Charles Dickens, Bleak House + A Tale Of Two Cities Essay, Research Paper

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Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens is perhaps one of the greatest and most studied British authors of all time. Possibly one of the most controversial writers of his time, Dickens wrote often about the vast gap between the lower classes and the aristocracy, as well as the inefficiency, immorality and unjustness of governments and the upper classes in general. In the books, A Tale of Two Cities, and Bleak House, Dickens wrote about his hatred for government and all its corruptness. This intense hatred for social institutions such as government and the courts, as well as his empathy for the lower classes most likely stems from his childhood experiences.

Dickens’ was born in Portsmouth, England, on February 7, 1812. John Dickens, his father, was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. The Dickens Family lived beyond their means, and consequently, John Dickens was imprisoned in 1824 for excessive debt. As was the law, the English courts imprisoned the entire Dickens’ family and sold the children to a labor factory. At the age of twelve Charles went to work in a boot-blacking factory earning six shillings a week. He described this period of his life as one of the most horrible. It is obvious that Dickens’ experience of childhood poverty and hardship served to shape his perspectives on the law, social reform, and compassion for the lower class. After this hardship was over, his sentence having been carried out, Dickens returned to school. Later, he worked in a law firm, and became a freelance reporter of legal issues and debate. These positions further shaped Dickens’ societal views. With this in mind, we may analyze some of Dickens’ literary works and attempt to identify similar themes contained within those works. The two works by Dickens are A Tale of Two Cities, published in 1859, and Bleak House, published in 1853. Through close analysis of these works, we see that Charles Dickens is an author who views laws and instruments of the law in a satirical perspective.

At the beginning of A Tale of Two Cities, Dickens expresses his concern about social problems. Specifically, he seems to be saying that as a result of the way in which the lower class in England is treated, a reaction on the scale of the French Revolution may arise. Dickens does so by comparing England and France at the beginning of and throughout the novel. Dickens takes special note of the conditions–claiming each country to be evil, and full of poverty, injustice and violence due to the irresponsibility of the leaders. Dickens is alleging that those in the position to regulate and enforce laws are the sole cause of the unfavorable conditions plaguing the poor and lower classes. To compound these allegations, Dickens even goes as far as to criticize the highest instruments of the law in each country–the king. Upon further examination, however, it becomes apparent that Dickens is comparing the stability of England with the chaos of France. He does so by discussing the lawlessness in France and the relative peace in England. Thus, one can conclude that England appears to be stable for the time being. One such example illustrating the stability of England is when Lucie Manette locates her father, Dr. Manette. He had been imprisoned in the Bastille in France, and Lucie explains how they will “go to England to be at peace and rest.” This only suggests that Dickens is satirizing the laws of France, and the incompetence of the authorities. Additionally, the depiction of France as the novel unfolds becomes increasingly dangerous. Violent acts are committed by mobs, most specifically, the storming of the Bastille, when Madame Defarge decapitates the governor. With all of this mind, it becomes obvious to the reader that Dickens is viewing the laws and the instruments of the law, specifically those of France, in a perspective which can be classified as a warning to England.

Additionally, it is also important to examine the specific cruelty during the French Revolution, and the specific contribution that it serves to form Dickens’ views, which are reflected directly in his writing. First, it is important to recognize that Dickens is presenting the time leading up to the French Revolution to the reader–a period of chaos, injustice and unfair treatment. Obviously, one can see how the laws are failing miserably if such chaos is allowed to progress in a societal environment. Second, we may look at the nature of the people that were presented in the novel by Dickens. Charles Darnay is a character that we may examine. Mr. Darnay has been arrested and tried twice in France, his only crime being a relative of an aristocratic family The mere fact of knowing that Darnay has been subjected to the French legal system on two subsequent occasions certainly indicates that the system is flawed and fails to accomplish what an ideal legal system should do–i.e. –Trying people for what they do, instead of who they are. Hence we can assume that Dickens is satirizing the law through the character of Charles Darnay. At one point in the novel, we learn that Darnay is being tried for treason because he attempted to rescue an employee of his family’s however, Darnay is identified as being a member of an aristocratic family. Dickens, by using Darnay as a wealthy member of society attempting to rescue a lower class member of society, symbolizes the inability of the law to protect the members of its society. Darnay, by rescuing his servant and being punished for his actions, is indirectly satirizing the British legal system, in that he shows how an aristocrat who attempts to help a lower class citizen is treated. During the course of the entire novel, Dickens shows how the legal system does not serve the interests of the common man, but rather, the aristocrat. By showing an aristocrat assisting a lower class citizen, he contradicts and satirizes the entire legal system at the time. Also, we may examine the character of Madame Defarge, and how she represented Dickens’ perspective of satirizing and criticizing the legal system and legal instruments. Madam Defarge is a character who is politically active–demanding change at all times. She constantly fuels violence, and is a strong advocate of hatred, poignantly shown by her mob endorsement and leadership. Madam Defarge, a representative of the middle class society is used to satirize the law in that she illustrates how ineffective any laws in place are. Lastly, it is also necessary to mention how Dickens’ takes offense to the British court system, for example in Chapter 2, Book 2, when a messenger is asked to deliver correspondence to Mr. Lorry at the court. The reader is informed that a case involving treason is being tried, the one previously referred to, involving Charles Darnay. He impresses upon the reader the frivolity of the court system through the sentence for treason against France–beheading. This serves to illustrate the “cruel and unusual punishment” concept, in that one may view this as an unjust and unreal punishment for something such as treason. Further, the reader is introduced to the harshness and severity of the law, something that Dickens viewed to be a problem with the operation of the legal system. We may take this all into consideration to infer that Dickens’ Tale of Two Cities certainly serves to vilify, renounce, and satirize the legal systems of France and England.

