dickens plays the problem out, instead, with Jo, to allow the confusion and despair of a single victim to rouse the reader's empathy. The officers of the law constantly hound him to “move on,” and the poor bewildered Jo does his best to comply even though no one will tell him where it is he is supposed to be moving. He protests pathetically at the imperative refrain when a constable drags him before Mr. Snagsby, saying, “I've always been a moving on, ever since I was born. Where can I possibly move to, sir, more nor I do move! ...O my eye! Where can I move to!” (Dickens 263). Not just *very* like, but *exactly* like the oxen, Jo is bullied from place to place without any guide, ending up in the wrong place and shooed away again: from Tom-all-Alone's to the village of Jenny and Liz, to Bleak House, and back to Tom-all-Alone's. The only final destination Jo ever reaches in all this forced “moving on” is his own grave. The image of the grubby, crying boy is much easier to grasp than a crowd of five hundred, and because Jo is the only poor boy the reader has seen in the company of Mr. Snagsby, we know it must be he who is weeping in Snagsby's shop. However, in the midst of his most plaintive protests, Jo is not even referred to by name. He is “the boy,” and, until the narrator identifies him, his cry could be the cry of any boy from Tom-all-Alone's.

The description of the oxen foreshadows another of Jo's most important scenes depicting

his dual nature: the scene in which he is taken into Bleak House by Esther and Charley, bringing his sickness with him. When they first meet him in the hovel, Jo speaks for himself and not for the masses: he mentions his own experiences of interacting with Lady Dedlock and Hortense, and of the sensations in his body as the disease works its way through (423). In experiencing bodily pain, Jo is rising to the status of an individual because he *has* a body; he is not one of the faces that belong to the mass that swarms through Tom-all-Alone's. Sitting as Jo is amongst the few characters who can recognize him as an individual—Liz, Jenny, and Charley, to whose kindness and physical touch he is responsive—Dickens has the opportunity to let Jo's human nature carry him through the scene. Instead, Dickens purposefully obscures it to an unnerving effect. His physical body is one of the few factors preventing Jo from being purely symbol. Touch, as previously discussed, is the primary way in which characters of Jo's station identify with him as an individual. In this scene, however, Jo has completely ceased to care about himself and his physical health. Esther observes that Jo is “strangely unconcerned with himself,” and that he regards all the efforts of Bleak House's tenants as removed from himself, “as if it were [being done] for someone else” (425, 428). Jo himself is blunt about his lack of concern for himself despite his pathetic state. When Charley points out to him the risk of his death if he does not seek shelter, Jo's indifferent reply is that “[People] dies everywhere” (425). Jo is, essentially, effacing himself from the scene, becoming as hollow as he is at his introduction at the inquest. He might as well be the vehicle of contagion to which Steinlight reduces him in her essay (238). The aftermath of his encounter with Bleak House leaves Charley and, subsequently, Esther to fend off the disease he brings with him into the house.

Although the very process of infection preserves Jo's nature as an individual—because it

is through the highly personal medium of touch that he passes his disease to Charlie—his role in this episode is primarily synecdochical. Through Jo, Dickens illustrates how the whole of Victorian society is infected by the very conditions in which it allows the poor to fester. Jo is as invasive as Tom, the evil and pestilential spirit of the slum who maliciously spreads disease indiscriminate of class (Dickens 614). The consequences of his encounter with Bleak House hearken back to the description of the oxen. Jo “and his order,” blindly stumbling through society like the “over-goaded” steer, unwittingly bring both themselves and the rest of society to harm (219). However, if Tom is out to inflict disease as a medium of revenge, Jo is just the opposite. Jenny says of the boy that he has done “nothing but what was kind-hearted by [her]” (620). It is not within Jo's nature or character to inflict harm upon someone else. This is not a role that Jo relishes, and if given the choice he would not have played it at all. When Jo realizes the full extent of the harm he has unwittingly done, he goes to his grave swearing that he “never went fur to do it” (634). Here the tension between Jo's generality and individuality becomes clear. His individual intentions are overridden by his synecdochical function as the disease-bearing Victorian poor. In his protestations after the disease has run its course through Esther and Charley, Jo indicates that such a function goes against his individual character.

