Charles Dickens' Trope of Great Gulfs: Irony in Bleak House

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Charles Dickens' Trope of Great Gulfs: Irony in *Bleak House*

by

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Abstract

In *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens artistically and ironically manipulates language to expose burgeoning socio-political gaps in Victorian times, most notably those that involve people who have access to money, power, food and salvation, and people who do not. Dickens refers to the unlikelihood of two societies from opposite sides of Great Gulfs being brought together and he assists in drawing attention to those gulfs with the language in his novel. Framed within the social mores of his era, Dickens uses the language of phrenology and craniology to satirize the "science" that the English were using to justify their expansionism into "lesser" intellectually and morally developed parts of the world, most notably Africa. He also uses the trope of cannibalism in terms of consumption in several different ways to illustrate the Great Gulfs between England and Others outside of England, between social classes, between genders, and between the haves and haves not within England. Dickens implies physical and moral consumption through some of his least likeable characters in *Bleak House* to reflect his Carlylean-influenced ideologies between people who support economic systems and people who attach themselves to the economic base without supporting it. Dickens also parrots many of Carlyle’s ideas when he uses the language of servitude and slavery to differentiate the Great Gulfs between a strong work ethic and one that is weak. It is Dickens’ language in *Bleak House* that exposes his disdain for England’s expansionism and demonstrates his strong isolationist views that fuels Victorians’ bias against England’s philanthropic efforts toward Others. As a result, Dickens’
writing in *Bleak House* holds some of the most stinging criticism on England's expansionism during his time.
This analysis of *Bleak House*'s social context discusses people who have access to money, power, freedom, food and salvation, and people who do not, and I argue that Dickens artistically and deftly manipulates language to expose these gaps in his society. While his writing not only represents and symbolizes the chasms between socio-political issues of the Victorian era, it also serves to depict the extreme differences between people who seemingly have everything and people who appear to have little to nothing. All of these topics use language that reflects some kind of power imbalance in the novel, and I contend that Dickens writes about these gulfs simply because they exist and, at times, he is inconsistent in his language use about these issues. He draws his readers’ attention to those differences by merely writing about the disparities whether explicitly or symbolically, and his writing subliminally affects his readers when his characters in *Bleak House* say and act in ways that illustrate societal gaps.

The language in the novel repeatedly magnifies the large chasms between people who have the means and power to fulfill their desires and those who have little to no access to the very fundamental basics of life’s necessities. This staggering discrepancy is illustrated in *Bleak House* when the narrator wonders, “What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very
curiously brought together!” (Dickens 235). This sentence prompts this entire analysis of how Dickens’ language use when reflecting the Great Gulfs in the Victorian era serves multiple purposes on multiple levels. On one side of that Great Gulf lies England’s social concerns and Dickens’ language in *Bleak House*, as well as many of his other writings, shows partiality and empathy for them. Dickens’ manipulation of language when it concerns Others’ social concerns outside of England, however, is less favorable. To that end, I argue that Dickens’ language in the novel reflects his stance against expansionism into Africa. Dickens writes in *American Notes* that there could be no future equality between the English people and the Africans because “Between the civilized European and the barbarous African there is a great gulf set” (Dickens, “Niger” 62). He continues to write saying that the time required to save and civilize the “ignorant and savage races …requires a stretch of years that dazzles in the looking at” (Dickens, “Niger” 62). To Dickens, these years were better spent on England’s own problems, chiefly the problems of its white poor. Using historical criticism to contextualize the socio-historical environment in *Bleak House* and formalist criticism to demonstrate how Dickens writes to draw attention to Victorians’ biases, I will illuminate Dickens’ viewpoints and prejudices in his writing about the scientific, economic, and philanthropic issues of the Victorian era.

**Dickens’ Concerns about England**

Other than his documented observations of the United States’ treatment of blacks in *American Notes* (1844), Dickens has no first hand experience with people of
African descent. This detached misinterpretation of blacks' lives was not uncommon, as Douglas Lorimer contends that Victorians rarely met blacks in England and as a result their "discussion of race took place in a haphazard fashion, mixing the observations of travelers with common prejudices" ("Theoretical" 428). As a result, Victorians often had confused and erroneous ideas on Africans' physical traits, cultural practices, and mental capabilities and, since England abolished slavery in 1833, Victorians were struggling to clarify their own role in slavery's history and their feelings about the "black question."

England's expansionism into other cultures and ethnicities led to social and psychological complications for its population. Some of the people of England were looking not only to expand into Africa to "civilize" the Africans' way of living but they were trying to define their own role as a largely Caucasian society in the midst of blacks' changing roles within and outside of England's own social order. Whites felt that they needed to increase their claim of Caucasian superiority over their ruling, or potentially ruling, territories. This was especially important with regard to territories with people of color. To that end, England began to fervently embrace the "sciences" of phrenology and craniology to show their superiority to people of color. Some English began to believe that there were legitimate, God-given physical differences between Caucasians and people of color that resulted in their right to be dominant. They also used these "scientific" findings to convince themselves that they were not only intellectually superior to people of color but also that these physical differences led to their moral superiority. These scientific "justifications" permitted some British
to pigeon-hole Others into places that allowed them to feel more superior, powerful, magnanimous, and charitable to those less fortunate. The British did not just apply these “sciences” to justify their superiority over people of color, but also to differentiate the English between their own class systems. Because of Victorians’ social awareness, the language Dickens uses in *Bleak House* draws his readers’ attention to the gap between people of African descent and Caucasians. His language use in the novel uses England’s knowledge of the language of phrenology and craniology to fuel some of his most biting commentaries on England’s xenophobia and hypocrisy. Later, I will discuss in more detail this “scientific” language in the novel as it relates to Caucasians and people of color; yet, it is important to understand that Dickens’ language in *Bleak House* becomes inconsistent because his attitude toward blacks changed over time.

The novel’s language also emphasizes the chasms between powerful upper-class citizens and powerless lower class people. To be part of *Bleak House*’s upper-class means having access to money that provides housing, food, opportunities, education, and salvation. Being a lower class character means having little or no money, searching for a place to sleep, eating very little food, and being uneducated, which ultimately means finding no opportunities to change his or her existence.

In the novel, Dickens addresses one cause for the enormous gap between the upper and lower classes through his language directed toward England’s Chancery system. Like the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit, many cases going through Chancery became bogged down in paperwork and took a great deal of time to resolve. Dickens
shares his disappointment in the system when he writes of his growing dislike for the “delays and irrelevancies of Parliamentary government” (Young 437) that continued to erode England’s governing structure with each passing year. Like much of England, the London Times called for reform; a columnist writes:

…the Court of Chancery is a name of terror..., a devouring gulf... Ask why... the representatives of a wealthy man...are rotting on parish pay, why the best house on the street, is falling to decay...you are just as likely as not to hear that a Chancery suit is at the bottom of it... A suit in that court is... insatiable. (Butt 1)

The choice of words the columnist of the London Times uses when writing about Chancery is interesting. The phrase “a devouring gulf” (Butt 1) implies something that is alive and is able to consume or absorb something or someone outside of itself. Moreover, “insatiable” (Butt 1) suggests that the Court of Chancery has a life of its own, one that is always hungry no matter how much time, energy, money, or work is put into it; one that ultimately consumes, separates, or destroys everything it touches. Whether Chancery consisted of aristocracy, of a prestigious bloodline, or of people of wealth is immaterial since the outcome of alienation and separation between itself and England’s lower class, less influential lineage, or poor was the same. These Great Gulfs are illustrated through major disparities in Bleak House: from the governing class of Sir Leister and Lady Dedlock to the poverty, diseased, and homeless conditions of Jo living in Tom-all-Alone; from naming Mrs. Bagnet’s children after three of England’s military installations (Quebec, Malta, Woolrich) to naming Mr.
Skimpole's daughters with romantic names to reflect his idealism (Comedy, Beauty, Sentiment); from the lush, green, spacious landscape of Chesney Wold to the polluted landscape of Jo's world in which "... ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence..." (Dickens, *Bleak* 236). Thus, like many sensitive topics that arise in *Bleak House*, Dickens' use of language reflects an indictment of Chancery and its role in creating social disparities.

The upper-class citizens in *Bleak House* are Caucasian and, with the exception of Lady Dedlock, are predominately male. Even though Queen Victoria reigned over Great Britain, white males were making nineteenth century political and social decisions. Using irony in his writing, Dickens' characters, however, do not always reflect the patriarchal order of their time period. Using satire and role reversals, discrepancies between some characters' gender roles serve bring attention to the gap that exists between men and women's roles in Victorian society.

The characters in *Bleak House* also reflect the chasm between people who contribute to society and those who do not. Unlike the before-mentioned gulf that shows the differences between upper and lower class, the novel's characters address what happens if one works and contributes to society and what happens if one does not. However meager that work or contribution may be, has significance to the outcome of some of the characters' lives.

Through the language of popular philosophies and theories of his day, the novel reflects disdain for English missionaries and do-gooder benevolents who appoint themselves to save Africans from their unchristian and primitive ways. For
Dickens, the venture to add Africa to England’s collection of imperialized colonies was impractical since there was so much poverty and social disparity that needed to be addressed in England. In *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (1988), Patrick Brantlinger argues that “Dickens thought savages so far beneath Europeans on the great chain of being that only fools expected to ‘railroad’ them into civilization” (178). Brantlinger contends that Dickens could not comprehend that Africa or Africans had anything of value to give to England. As a result, one *Bleak House* character, Mrs. Jellyby, is portrayed as a foolish woman whose neglects her family because she is so busy trying to save the people of Borrioboola-Gha with her philanthropic efforts.

**Carlyle’s Influence on Dickens**

I assert that Dickens loudly echoes Thomas Carlyle’s (1795–1881) philosophies in *Past and Present* (1843) and in *The Nigger Question* (1849) where Carlyle refuses the idea that an African is the same as an Englishman, even as a species. A Scottish essayist, historian, and philosopher, Carlyle was the writer Victorians were reading and he strongly influenced Dickens’ views. Dickens was, in fact, very frank about his admiration of Carlyle, attesting, “I would go at all times farther to see Carlyle than any man alive” (Dickens qtd. in Adrian 227). Brought up as a strict Calvinist, Carlyle lost his faith in Christianity later in life. Nevertheless, Carlyle’s writings continue to blend his religious nature with his loss of faith, making his writings very appealing to Victorians struggling with scientific and sociopolitical changes. In his literature, Carlyle stresses the importance of the individual an
ideology that Dickens found very appealing. His negative writings about freedom, democracy, and capitalism, however, caused him to be labeled as an isolationist, alienated him from the liberal thinkers of his time and, by the twentieth century, marked him as one of the original theorists of Fascist ideologies.

In a rebuttal to John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), in which Mill asserts that all races and colors of people are equal, Carlyle strongly expresses offense at the notion of global equality. In *The Nigger Question*, Carlyle denounces the slave trade yet contradicts himself when he writes that blacks were born to serve, and blacks who didn’t serve should be whipped by whites. In a later writing Carlyle writes, “Quashee, it must be owned … It must be owned, thy eyes are of the sodden sort; and with thy emancipations … thou… threatenest to become a bore to us” (“Permanence” *Past 1*). Carlyle’s thoughts on the slave trade and his choice to use words like “it”, “serve”, and “owned” are confusing to say the least. While he may have been opposed to the actual act of trading slaves, he appears to have had no problem with blacks being in service, whipped, or owned by whites.

Carlyle looks at people of African descent as something to be traded or bought. As merchandise, blacks are placed in a subhuman category whose value is considered much like property or chattel. Carlyle establishes the word “Quashee” as a derogatory term for people of Africa and people of African descent. In this one statement, Carlyle makes it clear that Africans must be owned and are subject to mercantilism. Without their usefulness of labor, whites will grow weary from blacks’ tedious existence. Carlyle uses “sodden” in this sentence inferring two meanings. First, he
redirects his language direction from Africans as property to be traded to a more condescending prejudice inferring that Africans’ eyes show dullness, which further suggests a lack of intellect. Secondly, Carlyle’s use of “sodden eyes” shows his racism against Africans as rum drinking, irresponsible people. Carlyle writes often of this particular bias in *The Nigger Question*. Carlyle also suggests that slavery’s emancipation movement, with all of its rhetoric, verges on becoming tedious and “a bore to us.” The “us” that Carlyle refers to is, no doubt, people who believe similarly to him, that blacks have a place on Earth just not living equally with Caucasians. This is a belief Dickens embraces as he reveals his prejudices through *Bleak House*’s language.

Carlyle continues to write in *The Nigger Question* that even though slavery was full of suffering, “...I myself have suffered much, and have not you? It is said, Man of whatever colour, is born to such...For in fact labour, and this is properly what we call hardship, misery, etc....labour is never joyous but grievous” (*Thomas* 13). At best a cavalier offhanded statement that he never expands on, Carlyle turns the very atrocities that defined slavery into merely hard work and life’s typical difficulties.

This resulted in helping to renew England’s overzealous abolitionist movement to build people from African descent up from their seemingly down trodden existences. Brantlinger writes, “According to Carlyle and Dickens, abolitionist and missionary activities were distractions from more appropriate concerns about poverty and misgovernment at home” (“Victorians” 174).
Dickens' writing shows inconsistency in his viewpoints between opposing slavery and England's expansionism and his own personal prejudices and biases. To that end, Arthur Adrian contends in "Dickens on American Slavery: A Carlylean Slant" that Dickens had strong feelings and concerns about America's slavery system and, as he toured through the United States prior to publishing *American Notes* (1844), he was ashamed to be waited on by slaves. He states that Dickens "poured out his indignation...on slavery in *American Notes*" and "in September 1852 of 'North American Slavery,' a collaboration with Henry Morley for *Household Words*, he renewed his blasts against the system" (Adrian 320-1). The earnestness with which he catalogued slavery's abuses in *American Notes* (1844) lessened from a March 1844 letter to John Forster, a close friend and editor of *The Examiner* to that September 1852 writing.

During those eight years, Dickens' writing, while still condemning slavery, became less critical. Adrian states that as Dickens grew older he became overwhelmed "with the crying need for social reform at home" (328) and he felt the welfare of the American slave should not consume England's energy. It was during this time that Dickens' began writing *Bleak House* and I argue that Adrian oversimplifies Dickens' position on slavery and people of color. Dickens' use of xenophobic, isolationist language in the novel shows his gradual movement from disdain for slavery's institution to one of apathy, even dismissal of its conditions. Influenced by Carlyle's ideas, Dickens reached a point in his life where he changed his sympathetic views for slaves' conditions to a point where he could say that people
of color were “too dull to be taught any of the work at hand” (Dickens qtd. in Adrian 328).

Dickens’ “‘Noble Savage’ essay (1853) echoes Carlyle’s *The Nigger Question* (1849), and his response to the Jamaica Rebellion of 1865 also agrees with Carlyle’s rigorous defense of Governor Eyre” (Brantlinger, Rule 207). It appears that as long as slavery is not attached to the British Empire, like the Unites States’ “peculiar institution,” Dickens is able to offer sympathy to blacks’ treatment and conditions. However, he has a good deal less sympathy toward blacks’ treatment when it is in some way associated with the British Empire, as he illustrates in his later writings supporting Eyre’s suppression of blacks during the Jamaican Rebellion. The slavery issue was only a topic of concern to Dickens when it affected the British Empire’s ability to economically care for people within the Empire. In a sense, one could imagine that Dickens’ likened the British Empire to a nuclear family. He didn’t care if other families had problems with their children; he just didn’t want his children to misbehave or to be distracted from the potential he envisioned for his own family.

Trying to untangle Dickens’ language to slavery, blacks, and Africa becomes very difficult given the many angles of propaganda that shaped and fueled Victorians’ opinions, writings, and religious proclivities. The cycle of propaganda was generated by pro and anti-abolitionists, by Carlyle’s massive influence on Victorian readers in general and Dickens specifically, and by missionaries looking to shape Victorians’ opinions to fill their philanthropic coffers.
Dickens’ Concerns about England’s Expansionism

To understand Dickens’ writing in *Bleak House* as a reaction to England’s responses to slavery and Africa, one must understand England’s multi-layered sociopolitics. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, people of African descent were defined by the social experiences of England’s whites. Caucasians were trying to define Africans by European culture, politics, mercantilism, and religion and found that blacks could not be delineated within these social definitions. Whether in Africa, in the Caribbean, in India, or in the United States, blacks were at the forefront of England’s thought process as it shaped the world it wanted to define. With regard to conflicts in race, class, politics, and religion, the white English were creating the definition of what it would mean to be a person of African descent living under British imperialism.

After 1833, the influence of anti-slavery propaganda on the Victorian people was at an all time high making some English more sympathetic to blacks’ conditions in slavery. In fact, Brantlinger states that when Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852, it sold more copies in England than in America ("Victorians" 175). Stowe wrote the atrocities of slavery in the United States in such painstaking detail, her novel’s depiction of slaves’ appalling conditions even had an effect on Dickens. Adrian briefly writes about Dickens response to Stowe’s novel: “it is apparent that Dickens has begun to modify his attitude toward the South [slavery]” (321); however, Adrian oversimplifies Dickens’ ideas about slavery and people of African descent.
Long before Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, literature depicting the horrors of the Middle Passage and writings by freed slaves like *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) fueled England’s abolitionists to save the people of African descent from inhumane treatment. Once Great Britain abolished slavery, the English became very concerned about what was happening to slaves in other parts of the world. With their own sordid history of slavery behind them, “the British began to see themselves less as perpetrators of the slave trade and more as potential saviors of the African” (Brantlinger, *Rule* 177). As a result, England’s viewpoint of Africans shaped its relationship with the United States.

