

## *The Decline of Inherited Property and Rise of Working Gentlemen in Bleak House*

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### **Abstract**

Attitudes toward gentility significantly changed during the lifetime of Charles Dickens (1812–70), leading to a redefinition of the term gentleman. Dickens keenly observed the social dynamics of the Victorian period, and his works reflected the evolving perceptions of class, morality, and social responsibility. This study analyzes Dickens's descriptions of key changes in the definition of a gentleman in his novel *Bleak House* (1852–53), focusing on the backgrounds of Mr. Jarndyce, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Mr. Rouncewell, Richard Carstone, and Allan Woodcourt. The analysis examines the changes in social mobility and industrialization, professionalism, and meritocracy as well as the emphasis on character and morality, philanthropy, and social responsibility. Findings revealed that the definition of a gentleman considerably changed during Dickens's lifetime. The sudden end of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce lawsuit implies the decline in hereditary property and rise of self-made gentlemen. The contrasts between those with inherited property and the self-made gentlemen in *Bleak House* reflect the broader societal shifts toward equal opportunity, moral character, and social responsibility. Challenges to the traditional criteria for gentility led to a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of the concept in Victorian England. The various types of gentlemen portrayed in *Bleak House* reflect and contribute to the evolving notions of what it meant to be a gentleman during this period.

Keywords: Dickens, Class, Estate, Inheritance, Law, Social Mobility

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## Introduction

This study focuses on Charles Dickens's description of key changes in the definition of a gentleman in his novel *Bleak House* (1852–53). The analysis explores changes in social mobility and industrialization, professionalism, and meritocracy as well as the emphasis on character and morality, philanthropy, and social responsibility. Dickens keenly observed the social dynamics, and his works reflected the evolving perceptions of class, morality, and social responsibility during his lifetime. The gentlemen portrayed in *Bleak House* contributed to the changing perspectives regarding what it meant to be a gentleman during this period.

## Qualifications for Becoming Gentlemen

The definition of gentlemen has a long history. As early as 1577, an English clergyman William Harrison (1534–93) divided the English people into four classes: gentlemen, citizens, yeomen, and laborers. He further classified gentlemen into four ranks as follows: aristocrats, lords or noblemen, knights and esquires, gentlemen (ch.1, 39). He believed that knights aimed to motivate people to show bravery in battles or praise their military merits after the battles ceased. Citizens, yeomen, and laborers had limited opportunities to become gentlemen.

By these discourses exemplified by Harrison, the basic definition of gentlemen as those of noble birth who did not engage in manual labor was formed. The following passages by Harrison persuasively explain the qualifications required for gentlemen:

Whosoever studieth the laws of the realm, whoso abideth in the university (giving his mind to his book), or professeth physic and the liberal sciences, or beside his service in the room of a captain in the wars, or good counsel given at home, whereby his commonwealth is benefited, can live without manual labour, and thereto is able and will bear the port, charge, and countenance of a gentleman, he shall for money have a coat and arms bestowed upon him by heralds (who in the charter of the same do of custom pretend antiquity and service, and many gay things), and thereunto, being made so good cheap, be called master (which is the title that men give to esquires and gentlemen), and reputed for a gentleman ever after, which is so much less to be disallowed of for that the prince doth lose nothing by it, the gentleman being so much subject to taxes and public payments as is the yeoman or husbandman, which he likewise doth bear the gladlier for the saving of his reputation. Being called also to the wars (for with the government of the commonwealth he meddeth little), whatsoever it costs him, he will both array and arm himself accordingly and shew the more manly courage and all the tokens of the person which he representeth. No man hath hurt by it but himself, who peradventure will go in wider buskins than his legs will bear, or, as our proverb saith, “now and then bear a bigger sail than his boat is able to sustain.” (ch.1, 45)

Thus, the qualifications required for gentlemen were outlined as follows: university education, learning of the liberal arts, no engagement in manual labor, dedication to the welfare of the nation and the public, respect for honor, and bravery.