This stands in stark contrast to what Dickens does in the last scenes leading up to Jo's death. If Jo is all but synecdoche in the infection scene, he is nothing *but* character by the time he breathes his last. The shift is evident as soon as Jo appears again in Tom-all-Alone's. Closer to death than he was in the throes of his illness, Jo is now very conscious of his poor health. The indifference he displayed in Bleak House is completely reversed; under the gazes of Allan Woodcourt and Jenny, he weeps for and pities himself (619). His gratitude shines out of his

grime and sickness as he troubles himself to thank those who have helped him on an individual level or at least tried to do so. As he distances himself from Tom-all-Alone's (and, simultaneously, comes closer and closer to death), Jo shows more personality than he ever has. His interactions with the other characters, such as Esther and Mr. Snagsby, prompt him to laugh, to cry, and to smile—emotional responses that, for the first time in the novel, are not prompted by emotional misery or physical discomfort (634).

Literally separated from Tom-all-Alone's, Jo also symbolically cuts ties with the slum he is supposed to represent. He is “wery thankful” when he discovers that his nightmare of having been returned to Tom-all-Alone's was nothing but a dream (635). In saying so Jo establishes himself as a separate entity entirely; not just one of the faces of the mass that swarms around Inspector Bucket and company in the slum, but as a distinct individual. He is still of the slum, still a member of that demographic, but Jo is not dying as a collective; Jo is dying alone. Rather than a puppet, Jo is depicted as a full-blooded character even as that blood is failing him. It is not a symbol who dies, but an individual whom the reader has finally been able to get to know as a person. The tragedy of Jo's humanity being snatched away as soon as it is fully realized grants Dickens's epitaph for Jo more convicting power than it ever could have held had it been written for a mere symbol:

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day. (636)

Paradoxically, in letting Jo's humanity override his symbolism, Dickens strengthens the pathos the reader feels for the whole of Jo's class. The faceless thousands for which Jo stands are no

longer an overwhelming, vague entity; instead, they are thousands of Jos, and the realization that each of the multitude is a single, separate person carries the force of a punch.

Even in Jo's death, the moment at which he is most purely a character and not a symbol, Dickens guides the reader's eye back to the instances in which Jo's dual nature enables Dickens to criticize Victorian society. In fact, the epitaph points a convicting finger at each of the institutions that have failed Jo—and, by extension, the entire class of the poor—in order of their appearance in the novel. The aristocrats of the government, London's religious institutions, and the miscellaneous altruists of the middle class all have the chance to save Jo, but none of them accomplish it. Lady Dedlock, a member of that high class Dickens addresses first, is all too glad to be rid of Jo once he has guided her to the burial ground, and after their encounter she never mentions him again. Chadband, it has already been established, is useless to his own congregation and thus doubly inept when it comes to helping Jo, spiritually or otherwise: Jo says that his brief encounter with Chadband gave him the impression that “he wos a speakin' to his-self, and not to me,” and Jo never learned so much as a prayer from him (635). Esther belongs in the class of “men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in [their] hearts,” but Heavenly compassion is not enough. Though she and Mr. Jarndyce try, Inspector Bucket spirits Jo away before their help can have any effect. Although, as Mr. Skimpole points out and as experience shows, keeping Jo could cause more damage than good, at least to the populace of Bleak House (425).

Though he points the blaming finger at these characters and classes, Dickens does not actually offer any solutions for the problem at hand in the novel. Once Jo dies, the entire focus on the London poor and Tom-all-Alone's vanishes from the narrative altogether. The main

characters retreat to the countryside, and no verdict is reached regarding how best to stay the deaths of the many people dying every day in London. Steinlight points out that Dickens never actually set out to offer solutions in his novel: Victorian novels are not a manual on how to fix social problems, they are a stage on which to act out the dialogues surrounding those ills (233). If Dickens is setting out to critique a system for its failures toward a certain demographic, then the fictional representation of that system must produce failures to be critiqued. In the framework of the novel, every institution that has the potential to alleviate the suffering of the poor is set up by Dickens to fail. This is demonstrated through the interactions between Jo and Allan Woodcourt, who is arguably the best-qualified person in the novel to help anyone of Jo's station. As previously stated, he treats Jo—in a removed way—as an individual and treats Jo's specific needs as he discovers them, and he too establishes the connection of touch. And yet Jo dies. The critique here is not directed at the proficiency of Victorian doctors, because Dickens makes it clear that Woodcourt is very good at his trade—almost superhuman, in fact, in his heroic actions after his ship wrecks off of India (Dickens 491). The critique instead concludes that even medical attention is not enough to address the needs of the poor. If the doctor who single-handedly mitigated the tragedy of a shipwreck cannot save Jo, who can? No one—at least, no one within *Bleak House*, or within the institutions as they existed in Dickens's London. The “strangeness” of Jo's death is that, within the system Dickens depicts in the novel, Jo was going to die from the start (219).