As America prepared for its Civil War, the English split in their opinions between the two principles they thought America’s impending war was truly about: slavery’s atrocities as opposed to the North’s aggression toward the South’s financial prosperity. Since England’s abolition of slavery, some Victorians adopted a self-righteous attitude toward United States’ slave owners. Britons thought they were more civilized than Americans because they no longer engaged in slave trade or holding. As a result, “[t]he blame for slavery could now be displaced onto others, Americans, for example” (Brantlinger, *Rule* 177). By the time the Civil War began, a portion of England’s population thought the South’s secession from the Union would eventually lead to slavery’s end, and Dickens was among this group of theorists. With Dickens in his beliefs was Lord Robert Cecil, Third Marquess of Salisbury and a conservative rising in the Tory party. He “emphasized the superior aristocratic qualities of southern life, but also affirmed his opposition to slavery, and reassured
his readers that an independent confederacy, urged on by the moral force of world opinion, would gradually emancipate its slaves” (Lorimer, “Role” 409).

Still others believed that the South’s secession would lead to continued economic prosperity for the South and an increase in English markets that were dependent on America’s cotton and other blockaded exports. By 1861, James Spence’s *The American Union* was being widely accepted by England’s conservatives who were calling for the South’s secession. The book even won over Dickens. “Charles Dickens’s magazine, *All the Year Round*, was one publication that became more pro-southern at the end of 1861” (Bellows 516) and Dickens “indicate[d] that he had no enthusiasm for the cause of the free states” (Adrian 323). Before Spence’s book, Dickens supported the war because of his dislike for the brutality in slave keeping. But, just as Carlyle vacillated between ideologies, Dickens’ viewpoints also contradicted each other. Dickens does not appear to oppose the idea of slavery since he supports Carlyle’s rhetoric that characterizes slavery as hard “labour.” And, like Carlyle, it appears that Dickens thinks the abolitionist movement is “smoke and mirrors” that diverts English attention from more pressing internal difficulties. Dickens does not object to the institution of slavery as much as he objects to the brutality used by slave holders. This is evident by the chapter “Slavery” in *American Notes*, in which he writes in gruesome detail of the tortures and punishments used against slaves. By the end of 1861, “Spence’s book convinced him that the northern war effort had nothing to do with slavery and that secession was not treason but a constitutional right” (Bellows 516). It is little wonder, then, with the literature and
propaganda being produced about America’s Civil War that English ideologies were further polarized which, in turn, magnified the Great Gulf of English prejudice toward people of African descent.

Meanwhile, England was also trying to deal with an abusive upper-class oligarchy in its Jamaican colony. Even though slavery had been abolished in Jamaica in 1834, Jamaican blacks were being worked literally to death by white British overseers in the sugar cane fields. With economic freedom out of reach and a powerful white political system in place, impoverished Jamaican men rebelled. British militias were sent to arrest everyone involved in the rebellion; however, the militias’ response was to suppress the rebellion with heavy handed viciousness: “400 people were hanged ... 600 were flogged, and 1,000 homes were burnt to the ground [before] Governor Edward Eyre declared martial law” (Bennett 1). When Eyre returned to Britain after the uprising, protesters of his excessive violence called for a trial for murder of British subjects under British law. Among others, Carlyle and Dickens supported Governor Eyre, who they considered “the hero rather villain of the Jamaica Rebellion of 1865” (Brantlinger, Rule 28). The people of England knew about the abusive conditions in Jamaica yet largely overlooked the abuses to maintain their market in the sugar industry. While trying to create a suitable solution to the working environment before the circumstances could affect their sugar-dependent industries, England’s courts did not want to appear hypocritical in light of their ideologies expressed toward the United States’ “peculiar institution.” Additionally, it
had to pacify class conscious Englishmen wishing to keep “race” a definition by which to extend their eminent domain over the Jamaican colony.

A large part of England’s “success” in its colonization in India was establishing a firm foundation in its governing and in its Anglicizing of the Indian culture. England’s language, agricultural focus, culture, religion, governing practices, and economic values infiltrated the Indian’s traditions and Westernized a civilization that did not go looking for this conversion. This Anglicizing created resentment as Indians knew their labor was building a strong British empire. Dwarfed in comparison, “…at the height of its power the British Raj ruled a population of some ninety million Indians” (David 14); Indians knew they were being controlled by a small governing group of British. This control illustrates a gross inequity to the Indians, as they were not reaping the benefits from their labor. Their poverty juxtaposed with Britain’s growing wealth from Indian labor served as a daily reminder of the gross inequity of British governance. This Great Gulf of governing inequity created an undercurrent of resentment. Britain’s governing practices were becoming the focal point as bitter Indians watched the development of discontent between Ireland and England. With the growing religious and political tensions between these two countries, some Indians may have suspected that it was just a matter of time before they would be able to overthrow Great Britain’s power and return to their own governing system. Dickens knew that the United States had overthrown being colonized and governed by England; he also knew about the bloody Jamaican Rebellion and Ireland’s growing discontent under English rule. Like
Carlyle, Dickens became bitterly resentful of England’s expansionism not only for the trouble that it was causing in other countries but largely because of the problems that it was creating and exacerbating at home.

As Imperial England continued to colonize around the world, some Britons began to resent their government’s expansionist efforts particularly its out-reach to Africa. For Victorians, Africa’s status as the “Dark Continent” was brought on by many factors: politics, economics, religion, social issues, prejudice, myths, and stories. In addition to blaming America for upholding its slavery system, England continued to look for something other than itself to blame for slavery’s atrocities. Whether consciously or not, the English began to blame Africans for the institution of slavery. Simply put, the English rationalized that if Africans had not needed to be saved from their savage and barbaric way of living, England would not have fallen into that terrible institution. To that end, the British, as well as other countries, rushed to Africa to civilize the savages. Missionaries were passionately heeding the call to go to Africa to Christianize the backward, primitive civilizations and benevolent money poured into these zealous efforts. And, as the English traveled to Africa, stories of what they found there traveled back to Great Britain, whether those stories were true or not. Stories of the African landscape, the people, their customs, habits, and ways of living became the fodder for the British imagination.

In Chapter Two, I discuss how Dickens uses the language of phrenology and craniology to bring attention to the Great Gulfs between people of color and Victorian England, between people’s capabilities, and between class distinctions within his own
race. I explore in Chapter Three how Dickens’ trope of cannibalism in terms of physical, moral, and economic consumption represents the Great Gulf between people who support economic systems and people who do not. In Chapter Four, I illustrate how the novel’s writing blurs the language of service and slavery which helps illustrate the developing Great Gulfs between the English toward Africans and between English social classes. I also incorporate Marxist ideologies to break down Dickens’ use of language in relation to service and slavery. Another way Dickens’ language creates a Great Gulf in *Bleak House* is by using irony and satire to make a stinging statement about Britons through their philanthropic efforts during expansionism. I will discuss Dickens’ harsh language about England’s philanthropy in Chapter Five. I finally conclude that Dickens’ points of view in *Bleak House* about the “opposite sides of great gulfs” (*Bleak* 235) are incredibly complex, recursive at times, and never completely resolved, yet are used to sway Victorians opinions to match what he believes in the moment.
Chapter Two: Phrenology and Craniology: The Birth of Prejudice

Charles Dickens shows through his writing in *Bleak House* that he is well read on up-and-coming discoveries of phrenology and other “scientific” propaganda which he uses to highlight the Great Gulfs between people of color and Victorian England, between people’s capabilities, and between class distinctions within his own race. Largely, his use of phrenological language satirizes how absurd his contemporaries are for listening to and believing in this “science.” To understand many of the prejudicial references in the novel, I need to summarize the history of phrenology.

The father of phrenology or craniology was German professor Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840). He collected human skulls that ranged from those of the Caucasus in Russian that led him to suppose that Europeans came from that region, to coin the word “Caucasian” to describe white variety of humans, and to prefer this “most beautiful form of skull” to the extremes furthest from it, skulls which he called “Mongolian” and “Ethiopian.” (Fryer 167)

As Blumenbach categorized skulls in terms of “beauty” and race definition, he initiated the benchmark by which future “scientific” studies would begin categorizing race as a precursor to social hierarchies.

Dickens uses language that satirizes Blumenbach’s theory when he briefly mentions his name in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843) as he introduces “the Pedigree of the Chuzzlewit Family” (Dickens, *Martin* 13). Leading up to an explanation that
distinguishes the Chuzzlewits from others, Dickens paraphrases Blumenbach’s theory by stating that even though humans have qualities that are closer to swine than any other creature, people are still direct descendants of Adam; he does not, however, mention Eve’s contribution to humankind’s lineage. One might anticipate a profound quality or virtue to differentiate the Chuzzlewit family from the rest of the population based on Blumenbach’s hierarchal skeletal studies; however, Dickens “compliments” the Chuzzlewit ancestry when he writes “without trenching on the Blumenbach theory … some men certainly are remarkable for taking care of themselves” (Martin 18). In essence, his writing infers that while Caucasians’ skulls indicate their superiority, the Chuzzlewits’ most distinct quality is that they are either incredibly good at maintaining their cleanliness, or that they are exceptional in their ability to overcome anything in order to preserve their standard of living. According to Blumenbach’s theory, this statement infers that Caucasians are cleaner and more likely to take care of themselves than Others. The irony lies in that, given all the distinguished attributes a person’s or family’s character can acquire in a lifetime, Dickens’ language concludes that hygiene or the ability to survive are ultimately more important than any other quality. Using irony, Dickens’ writing in Martin Chuzzlewit shows his awareness of Blumenbach’s ideas.

From Blumenbach’s work, Peter Camper (1722-1789), a Dutch surgeon and authority on medicine, formed the foundational theoretical base for modern craniology and used science to justify racism. Camper measured the length from “which the jaw juts out from the rest of the skull. A wide angle was to indicate a
higher forehead, a bigger brain, more intelligence, and a more beautiful appearance” (Fryer 167). Camper believed that as the forehead’s angle grew wider from Africans to Europeans, the human mental capabilities changed from less intelligent to the most intelligent.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828), also a successful German physician, developed theories concerning craniology. In short, Gall theorized that a man’s mind and passion (or human nature) were in the brain, and the power (or untapped power) of the mind and passion was an organic problem of neuroanatomy. Gall’s research to determine where man’s human nature lay in the brain was being driven by his need to find a scientific explanation for evaluating man’s social status in society. For people open-minded about his conjectures, these theories appeared to present a radical, new way of thinking about and categorizing people in society. After Gall made his ideas popular, others expanded and elaborated on them to suit their own ideas and agendas. German J. G. Spurzheim (1776–1832), a former student and follower of Gall’s doctrine, sectioned the human mind with each section carrying a different function and characteristic. Samuel George Morton (1799–1851), an American lawyer, measured skulls’ circumferences to determine cranial capacity. In George Combe’s Elements of Phrenology (1824), Combe took Gall’s and Spurzheim’s approach of stressing anatomy to “advance” phrenology to a moral approach. A supporter of Morton’s findings, Combe “argued that Morton’s collection would acquire true scientific value only if mental and moral worth could be read from brains” (Gould 52).
The language in *Bleak House* reflects some of Combe’s ideas of defining one’s moral worth through phrenological characteristics. In writing about Mr. Smallweed’s grandfather, Dickens writes, “In respect to ideality, reverence, wonder, and other such phrenological attributes, it [the grandfather’s mind] is not worse off than it used to be” (*Bleak* 307). These attributes have more to do with character than with intelligence, thus supporting Combe’s principles. What these theories allowed for were “leaders and intellectuals not [to] doubt the propriety of racial ranking – with Indians below whites, and blacks below everybody else” (Gould 31). In what Arthur Lovejoy would refer to as the “Great Chain of Being,” phrenology developed into a way of making sense of the hierarchal structure for power and social class that each class was fated to fulfill. The abolitionists’ success and the “scientific” discoveries that allowed English Caucasians to justify racism and ethnic superiority created the right environment for Victorians to “shar[e] a view of Africa which demanded imperialization on moral, religious, and scientific grounds” (Brantlinger, *Rules* 174).

Dickens incorporates phrenological language into *Bleak House* in a manner that illustrates his prejudices and biases. While in London, Mrs. Pardiggle, accompanied by Mr. Quale, visits Jarndyce and Esther to formally introduce Mr. Gusher through a letter. Again, at a later date, Mr. Quale acts as an accompaniment, although this time he joins Mr. Gusher for a visit with Ada and Esther. In introducing Gusher to Ada and Esther, “…Mr. Quale asked Ada and me, not inaudibly, whether he [Mr. Gusher] was not a great creature…and whether we were not struck by his massive configuration of brow” (Dickens, *Bleak* 220). Quale is depicted as a weak
character that acts mindlessly and without intention. He does not distinguish discernable qualities in anyone or anything since "[A]ll objects were alike to him" (Dickens, *Bleak 219*). Quale does not really know the value of the causes he promotes or of the people he flatters. He is not even discriminating about whom he flatters as he offers "a testimonial to anyone" (Dickens, *Bleak 219*). He admires other characters whether they deserve admiration or not, and he parrots most conversations he hears from the people he admires. This establishes Quale as someone who believes he is sincere, but Quale’s judgment cannot be trusted since his compliments and reiterations are directed to anyone, for anything. Quale’s mirroring what he hears and his lack of reflection on the words’ meaning also speaks to Dickens’ use of irony with Quale’s fascination with crania. Since Quale has a false and hollow personality, Quale’s fixation on craniology cannot be taken seriously. Similarly, Quale passionately admires Mrs. Jellyby. Since Quale cannot be taken seriously, Mrs. Jellyby or her work cannot be taken seriously either. On a much larger scale, Quale’s characteristics parody those Britons who are mindlessly and devotedly following behind the benevolents and abolitionists without really being able to discern if the social do-gooders deserve their admiration. I will discuss this population more in-depth in Chapter Five. Because the English, like Quale, exhibit a lack of awareness about the people they admire, the status of these people and their causes are lessened considerably. Dickens’ writing suggests that mindless and naïve Englishmen parrot conversations of those people they hold in adulation whether those words have any importance or not.
Quale implies that because the circumference of Mr. Gusher’s cranium is large, his intellect, passion, and moral code (i.e., human nature) must also be great. Quale also infers that because Mr. Gusher has a profoundly large frontal lobe that he is, of course, superior to all people of African descent, all Indians, and most likely, superior to most whites who do not have as “massive configuration of brow” (Dickens, *Bleak 220*) as him. Mr. Gusher, however, is a “flabby gentleman with a moist surface, and eyes...that seemed to have been originally made for somebody else...” (Dickens, *Bleak 220*). Quale’s admiration of Mr. Gusher is ironic, given Gusher’s fleshy and unattractive physical description. He is aptly named “Gusher” for the way he “gushes” in intolerable, seemingly endless chatter, especially when he is trying to bilk money from someone. It is also interesting that Gusher’s eyes are described as something that seem made for someone else. Dickens’ language suggests that Gusher’s eyes see the world around them but that they don’t look at the world in a way that makes it meaningful to him. Describing Gusher’s eyes in this way shows that some Victorians are disconnected from the unhealthy conditions that exist around them. The English see what is around them: the poverty, disease, lack of sanitation, and orphans; however, they really are not looking at the individuals living in these conditions. These terrible circumstances that some of England is living in are not registering in the observers’ minds with meaning.

Similarly, the English that are passionate about expansion into Africa only see Africa as a means through which they can feel better about themselves because of their country’ past role in slavery. Additionally, they see Africa as a positive
investment in not only saving Africans’ lost heathen souls but also in gaining Africa’s resources. The English, however, are not looking at the irreversible affect their intrusion into Africa will have on its culture. They also are not looking at Africa as a continent that has its own governing system, its own religions, and its own ways and means of commerce. Gusher’s character allows the novel to make a heavy-handed social commentary on what is happening in England. Making Gusher the focus of Quale’s admiration speaks to Quale’s idiocy. That Quale admires Gusher for his large forehead allows the novel to speak to the ridiculousness of craniology as a measure of distinction between these two characters.