According to Harrison's classifications, merchants or traders were ranked below gentlemen as citizens. Nevertheless, gentlemen and wealthy merchants were mutually dependent in Harrison's time. He lamented this trend:

In this place also are our merchants to be installed as amongst the citizens (although they often change estate with gentlemen, as gentlemen do with them, by a mutual conversion of the one into the other), whose number is so increased in these our days that their only maintenance is the cause of the exceeding prices of foreign wares, which otherwise, when every nation was permitted to bring in her own commodities, were far better, cheaper, and more plentifully to be had. Of the want of our commodities here at home, by their great transportation of them into other countries, I speak not, sith the matter will easily betray itself. Certes among the Lacedæmonians it was found out that great numbers of merchants were nothing to the furtherance of the state of the commonwealth: wherefore it is to be wished that the huge heap of them were somewhat restrained, as also of our lawyers, so should the rest live more easily upon their own, and few honest chapmen be brought to decay by breaking of the bankrupt. (ch.1, 47)

Harrison was displeased with the gentlemen who sold their estates to merchants. He noted that merchants did nothing useful for public welfare; they had to remain in their class and caused shortages of goods due to exports and increased living costs. Harrison deemed merchants greedy and believed that their greed spoiled the noble gentlemen. His view was undoubtedly based on prejudice but showed the gentlemen's dual attitude toward merchants: they needed and despised the merchants' wealth.

The concept of gentlemen, exemplified by Harrison, was passed down from generation to generation, gradually adapted to the sociocultural climate. Robin Gilmour argues that the following professions were considered gentlemanlike at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution: army officers, Anglican Church clergymen, London physicians, those educated at Oxford or Cambridge, and retired tradesmen who purchased landed estates. These professions were virtually excluded from the rank of gentlemen: surgeons, attorneys, Dissenting clergymen, first-generation factory owners, and engineers (7). Gilmour observes that, "it [this classification] had its own logic, ensuring the prestige of those occupations which reinforced the stability of a social hierarchy based on the ownership of land" (7). Clergymen, officers, and physicians did not always own landed estates; however, they were included among gentlemen.

### **Greed and Obsession With Inherited Property**

Based on these changes in the definition of gentlemen, the argument continues to analyze *Bleak House*. The novel begins with the scene in Chancery Court, where the Jarndyce and Jarndyce trial is in progress. The narrator repeatedly emphasizes the distress caused by endlessly delayed trials and blames the incompetent judges and solicitors. They work as little as possible, leave complicated main suits unsettled, and engage in minor separate charges. Nevertheless, they cannot solve less complicated legal problems. Their lack of motivation is evident from their slow speech and unsuppressed yawns. Chapter 19 states that the chief judge works two days a week, and the court is closed for over five months, that is, almost half a year. On their limited working days, the law officials repeat pointless arguments and document examinations. It is not surprising then that the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case is prolonged.

In addition to the incompetence and poor management in the judicial system, suitors' greed and obsession with inherited property and solicitors' greed are repeatedly described. Chapter 1 hints at how both plaintiffs and defendants shamelessly resort to cheating and trickery and

reveals that hatred and hostilities are bequeathed to the offspring rather than the property they desire to possess. As mentioned previously, respect for inherited property was deeply ingrained in the Victorian mindset. Inherited property represented family history, lineage, and status that could not be replaced by cash or stock. The Jarndyces are frantically involved in the suit because they are obsessed with respectability and money.

The Jarndyces face tragedies of their own accord by exchanging their goodwill for greed. However, as the plot unfolds, readers find that the Jarndyce solicitors take advantage of their clients' greed and make money even after the suit is cancelled. Vholes is a good example to elucidate this point. His business is humble compared with those of Tulkinghorn and Kenge. Therefore, Vholes attempts to prolong the suit and secure his client, Richard Carstone, who is desperate for money. Not only Vholes but all Chancery officials and solicitors do not want the suit to end because as long as it is ongoing, they can earn money with minimal work. Kieran Dolin states, "In *Bleak House* Chancery barely acts at all; instead it is presented as feeding off the estate, as concerned only with the self-maintenance of the suit and the profits to the legal officers" (84). The unsettled Jarndyce suit is not solely due to the inadequacy of the legal system; greedy law officials who actively take advantage of suitors' greed and obsession are the ringleaders of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce because they are aware about how to use laws and proceed with trials.