In Allan's defense, he runs into Jo too late to provide any help other than to make Jo comfortable as his “cart” fails him (Dickens 627). This, however, is a critique in and of itself. Environment is hugely influential. A festering slum is only likely to breed contagious disease,

and those who leave it to become well will return only to fall ill again. A slum such as Tom-all-Alone's breeds dangers and corrupts its inhabitants: Dickens says that if domesticated dogs were turned “wild, like Jo...they will degenerate that they will lose even their bark—but not their bite” (219). In order to keep people from such degenerate living quarters, London would need to improve its infrastructure in the slums and to fix its sanitation system. Sanitation in particular was a concern for Londoners of 1851. The issue was covered in several articles in London's newspaper the *Times* (Butt 10). Dickens had already had a long-standing interest in sanitation reform, writing about it in his introduction to *Martin Chuzzlewitz* and in *Oliver Twist* (11). These particular reforms must, however, take place before any other help can be effectively administered. In the preface to a later edition of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens writes that “this reform [slum clearance] must precede all other Social Reforms” or else they will “bear within themselves the certain seeds of ruin to the whole community” (12).

“What a triumph is Jo!” wrote one Dickens fan, Dean Ramsey, to the author's biographer John Foster. “Uncultured nature is there indeed; the intimations of true heart feeling, the glimmerings of higher feeling, of higher feeling, all are there; but every thing still consistent and in harmony” (Foster 27). Within years of *Bleak House*'s publication, “the poor street-sweeper Jo... [had] made perhaps as deep an impression as anything in Dickens” (27). As character, the inevitability of Jo's death is tragic; as synecdoche, it is horrifying. The gravity of the loss of Jo and the impending loss of more like him strike the reader with equal force separately while also acknowledging the link they have shared throughout the novel. A solution to the problem of poverty might be unattainable in *Bleak House*, but the novel does offer one solid criticism: the poor, though they make up an overwhelming and intimidating population, must be met as

individuals rather than the embodiment of their entire class if any improvement in their living conditions is to be achieved. Though he is an effective medium through which Dickens personalizes the general state of his “order,” Jo is, at the last, a character in his own right. The tension of his dual nature is finally eased, granting Jo and everyone like him the acknowledgment of individuality that, sadly, they have for too long been forced to live without.

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## Research Strategies and Library Resources

My essay on *Dickens's* novel *Bleak House* actually began while I was studying at Oxford University through Mercer's affiliation with the Oxford Overseas Study Course. It was my introductory essay for the semester, in which I was asked to write an analytical piece about one of the texts we had read during the summer before our studies began. My paper turned out to be around twelve pages long with only two sources outside the book itself, both of which came from my Oxford professors. When I returned to Mercer, I brushed the essay off for my Literary Theory class for Dr. Senasi in the English department. A look at my paper's bibliography will reveal just how much development the essay underwent during that class: I added thirteen more sources and ten more pages, after applying substantial edits to the work I had already completed. Dr. Senasi encouraged me to go to Tarver to plumb the Dickens collection in search of works that would help me give my essay more historical context.

I began by looking specifically for critical work, in books and online, that related to *Bleak House* or to Dickens's writings regarding London's poor class. The biographical work that I managed to dig up included helpful bibliographies, which pointed me to other works by Dickens and Dickens scholars. Much of my research was conducted through finding a reference to a work as I was reading and tracking it down to read it in its entirety.

The library's resources were immensely helpful as I began the second, much more intensive stage of my essay. With the help of a few kind library assistants, whose names have been forgotten but whose assistance was invaluable, I searched journal after journal, article after article in all of Mercer's physical and online collections. Mercer's JSTOR, EBSCO, and MLA databases led me to critical essays that helped shape my understanding of Dickens's writing

method, greatly improving upon the analysis with which I had begun. Thanks to the interlibrary loan system, I was able to get John Forster's two-volume set of *The Life of Charles Dickens* from Mercer's library in Atlanta. That biography gave me one of the best pieces to the puzzle of my essay: it pointed me to Dickens's social work and his publications in his self-published periodical, *Household Words*. The anecdotes published in *Household Words* became vital to my understanding of Dickens's purpose in writing the character of Jo, and though Mercer did not have any copies of the periodical available, staff members in the library kindly helped me find what I needed, even if it meant straying from the traditional avenues of the online databases to look through eBooks and Google searches.

Because the meat of my research consisted of historical primary sources, Tarver Library was limited in what it could give me right off the bat. However, the staff was incredibly efficient and helpful in getting me what I needed from other sources. Their friendly guidance greatly improved the research process and the quality of my paper.