Mr. Quale, though, appears to envy anyone with a large forehead. In that envy, Quale wears his hair in such a way as to enhance the look of his forehead. In a visit to Jarndyce, Ada, and Esther, Quale “seemed to project those two shining knobs of temples of his…and to brush his hair farther and farther back, until the very roots were almost ready to fly out of his head” (Dickens, Bleak 219). Since Quale needs to pull his hairline back in order to increase the visibility of his forehead, one assumes that his forehead and frontal lobe are small and not readily seen. Esther’s first impression of Quale is that he is a strong follower of Mrs. Jellyby and her Borrioboola-Gha cause. With deeper reflection, Esther learns that Quale is no more than a “train-bearer and organ blower” (Dickens, Bleak 219). Quale’s commitment to saving Africa is as false as his forced receding hairline. Esther’s observation of Quale shows that he lacks importance and that anything he values is diminished, including Mrs. Jellyby and her African cause.
The novel has many additional satirical comments on characters’ foreheads. In Esther’s first introduction to Harold Skimpole’s first introduction in the novel, Esther observes, “He was a little bright creature, with a rather large head” (Bleak 81). The author’s use of phrenological language infers that because Skimpole has a large head, he has a large frontal lobe as well. Skimpole, however, is exceedingly childlike, even though he is a grown man. Dickens describes him as romantic, sweet, innocent, free, and spontaneous. Victorian readers may assume, given their knowledge of phrenology, that Skimpole has an excellent human nature, an uncorrupted passion and a “little bright” intellect. Esther, however, does not see Skimpole as having come from excellent stock, as his large head may indicate. She sees him as a man who may have been damaged in his youth and “had undergone some unique process of depreciation” (Dickens, Bleak 81). Once again, an undistinguished character reflects how misguided craniological theories are with regard to people’s appearances. Mr. Bucket further speaks to Skimpole’s character with a very insightful observation when he states: “Whenever a person says to you that they are as innocent as can be in all concerning money, look well after your own money, for they are dead certain to collar it, if they can” (Dickens, Bleak 810). Ironically, Skimpole vacillates between naïveté and manipulation without much middle ground in the Bleak House community. Because Skimpole has a “rather large head” (Dickens, Bleak 81), one could assume that even with his naïveté and manipulative nature he is still infinitely above people of color in his intellect and moral code. Because Skimpole is a buffoon
and a user of nearly everyone in *Bleak House*, though, Skimpole’s character serves to illustrate the lack of credence in craniological theories.

Dickens uses language that references a broad forehead with another character of lesser esteem; *Mr.* Bayham Badger describes *Captain Swosser*, a character of higher esteem. *Mr.* Badger, third husband to *Mrs.* Badger, gives Jarndyce, Ada, and Esther a tour of the portrait gallery in his home. He introduces the portraits of *Mrs.* Badger’s first two husbands, *Professor Dingo* and *Captain Swosser*. As they stand before a picture of Captain Swosser “…on his return home from the African Station where he suffered from the fever of the country” (Dickens, *Bleak* 191), Badger admiringly points out that the picture captures the Captain’s “…very fine head. A very fine head!” (Dickens, *Bleak* 191). This character, even deceased, is not only physically elevated in his portraiture well above eye level, but is also described having “a very fine head” (*Bleak* 191) to indicate that he was of superior breeding, intellect, passion, and moral fiber. Once again, a weak, nondescript character, Badger, points out Swosser’s superior craniological attributes. This decreases the Captain’s stature simply by being associated with Badger. Similar to when Dickens writes about Quale and Skimpole, Badger’s observance of the size of Swosser’s forehead says more about him than Swosser because Badger judges the Captain by his cranium rather than his character. Having these weak, almost void characters marvel about others’ craniological attributes lessens the “science’s” importance and value. These characters reflect that people who think that craniology is important and legitimate are basically imbeciles.
In his mindless adulation of Swosser, Badger states that Captain Swosser survived the “fever of the country” (Dickens, *Bleak* 191) which speaks well to the Captain’s fortitude. It is not clear, however, *which* country Swosser derived the fever from nor is the “fever of the country” (*Bleak* 191) defined. One could automatically think of the fever in terms of an illness most likely contracted in Africa, like malaria. However, one also could read that by keeping “fever” and “country” ambiguous, Dickens’ language symbolizes England’s continued “fever” to make Africa a part of the British Empire. That Captain Swosser survived the “fever of the country” (Dickens, *Bleak* 191) implies that he became caught up in England’s zealousness to imperialize Africa but finally came to his senses to leave Africa and its inhabitants alone. Similarly, suggesting that Swosser survived the fever validates that Victorians were highly susceptible to propaganda to change or use Africa for whatever reasons they may have had.

Language in *Bleak House* appears to be in support of Gall’s research to find a scientific explanation to distinguish class. This is illustrated in the scene in which Prince Turveydrop is teaching a young girl to dance. As Caddy (Catherine) and Esther approach Prince to speak to him, Ether observes, “him engaged with a not very hopeful pupil – a stubborn little girl with a sulky forehead” (*Bleak* 346). Dickens’ choice of words “sulky forehead” is peculiar. While “sulky” generally refers to a depressed or sullen mood and is associated with the downward turn of a person’s lips, this little girl has a depressed appearance with her downward turning forehead thus making her cranium appear to be smaller. Dickens’ language use of “sulky forehead”
infers that her cranium is small and, therefore, she is inferior to those around her. However, that this girl *has the opportunity* to appear “sulky” and express her stubbornness says that her class is above Prince Turveydrop’s. She is, after all a paying customer for the dance lessons and she is not pleased with his services. The layering of class within class is also evident through Prince’s subservient position to his father, Mr. Turveydrop, who is the Model of Deportment. Mr. Turveydrop’s description as the Model of Deportment is inconsistent because he lives in shabby conditions with sparse furnishings. Like Mr. Quale’s hairline, Mr. Turveydrop’s deportment is a false image that he aspires to rather than really has. By layering social structures and by using subtle phrases to illustrate phrenology in determining characters’ status, the novel clearly indicates ranks within classes

One last example of *Bleak House*’s use of phrenological language lies in Esther’s introduction to one of Mrs. Jellyby’s children, Peepy. Peepy is frightened and crying because he puts his head between two iron railings and is stuck. As a milkman and officer work to release him, Esther notices that Peepy has “a naturally large head” (Dickens, *Bleak* 46). The novel’s language creates a differentiation between the aforementioned dancing girl with the “sulky forehead” and Peepy who has a large head. This differentiation shows the breadth of the potential they both can attain. The novel implies that although Peepy belongs to the same or lower class as the girl, his “naturally large head” shows he has more potential because of its shape. The two children are differentiated for several reasons. First, the novel magnifies the Great Gulf between females’ capabilities and males’. Living in a white patriarchy,
most Victorians would naturally believe in a male's superior capabilities over a female's. That the girl dancer has a smaller "sulky forehead" compared to Peepy's "naturally large head" indicates the boy's inclination to become more intelligent. That said, there are a couple of ironies in Peepy's description. The first irony lies in the notion that Peepy, who belongs to the presumably middle class Jellyby family, has more potential than the girl whose family has extra money to buy her dancing lessons. This example suggests that people who have money do not necessarily have the greatest potential to advance between classes. Another irony lies in Mrs. Jellyby overlooking and neglecting Peepy's potential because she has "fixed her fine eyes on Africa" (Dickens, *Bleak* 49). When looking back at the novel's description of phrenological attributes as "...ideality, reverence, wonder, and other..." (Bleak 307), this suggests that Peepy's potential, although great, will largely go untapped because Mrs. Jellyby is "a little unmindful of her home" (*Bleak* 76) by remaining too busy developing Africa's potential. Neglecting Peepy's welfare and potential, as well as the rest of her children's, should be expected from Mrs. Jellyby because, as she readily admits, "can I permit the film of a silly proceeding... to interpose between me and the great African continent? No. No.... No, indeed" (Dickens, *Bleak* 354). Like the girl dancer, Peepy's potential to advance between classes is also thwarted, though not because of wasted potential but because of potential that is being neglected. Mrs. Jellyby makes it very clear that her work with Africa is significantly more important than her work as a parent.
By the time Dickens published *Bleak House*, legitimate scientists began to change their viewpoints away from craniology as a means to categorize human hierarchy. Lorimer contends that “shifting the emphasis away from origins of modern scientific racism in the 1850s and 1860s to its acceptance by professional science in the 1880s and its popularization in the 1890s and thereafter” (“Nature” 383) was the direction scientists were moving toward. The pseudo-science of craniology and phrenology led to the legitimate scientific study of anthropology. Despite this turn, however, the damage of institutionalizing prejudice had begun. Dickens' vacillating viewpoint toward craniology shown through his language use in *Bleak House* shows his own inner struggles in clarifying his prejudices and biases. The phrenological language Dickens uses in *Bleak House* draws attention to the Great Gulfs with respect to race, class, gender, and status in England in the early and mid-nineteenth century.
Chapter Three: Cannibalism – Physical, Moral, Economic

Dickens uses the language of consumption, physical, moral, and economical to draw attention to Great Gulfs between people who have, make and contribute resources to society and people who don’t. People who voluntarily attach themselves to a contributing person or economic support system do not add any assets to the person or the system in which they live. Characters in Bleak House attach themselves to economic support systems, feed off of other characters’ attributes and, eventually, destroy the other characters. Dickens parrots many of Carlyle’s ideas as he differentiates the Great Gulf between a strong work ethic and one that is weak.

Physical and Moral Consumption

While I will later talk about consumption as it relates to economics, I begin here by referring to consumption in terms of physical consumption. Along with other prejudices, Victorians viewed Africans as cannibals. So, for Victorians extending themselves into the unknown Africa, their “fear of engulfment expresse[d] itself most acutely in the cannibal trope” (McClintock 26). Mary Douglas, a twentieth century social anthropologist, argues in *Purity and Danger* that “Societies are most vulnerable at their edges” (Douglas qtd. in McClintock 24), and people perceive themselves to be in imminent danger as they move out of the comfort of their familiar world into a world with which they are unfamiliar. As English explorers and missionaries extended into the unknown African culture, fear of becoming consumed into or by that unknown world led Victorians to fear cannibalism. Graham Greene “noted how geographers traced the word ‘cannibals’ over the blank spaces on colonial maps”
With increased travel between Africa and England came remarkable stories from both races; not the least amazing are the stories of Others as cannibals. While the idea of Africans as cannibals is discussed below, it should be noted that Africans believed that Europeans were cannibals as well. In fact, documented, first-hand accounts from enslaved Africans show that they believed Europeans were going to eat them on the transport ships or once the ships landed (Piersen 11). History has recorded Africans drowning themselves by jumping overboard to avoid what they thought was their potential fate of being cannibalized by their captors (Holloway 1). To understand the language of cannibalism in literature starting in the eighteenth century also helps one to understand the encounters between the people of Africa and Europe.

The term “cannibal” (derived from the term “Carib” which is an aboriginal native from the West Indies) was coined by Christopher Columbus with his mistaken discovery of America. Eric Cheyfitz writes, “After…Columbus…cannibal will come to mean one thing in Western languages: a human who eats another’s flesh…, principally Native Americans and Africans” (42). Caucasians developed assumptions that Africans were man-eating beasts. Little was truly known about Africa except for what was being published in travel journals or being brought back by word of mouth from missionaries. Caucasians’ view of Africans as cannibals became a staple of imperialist discourse…of the nineteenth century. These [views] were buttressed by the pseudoscientific writings of …David Hume, who compared Africans to animals and denied their
ability to think rationally, implying a bestiality that was linked directly to cannibalism. (Rice 110)

In a different slant on the definition of cannibalism, W. Cooke Taylor, author of _The Natural History of Society in the Barbarous and Civilized State_ (1840), states that cannibalism is “a depraved and unnatural appetite” (Taylor qtd. in Herbert 62). This “appetite,” Taylor concludes, takes hold of someone when circumstances are conducive. When a man is under a corrupt influence, he has the potential to adapt to the corruption even if the influence lies within an unbelievably perverse situation or action. This adaptation to a depraved appetite can apply to a moral consumption as well as physical.

Keeping within Taylor’s definition, _Bleak House_ uses the notion of depraved appetite and cannibalism metaphorically. The novel portrays nearly everyone who becomes involved with the Jarndyce and Jarndyce law suit and who are piqued with its enticing financial outcome as potentially a victim of moral cannibalism because their excessive interest leads them to despair and ruin. For example, Miss Flite, who follows the case on a day-to-day basis, is nearly driven mad by the prolonged enticement of its end. Miss Flite’s deteriorating mental health can be seen as a gradual cannibalism of her sanity at the “hands” of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case. Richard Carstone becomes so obsessed with his potential financial windfall that he squanders his life with the hope of his share of the law suit’s impending fortune. He finally plunges into a mental depression that eventually leads to his death.
One should not doubt, however, that Dickens believes that the acts of savage, bestial cannibalism are primarily, if not solely, that of primitive men. Dickens makes his opinions known when he reacts to the Franklin Expedition (1845). Led by Sir John Franklin, a knighted Englishman, the Expedition was exploring the North-West passage boundaries when his men traveled so far into unexplored territory, the group ran out of provisions. In later years, Dr. John Rae, an explorer and surgeon, was exploring what is now called Rae Strait when he came across "Esquimaux" (Dickens, "Lost" 463) that found the remains of the Franklin Expedition. Rae concludes from the Esquimaux' evidence that "From the mutilated state of many of the corpses and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last resource – cannibalism – as a means of prolonging existence" (Dickens, "Lost" 464). In a two-part article, Dickens rejects Rae's findings and questions whether his information has any validity since Rae comes by it through the third-party Esquimaux. Dickens blasts Rae's ideas: "there is no reason whatever to believe, that any of its members prolonged their existence by the dreadful expedient of eating the bodies of their dead companions" (Dickens, "Lost" 463). Dickens completely dismisses the idea as pure speculation and gossip, and he rejects the allegation that the men of Franklin's Expedition would choose such a savage practice because it went against their "firmness ... fortitude ... lofty sense of duty... courage, and their religion" (Dickens, "Lost" 492). These men, Dickens believes, were good, God-fearing Englishmen. Their deep-seeded morals would overcome any of their bodily
needs. Cannibalism would never cross their minds; after all, they were not savages like Africans and other lesser beings.

Despite his extreme aversion to the topic, Dickens uses satire when using the language of cannibalism in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843). In an amusing exchange between Chuzzlewit and “a strong-minded woman” (Dickens, *Martin* 62), the woman scolds him “to not look at me and my daughters as if he could eat us” (Dickens, *Martin* 68). Chuzzlewit assures the “strong-minded woman” that he is not a cannibal, to which she exclaims “I don’t know that!” (Dickens, *Martin* 68). In a sarcastic retort, Chuzzlewit assures the woman that even if he was a cannibal, he would not eat her because “a lady who had outlived three husbands and suffered so little from their loss, must be most uncommonly tough” (Dickens, *Martin* 68). Despite the humor, this reference to cannibalism serves multiple purposes for understanding Dickens’ later writing in *Bleak House*. First and foremost, it illustrates Dickens’ keen gift for writing satire since “tough” can reference the coarse texture of meat or a person’s strong fortitude. Secondly, it illustrates how the language of cannibalism can subliminally shape Victorians’ minds about Others. Finally, the language in this passage also shows Victorians’ contempt for “strong-minded women” (Dickens, *Martin* 62). In fact, for Chuzzlewit strength in a woman’s character is so distasteful even a cannibal would reject eating her. That said, Vholes being compared to a cannibal and having the trope of cannibalism used to reference him speak to his poor character.
Economic Consumption

Vholes, an attorney representing Richard Carstone’s interests in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce law suit, is described with language that infers Vholes’ cannibalistic nature. While Vholes is most likened to a cannibal, he also draws up images of Bram Stoker’s vampire as well. By dressing in black, leaving his prey yearning for more (hope, money) and, ultimately, sucking the life out of the people he attaches himself to, it is easy to connect cannibalism language to Vholes. Ironically, the character’s name “Vholes” is very near the term “voles”. “Voles [are] rodents that are “commonly mistaken for rats and mice...[that are] voracious feeder[s]...[and] have many enemies...The field vole relies on alertness and concealment for protection” (Chinery 344). The qualities of the rodent speak well to many of Vholes’ qualities. That the vole is compared to a rat which is also a cannibal is humorous. His methods of representation as an attorney are dubious. He dresses in “black, black-gloved, and buttoned to the chin...and [has] a slow fixed way ... of looking at Richard” (Dickens, *Bleak* 560). Vholes is described like a black spider, or black widower that is found in warmer parts of the world like Africa (“Black” 1) “looking at his prey [Richard Carstone] and charming it” (*Bleak* 562). Vholes’ interests in Richard extend to Richard’s impending financial windfall from the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit. Dickens’ infers in his writing, however, that Vholes suspects that there will be no windfall from the law suit; therefore, he is financially cannibalizing Richard for “expenses” associated with representing his interests. To make matters worse, Vholes repeatedly talks about the dependency of “his three daughters and his father is
dependent on him in the Vale of Taunton” (Dickens, *Bleak* 573). While the Vale of Taunton is actually a location in the United Kingdom, one cannot help but wonder if Dickens’ humor extends to Vholes’ “veil of taunting” to Carstone’s situation. Nevertheless, Vholes exploits his family to garner as much sympathy and money as he can from those around him.

In an episode in which the laity suggests repealing the statute that supports Jarndyce and Jarndyce, Mr. Kenge, a senior partner at Kenge and Carboy the firm representing the suit, states that to dismiss the case would put Vholes’ financial future into jeopardy and that would be very bad because “Mr. Vholes is considered, in the profession, a *most* respectable man” (Dickens, *Bleak* 574). Kenge’s statement is ironic since Vholes is everything but respectable, let alone “most” respectable. The novel incorporates a figurative satire when cutting off Vholes’ finances is likened to starving a cannibal: “As though, Mr. Vholes and his relations being minor cannibal chiefs, and it being proposed to abolish cannibalism, indignant champions were to put the case thus: Make man-eating unlawful, and you starve the Vholeses!” (*Bleak* 574-5). In essence, Kenge describes Vholes and his family as low-level cannibal chiefs; and, to deny Vholes the opportunity to practice law in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case would be equivalent to making cannibalism illegal for cannibals. If Vholes cannot practice law in this suit, it would not only starve the cannibal-likened Vholes but would also starve his three cannibal-likened daughters and his cannibal-likened “father… in the Vale of Taunton” (Dickens, *Bleak* 573). This is ironic because the cannibalistic Vholes is feeding off a law suit that is wasting away to nothing; it nearly
has no “life” (i.e., money) despite how hungry he is. In terms of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, it really won’t matter if cannibalism is made illegal since Vholes is likely to starve to death if this case is the main sustenance of his and his dependents’ diet.