### **Mr. Jarndyce's Desperate Escape From the Curse of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce**

The discussion examines the main characters' responses to inherited property. Mr. Jarndyce, one of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce beneficiaries, maintains that the lawsuit is a family curse and strongly hates unscrupulous lawyers.

"The lawyers have twisted it into such a state of bedevilment that the original merits of the case have long disappeared from the face of the earth. It's about a will and the trusts under a will—or it was, once. It's about nothing but Costs, now. We are always appearing, and disappearing, and swearing, and interrogating, and filing, and cross-filing, and arguing, and sealing, and motioning, and referring, and reporting, and revolving about the Lord Chancellor and all his satellites, and equitably waltzing ourselves off to dusty death, about Costs. That's the great question. All the rest, by some extraordinary means, has melted away." (ch.8, 116)

Jarndyce's narrative shows that he has been suffering deeply from the prolonged lawsuit. He is pressured to escape his family curse and use his fortune for good purposes. He dislikes being thanked because he does not seek for his own interests at all. He remains unmarried possibly because he does not want to pass the family curse on to his offspring. Dolin points out the lack of reality in Jarndyce's actions: "While there is a fount of generosity in the family, while the distribution of wealth extends to whoever comes under notice, the problem of scarcity and competition does not exist, and the reality of conflict can be displaced into the category of unnatural" (93). However, Jarndyce's unconditional kindness and contribution to the betterment of his neighborhood are qualifications that British gentlemen honored. His desire to do something good is further intensified by his uncle's tragedy and forms his personality.

## Troublesome Career Paths of Richard Carstone and Allan Woodcourt

Mr. Jarndyce's kindness and care extend to the young people under his guardianship: Esther, Richard, and Ada. From his family tragedies, he learns that the court and law officials are incompetent and, therefore, prevents his wards from getting involved in the lawsuit. He decides that Richard needs to seek employment and earn a living rather than wait for the prospective inheritance. Richard is naïve and confident but not particularly ambitious. Without interest in a specific profession, he attempts any available career—medicine, law, and the military—only to quit it. His deep involvement in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce, heavy debt, and premature death show that he has fallen prey to greed, a trait of the Jarndyce family.

Mr. Jarndyce empathizes with Richard because he understands that Richard's lack of firmness and patience is partly fostered by his family's obsession with the Jarndyce and Jarndyce: "It [Chancery] has engendered or confirmed in him a habit of putting off—and trusting to this, that, and the other chance, without knowing what chance—and dismissing everything as unsettled, uncertain, and confused" (ch.13, 201). However, people outside the Jarndyce family circle are critical of Richard's inabilities. For instance, Mrs. Badger comments bitterly on Richard, who is working as an apprentice under her husband, Mr. Badger:

"He [Richard] is of such a very easy disposition, that probably he would never think it worth-while to mention how he really feels; but he feels languid about the profession [surgeon]. He has not that positive interest in it which makes it his vocation. If he has any decided impression in reference to it, I should say it was that it is a tiresome pursuit. Now, this is not promising. Young men, like Mr Allan Woodcourt, who take it from a strong interest in all that it can do, will find some reward in it through a great deal of work for a very little money, and through years of considerable endurance and disappointment. But I am quite convinced that this would never be the case with Mr Carstone." (ch.17, 279)

Mrs. Badger's remarks indicate that Richard lacks the motivation needed to acquire medical knowledge and skills; thus, training him is burdensome. Although Esther is not fond of Mrs. Badger, she lectures him mildly. Richard's response confirms the accuracy of Mrs. Badger's and Esther's beliefs: "After all, it may be only a kind of probation till our suit is—I forgot though. I am not to mention the suit" (ch.17, 281). Despite Mr. Jarndyce's guidance, Richard expects to inherit the Jarndyce property. For this reason, he is frustrated with any profession that he chooses.

