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## The neglected child of Dickens' Bleak House

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### Abstract

In this paper, Charles Dickens' literary technique of using minor characters to make a social criticism about society whilst maintaining their importance in the novel through plot interconnectivity is examined. Dickens had a particular strength of forcing the plight of his downtrodden characters, in this paper the young chimney sweep Jo Toughy is examined, and forcing the reader to take notice of the social injustice that existed in Victorian England and thus generated sympathy and awareness for the level of poverty that was a daily feature of life in London.

**Keywords:** Dickens, Bleak House, Child Poverty, Social Criticism, Literature Analysis

## ディケンズの Bleak House に描かれる無視された子供

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Charles Dickens wrote about the world around him and filled it with some of the most memorable characters in all of English Literature, some of those characters were the fictional versions of the most unfortunate souls in 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial England, but Dickens made them important. This new industrialized urban environment was the backdrop to tales of interwoven connections that all contained social criticisms. One of the most notable of Dickens' characters is the young boy Jo Toughy, the crossing sweeper in *Bleak House* (1853). Dickens used children and young adults more so than any other Victorian novelist. He had a particular strength of forcing the plight of his downtrodden characters' lives upon the reader in order to highlight the social injustice that existed in England at that time and thus generated sympathy and awareness for the level of poverty that existed in England.

The orphan protagonists such as David Copperfield and Oliver Twist drew much from the autobiographical experience of the poverty and degradation that Dickens suffered as a child when he was forced into a blacking factory at the age of twelve as a result of his father, John Dickens, being thrown into debtor's prison. That said, it was the many minor characters such as the young women who have fallen from grace, such as Martha Endell from *David Copperfield* (1849), who is forced into a life of prostitution but helps reunite Mr. Peggotty with his beloved niece Little Emily. Or Nancy from *Oliver Twist* (1837) who is a former child thief turned prostitute who helps Oliver get back to the kind Mr. Brownlow and away from street life in London, albeit tragically getting murdered by the villain Bill Sikes for her trouble. Or the street child, Jo Toughy, from *Bleak House* (1853), the crossing sweeper, who plays an essential role to the plot's interconnectivity, becoming a lynch pin of the story, therefore highlighting their importance.

Dickens uses this "utterly neglected" (180) child as a key figure to the novel's plot, which is unexpected (by the reader), but quite intentional by the author. Jo represents the lowest of the low when it comes to the hierarchy of society. He is an orphaned street child who quite literally scrapes out a living sweeping mud and horse manure out of the way for pedestrians crossing the road. This is the type of person you would never notice on the street, you would step over if they were in your way, a person of no significance. However, a contemporary reviewer of *Bleak House* claimed that, "the gem" (325) of the novel is in fact Jo. Dickens enlists the reader to care about this young boy from the moment he appears in the novel. Jo is called upon to testify about his knowledge of the death of a Mr. Nemo whom the boy has befriended.

Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don't know that everyone has two names. Never heard of sich a think. Don't know that Jo is short for a longer name... Spell it? He can't spell. No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. What's home? (128)

As soon as the introduction is commenced it is over, based on the fact that Jo is not capable of giving testimony to the Coroner, as he is deemed too ignorant due to his complete lack of education so the

narrator dismisses him as not important and he is “put aside to the great edification of the audience.” (128) and as quickly, as this character entered the narrative he seems to be on his way out but Dickens has other plans by focusing the reader’s attention on the plight of young Jo. The narrator comments, “It must be strange state to be like Jo...stone, blind and dumb!” (181) now the easily dismissed boy takes on a new dynamic as the social problem of literacy of all the boys like Jo is brought to the forefront. If Jo can’t read or write, what is his world like? Wandering through the world not being able to read or write having all the signs in the city being a complete mystery to him, he is alienated from society and “Jo’s anomalous position within society... he is ignored by the superior beings who ought to help him.” (126) Another contemporary source of Dickens, an American critic named, George J. Worth, mentions that the problem with “juvenile vagrancy” in the 1850s in London was so bad that it was being discussed in Parliament. He writes, “Another serious social problem with which Dickens dealt with in his novel [i.e., Bleak House], primarily through the character of Jo the crossing-sweeper, was juvenile vagrancy.” (328) Readers were aware that Dickens was being more than just a novelist with his characters but also a social critic.