Dickens does not use language that likens Vholes to a parasite, which his character also resembles. To be a parasite allows a host to live passively while the parasite lives on it. For example, Harold Skimpole attaches himself to people who have money and stays with them as long as they allow him to stay. Skimpole readily admits that he is, in essence, an innocent sheep being led by whoever financially leads him: “If he [Richard] takes me by the hand, and leads me through Westminster Hall in an airy procession after Fortune, I must go” (Dickens, Bleak 558). Skimpole allows himself to be led by Richard or, for that matter, anyone who opens his or her wallet to him. Richard is Skimpole’s financial host while Skimpole attaches to him; he doesn’t overpower Skimpole and vice versa. Richard has no long lasting impact on Skimpole’s survival because Skimpole, much like a vampire, will ultimately find another financial host.

Alternatively, a cannibal utterly dominates and consumes another. Vholes dominates Richard’s life and will, eventually, consume him in the sense that he facilitates in Richard’s demise. Richard is not equal to Vholes nor does he have control of him. Vholes senses Richard’s weaknesses about financial security and dominates him no matter how much he talks about being of service to him. Likewise, Vholes attaches himself to Richard’s impending financial success until that success
no longer exists. In fact, while the end of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case would have left Richard with a financial settlement, Vholes’ as well as other attorneys’ fees consume all remaining money. The relationship between cannibal Vholes and soon-to-be consumed Richard is reinforced as Vholes is “always looking at the client [Richard], as if he were making a lingering meal of him with his eyes as well as with his professional appetite” (Dickens, Bleak 576). In fact, as long as Richard is alive, Vholes, with his vampire, cannibalistic ways, will always look at him as a way to achieve his next meal.

Vholes’ consuming look is differentiated from characters who do not consume what they look at. Juxtaposed to Vholes’ devouring look is one described in Martin Chuzzlewit. Mark Tapley and Chuzzlewit meet a black man, “Cicero,” sitting on a landing near the door of the Rowdy Journal office. The black man stares “intently at Mark, while Mark … returned the compliment in a thoughtful manner” (Dickens, Martin 272). Neither engage in a conversation with the other. Tapley tells Chuzzlewit about Cicero’s slave history; but the truth of Tapley’s story should be questioned since a conversation between the two of them is not witnessed. This is an example of how a look, Tapley’s and Chuzzlewit’s, is used to objectify the existence of another human being, Cicero. They talk about him in third person instead of talking to him; in fact, when Tapley calls the black man by his name, Chuzzlewit asks Tapley instead of the black man, “Is that his name?” (Dickens, Martin 275). It is as if the black man does not exist and their stares do not act in ways that consume him. Cicero is like Teflon™ in that he absorbs nothing, not even a look; their looks have little to no
meaning. This example illustrates how people can be part of the landscape, but they do not necessarily have an effect on or are live in the landscape.

In this case, the act of looking objectifies and depersonalizes a person's existence rather than consumes it. The black man is objectified when Chuzzlewit lands in New York, a northern state. This passage in *Martin Chuzzlewit* elicits another example of Dickens' inconsistency when writing about people of color. Adrian argues, "Convinced that the shameful treatment of the liberated Negro in the free states was essentially as reprehensible as the subjugation of the slaves in the South, he [Dickens] took a stand against the defenders of the Union" ("Dickens" 322). This passage further illustrates the extent to which Dickens vacillates from being sympathetic to people of color in *American Notes* to supporting Governor Eyre for his suppression of blacks during the Jamaican Rebellion. I made a distinction earlier that Dickens tends to use sympathetic language about blacks as long as their oppression occurs outside of the British Empire. Whether dismissing or consuming, however, the look serves to represent the Great Gulfs between the haves and the have-nots, the English and Americans, the North and the South, and the English and the Africans.

In *Bleak House*, Richard is not Vholes' only target. Esther also observes a cannibalistic characteristic of Vholes when she expresses her discomfort with "that slowly devouring look of his" (Dickens, *Bleak* 901). The novel suggests that Esther's potential financial windfall when she becomes mistress of Bleak House will be Vholes' next target. Esther also notes that Vholes, who scurries after Mr. Kenge to continue a conversation about the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, "gave one gasp as if he
had swallowed the last morsel of his client” (Dickens, *Bleak* 901). Vholes is likened
to an animal that eats its catch and gives a final burp as it walks away, contentedly
satiated. This statement also foreshadows Richard’s death because once Vholes
consumes Richard’s interests in the case, he will move on to his next client until that
person is completely destroyed as well.

Another point of interest that comes from the passage in *Bleak House* in
which Kenge likens Vholes to a cannibal is the use of the phrase “cannibal chiefs,”
which is prejudicial toward Africans. Because the British thought Africans were
lesser beings, “in their books and essays the Victorians demote all central Africa’s
kings to ‘chiefs’ ” (Brantlinger, *Rules* 183). Missionaries and explorers fed into
Victorians’ prejudices through their propaganda that Africans were lesser beings who
could barely be tamed but worth their benevolent efforts nonetheless. Kenge’s use of
the “chief,” however, has several layers of irony attached to it. Kenge is a partner in a
law firm and Dickens is extremely bitter toward Chancery at this time in his writing
because of its disregard for helping England’s underprivileged. Having achieved what
would be regarded as an elevated station in employment, Kenge’s advocating for a
cannibal-likened chief (Vholes) lessens his credibility significantly. I will speak to
Dickens’ use of language when developing Kenge’s character below.

Skimpole, who is of a dubious nature, uses the same word that Kenge uses:
“chief.” As Skimpole walks through a portrait gallery at Chesney Wold with Ada,
Richard, and Esther, he uses the word “chief” in a negative connotation as well. He
casually makes disparaging comments about his hosts’ ancestors, stating that Lady
Dedlock’s predecessors were mean, strict, and abusive in their powerful positions.

Skimpole states that the women “put their sticking-plaster patches on to terrify commoners, as the chiefs of some other tribes put on their war paint” (Dickens, *Bleak 559*). Skimpole’s use of the word “chief” is unflattering. He describes these women applying their make up as if they were preparing for war. Skimpole’s usage of “chief” with Lady Dedlock’s ancestry not only demeans other civilizations’ ruling powers, but also demeans women by giving them characteristics that incite war and terror. Skimpole language is prejudicial to Africans’ governing capabilities and demeaning and insulting to Lady Dedlock’s ancestry. Inadvertently or not, he is saying that females are below the white patriarchy by likening them to the lesser Africans. He is also speculating about how the upper class is abusive to its servants. This is all very “tongue in cheek” because Skimpole, who is by no means a true member of the upper class, is a parasite to people with money. Skimpole’s hypocritical use of the word “chief” says that he thinks Africans and women are lesser beings than white males.

Kenge and Skimpole’s interrelatedness in using the same word can be seen through a much larger scope. If Kenge symbolizes the upper class and Chancery, and Kenge advocates for Vholes who exhibits cannibalistic behavior, the upper class and Chancery could be equated with also advocating for cannibalistic behavior. Kenge’s character is similar to Skimpole’s in that they both use the same word, “chief.” Skimpole, however, is not in the same class as Kenge; in fact, Skimpole really isn’t even part of a class since Skimpole is parasitic to whomever he can attach himself. If Kenge (Chancery) advocates for Vholes-like behavior (cannibalism), it would not be
a far reaching leap for Kenge to also advocate for Skimpole-like behavior (parasitic). The novel shows that Chancery advocates for cannibalistic /parasitic behavior, however, Chancery does not advocate for this behavior for itself but for a different, lower class (i.e., Vholes, Skimpole). This lower class, though, must feed off of someone or something, and most likely the ones who are being hurt are the people in the lowest class. Through a few simple words and metaphors, Bleak House makes an incredibly stinging commentary on Chancery’s role in England’s economic, social, and moral decline. The writing in the novel incites Chancery with the abhorrent conditions it has created and sustained for the extremely poor like Jo and “Neckett’s children” (Dickens, Bleak 224). Without a doubt, the novel’s use of the word “chief” feeds into Victorians’ fears and biases toward Others. Not only is the word used to portray the Great Gulf between whites and blacks but also between men and women, and between social classes.

A final example of consumption comes through the character of Jo. Poor and without access to health care, Jo contracts a contagious disease. Esther administers remedial nursing to Jo, only for him to run away in the middle of the night. What he leaves behind, though, is his disease, which Esther contracts. After a very long recovery during which she almost dies, the disease consumes one of Esther’s qualities, her beauty; her appearance is altered forever, a condition Jo never learns he is responsible for. Jo’s cannibal-like disease consumes Esther’s beauty. It not only causes the death of Esther’s good looks, but also consumes a part of Esther’s self confidence as a woman. While she is able to retrieve confidence at some level by the
end of the novel, a part of Esther’s personal make up that existed before the disease no longer exists after recovering from the disease. This male over female contagion and dominance serves as a symbolic rape in which, no matter what a male’s condition, he is still superior to and can overcome a female. After “touching” the female (giving Esther the disease), the male can run away into the night having stolen her innocence (or Esther’s beauty). The female is forever altered and the male has no clue of the effects his actions have had on her life. In this example, a disease separates the poor from the upper middle class and represents the gap between men and women.

My examples are tied together and supported in a very strong argument by Olga Stuchebrukhov. She demonstrates that Esther’s journey from illegitimate child to respectable woman represents “Dickens’ idealistic vision of the middle-class nation [England]” (Stuchebrukhov 1). As Esther grows through duty, self-sacrifice, and integrity, her character development juxtaposes to England’s elite but failing Chancery system. “Ultimately, it is Esther who ... administers her help regardless of social status by taking care of the sick Jo and ... in doing so, becomes the guardian of the socially weak” (Stuchebrukhov 3). The benevolence that middle class Esther provides for Jo is more than what the elite Chancery is providing. By placing Esther in a position in which she succeeds in providing services that Chancery does not, she is significantly elevated from her illegitimate birth and orphan upbringing to one of middle class respectability. That Esther, in her middle class status, reaches out to the lower class Jo and is left altered forever by the experience is not a surprise. Esther
must be altered either physically, intellectually, emotionally or spiritually so that she does not come away from the experience desensitized like the Chancery system. Without doubt, by caring for Jo, Esther not only legitimizes her position in the middle class but is elevated above that of England’s “esteemed” Chancery. Leaving Esther altered from catching Jo’s disease also shows that the middle to upper-middle class is as susceptible and as close to becoming poor and to becoming a victim of Chancery as people more vulnerable to the system like Jo.

As unpalatable as the discussions of morally consumed and flesh-eating people are, a much broader view of cannibalism is more readily apparent in *Bleak House*: “economic cannibalism. European colonialism... [was], after all, literally to consume generations of Africans” (Pierson qtd. in Rice 113). Economic cannibalism differs significantly from free or unequal trade. Trade consists of one market exchanging with another; both persevere whether the trade is fair or dramatically out of balance. Economic cannibalism, however, defines one market consuming another until the second market no longer exists. According to Pierson, as Africans were stolen from Africa and shipped all throughout the western world, the Africans’ customs, languages, arts, and skills in fishing, building, agriculture and trades were absorbed by westerners. In fact, General Augustus Henry Lane-Fox Pitt Rivers, one of the fathers of archeology, would say in 1872 that he thought there was an immediate need to study primitive people because “the manners and customs of uncivilized races are changing with a rapidity unprecedented in the world’s history,
and...the continued existence of some of these races is becoming a question of only a few years" (Lane-Fox qtd. in Lorimer, “Theoretical” 409).

Karl Marx writes in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) about economic consumption and man’s dependency for survival on the economy. In it he writes about “labourers, who live only as long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital” (Marx and Engels 87). And, while Marx’s ideas came too late for Dickens’ use, Dickens does echo Carlyle’s thoughts in *Past and Present*. Carlyle writes, “That the mandate of God to His creature man is: Work!” (“Captains” Past 4). Over and over again, Carlyle cites “Work” as the action that ends all social evils. He writes, “Genuine WORK alone ... that is eternal, as the Almighty Founder, and World-BUILDER himself” (“Beginnings” Past 6), and “All human interests, combined human endeavors, and social growths in this world, have...required organising: and Work, the grandest of human interests, does now require it” (“Captains” Past 4), and “...work is alone noble...” (“English” Past 1), and finally, “…whatsoever of Strength the man had in him will lie written in the Work he does” (“Happy” Past). Like “God”, Carlyle nearly always capitalizes “Work,” showing that he thinks of work as a type of religious experience that will bring mankind closer to God. Through certain *Bleak House* characters’ lives and outcomes, it is obvious that Dickens’ thoughts on work are similar to Carlyle’s philosophies.

Jo lives on the periphery of society, as many of Dickens’ characters live; he begs for food, money, and a place to hide or sleep. While Jo is one of the more
sympathetic characters in *Bleak House*, his menial work contributes little to nothing toward society's industriousness. He does not increase capital through his existence. Using Marx's ideology that "labourers, who live only as long as they find work" (Marx and Engels 87) means that Jo who absorbs more than he gives can no longer live. While Jo is dying, Allan Woodcourt attempts to lead him through the Lord's Prayer. Jo labors to repeat what Woodcourt says while not knowing the benefit of reciting it. Woodcourt's purpose for leading Jo through this prayer is to prepare Jo's soul for God, but Jo dies before he completes saying the Lord's Prayer. Given Carlyle's and Dickens' work philosophy, Jo's soul is not prepared to meet God. His unforgivable sin is that he does not significantly contribute to the economic base. As a result, Jo's death balances an economic power within *Bleak House*.

Richard Carstone's lack of productivity produces an outcome much like Jo's. While Carstone does study, he never selects a career. Richard has two brief interludes in learning law and medicine. Then, he enlists in the military and eventually squanders his time there. When Richard realizes he may end up with a potential financial windfall from the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, he looks busy while biding his time until the suit concludes. He hopes that by the end of the case, he will be awarded a substantial settlement and he won't need a skill or need to work. Marx writes that, "In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values" (Marx 6). While Marx generally defines exchange value to a manmade commodity, in this case he refers to *man* as having an exchange value. A critic of industrialization, Marx implies that as long as a person has something another person can profit from, that
person is useful in society. He surmises that humans tend to look at one another only in relation to what they can get from another person. Marx's ideology of exchange value can be applied to Richard's work ethic. While Richard could be an intelligent, productive member of society who contributes to the capital base, he, instead, does not find stable work or add to the base economy.

There is a significant difference between Jo's and Richard's exchange value in Bleak House, though. Because of the faulty social system created and maintained through Chancery, Jo cannot obtain an education because he lives in the poorest class. This lack of education means no one can profit from Jo's meaningless tasks; therefore, according to Marx, Jo is not useful in society. Richard, however, has ample opportunity to obtain education because he has access to money and education through his middle to upper-middle class stature. In fact, Richard spends much of his early life as a student in one form or another but squanders his education and the employment prospects that could come from having his schooling and apprenticeships. Richard's squandering of these opportunities compared to Jo's lack of opportunities because he is trapped in an unjust social system does not put Richard in a good light. Richard has the chance to add to the economic base of his society, but wastes his time and opportunities something Jo cannot even fathom being able to do. According to Marx's theory, then, Richard is not useful to society since he squandered his chances and education; society has nothing to profit from him. Richard must, therefore, meet the same end as Jo. Once again, the economic power base in the novel ensures that anyone who does not contribute to society's
profitability through work no longer exists. Jo’s demise elicits more sympathy than Richard’s given that Richard wastes his life waiting for the “get rich quick” solution from the Jarndyce and Jarndyce law suit while Jo struggles daily just to eat and have a doorstep to sleep on.

Richard wastes current time waiting for the settlement to conclude as well as his potential future time by wanting to live a life of leisure after attaining that money. These are unsatisfactory situations to Carlyle and to Dickens. Carlyle writes, “Idleness is worst, Idleness alone is without hope: work earnestly at anything... There is endless hope in work...” (“Gospel” Past 2). Richard idles away his time, half-heartedly learning what could be very valuable skills that contribute to his society. Because Richard wastes his youth being uncommitted to work and because he invests so much of his time searching for an idle, workless future, he meets a hopeless end.

As the seemingly endless Jarndyce and Jarndyce case continues and Richard’s potential settlement depletes, Esther observes Richard becoming weakened as his hope for an easy life moves further and further away from him. Esther observes: “I cannot use the expression that he looked old. There is a ruin of youth which is not like age; and into such a ruin, Richard’s youth and youthful beauty had all fallen away” (Bleak 856). The gradual depletion of Richard’s energy reflects Carlyle’s ideologies that Work is the life force that makes humans thrive. Bleak House follows Carlyle’s thoughts on this issue but ensures that Richard dies with remorse. With his last words, Richard asks Ada to forgive him because he has “done you many wrongs...I have fallen like a poor stray shadow on your way, I have married you to poverty and
trouble, I have scattered your means to the winds" (Dickens, *Bleak* 904). Richard dies because he does not Work and does not contribute to society. Richard dies before Ada can literally say a word to offer him her forgiveness. Like Jo, who is not forgiven when he dies, Richard is also not redeemed.