Richard's failure to pursue his career predicts future degradation and ruin. Chris Louttit points out that Dickens's presentation of characters is largely defined by their jobs (14). Richard's incompatibility with any profession reflects his dependence and vulnerability. In addition, he apparently longs for leisured gentlemen. Gilmour states that in Victorian society, there was an uneasy fascination for dandies and a useless man who made his incompetence and disdain for work the icon of refinement (7). This remark shows that Richard is obsessed with the wealth and luxuries that the Jarndyce and Jarndyce can bring him: "We only say that if it *should* make us rich, we have no constitutional objection to being rich" (ch.14, 223-24). Unlike Mr. Jarndyce, Richard does not internalize the necessity of restraining greed for money or supporting people in need. Richard's understanding of gentlemen is rather superficial.

Meanwhile, Allan Woodcourt is a surgeon and possesses all the qualifications that Richard lacks; he tirelessly treats the poor. Esther observes: “It was not lucrative to a young practitioner, with very little influence in London; and although he was, night and day, at the service of numbers of poor people, and did wonders of gentleness and skill for them, he gained very little by it in money” (ch.17, 289). Woodcourt’s low income is due to disparities in the medical profession. As mentioned previously, surgeons were not regarded as gentlemanlike (Gilmour 7) because they originally belonged to the field of barbers. Wealthy patients preferred physicians to surgeons (Carpenter 26); as Esther notes, scrupulous surgeons would have not made money. Loutitt notes that Woodcourt is merely hardworking, exciting neither readers nor Dickens (4). However, Woodcourt’s simple honesty formed by his profession was a virtue that Dickens highly regarded.

By the nineteenth century, the medical industry had become highly competitive due to an increase in the number of medical professionals (Carpenter 12). It is challenging for Woodcourt to succeed in competitive London; thus, he decides to visit China and India as a ship doctor. It appears that he intends to restart his career in less competitive colonies, but as the cases of Dickens’s sons demonstrated, not everyone succeeded in colonies (Takei 91-92). Woodcourt eventually takes up the post of a doctor at a hospital for the poor, accepting Jarndyce’s offer. In addition, when he marries Esther, Jarndyce presents the newly married couple with the New Bleak House. Dolin notes that Jarndyce’s gifts are meant to be dowry (93). Jarndyce treats Esther and Woodcourt as adopted children, and they are likely to inherit the original Bleak House. Woodcourt’s history shows that it was difficult to succeed in any profession through skill and hard work alone and that influential gentlemen were supportive patrons.

### **Mr. Rouncewell and Sir Leicester Dedlock: Self-Made Gentlemen and Aristocrats**

In Chapter 65, Jarndyce and Jarndyce abruptly ends with fits of laughter from the assembled clerks and young solicitors. Their laughter represents the bitterness and criticism that middle-class workers without pedigree or property had against the affluent. For those trapped in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce, time has stopped and nothing has changed. However, outside Chancery, those with skills and talent could rise in the world by setting up their own businesses, although they were born with “dirt spoons.” Gilmour says, “The greatly increased mobility of nineteenth-century society posed problems of adjustment for the established gentleman – what occupations could he pursue without injuring his gentility? – but for the enterprising self-made man, it offered tantalizing rewards, among them, if he was to believe Samuel Smiles, the goal of becoming a gentleman” (99). *Bleak House* was published seven years before Smiles’s masterpiece *Self-Help* (1859). However, successful self-made men in Dickens share much with Smiles’s beliefs.

Mr. Rouncewell is a man whom Smiles would have held in high esteem. In Chapter 2 of *Self-Help* entitled, Leaders of Industry—Inventors and Producers, Smiles says, “Many ingenious minds are found laboring in the throes of invention, until at length the master mind, the strong practical man, steps forward, and straightway delivers them of their idea, applies the principle successfully, and the thing is done” (18). Rouncewell is the eldest son of the housekeeper at Sir Leicester Dedlock’s house. From childhood, he enjoys creating steam-powered machines and demonstrates scientific talent. Declining to become a butler for Sir Leicester Dedlock, he succeeds in the iron manufacturing industry. His life and career embody self-help, which Smiles advocated:

“I have been,” proceeds the visitor [Rouncewell], in a modest, clear way, “an apprentice, and a workman. I have lived on workman's wages, years and years, and beyond a certain point have had to educate myself. My wife was a foreman's daughter, and plainly brought up. We have three daughters besides this son of whom I have spoken, and being fortunately able to give them greater advantages than we have had ourselves, we have educated them well, very well. It has been one of our great cares and pleasures to make them worthy of any station.” (ch.28, 477)

Rouncewell is one of the first-generation factory owners who were not originally deemed gentlemen. With his success, his children grow up in a far more sophisticated environment than his parents and are considered fine gentlemen and ladies. Thus, the middle class is revitalized.

