

Some contemporaries' comments on *Bleak House*:

1. John Forster (Dickens's friend and first biographer):

"The great Chancery suit ... is worked into every part of the book ... Nothing is introduced at random, everything tends to the catastrophe, the various lines of the plot converge and fit to its centre, and to the larger interest all the rest is irresistably drawn."

2. Henry Fothergill Chorley (*Athenaeum*):

"Not a point is missed – not a person left without share in the gradual disclosure – not a pin dropped that is not to be picked up for help or harm to somebody."

3. George Brimley (*Spectator*):

"[The book suffers from an] absolute want of construction ... [A large number of characters] might be eliminated from the book without damage to the great Chancery suit, or perceptible effect upon the remaining characters. So crowded is the canvas which Mr. Dickens has stretched, and so casual the connexion that gives to his composition whatever unity it has, that a daguerrotype of Fleet Street at noon-day would be the aptest symbol for it."

4. John Ruskin, in "Fiction, Fair and Foul":

"The monotony of life in the central streets of any great modern city, but especially those of London, ... leaves the craving of the heart for a sincere, yet changeful, interest, to be fed from one source only. Under natural conditions the degree of mental excitement necessary to bodily health is provided by the course of the seasons, and the various skill and fortune of agriculture. ... What though can enough comprehend the contrast between such life, and that in the streets where summer and winter are only alternations of heat and cold; where the ground is only a pavement, and the sky no more than the glass roof of an arcade; where the utmost power of a storm is to choke the gutters, and the finest magic of spring, to change mud into dust; where – chief and most fatal difference in state – there is no interest of occupation for any of the inhabitants but the routine of counter or desk within doors, and the effort to pass each other without collision outside; so that from morning to evening the only possible variation of the monotony of the hours, and lightening of the penalty of existence, must be some kind of mischief

"It might have been thought ... that the denial of their natural food to human feelings would have provoked a reactionary desire for it; and that the dreariness of the street would have been gilded by dreams of pastoral felicity. Experience has shown the fact to be otherwise: the thoroughly trained Londoner can enjoy no other excitement than that to which he has been accustomed, but asks for *that* in continually more ardent or more virulent concentration; and the ultimate power of fiction to entertain him is by varying to his fancy the modes, and defining for his dulness the horrors, of Death. In the single novel of *Bleak House* there are nine deaths ... carefully wrought out or led up to, either by way of pleasing surprise, as the baby's at the brickmaker's, or finished in the threatenings and sufferings, with as much enjoyment as can be contrived in the anticipation, and as much pathology as can be concentrated in the description. Under the following varieties of method:

One by assassination Mr. Tulkinghorn
One by starvation, with phthisis Jo
One by chagrin Richard
One by spontaneous combustion Mr. Krook
One by sorrow Lady Dedlock's lover
One by remorse Lady Dedlock
One by insanity Miss Flite
One by paralysis Sir Leicester

Besides the baby, by fever, and a lively young Frenchwoman left to be hanged. [Not to mention Gridley, Miss Barbary – and others?]

“And all this, observe, not in a tragic, adventurous, or military story, but merely as the further enlivenment of a narrative intended to be amusing; and as a properly representative average of the statistics of civilian mortality in the centre of London.”