While the reader may have sympathetic feelings for Richard’s wasted life or Jo’s unfair treatment in poverty, *Bleak House* clearly indicates that to not Work is to lead a directionless life that, sympathy or not, needs to come to an end. So, the novel illustrates how wide the Great Gulf is between the financial contributors to society, those people in a class above poverty, and those who do not contribute financially to society. Through his use of language, Dickens indicates that those who feed off of the lives of others, like Vholes and Skimpole, are potentially evil and suspect. Others, like Richard Carstone, who aren’t presently feeding off of others but are waiting for their enrichment, will face an unfulfilled and unhappy end. Still yet, the impoverished, like Jo who has few chances of opportunity but contributes little to society other than by sweeping doorsteps or guiding people through the streets, are seen as sympathetic but are still cast off.

Dickens’ use of language associated with eating and consuming are words Victorians recognized as symbolizing England’s imperialism. In “The Imperial Food Chain: Eating as an Interface of Power in Women Writers’ Geography Primers,” Megan Norcia argues that children’s educational primers, which were largely written by middle class women, reflected that “overindulgent diet affected the temperament as well as the body” (256). These women were able to write about eating and dietary
habits with an underlying message directed at the appetite of Imperial England. “By linking excesses of the flesh, primers show how overindulgent appetites lead to moral destruction and indifferent attention to the institutions of marriage and family” (Norcia 255). Norcia’s premise is affirmed through two characters in *Bleak House*: Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby.

Mrs. Pardiggle is described as “a formidable style of lady... who had the effect of wanting a great deal of room. And she really did, for she knocked down little chairs with her skirts that were quite a way off” (Dickens, *Bleak* 113). Mrs. Pardiggle’s description as a woman in want of “a great deal of room” infers that she is a character that walks into a room and consumes its space and overwhelms its inhabitants with her excessive, overbearing personality. Mrs. Pardiggle is a woman who does most everything in excess. She engages her five young boys in her philanthropy work and speaks with pride that they give their entire allowances over to the “Tockahoopa Indians... [and]... the Great National Smiths Testimonial” (Dickens, *Bleak* 114). Better yet, her youngest son “has voluntarily enrolled himself in the Infant Bonds of Joy” (Dickens, *Bleak* 114). Editor Stephen Gill of the 1998 Oxford Edition of *Bleak House* notes, “The Band of Hope was a temperance movement targeting children” (Dickens, *Bleak* 922). Changing “Band” to “Bond” shows irony by targeting the ridiculousness of evangelicals having small children swear off alcohol and tobacco, two vices they most likely know nothing about. This is especially ironic since Africa’s King Obi from “The Niger Expedition” specifically asked English traders for these two particular items in his trade agreement in
exchange for helping to end slave trading in his country. At first glance, Mrs. Pardiggle’s excessive appetites do not appear to cause “moral destruction and indifferent attention to the institution of marriage and family” (Norcia 255) because her children appear selfless in their charity toward others. The novel continues, however, to describe the children as “dissatisfied...weazen and shriveled...absolutely ferocious and discontent[ed]” (Dickens, *Bleak* 114). The children are either severely overshadowed by Mrs. Pardiggle’s overly demonstrative personality to the point where they are resentful of her philanthropic causes, or they are severely neglected by her lack of attention because she is so focused on her work for others, or both. Their description as “weazen and shriveled” (Dickens, *Bleak* 114), however, does infer that they, like Jo, are undernourished. Also ironic is that Mrs. Pardiggle passes judgment on Mrs. Jellyby’s child rearing for not involving her children “in the objects to which she is devoted” (Dickens, *Bleak* 114). Mrs. Pardiggle’s excessive consumption is not only evident by her size, but with her excessive involvement of her own children in her devoted ideals. She details a long list of the activities that, for the most part, consume every day, all year long. Her consumption of her children’s time and energy is so excessive that she has eaten away their youth, leaving them bitter, angry, and starved for attention. Additionally, Mrs. Pardiggle insists that her children’s entire allowance be given away to her charities. Every time the allowance is put into their hands, she takes it away from them to give away. This excessive financial giving to her charities makes the children angry and resentful toward the charities because they are virtually working for nothing. Given Marx’s ideology that a person is useful in
society as long as he or she has something another person can profit from, Mrs. Pardiggle’s revoking her children’s allowance puts them in a terrible position. The children are literally left empty handed with nothing to contribute to society. Since “labourers...live only as long as they find work” (Marx and Engels 87) and Mrs. Pardiggle’s children don’t work, Mrs. Pardiggle is endangering her children’s existence. Mrs. Pardiggle’s excessive involvement in philanthropy comes at the expense of the emotional, moral, and physical destruction of her own children.

Using Mrs. Pardiggle’s excessive appetites and philanthropic involvements as indicators of “discussion on the appetite of Imperial England” (Norcia 253), *Bleak House* makes a scathing comment about England’s expansionist efforts through philanthropy. If Mrs. Pardiggle is a symbol of a robust England, the novel’s language implies that the way she overwhelms a room’s space and its inhabitants with her excessive, overbearing personality reflects England’s greed for space. Likewise, England gives money to its colonies (children) only to take it back. This could largely be applied to England’s expansionism into the West Indies and the incredible wealth England was making from the colony’s exports. Mrs. Pardiggle gives her children’s money either to religious charities or to charities that support Other civilizations. Her actions reflect the same actions of England and how it directs its money. She is, in a sense, spending her children’s inheritance and therefore affecting her family’s future generational financial growth. Likewise, The English are spending their money and the next generation’s money that will ultimately create an enormous national debt and affect England’s future financial prosperity. Ironically, Mrs. Pardiggle does not give
any of her own money toward her causes; she just gives her time and energy. The money given to her causes is literally taken from the little people. This is a very strong statement about England taking money from those who can least afford to do without it to support its philanthropies. In Bleak House, those who are least able to afford the philanthropic gift giving are most likely the extremely poor like Jo and Neckett’s children.

Mrs. Jellyby’s character is considerably similar to Mrs. Pardiggle’s but less verbose. Equally as intense to her cause and neglectful of her children, Esther notices that “Mrs. Jellyby required a good deal of attention, the lattice-work up her back having widened considerably since I first knew her” (Dickens, Bleak 440). Mrs. Jellyby’s girth has also widened as a result of consuming. In a sense, she has grown fat off the riches of others: the philanthropic project of Borriboola-Gha.

Mrs. Jellyby’s neglect of her family is evident before Esther even meets her. The first Jellyby Esther meets is Peepy, who she describes as “one of the dirtiest little unfortunates” (Dickens, Bleak 46) she has ever seen. As Esther enters the Jellyby house, she passes many children on the staircase including one that falls down the stairs, which Mrs. Jellyby does not seem concerned about. Richard counts eight Jellyby children, none of whom are being supervised by their mother or father. Given the clearly defined roles of men and women in the nineteenth century, society would expect Mrs. Jellyby to watch over her children and keep them cleaned, properly schooled, and behaved. Their mother, however, is obviously disinterested in them and their behavior. In fact, after Peepy falls down the staircase, he presents himself to his
mother with a bandage on his forehead and his wounded knees. Mrs. Jellyby reacts by saying, "‘Go along, you naughty Peepy!’ and fixed her fine eyes on Africa again" (Dickens, *Bleak* 49). Her children are unkempt and her home is in complete disarray because of her distracted attention toward her philanthropic cause. In fact, when pressed for her opinion of Mrs. Jellyby, Esther sheepishly points out “that she was a little unmindful of her home […] it is right to begin with the obligations of home…while those are overlooked and neglected, no other duties can possibly be substituted for them (Dickens, *Bleak* 76-7). Dickens nearly quotes himself from his early writing in “The Niger Expedition”: “The work at home must be completed thoroughly, or there is no hope abroad” (63).

Mr. Jellyby is also a neglected and virtually unseen member within his own home. His characterization is atypical of the roles husbands held in their own home. Men were dominant in their relationships with their wife and children, a trait Mr. Jellyby in no way exhibits. As a Victorian husband, Mr. Jellyby could insist Mrs. Jellyby be passive, compliant, and orderly. Husbands left the home to go to work, yet Mr. Jellyby never seems to leave his home. In fact, there is a stain on the wallpaper where he rests his head. A man laying his head against the wall and taking deep weary sighs is not a man in charge. This is evident of Mr. Jellyby within his household as well as outside his home as Mr. Kenge indicates, “‘Ah! Mr. Jellyby,’ said Mr Kenge, ‘is – a – I don’t know that I can describe him to you better than by saying that he is the husband of Mrs Jellyby’” (*Bleak* 44). Readers of the nineteenth century would expect Mrs. Jellyby to be referred to as Mr. Jellyby’s wife, but the
Jellyby home does not reflect a typical nineteenth century household. Readers would be amused by this reversal of titles even if they were familiar with a dominant Queen. Britons were accustomed to Queen Victoria’s relationship with her husband Prince Albert. The Queen had nine children during their marriage and while she was “confined by her multiple pregnancies, Albert undertook many of her responsibilities. Victoria herself said that Albert was king in all but name” (“Queen” 3). The role model the English were accustomed to was one in which women, even the Queen, allowed men to assume the dominant role.

Once again, when drawing a parallel between Mrs. Jellyby’s excessive appetites and philanthropic involvements as indicators of “discussion on the appetite of Imperial England” (Norcia 253), the novel’s portrayal of Mrs. Jellyby creates a stinging commentary on England’s expansion. Like Mrs. Jellyby, England is robust and focused on doing well for others outside of itself. Unfortunately, however, England’s attention is so far-sighted on saving Africans from their primitiveness, saving their souls, and “providing” them with a culture, that it has neglected to care for its own “family.” England continues to produce a population at a large and steady rate, like Mr. and Mrs. Jellyby and Queen Victoria, but it does not focus its money, energy or attention toward its ever-growing needs. In one of the Bleak House’s most sincere and poignant moments, Dickens writes of the terrible conditions facing England’s children.

In a poor room with a sloping ceiling, and containing very little furniture, was a mite of a boy, some five or six years old, nursing and
hushing a heavy child of eighteen months. There was no fire, though the weather was cold; both children were wrapped in some poor shawls and tippets, as a substitute. Their clothing was not so warm ... and their small figures shrunken... (225)

The well-fed Mrs. Pardiggle or Mrs. Jellyby do not appear favorably when they are compared to the shrunken, cold, little bodies of small children. Because both of them keep their sights on causes away from their children’s welfare and beyond their home’s borders, all their time, energy, and money are directed to Others. That time, energy, and money, the novel admonishes, should be spent on the upbringing and welfare of England’s poor, as Esther carefully articulates about Mrs. Jellyby’s lack of focus on her “obligations of home” (Dickens, Bleak 16). In a second example of the conditions of England’s poor as compared to its outreach to Others, Dickens writes of Jo:

He is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle’s Tockahoopa Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby’s lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borrioboola-Gha... he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article... native ignorance, the growth of English soil climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish. (Bleak 669)

Dickens’ language use in this passage is very telling of Jo and of the setting that he lives in. First, the novel makes it clear that Jo is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle’s causes that she advocates so heavily for. The money that she gives and the robustness
with which she offers her work is directed to the unknown Others rather than the lowest class that she passes by on English streets. Jo, a member of this lowest class, is virtually invisible to her even though her sights are directed toward the Tockahoopas Indians a civilization she has most likely also not seen. This, once again, is a reiteration of how England is taking care of Others outside of itself but not taking care of its own people. Dickens also says that Jo “is not one of Mrs. Jellyby’s lambs” (Bleak 669). Using the word “lambs” suggests a couple metaphorical allusions. Christians often refer to Christ as a shepherd and humans as His flock. By placing Mrs. Jellyby in the role of shepherd or Christ and by putting Jo as a lamb in an untended flock, the novel infers that Jo is not one of Mrs. Jellyby’s duties to care for. In other words, Jo, innocent and unsaved, is not one of Christ’s or Mrs. Jellyby’s priorities to care for because he “is wholly unconnected with Borrioboola-Gha” (Dickens, Bleak 660). Using England in as the shepherd not tending to its lowest class’ needs is also an aptly applied metaphor. Lambs were also often used for sacrifices to gain favor, praise or thank the gods or God. Since Jo is not one of Mrs. Jellyby’s lambs to use in one of these capacities for her work with Borrioboola-Gha, he really is of no use to her. In the same metaphor, since Jo as the lowest class is not one of England’s lambs to use in some way to create capital, he is of no use to England as well.

Jo is, however, reduce in this passage with words such as “article,” “growth,” and “lower that the beasts” (Dickens, Bleak 669). Objectified and lowered below the beasts, the language infers that like an object or as some Christians believe an animal,
Jo does not have a soul. Since he does not and cannot have a soul, no resources should be directed toward him whether those resources come in the manner of care, money, or salvation.

Dickens also outlines the horrific conditions that one of England’s “ordinary home-made” (Bleak 669) children lives in. The language Dickens uses in this passage appears to admonish England by saying if Jo was a “genuine foreign-grown” (Bleak 669) recipient of one of Mrs. Pardiggle’s causes, or if he was Mrs. Jellyby’s philanthropic focus rather than the Borribooola-Gha settlement, then, perhaps, he would not be living in these less-than-human conditions.

When referring to England’s philanthropic expansionism into Africa, Dickens writes, “The air that brings life to the latter brings death to the former” (“Niger” 62). It is a bleak prediction for the have-nots in the Victorian era. His irony, however, is not lost even in his most heart-felt writing. “Native ignorance” can take on a double meaning in Dickens’ aforementioned writing. On one hand, Jo is identified as a “native” Englander, one of Britain’s originally born population. Jo’s “native ignorance” suggests that he doesn’t have any idea what it would be like to live in better conditions since he has lived in poverty his entire life. Never having known any other life than the terrible one he leads, he is ignorant of a better way of living, as well as ignorant that England is providing better living conditions for Others outside of England. On the other hand, “native ignorance” states the obvious: that Others are ignorant of their own living conditions’ potential of being different. “The growth of English soil and climate” (Dickens, Bleak 669) is referring to the dirty living
conditions that Jo is living in and the climates that he must suffer through since he is homeless. Likewise, *Bleak House* is referring to England’s outward growth through its expansionism. Just like Jo’s abhorrent living conditions would cause his spirits to decline, the novel implies that England’s expansionism is lowering the very nature and well being of those it is reaching out to. Those being colonized will forever be negatively changed, so that they also will be equivalent to Jo weathering the same conditions and could, potentially, cease to exist.

This interpretation supports Lane-Fox’s theories that “the manners and customs of uncivilized races are changing with a rapidity … unprecedented in the world’s history, and... the continued existence of some of these races is becoming a question of only a few years” (qtd. in Lorimer, “Theoretical” 409). Dickens’ use of language in *Bleak House* shows a side of England’s expansionism that is not very pleasant to look at. For the English living in savage-like conditions in the lowest class like Jo and the above mentioned “mite of a boy, some five or six years old, nursing and hushing a heavy child of eighteen months” (Dickens, *Bleak* 225), their hope for a better life looks dreary. The undernourished and homeless children in *Bleak House* are poor in part because England’s expansionism means spending money elsewhere instead of taking care of its own people. In fact, the novel infers that these neglected poor could cease to exist because of England’s redirected resources from its own underprivileged citizens to other cultures through expansionism. Further, Dickens’ language foreshadows that expansionism could have catastrophic results for its potential colonies and for the people of those colonies. According to the novel, taking
care of Others rather than taking care of England’s own neglected poor and 
uneducated will have terrible, irreversible, and lasting repercussions for both cultures.
Chapter Four: Servitude and Slavery

There is a difference between Dickens’ use of the language of service and his use of the language of slavery as the novel characterizes Great Gulfs. Dickens’ use of this language highlights an undercurrent of prejudices that represent the Great Gulf between English and Africans and between English social classes. Likewise, when Dickens mixes the language of slavery with service, it desensitizes the very nature of what slavery is.

In order to understand how Dickens interchanges service language to the language of slavery, the definitions of “service” as well as “slavery” need to be examined. “Service” entails employment no matter how meager the pay. Someone who voluntarily provides for someone else grants a service as long as there is some small compensation involved in the transaction between the two. The two key words in the previous sentence are “voluntary” and “compensation.” Alternatively, “slavery” necessitates one person be owned by another as property and engaged in involuntary work for no compensation. Slavery usually includes labor under the threat of violence. Dickens’ blurring of the language between two distinct economic conditions belittles the nature of slavery, as does Carlyle when he writes that slavery is like “labour, and ….labour is never joyous but grievous” (Thomas 13). Dickens supports Carlyle’s viewpoint by inferring that there really is no true form of slavery; there are only different levels of service. Carlyle’s prejudice is supported in Bleak House through its subtle manipulation with words.
The novel’s blurring of the definition and concept of service and slavery also serve to blur the lines between class systems as well as races. It is very clear in the novel who belongs to a certain class and should remain in it. Esther’s unpaid duties in the novel show her being comfortable and happy as mistress of the house. Her duties consist of responsible, elevated tasks as she “paid the bills...added up my books,” and “examining tradesmen’s books...filing receipts” (Dickens, *Bleak* 135). These tasks and responsibilities require education and critical thinking, unlike menial, unskilled tasks like washing floors and polishing the silver. Possessing and performing these duties and skills place Esther in a higher intellectual class than others in her world. This intellectual superiority places her in an awkward relationship with other people in the house that perform duties. Esther volitionally performs her duties without compensation. She is neither a servant nor a slave; in essence, she is voluntarily a housekeeper. In fact, Mr. Guppy comes to visit her and Esther “rang the bell, [and] the servant came” (Dickens, *Bleak* 141) to show Guppy to the door. Because the other person is referred to as a “servant,” the novel differentiates him or her as a servant in the truest form of the word: voluntarily in employment and paid for that employ. This, then, places the servant in a juxtaposed relationship to Esther. Since it is Esther’s beckoning that initiates the servant to come to her, her position is superior to the servant’s. Both are volitionally performing their services; however, the servant earns money while Esther’s source of income is left ambiguous. Unlike most *Bleak House* characters who can be easily categorized in a social class, Esther seems to be in a class all by herself. Although Esther’s position is ambiguous, she is in that role so
she can fulfill her purpose of becoming the symbol of unfaltering morality in the novel.