Rouncewell's social rise is also evidenced by his entry into politics. Andrew Sanders notes that Rouncewell represents central figures in political arguments after the 1832 Reform Bill, which enabled residents in northern industrial cities, such as Manchester and Leeds, to send their representatives to Parliament (xxxiii). His victory over Sir Leicester Dedlock's party signals the motivation and liveliness peculiar to the new class, eager to keep pace with those of a higher social standing.

Sir Leicester Dedlock is displeased with Rouncewell, as the man whom he regards as his inferior now overwhelms him. His reactions to Rouncewell are similar to Harrison's disdain for merchants. He associates James Watt (1736–1819), whom Rouncewell deeply respects, with Watt Tyler (1341–81), and considers that Rouncewell is likewise a rebel. Dolin points out the fear for democracy in Sir Leicester Dedlock's actions (91) such as dislike for any type of change.

Sir Leicester Dedlock's resistance to something new is further caricatured by the denial of the improvement and progress commonly shared by his society. Chapter 12 describes their pettiness and ignorance.

There *are*, at Chesney Wold this January week, some ladies and gentlemen of the newest fashion, who have set up a dandyism—in Religion, for instance. Who, in mere lackadaisical want of an emotion, have agreed upon a little dandy talk about the Vulgar wanting faith in things in general; meaning, in the things that have been tried and found wanting, as though a low fellow should unaccountably lose faith in a bad shilling after finding it out! Who would make the Vulgar very picturesque and faithful by putting back the hands upon the Clock of Time and cancelling a few hundred years of history. (ch.12, 193)

Although attired in the latest fashion, the mindset of Sir Leicester Dedlock's society is the same as that of those who lived two centuries ago. They consider themselves entitled to possess privileges and want to leave those of lower social standing as they are.

Sir Leicester Dedlock's obstinate refusal to appreciate change is described negatively throughout *Bleak House*. However, he is better than his followers. Except for Mr. Rouncewell, Sir Leicester Dedlock is affectionate toward his circle, regardless of their family background and social standing. He sincerely loves Lady Dedlock, who does not come from a noble family, and is always kind toward Mrs. Rouncewell. Moreover, after a paralytic attack, he welcomes George Rouncewell into his home and relies on his nursing skills. This indicates

a reconciliation among Sir Leicester Dedlock and the Rouncewells: aristocrats, tradesmen, and servants. For this point, Gilmour says that, “the Victorian bourgeoisie was a revolutionary class: that its emergence did not result in a revolution, or that the revolution took a gradual rather than violent form, was due in large part to the fact that it was able to find a *modus vivendi* with the aristocratic ruling class. What has come to be called the Victorian Compromise had for one of its central features the gradual supersession of one kind of social structure by another” (8). Sir Leicester Dedlock does not live much longer, and his family property Chesney Wold gets inherited by distant relatives. However, mingling with different classes, peace and order in Sir Leicester Dedlock’s home are somehow restored.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of *Bleak House*, the Jarndyce and Jarndyce property is wasted and gone. The estates of Mr. Jarndyce and Sir Leicester Dedlock are expected to be passed on to outsiders or collateral relatives. This suggests that the value of an inherited property is maintained, but poor legal systems should be improved, complicated inheritance must be resolved, and greed should be restrained. In addition, in Dickens’s world, those who make a fortune on their own without relying on their family background and property are deemed better than those who contend with inherited property alone. The contrasts between those with inherited property and the self-made gentlemen in *Bleak House* reflect the broader societal shifts toward valuing equal opportunity, moral character, and social responsibility. Challenges to traditional criteria for gentility led to a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of the concept in Victorian England. The gentlemen portrayed in *Bleak House* reflect and contribute to the evolving notions of what it meant to be a gentleman during this period.

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