The character of Jo is used by Dickens to make points on religion within Victorian society at the time considering there was a “great zeal for foreign missions, for bringing the Word to the unenlightened heathen.” (182) In the chapter, “Telescopic Philanthropy” Dickens introduces the character of Mrs. Jellyby, who is obsessed with doing projects that benefit Africa; yet she fails to look after her own children in her London home. Jo is a destitute child, and sadly he is one of tens of thousands of street children living in the Old Town. Dickens makes the point using Jo that he is not “fitting” of the image of poverty. “Jo... is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article. Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common street, on in soul a heathen.” (182) In using his characters to create a message of awareness, Dickens was making a statement whereby he believed that it would be better if the Victorians with their high morality did a little bit more for their cities rather than worry about places thousands of miles away. Jo is a victim of the social and economic upheaval of the Industrial Revolution. Dickens invokes characters like Jo in order to fulfill the “moral touchstone” role, “bringing out the good Samaritan in many of the characters he encounters.” (10) The good nature of this young boy who has so little provided to him naturally resonates with human compassion, which is brought out in characters like Esther Summerson and the kind doctor Alan Woodcourt, who both try to help Jo.

In creating Jo, Dickens was just turning fact into fiction, as the inspiration for this was immediately local. It is quite evident that Dickens had read Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, in 1851, the same year he began *Bleak House*, Mayhew makes reference to the vocation of Jo, “taken as a class, crossing sweepers are among the most honest of the London poor...” (642) Dickens qualifies this with Jo, who despite having an incredibly hard life, which could understandably make him angry,



Source: Punch, 26 January 1856 (p. 34)

<http://www.victorianweb.org/periodicals/punch/17.html>

untrusting, and aloof from society. Instead Jo is a loving young boy who is cautious but forthcoming with the people he interacts with. Despite the hardness which society has dealt to him he responds with his humanity intact.

Another aspect Jo brings to the novel is the living conditions of the unfortunate souls of London. The “Tom-all-Alone’s” area is a slum where Jo lives, “it is a black, dilapidated street avoided by all decent people... by night, a swarm of misery.” (189) Dickens is clever as he talks about Jo’s home and is able to bring attention to the very lack of quality buildings because houses were known to collapse, making a “paragraph in the newspapers.” (190) Jo’s life is surrounded by this and the only reason the reader is learning this is because Jo will play an important part in deciphering the mystery surrounding some very different people.

Lady Dedlock is an upper class woman searching for confirmation that a signature she has found is that of her ex-lover, Captain Hawdon (Nemo) with whom she bore a child, Esther Summerson (the protagonist). Jo Toughey is able to provide the answer to this mystery, by showing Lady Dedlock the grave of the man who was nice to him (Nemo) who is in fact her former lover and Esther’s father. Jo dies shortly after he has revealed what he knows. Despite bringing some closure to the story he is never rewarded for his actions besides some kindness right at the very end of his young life, it is

tragic, because it seems all far too little too late.

Jo Toughey, the crossing-sweeper is a victim of “social oppression” who is “destroyed unjustly” (8) by a hard cruel world which was 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial England. Sadly he was not a rarity but a commonality. The Victorians lived in an era of great social progression and generation of wealth which coexisted with social brutality and abysmal poverty. In 1861, Dickens wrote “Night Walks” which was an essay covering his nightly walks through London where he witnessed this coexistence with his own eyes. In his conclusion he wrote, “I knew well enough where to find Vice and Misfortune of all kinds, If I had chosen; but they were put out of sight, and my houselessness had many miles upon miles of streets which it could, and did, have its own solitary way.” Dickens did his generation justice by immortalizing the likes of Jo Toughey, the crossing-sweeper, so they would not be forgotten but serve as a reminder to society that the “neglected child” should not be an afterthought but forethought, no plot revelation required.

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