The novel clearly makes a class distinction when using the language of service between Charley and Judy Smallweed. Charley is in service to Judy. Judy calls for Charley’s services, at which time Charley is “obedient to the summons” and appears “in a rough apron…with her hands covered with soap and water, and a scrubbing brush in one of them” (Dickens, Bleak 310). That Charley immediately comes when she is called places her in a lower, subservient position to Judy. Judy blusters that Charley is “more trouble than you’re worth, by half” (Dickens, Bleak 311) indicating that Charley is paid for her labor, whether by Judy or someone else is not revealed. What is revealed is that Judy values Charley’s labor for only half as much as she is being paid. Even though Judy is in a class above Charley, the novel continues to show Judy’s unflattering behavior as she “snap[s]” (310), “stamp[s]” (310), and “cries” (Dickens, Bleak 313). She collects the dregs of tea in the bottom of already-sipped tea cups and she scrapes up bread crumbs for Charley’s dinner. Judy’s nasty and ungracious behavior toward her family’s servant, however, causes one to gravitate toward Charley. It is her quiet manner and small, delicate way of saying, “Yes, miss…” (Dickens, Bleak 313) that endears Charley and allows her to serve as a foil to Judy’s offensive behavior. Even though Charley is clearly Judy’s servant, she appears elevated in her social status because she has a better sense of decorum and decency than Judy. Once again, like Peepy and the girl with the “sulky forehead,” the novel is making a commentary that people who have money do not necessarily have the most
potential, even in their character; or, they might have potential but do not realize it. This is also evidenced in Esther's relationship with Ada. Esther is a housekeeper as well as Ada's social inferior. She becomes, however, Ada's companion. Ada has access to money that Esther does not, as the novel indicates Richard drains Ada's life savings. It is not Ada, then, who ends up accomplishing her best potential since she wastes so much of it waiting for Richard to make something of himself. It is Esther who does not have access to money, who achieves her most potential since she accepts her altered appearance, remains loyal to Mr. Jarndyce, marries Allan Woodcourt, and lives in her own Bleak House, all while remaining the moral center of *Bleak House*.

In a conversation between Mademoiselle Hortense and Esther, Dickens' use of language blurs the distinctions between service, voluntary work, and slavery. Hortense approaches Esther for a position as her attendant, but Esther says she is uncomfortable with the idea: “‘I assure you,’ said I, quite embarrassed by the mere idea of having such as attendant, ‘that I keep no maid – ’” (Dickens, *Bleak* 339). The “maid” that Esther refers to in this conversation is a lady's maid that would be a personal servant attending to her beauty needs and personal attire. It would be appropriate for someone like Ada to have a maid; however, for Esther, who is Ada's social inferior, it would be unlikely, if not inappropriate, to have one. Perhaps it is the word “keep” that also makes Esther feel uncomfortable. To “keep” infers to maintain and hold on to something or someone as if one possess it. In this sense, Esther is not looking at Hortense's proposition as a potential servant but as an obligation she will
have to maintain. Hortense does not alleviate this impression when she blusters, “I wish with all my heart to serve you. Do not speak of money at present. Take me as I am. For nothing!” (Dickens, *Bleak* 339). Even though Hortense refers to serving Esther, Dickens again blurs the language by subtracting payment from service with Hortense’s plea to “take” her. To “take” implies that Esther is to “obtain” her as if she is a product to acquire through buying, selling or trading. Like Carlyle, Dickens believed “in balance between utilitarianism and romanticism” (Stuchebrukhov 8). Given Esther’s elusive rigidity in comparison to a foil like the passionate Mademoiselle Hortense, Esther is the ideal character that represents this ideology.

Unlike Esther who is modest, reserved, and uses common sense, Hortense is passionate, vain, and lacks self control. Stuchebrukhov argues that “Hortense is depicted as a possible lesbian” (7). This depiction may also be one of the reasons Esther feels uncomfortable in “tak[ing]” Hortense. Esther’s resistance to “keep” this lower class woman who exclaims “with all my heart” (Dickens, *Bleak* 339) to be an attendant to her, offers a romantic undertone that the morally sound Esther, of course, would find uncomfortable. Hortense pushes the conversation further by sexualizing her plea to Esther by uncontrollably blurting, “Take me as I am. For nothing!” (Dickens, *Bleak* 339). As Hortense’s language becomes nearly uncontrollably sexualized, it is clear that Esther is “put off” by Hortense’s alternative social standing. For her own ambitions, Hortense offers herself to Esther; she has complete control over her body and whoever she chooses to give it to. She is even capable of offering herself for free. This signifies that Hortense can decide whether to offer her services
at no charge, a voluntary action, or to be paid for her services which, when kept within the sexualized language, symbolizes prostituting herself. By sexualizing the language of a person of a lower class toward a person of a higher class, by pushing the language of service toward someone working “For nothing” (Dickens, *Bleak* 339) and by allowing a character to be something to be bartered with, the novel’s language of class, service, and slavery blurs class distinctions and, most importantly, desensitizes the true nature of slavery.

Characters bartering themselves or being bartered as objects or goods continues when Mr. Jarndyce brings Charley into Bleak House to serve Esther. As Charley talks to Esther, she makes her role perfectly clear when she says, “I’m a present to you” (Dickens, *Bleak* 356). She repeats a similar sentence a little while later in their conversation when she states, “If you please, miss, I am a little present” (Dickens, *Bleak* 356). Even though Mr. Jarndyce saves Charley from the abusive employ of unrefined Judy Smallweed, he creates a position for her as an attendant to Esther. There is no mention of how Mr. Jarndyce comes to employ Charley, whether she comes to him looking for a job, whether he goes to her asking if she wants a job, or whether he goes to Judy Smallweed and asks her for Charley. This is left ambiguous. That Charley presents herself as a gift to Esther from Mr. Jarndyce, however, clearly marks an understated transition from service language to slave language. By objectifying herself as a “present,” Charley indicates that she has no control over her own body. She is something to be given away. Charley tells Esther that she is to be her maid which implies paid services. The novel, though, blurs the
implication that Charley has autonomy and makes her own wage when she states that she is an object that Mr. Jarndyce is handing over to Esther as a token of his affection. This scenario’s language and implications are similarly to the sexualized transaction between Hortense and Esther. It infers that Charley is outside of the definition of prostitute. She is, however, within the definition of human trafficking or sex trafficking business. She is brought from a poor or abusive environment (i.e., Judy Smallweed’s home) to a location where she believes she will find a more humane or lucrative future (Jarndyce’s Bleak House). Once there, she is objectified and given to someone else (slave). Whether she is being compensated for her services is irrelevant since she has no choice but to stay or go back to her miserable beginnings. Whether she is in a servant’s position in Judy Smallweed’s employ and makes a lateral move as a servant into Jarndyce’s employ, or whether she transitions from service into a slave’s position is immaterial. Poverty entraps Charley in the position she is in.

Gliding over clichéd slavery language and blurring that language serves to desensitize Victorians’ feelings to slavery’s true nature and circumstances. To illustrate this blurring and misuse of the language of slavery in *Bleak House*, the narrator says, “he [Mr. Turveydrop] married a meek little dancing-mistress … and had worked her to death, or had, at the best, suffered her to work herself to death, to maintain him in those expenses which were indispensable to his position” (209). In this situation, the novel’s language use is outside of the boundaries of defining slavery as seen generally in terms of blacks and whites. By blurring the language of slavery within a Caucasian marriage, the novel alienates Victorians from the true
connotations of slavery since they would not see marriage in the same light as slavery. Mr. Turveydrop, “a model of Deportment” (Dickens, Bleak 208), is a symbol of wealth and posturing. He believes he is an aristocrat, yet has to strain too hard to act like one. He lounges, has no fencing skills, and misinterprets when people are talking about him rather than in esteem of him. Mr. Turveydrop naming his son “Prince” Turveydrop suggests that the former Turveydrop is king of his domain. He, however, is clearly someone that has no concept of what hard work truly is and, as such, the use of the language of slavery is ironic since it is associated with this posturing, largely useless character. Unfortunately, Prince also labors endlessly to support his father’s lifestyle. To this end, Mr. Turveydrop serves as symbol of the old way of aristocratic thinking: that what it values means nothing. Mr. Turveydrop postures and pretends that he is something more than what he is. Mrs. Turveydrop and his son’s hard work enable him in his behavior. Mr. Turveydrop, supported by the Victorian patriarchal society, has legal rights over some aspects of domain within his marriage like controlling their finances, being permitted to be abusive and neglectful to her and their family within certain limitations, and making decisions that, whether good or bad, affect the household. To literally work Mrs. Turveydrop to death suggests that she has less freedom from her husband and his demands than the common slave would have from his or her owner. The difference, however, is that Mr. Turveydrop does not own Mrs. Turveydrop and she works voluntarily. This misuse and blurring of the language of slavery, illustrates a distinction of the class system in England and its inherent unfairness to working class women.
In a later scene, Volumnia and her uncle, Sir Leicester, talk of Mr. Tulkinghorn’s work. Volumnia is distressed that Tulkinghorn, a man she has a fondness for, is overburdened in his employment. *Bleak House*'s language is similar to that used when the narrator discusses Mrs. Turveydrop’s work. Volumnia says to her uncle, “I suppose Mr. Tulkinghorn has been worked to death” (Dickens, *Bleak House* 597). In this instance, Volumnia, a shallow, vulture-like woman, who will eventually hover over her dying uncle so that she can inherit his fortune, expresses a cliché. Her misuse of the language of slavery acts as an overly used hackneyed remark that hints at mistreatment. Volumnia, like the rest of the characters in *Bleak House*, has no idea what a slave looks like, what someone “worked to death” looks like, or what the conditions of a slave are. It is also unlikely that she, like Mr. Turveydrop, in her upper class existence, has worked hard enough to know the extent of hard labor.

Volumnia’s casual use of the phrase “work to death” turns the tired out, overused phrase into one that carries no meaning. The subtle blurring of the language of slavery into everyday, worn out expressions separates the concept of slavery with the reality of its atrocities and represents the Great Gulf of misunderstanding between Englishmen and the people of African descent’s history.

Dickens admitted in 1859 that he patterned Harold Skimpole, the happy-go-lucky, self-described “child” who John Jarndyce protects, after his friend Leigh Hunt. Hunt’s “animation, his sympathy with what was gay and pleasurable; his avowed doctrine of cultivating cheerfulness, were manifest... with a sort of gay and ostentatious willfulness” (Dickens, “Leigh” 227). His writing in “Leigh Hunt.
"Remonstrance" indicates that Dickens was delighted with Hunt’s manner and attempted to reproduce it in Skimpole. While he meant no offense to Hunt by “making the character speak like his old friend” (Dickens, “Leigh” 229), I find Skimpole one of Bleak House’s least likeable characters. While Skimpole lies on his back talking with Mr. Boythorn, a character Dickens patterned after another close friend, Walter Savage, Skimpole states, “Enterprise and effort … are delightful to me” (Bleak 273). Ironically, Skimpole does not exhibit enterprise or effort. He is manipulative in his lack of responsibility, in his ease with other people’s money, and with his poor-to-no work ethic. In fact, in a conversation with Esther about responsibility Skimpole states, “I am the last man in the world for such a thing. I never was responsible in my life – I can’t be” (Dickens, Bleak 557). Likewise, in her first impressions of Skimpole, Esther narrates, “That he had no idea of time … that he had no idea of money” (Dickens, Bleak 82). It is this irony that begins to set the mood for Skimpole’s later discussion. Skimpole discusses his dream of “adventurous spirits going to the North Pole, or penetrating to the heart of the Torrid Zone” (Dickens, Bleak 273). Stephen Gill notes that Skimpole alludes to “African exploration, whose most famous hero, David Livingstone, began his African adventure in 1841” (Dickens, Bleak 928). Victorians, including Dickens, read travel books voraciously. In 1857, David Livingstone wrote and “sold seventy thousand copies” (Brantlinger, “Victorians” 176) of his Missionary Travels. Dickens was, indeed, ahead of the general population’s taste for Livingstone’s travelogues. It is interesting that Dickens, who dislikes the “evangelical types, made an exception of Livingstone, calling him
one of those who 'carry into desert places the water of life' " (Brantlinger, "Victorians" 176). One wonder, though, if Skimpole’s talking about Africa’s Torrid Zone demotes Livingstone’s work. Certainly Livingstone’s work mentioned by a buffoon carries less weight than if Boythorn, a man Dickens highly respected, comments on Livingstone’s work. Even when Bleak House shows credible philanthropic work being done in Africa, that work is lessened in its importance by having someone whose voice is not taken seriously talk about it.

Skimpole further diminishes the plight of the people of African descent by referring to the conditions of American slaves when he states:

I dare say they are worked hard, I dare say they don’t altogether like it, I dare say theirs is an unpleasant experience on the whole, but, they people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me, and perhaps that is one of the pleasanter objects of their existence.

(Dickens, Bleak 273)

Skimpole even pondering the subject of work is ludicrous; it is especially absurd that he pretends that he has some knowledge of what the conditions are like to be an American slave. With the precursor “I dare say,” Skimpole supposes aloud to Boythorn that if these conditions are true about American slaves, the conditions can’t be so terribly bad because “they people the landscape for me” (Dickens, Bleak 273). This phrase can take on several different meanings. First, Skimpole suggests that American slaves’ experience working in slavery cannot be too unpleasant because they are still allowed or still want to “people” or procreate. If they are still allowed to
and have the free time to procreate, this “privilege” is one that most people would find enjoyment in, thus permeating something pleasant within slavery. Likewise, he is suggesting that slaves still want to procreate. This can mean that slavery is not so bad because they are not hesitating to bring children into; after all, children born to slaves would become the property of the slave owner and become slaves as well. Still yet, when Skimpole states, “they people the landscape for me” (Dickens, *Bleak* 273), he may be simply saying that slaves help to provide a picturesque landscape for his imagination. Put simply, as long as slaves continue to have children, they create a certain kind of “art” for Skimpole’s aesthetic values. For Skimpole, even if slavery does happen, it happens for a reason and there can be a beauty found in it.

Dickens’ use of language through Skimpole’s reflection reflects a shift in Dickens’ feelings about American slavery. During the eight years between writing about slavery’s abuses in *American Notes* (1844) and writing in “September 1852 [in] “North American Slavery” (Adrian 320) Dickens was unusually quiet in his opinions about slavery and the people of African descent. Adrian asserts that because Dickens was overcome with England’s need for social reform, he thought England’s energy and money were best spent taking care of its own people. With eight years to reflect on slavery and Carlyle’s influence on the subject, Skimpole’s language use reflects Dickens’ growing ambivalence and inconsistency in his ideologies within *Bleak House*.

Skimpole’s use of language while reflecting may also to point to what Dickens’ thought was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s hypocrisy. While Dickens coolly
congratulated Stowe on her success with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, he wrote in an 1852 issue of *Household Words* that “[h]e found *Uncle Tom* ‘a noble work,’ but one with many faults. In particular he criticized its ‘overstrained conclusions and violent extremes’ ” (Stone 189). Drawing unfavorable attention for his harsh opinions about her novel, Dickens grew resentful of Stowe. Lord Denman, an abolitionist and good friend of Dickens, was very upset with Dickens’ views. Having reviewed the first seven chapters of *Bleak House* around the same time as Dickens’ review of Stowe’s novel, Denman blasted Dickens’ characterization of Mrs. Jellyby as a gross, unrealistic exaggeration of an abolitionist zealot. Dickens took this criticism badly. Skimpole’s reflection shows that Stowe’s depiction of slavery, even if it was true, couldn’t be as bad as she describes in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. And, Skimpole continues, even if slaves’ conditions are truly as bad as Stowe writes about, she has been able to create “a poetry” (Dickens, *Bleak* 273) from their experience. This “poetry” resulted in Stowe’s fame and fortune through *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and, as a result, it became “one of the pleasanter objects of their [England’s and America’s] existence” (Dickens, *Bleak* 273). While Stowe’s depiction of the horrors of slavery and the suffering of people of African descent drew light on that subject, as callous as it may sound, she did gain notoriety and fame for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; so, in a sense, Stowe found a certain “poetry” for herself in the publishing of her novel. Had her book been one that was nonfiction instead of fiction, I doubt that the creative process would allow for the notion of “poetry” to enter into Skimpole’s language in *Bleak House*. 
One final analysis of Skimpole’s reflection shows how his character acts as a symbol of England’s’ naivété about the subject of American slavery. Some people of England, like Skimpole, could only guess at slaves’ working conditions. They could assume that America’s slavery was not a “pleasant experience” but they really couldn’t speak to American slaves’ circumstances because the English largely had not seen them first hand. Still, Dickens infers through his language use that the talk of slaves, slavery, abolitionism, and even Stowe’s novel provide the British a “landscape” to reflect on. In fact, the topic of slavery provides “a poetry for” the English because it allows them to reflect on their own goodness for no longer being involved in slavery. Like Skimpole, their naivété about and distance from the subject permit them to engage in “one of the pleasanter objects of their existence” (Dickens, Bleak 273): conversation. As long as there is slavery, the English have something to talk about. Dickens’ writings in his letters and articles on slaves, slavery, and abolitionism are not always consistent with what he writes in his novels. His irony, cynicisms, and underlying inferences often blur the true meaning of slavery and its conditions. And, it is through Dickens’ use of language one can see his feelings shift on these and other important issues of his era.