Similarly, while exploring Dickens’ propensity to criticize the law and legal systems, we may look to another work of his which accomplishes just that. Bleak House is a novel that was written by Dickens to attack the British legal system. First, we may look at Dickens specific criticism of the instruments of the law, such as the incompetence of the court to handle a proceeding brought before it. We learn of a pending lawsuit, titled Jarndyce v. Jardyce, in which a family is waiting impatiently for inheritances from the slow proceeding. Dickens explains how the suit contains multiple parties and has been going on for a long time. Additionally, we see how a portion of the suit is heard by the high court, Chancery, in London. The foundation is set by Dickens — that the Chancery High Court is an institutionalized abuse of the law. Dickens illustrates this by showing that the court has further complicated the matters of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce. It is common knowledge that it is the purpose of the court to clarify matters that are complicated, and in a civil matter to determine which party is entitled to what is in dispute. By showing that the court has complicated matters, Dickens proves the unreliability and in-competency of the institution. The author also vilifies the justice of the court, when he makes an announcement from the bench that he will meet with the “two young people”. An officer of the court, be it a judge or an attorney must be attentive to be efficient. Not remembering something as simple as a subject’s name creates a poor reflection of the court system, as any judge would refer to parties in a legal proceeding by their names. It is obvious that Dickens is satirizing an instrument of the law, in this instance, the court system, and the judges it employs. Dickens had proven that the courts, and those responsible for their regulation, specifically, the judge, are unable to handle this inheritance suit. Rather, they have further complicated matters to the point where no one understands them. This supports the belief that Dickens views the law and its respective instruments from a satirical perspective.

It is also worthwhile to examine Mr. Tulkinghorn, the attorney of the Chancery Court. Through close analysis, we may conclude that he is one of Dickens’ most despised characters in the novel. He is the legal advisor of Sir Leicester. He is a symbol of Dickens’ satire of the courts in that he fails to adequately provide for the interests of his client. An attorney has an inherent relationship with their client–they are retained to look out for the interests of that client, and protect anything that client may have to the best of their ability. Dickens makes sure that Tulkinghorn fails to do just that. We see the attorney develop an obsession with his client’s wife when she begins to inquire about legal documents. Tulkinghorn basically neglects his clients’ interests and instead pursues what is not related to the matter at hand, his client’s wife. Hence, we see that Tulkinhorn is a reflection of the court system. He is a symbol of Chancery, and his unpredictable behavior only leads us to conclude that it runs a parallel with the inefficiency of Chancery as an institution. Without a doubt, Dickens main target in Bleak House is the legal system and all its components, Mr. Tulkinghorn, the judges, and the courts Dickens has absolutely no regard for the fashion in which the court system chooses to operate, in fact he despises it.

Now that two similar works have been analyzed, we may now draw comparisons and run parallels between the works. It is obvious that both works attempt to criticize the legal system and specific instruments of the law. We may relate the French government in A Tale of Two Cities to the court system in Bleak House in that each was the main institution that Dickens was centering his contentions upon. Dickens mockery of the law in each novel was related to an institution. Additionally, comparisons may be drawn between the characters in both of the works as Dickens used each character to represent just how badly the laws of the institution had failed.

In conclusion, it is obvious that Charles Dickens was an author who absolutely despised the law. He disliked attorneys, and viewed legal authorities and court systems as incompetent. It appears as if this belief may have come about as a result of his background as a child. Perhaps as a result of the poor childhood that Dickens had due to his family being imprisoned for failure to pay their debts, he developed a hatred for the institution of the courts. Perhaps Dickens’ viewed the law as an institution which was unable to serve the needs of the people. Thus we can only conclude that Charles Dickens, as expressed through his works held a deep aversion to the entire legal system.