Dickens also misuses the language of slavery in an emotional scene where Caddy Jellyby talks with Esther because Mrs. Jellyby wants her to marry Mr. Quale. Opposed to this idea, Caddy angrily states, “I am determined. I won’t be a slave all of my life, and I won’t submit to be proposed to by Mr. Quale. A pretty thing, indeed, to marry a Philanthropist. As if I hadn’t had enough of that!” (Dickens, Bleak 201).
There are several ironies within Caddy’s dialogue. Her resistance to being a “slave all my life” indicates that she believes that she has been a slave previously in her life. Despite disliking the task, she copied letters for her mother for the Borrioboola-Gha project. Like Mrs. Turveydrop, Caddy voluntarily performed this task; she was not the legal property of her mother. In fact, Mrs. Turveydrop had few to no legal rights. “In 1851 a woman could not even be the legal guardian of her own children” (Chandler 1). Like Mrs. Turveydrop, if Mrs. Jellyby had no legal rights to be Caddy’s legal guardian, it would be impossible for her to force Caddy to perform slave duties. Therefore, however much Caddy may have disliked copying the letters, it was her obligation, responsibility, or kindness that was driving her to perform this task, not slavery. She also infers that by marrying Mr. Quale she will be in a state of slavery performing tasks unwillingly and without recompense. While her potential marriage to Mr. Quale could contain the voluntary tasks that preceded her potential marriage to him, her work with Quale cannot be defined as slavery anymore than the work she performed for her mother. This becomes ironic when Caddy marries Prince Turveydrop and ends up working constantly within that marriage. The very ideal that she turns away from with Mr. Quale is the situation she ends up with in her marriage to Prince. It is Caddy’s love for Prince that differentiates the two marriage opportunities in her mind. She rejects Mr. Quale’s philanthropic work because she sees her mother’s philanthropy work destroy her immediate family. Caddy equates marriage and philanthropy with slavery. When philanthropy is taken out of the
equation with marriage, the concept of slavery with marriage is no longer in Caddy's mind.

While *Bleak House* is populated with references to slavery, Richard Carstone provides one final ironic example. Richard hops from profession to profession because when the job requires that he become too accountable or when the potential career becomes too taxing of his time, he dismisses the responsibility and leaves the position. In a conversation with Esther, Richard explains his decision to leave his apprenticeship at Jarndyce and Jarndyce law firm. "I fancy I have had enough of it. Having worked at Jarndyce and Jarndyce like a galley slave, I have slaked my thirst for law" (Dickens, *Bleak* 343). This statement is ironic on several levels. First, like Skimpole, Richard in no way works hard or diligently on any job, much less work as hard as a galley slave. Secondly, Richard quits his schoolings; this is not an option a slave would have no matter how hard the work. Finally, Richard makes a reference to a galley slave as if he actually knows what one is and what kind of work one might be engaged in. Richard, like much of England, may read of the work and circumstances of galley slaves, but he has no idea of the true work in those situations. To compare his circumstances to work he cannot identify with is ignorant. As the novel's "slacker," Richard's use of the language of slavery becomes something complex. Richard saying that he feels as if he has worked like a galley slave shows the novel blurs the language of slavery to demonstrate that people do not work hard and compares the English to slaves who are nowhere near having the circumstances of slaves. The true irony lies in that the novel's characters who have never seen a slave
glide over clichéd language of slavery. *Bleak House* 's blurring of the language of slavery serves to slavery’s true circumstances.
Chapter Five: Philanthropy

Prior to 1833, the British could distinguish themselves from blacks through the legal establishment of slavery. Then, Caucasians differentiated themselves from people of color through phrenology and craniology. As Adrian shows, Dickens' change from a sympathizer about blacks' conditions to a disdain for their favored treatment by some English, results in the bitterness in some of his later writings. Some upper class English were agitated by the do-gooder, benevolent population that wished to save the "dark, heathen" continent of Africa and its people from eternal damnation by introducing their own Christian values. Still, other English thought that people of African descent should be left alone and that affairs at home should take precedence over missionary work. The characters in *Bleak House* reflect a Great Gulf between themselves and others through their philanthropic efforts. The novel capitalizes on England's views of protectionism with several characters. Mrs. Jellyby and her African work represent all that is negative with England's expansionism into Africa. Influenced by Carlyle's philosophies of isolationism and a strong work ethic, Dickens language use draws closer attention to English biases by using philanthropy to represent the Great Gulfs between whites and blacks, gender roles, and the privileged and the unprivileged. As a result, *Bleak House* holds some of the most stinging criticism on philanthropy as it relates to England's expansionism.

The novel's disrespect for Christian philanthropic ventures directed to aid Others outside of England is shown in a multi-layered metaphor. *Bleak House* 's narrator wonders about the unfathomable distance "from [the] opposite sides of great
gulfs” (Dickens 235) and ponders the “connexion” (Dickens 235) that people from different cultures could have with one another. The novel’s writing infers that Great Gulfs, whether between England and Africa, the empowered and the less empowered, or between males and females facilitate in people’s lack of connection. Stephen Gill notes that the phrase “great gulf” from this passage refers to Christ’s parable of Dives and Lazarus. The wealthy Dives ignores the beggar Lazarus’ cries for food as Dives “was splendidly clothed and lived each day in mirth and luxury” (Living Bible Luke 17.19). Having died, Dives suffers in hell begging the heaven-sent Lazarus to “Send Lazarus over here if only to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in these flames” (Luke 17.24). While Christian interpretations of this parable can be made, several socio-economic inferences can also be applied.

One interpretation offers insight into the novel’s adoption of Carlyle’s ideas of protectionism. With Dives as a symbol of England’s elite and Lazarus as a symbol of England’s poor, the Great Gulf between the two socio-economic levels is troubling. England’s elite wallows in its luxury and wealth while England’s poor, like Jo or in Bleak House or children appearing in other Dickens’ novels, suffer. They are ignored by England’s charitable undertakings while philanthropists focus on missionary work in Africa. Dickens writes with hostility of missionaries as “perfect nuisances who leave every place worse than they find it” (Dickens qtd. in Brantlinger, “Victorians” 174). In reference to the historic Niger Expedition, Dickens wrote in 1848 of “the heated visions of philanthropics for the railroad Christianisation of Africa, and the abolition of the Slave-Trade” (“Niger” 62). Dickens is saying that the only way to
Christianize Africans is to “railroad” them into that belief. The efforts extended for this purpose should, according to Dickens, be spent on “saving” England’s poor.

This metaphor also offers a warning to England’s wealthy to not ignore its own poor population. England’s wealthy could one day fall; and, those once-wealthy people could be in a position to ask for help from the once poverty-stricken people. Those people, however, may not be in a position to help. It is important to remember that in Christ’s parable in Luke, Lazarus does not refuse to help Dives. Abraham speaks for Lazarus and will not allow Lazarus to deny Dives’ need. This is an important distinction because if the preceding symbolism holds true, England’s elite would not be abused in the same manner that they abused its poor. A close interpretation of the passage in Luke suggests that circumstances outside of the newly wealthy population’s control will prevent it from helping a potentially newly-poor England save itself and its future generations. In Luke, hell-bound Dives asks Abraham to send Lazarus to Dives’ five brothers to warn them about hell so they can correct their behavior before ending up there. Once again, it is not Lazarus who denies this request but Abraham. In this interpretation, the first generation of England’s once-wealthy which has fallen will ask for the once-poor population for help. Now in a new place of power because of its newly-born wealth, the once-poor will deny help to the fallen ones. They will not deny them because of cruelty, however; they will deny them because of circumstances out of their control. As a result, the brotherhood of England’s once-wealthy or next generation(s) will also fall at the hands of those circumstances. The circumstances that doom Dives are brought
on by no fault of Lazarus. The wealthy people’s demise comes at the hand of their own greed and self-indulgence. Dickens may be commenting on the English’s anxieties of a growing middle class; but, most likely, he is forewarning his culture about expansionism into Africa. *Bleak House* warns that despite England’s wealth, it should not stretch its philanthropic money too thin through expansionism. In the end, the needy from colonized countries may begin to prosper so well through England’s help that they may usurp the wealth and power of England, which has been exhausted.

Another interpretation of this parable can be made with Dives symbolizing Caucasians and Lazarus symbolizing people of African descent in slavery. England’s whites had long ignored blacks’ conditions in slavery. Then, Thomas Clarkson, an abolitionist and one of the founding members of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, approached William Wilberforce, an Evangelical Christian and Member of Parliament (MP). Heavily influenced by Clarkson’s ideas, Wilberforce lobbied for the end of slavery “and for 18 years he regularly introduced anti-slavery motions in parliament” (“Historic” 1). Despite his intense efforts, “[t]he pathway to abolition was blocked by vested interests, parliamentary filibustering, entrenched bigotry, international politics, slave unrest, personal sickness, and political fear” (“Christian” 1). Still, in 1807 the slave trade was abolished; this act, however, did not free people who were already enslaved. With continued efforts, slavery was abolished by 1833, shortly before Wilberforce died. With all the factors weighed against abolitionists to end slavery in England, it is a wonder that the country was able to
reach an agreement on this issue. With the United States on the brink of its Civil War, Eyre’s oppression of blacks in Jamaica, and English Christian philanthropists eager to bring Jesus to Africa, the Dives and Lazarus parable warns that meddling with blacks and their culture will come back to hurt whites either economically or morally. Through the parable, the novel forewarns that Caucasians’ past poor treatment of slaves, whether through their brutality or by interfering with passing legislation for their humane treatment, will come back to hurt them in the future, though through no fault of the future-freed slaves.

One last interpretation of this passage is that Dives symbolizes England’s economy and Lazarus symbolizes Africa’s economy. Parts of England existed in wealth and comfort and were not interested in the growth and development of Africa for its own sake. The novel could be warning England’s economists not to ignore helping Africa’s economy. The twist in the situation is, according to the Dives and Lazarus parable, that Africa’s economy could one day flourish and England might need financial help from Africa and its resources. Through no fault of its own (a change in kings, government or economic values over time), Dickens’ use of this parable foreshadows Africa’s flourishing economy as being unable to help a future crippled English economy. In The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy (1840), Thomas Fowell Buxton, leader of the British anti-slavery movement, portrays Africans as eager to trade with Britain. However, while Buxton looked to Africa as a potential trading economy, “Blame was increasingly displaced onto Africans themselves for maintaining the slave trade as a chief form of economic exchange”
Africa’s desire for a thriving economy was inevitable, and in “The Niger Expedition” Dickens writes of the Expedition’s goal to create a treaty with Africa’s King Obi. This treaty offered undefined goods to the King in trade for his participation in ending Africa’s slave trading. Obi “was very willing to do away with the slave-trade *if a better traffic could be substituted*” (Dickens, “Niger” 50). If Africa could replace slavery’s profits with natural resources that could be replenished at a greater profit, like farming and sales of its crops, ideally Africa’s economy could flourish much like America’s had through its sales of tobacco and cotton. The Dives and Lazarus parable also has a particular tone of truth to it since Dickens’ writings examine England’s most impoverished conditions. Dickens witnessed the growth of the United States and saw how its economic conditions grew and challenged England’s commercialism. Under the right conditions, Africa could grow to become a similar economic challenge.

While the metaphorical language in *Bleak House* represents a dislike for philanthropic efforts directed toward expansionism, Dickens language become more direct of his disdain for organized Christian philanthropy. As Jo comes out of Tom-all-Alone in the early morning eating a dirty piece of bread,

...he sits down to breakfast on the door-step of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, and gives it a brush when he has finished, as an acknowledgement of the accommodation. He admires the size of the edifice, and wonders what it’s all about.

(Dickens, *Bleak* 237)
Jo embodies the spirit at the core of a good deal of Dickens’ works. He is poor, used by some, overlooked by most, illiterate, and stumbles through his day trying to find a place to sleep and to make money to buy food. Dickens’ irony shows how England’s children like Jo are left to literally suffer in the shadows of the noble, benevolent Christian efforts that are being extended to the children of Others. Like much of his writing in *Bleak House*, Dickens’ irony in this passage is multi-layered.

First, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) began its missionary work in North America in 1702. By 1821 it expanded its work of “the conversion of heathens and infidels” (Society 1) to South Africa. At the beginning of its inception, the SPG had meager financial resources and little money was sent to its missionaries. This would change dramatically, however, when the SPG became a major slave owning association in Barbados in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Barbados’ Christopher Codrington owned slaves until his death in 1710. He bequeathed his slaves and his slave plantations to the SPG and, consequently, to the Church of England (Webb 1). Codrington’s benevolent treatment of his slaves would dramatically change after his death, though. Thirty years after the SPG took over Codrington’s estates, the missionaries were deliberately working the slaves to death and “[e]nslaved people who worked...were branded on their chests with the word ‘society’ ” (Pocock 1). As the slaves’ conditions in the Caribbean were unveiled, pressure mounted on the Barbados “property” owners and the Church of England. The Church relinquished its slave holdings but only because it was forced to. One man involved with all of this, Henry Phillpotts, would be “appointed [in
1830] Bishop of Exeter and in the House of Lords continued to be an opponent of political, economic and social reform” (Pocock 1). Phillpotts was one of the most notable figures in the Church of England to make a profit from the abolition of slavery. He was paid “for the loss of 655 slaves” (Pocock 1) that had formerly belonged to the SPG when they were emancipated in 1833. With this money he was able to restore his palace “in a most creditable manner” (“Lives” 2). The irony here is that the SPG was supposed to be helping the people it was branding with hot irons and working to death. That Jo notices the grand edifice speaks to the SPG’s and the Church’s spending on frivolities like large and imposing buildings rather than channeling money into food, clothing, education, and a place to sleep for its most deserving needy. “Needy,” to Dickens, were people like Jo and Peepy rather than people of color.

Another irony of this passage is that Jo “admires the size of the edifice, and wonders what it’s all about” (Dickens, Bleak 237). Jo cannot read the sign that distinguishes the building because he is illiterate. Once again, the organization is satirized. One of the SPG’s purposes was not only to save foreigners’ souls but also to educate them. That Jo is English-born and illiterate speaks poorly of this organization and supports some of the English’s isolationist ideologies. Dickens had very strong feelings about England’s illiteracy, like Jo’s and that of “[t]he bridegroom, to whom the pen was handed..., made a rude cross for his mark” (Bleak 531). He believed that education should come from the public sector, not from a religious organization. Dickens writes, “Catechism is wholly inapplicable to the state of ignorance that now
prevails” (qtd. in Litvack 2). Offering no solution to the illiteracy problem, *Bleak House*, instead, illustrates derision for the SPG providing education to Others before providing literacy skills for England’s needy. In an 1844 Birmingham speech Dickens said,

> if you would reward honesty, if you would give encouragement to good, if you would stimulate the idle, eradicate evil, or correct what is bad, education – comprehensive liberal education – is the one thing needful, and the one effective end. (Dickens qtd. in Litvack 1)

There is little doubt that, according to Dickens, in order to obtain a civilized world, education is the answer. England, however, should become more civilized before its missionaries and its money are extended to Africa.

In a similar passage that illustrates the Great Gulf of need within *Bleak House*, Jo is, once again, the novel’s focal point. As Jo leaves Mr. Snagsby’s home he is given “broken meats from the table” to eat, which he is “hugging in his arms” (Dickens, *Bleak* 290). In this particular moment Jo is likened to an animal, a scavenger of someone’s leftovers. Jo is instantaneously lessened by not being allowed to have the first offering of food and by not being allowed to eat at the table with others. Norcia talks about Victorian primers “staging... imperial dinners at which... a hierarchy of eaters whose contributions to the meal represent their national character and capability” (256). If the person dining represents the national character of England, the metaphor would hold true that the dinner table represents England’s Imperial status. The courses, or countries England has successfully colonized, feed
the person dining, or the national character. While I will discuss later how side dishes serve as symbols of the Others and a less significant means by which the Body nourishes itself, it is important to note in this passage that Jo is not sitting at the table when he is “served”; in fact, Jo is leaving Snagsby’s home. That Jo is not important enough to be one of the “national character[s] of England” and is unable to show his “capabilit[ies]” (Norcia 25) at the table, reinforces Dickens’ belief that England’s poor are not recognized nor cared for. Jo leaving Snagsby’s house, a home in which he does not live nor belong to, foreshadows his death. Jo will similarly leave his world, a world in which he struggles to live in and to belong to. Also incredibly sad about this moment is that Jo is “hugging” the food in his arms, as if he is holding something dear and precious to him that he loves. The narrator in the novel observes:

And there he sits, munching and gnawing, and looking up at the great Cross on the summit of St. Paul’s Cathedral, glittering above a red and violet-tinted cloud of smoke. From the boy’s face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great confused city; so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach. (Dickens, *Bleak* 290-1)

Jo’s poverty, ignorance and lack of salvation are emphasized in this passage. While Jo struggles to feed himself, philanthropists continue to raise money and pour their resources to Others outside of England. These resources are spent to bring Africans’ souls to Christ, yet Jo’s unsaved soul lies within his starving little body staring up at this Christian symbol with curiosity. The novel’s use of underlying messages and subtle irony in this passage are emblematic of Jo’s alienation from
aspects from his own culture, aspects that are being made readily available to Others.

The prior passage about Jo begins with him sitting on the steps of the SPG similarly to this second passage; “he sits down to breakfast” (Dickens, Bleak 237), and “there he sits munching and gnawing” (Dickens, Bleak 290). In both of these passages, Jo sits down to eat. Once again, while it is clear that Jo has the capability to “sit down” at a table with other people and engage in an eating experience, the Great Gulf between Jo’s social status and others’ prevents him from having that experience. He is also sitting lower than his surroundings creating an impression of Jo’s submissiveness, as if Jo becomes smaller within his own landscape in order to experience it more effectively. After all, when Jo stands up he must move along, scavenge for food, seek shelter, and find safety. In a sense, when Jo stands he is not really living but surviving; however, when Jo sits down he is able to reflect and actually see his surroundings for what they are, even if they don’t make sense to him.

The novel also shows Jo “looking up at the great Cross on the summit” (Dickens, Bleak 290) as if he is in a position of kneeling before the Cross at Calvary. In this stationed positioned, then, Jo seems ready to pray before the Cross before his meager meal of “broken meats,” a subtle reminder of Christ’s Last Supper, in which the disciples eat the bread that Christ gives to them as a symbol of his body which would soon be “broken” from his crucifixion. What is ironic here is that Jo does not know what to do with this scenario because Jo has not been taught how to pray or about Christianity. Mrs. Jellyby, the SPG, and other missionary organizations look to
educate the natives of Africa in order to save their heathen souls, yet there is a lonely, forgotten soul who needs to be educated and saved right in their back yard.

Continuing on in the passage, Jo looks at the Cross that is at the very peak of St. Paul’s Cathedral. The SPG’s grand edifice is juxtaposed to Jo’s meager existence. Dickens’ word choices illustrate the wealth of organized religion through rich words like “Cathedral” instead of “church,” and by describing the Cross as “glittering” like gold in an unreachable sunlight amidst Jo’s dark, filthy world. As with the previous passage’s language, Bleak House takes a direct hit at a religious institution: the Church of England. When Jo looks at the untouchable Cross through “a red and violet-tinted cloud of smoke,” Dickens’ use of language creates the perfect Gulf between Jo and his ability to reach salvation through knowing Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross. First, the novel describes a colored haze created through smoke. Smoke generally comes from something burning or from fire. If one applies Jungian archetypes to Dickens’ use of color, red has several signifiers. Red indicates a hot and angry barrier that is socially created to keep Jo from salvation; it symbolizes a barrier of passion that exists between Jo and religion that Jo does not understand; red acts as the color of Christ’s blood that He sacrificed to save Jo. In either of these interpretations, it is clear that Jo lies on one side of the Gulf and there is a barrier, a literal and symbolic smoke screen, between him and the Cross (salvation) that he must understand to pass through. This supports my earlier argument that, according to Carlyle’s and Dickens’ ideologies about Work, because Jo provides menial Work which does not support England’s economic power, Jo cannot reach salvation.
Continuing to apply Jungian archetypes to the “violet-tinted cloud,” violet, created by blending blue, red, and white, can be scrutinized using symbolic representation of each color given in past literature and paintings analysis. In keeping with the theme of religiosity, blue symbolizes the purity of Mary or the clarity of the water in which John baptized Jesus; red symbolizes the blood of Christ; white represents innocence or a life without sin. Because the cloud is “tinted” with violet, Jo must, somehow, recognize all three of these symbols to reach or, at the very least, to see salvation.

Stepping briefly away from the religious imagery, the use of these colors also makes a cutting comment about England. Like America’s flag, England’s flag’s colors are red, white, and blue. By placing these colors between Jo and salvation shows that England is standing in the way of the poor being saved.

Jo’s staging in this scene is important to the novel’s message of reaching out to Others for services that should be rendered at home. Dickens’ language illustrates this Gulf with Jo’s understanding that the Cross is the ultimate emblem that keeps him confused within his cruel and uncaring world of Tom-all-Alone. “The sacred emblem” (Dickens, Bleak 290) of the Cross is far away from his reach. Not only is salvation far away from Jo, but its visibility also proves to be problematic and confusing to him. This symbol that philanthropic people talk about, wear, pray to, and grandly build on church tops only serves to confuse him. The Cross is confusing because it has no meaning to him, but it has significant meaning in the world in which he lives. The novel suggests that Christians using philanthropy have their priorities confused by wanting to save Africans when England’s poor need saving. The “great
confused city” is symbolic of London with its confused priorities. Alternately, *Bleak House* implies that the “great confused city” is the city of gold or heaven. This symbolism suggests that heaven is a confused destination that Christian philanthropics are trying to help Others reach. By keeping their eyes solely on heaven, they have lost sight of the work that needs to be done to help the people in front of them. As a result, both civilized London and heaven are completely out of Jo’s reach because he lacks the knowledge to access either of them.

The satire in *Bleak House* addresses evangelical “telescopic philanthropy” with Mrs. Jellyby, a do-gooder so absorbed with the welfare of the natives of Borrioboola-Gha that she allows her family to fall into ruin. Mrs. Jellyby’s character appears to attract the most criticism when compared to other Dickens’ character in the novel. Lord Denman’s review of the first few chapters of the novel in 1850 no doubt contributes to Mrs. Jellyby’s character recognition. First, Denman attacked Dickens by writing in the London *Standard*: “… he [Dickens] exerts his powers to obstruct the great cause of human improvement [ending slavery]…” (qtd. in Stone 190). Then, he attacked Mrs. Jellyby’s character by calling her a “disgusting picture of a woman” and “if meant to represent a class, we believe that no representation was ever more false” (Denman qtd. in Stone 190). Denman did not stop with just one review though; he wrote four more articles that obliterated Dickens’ values, destroyed *Bleak House*, and praised Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Having suffered a stroke that left him an invalid, Denman’s daughter, Mrs. Cropper, sent Dickens an apology on her father’s behalf. For reasons only known to him, Dickens wrote her back defending Mrs.
Jellyby: “Mrs. Jellyby gives offense merely because the word ‘Africa’, is unfortunately associated with her wild Hobby. No kind of reference to slavery is made or intended, in that connexion” (Dickens qtd. in Stone 194). Given the facts that I argue, I do not believe his reply to Cropper is completely true. Dickens’ placement of the comma before the prepositional phrase at the end of the second sentence allows him to be cagey. That comma gives him wiggle room to say that in a particular setting with Mrs. Jellyby or in the lone context of her character, she never literally says the word “slavery.” While Mrs. Jellyby may never actually say that word, many other words that Dickens uses to develop her character infer a great deal about issues related to people of color.

The reader is first introduced to Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House* as she dictates letters to her daughter, Caddy, “in reference to his [Mr. Swallow’s] letter of inquiry on the African project” (Dickens 48). Dickens never clearly defines what the contents are in all the letters that she dictates and writes. The novel briefly mentions that Mrs. Jellyby talks about the “general merits of the cultivation of coffee, conjointly with natives, at the settlement of Borrioboola-Gha” (Dickens, *Bleak* 199). For whatever reason, Mrs. Jellyby’s passion for her African work consumes her whether it has a purpose or not. In fact, it is through Dickens’ irony that Mrs. Jellyby’s philanthropy to Africans means more to her than caring for her own family. Esther, Ada, and Richard arrive at the Jellyby home for a visit. As Ada and Esther refresh themselves in a room, Esther observes “the curtain… was fastened up with a fork” (Dickens, *Bleak* 49). Richard begins to freshen up in another room, but there is no hot water.
Caddy Jellyby finds that there is no hot water, that the boiler is broken, and that the kettle to boil water for her guests is missing. Esther relates good-humouredly that “Richard told us that he had washed his hands in a pie-dish, and that they had found the kettle on his dressing table” (Dickens, *Bleak 50*). It is clear by the seemingly common misuse of items within the Jellyby home that this household is in chaos. This is a none-to-subtle way of reminding the English that their own “household” is in chaos and that their immediate attention should be directed toward their social ills. To further illustrate the clutter and disorganized Jellyby household, the novel shows that while the guests have dinner with the Jellybys, “Richard…saw four envelopes in the gravy at once” (Dickens, *Bleak 50*). Norcia explains that it is a common theme in nineteenth century literature to “stag[e] … imperial dinners at which the superiority of the fate ingested by English bodies is underlined” (256). While the main course is symbolic of England’s dominance at the imperial table, “writers relegate Others to the provisions of small side dishes” (Norcia 257). Mrs. Jellyby’s floating envelopes in the gravy shows that while Mrs. Jellyby may have the best of intentions by advocating for Africa’s Others through her letter writing, her actions are very marginal. Her letters lying in the gravy appear insignificant, much like her actions. They also represent that the English are not capable of taking care of Others since her letters are literally lying in the gravy, not being retrieved from it. In the episode where Peepy’s head becomes stuck between the iron railings, Esther recounts a conversation she had with Richard upon their first meeting Mrs. Jellyby. Esther observes that Mrs. Jellyby has “handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way
off. As if – I am quoting Richard again – they could see nothing nearer than Africa!” (Dickens, *Bleak* 47). Mrs. Jellyby is looking so far away that she cannot see what is in front of her; and, what is in front of her is her home in chaos, her attention misplaced, and her efforts largely being insignificant. Once again *Bleak House* incorporates metaphors and irony to show that the English should take care of its own families before venturing to distant lands providing aid to Others that may or may not need or want it.

Mrs. Jellyby’s focus on West Africa is pertinent to the story line in the novel. Mrs. Jellyby states, “We hope by this time next year to have from a hundred and fifty to two hundred healthy families cultivating coffee and educating the natives of Borrioboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger” (Dickens, *Bleak* 48). Dickens is particularly critical of the Niger Expedition of 1841, which he dryly writes about in a submission to *The Examiner* in 1848. Led by Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, the Niger expedition ventured into West Africa to introduce “unrestricted commerce with Great Britain…an improved system of agricultural cultivation…the abolition of human sacrifices…the diffusion…of the true doctrines of Christianity; and a few other trifling points” (Dickens, “Niger” 46). The Expedition ended poorly; “of the 145 people in the expedition party, 40 out of the 45 Europeans died of malaria” (Akinwumi 1). Dickens attacks the goals of philanthropists like Buxton and declares Africa too unfit for the well bred Englishman to explore or civilize. Dickens writes, “if the ends sought to be attained are to be won, they must be won by other means
than the exposure of inestimable British lives to certain destruction by an enemy against which no gallantry can contend” (“Niger” 46).

Like most of Dickens’ writing in *Bleak House*, placing Mrs. Jellyby’s focus on settling families near the Niger is not without its ironies. First, that Mrs. Jellyby fixates on about 150 to 200 families is similar to the number of people led by Buxton on that disastrous Expedition. This hints that Mrs. Jellyby’s philanthropic efforts could end up under the same circumstances as Buxton’s. It is ironic that Dickens uses the word “healthy” in describing the type of families to venture to Borrioboola-Gha. No doubt Buxton took healthy people with him; yet, when exposed to diseases for which they had not built up immunities, they died: “and sixty in all are sick, and thirteen dead. Nothing but muttering delirium or suppressed groans are heard on every side on board the vessels” (Dickens, “Niger” 57). What is also ironic is that Mrs. Jellyby, idealistically, does not foresee exposing the Africans to European disease, yet Africans contracted and died from European diseases like smallpox and measles. This illustrates Mrs. Jellyby’s Great Gulf of naïveté between what is really happening in Africa and what she dreams of or plans for through her letter writing. One final irony lies in her desire to educate the natives. Once again, Dickens shows the Great Gulf in English society wanting to take care of Others outside of its borders before taking care of its own uneducated like Jo and the illiterate bridegroom.

As much as Mrs. Jellyby is an active, almost aggressive character, Mr. Jellyby is inanimate and passive. Mr. Jellyby is passive in his actions to his wife’s lack of attention to their family. Mr. Jellyby “seemed passively to submit himself to
Borrioboola-Gha, but not to be actively interested in that settlement” (Dickens, *Bleak 51). He is well aware of his family’s deterioration, yet does nothing to help improve its condition. As a husband in the 1850s, he would be fully within his right to demand that his wife tend to the tasks of taking care of the home and children. Instead, she is dominant. Her dominance is not completely unlikely as women were finding a larger role not only in philanthropy but in African exploration. As Blunt notes, “Imperial expansion provided unprecedented opportunities for white, and at least middle-class, women to travel with motives including …missionary zeal” (52). It was, after all, mid-nineteenth century women who laid the groundwork for Mary Kingley’s publication of *Travels in West Africa* (1897) which went into five editions in the same year it was published.

While Mrs. Jellyby does not travel to Africa to perform her own missionary work, she finds her voice by taking the dominant role in the household. By losing power in their home, Mr. Jellyby actually reverses roles with Mrs. Jellyby as he is largely voiceless. Away from feminine constraints, she takes on masculine behavior and violates appropriate feminine conduct by being a do-er and by not paying attention to and caring for their family. Left in the feminine or wife’s role, Mr. Jellyby fails. While Mr. Jellyby appears to have a seemingly useless role other than to be Mrs. Jellyby’s husband, he has one important function that Mrs. Jellyby cannot take care of by herself; he impregnates her, often. While quiet and appearing passive, Mr. Jellyby actually does stop laying his head against the wall, at least eight times that the reader knows of, to inseminate Mrs. Jellyby. They create their children but
neither takes care of them. In making a parallel to England’s role, the reference infers that England continues to populate itself thus producing many children that it doesn’t take care of. Like Mr. and Mrs. Jellyby’s household, England’s house is falling into ruin for lack of attention and care.

The Jellyby family acts as a microcosmic symbol of what is actually happening through England’s expansion into Africa. While England’s philanthropists are involved in settling and Christianizing Africa, the rest of England’s population is not being responsible in taking care of their social ills. Instead, like Mr. Jellyby, those British who are not engaged in externally directed philanthropy, are passively watching as their own country falls into disrepair and are doing nothing to take care of its own situation. Worse, Christian philanthropists have seized England’s character through their aggressive actions, have taken away its power, and are forcing it into inertia. These characters in *Bleak House* symbolize how the expansion into Africa threatens the very fabric of English households in the Victorian patriarchy; the novel warns that expansionism causes a reversal of hierarchy. This reversal, *Bleak House* concludes, leads to the breakdown and demise of the family and its traditions. The breakdown illustrates the destabilization of male and female roles as a result of externally directed philanthropic work.

Dickens’s use of language shows how expansionism weakens the family’s leading roles and can lead to the ruin of the established patriarchal authority. Whether it is through the reversal of male and female roles or through a country overpowering another through Christian-led expansionism, Dickens’ illustrates through the use of
his language in *Bleak House* negative views of England's Imperialism through Great Gulfs.
Conclusion

Without doubt, Dickens was passionate about caring for England’s poor, uneducated, and unprivileged. He was equally as passionate in his negative opinions about England’s expansionism into Africa. Dickens’ writing with sympathy toward people of African descent in his 1844 *American Notes* does not correlate with his bitterness and cynicism toward blacks in 1853’s *Bleak House*. And, while Adrian skips a stone across the pond of Dickens’ thoughts and feelings on the “black question,” I argue that Dickens’ points of view about the “opposite sides of great gulfs” (*Bleak* 235) are incredibly complex, recursive at times, and never completely resolved. In biting irony and satire, Dickens makes his feelings, either intentionally or subliminally, known in *Bleak House* using language that is recognizable to Victorians to sway their opinions to match his. He writes with a wide range of knowledge of the socio-dynamics during his era, not only within England but throughout the world. Dickens uses the language of phrenology to illustrate what he thinks is Caucasians’ God-given superiority to blacks, and the language of cannibalism to represent the Great Gulf that already exists between cultures. He uses this same type of language to emphasize distinction and superiority between social classes as well as gender. Dickens’ use of language shows Carlylean isolationist views through his contemptuous characterizations of Christian missionary work, and the novel warns England of potential economic hardship if that work continues.

Generally, using irony in writing is very difficult to do well. Using irony with acute knowledge of an era’s scientific, economic, and philanthropic conditions is
unimaginably brilliant. Some of Dickens’ messages may seem “tongue-in-cheek” and overly-simplified, like much of Harold Skimpole’s dialogue. But, once many of the underlying messages behind those seemingly innocent conversations are understood, one will find a very complicated composite of Dickens’ use of language to reflect his thoughts on the Great Gulfs created by England’s expansionism.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

But once the realization is accepted that even between the closest beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky! ...All companionship can consist only in the strengthening of two neighboring solitudes. (1)

Dickens never realizes this place of solitude that Rilke alludes to. Through his language use he shows that he does not see himself, or any Englishman, as a human being close to any African or person of African descent. Dickens not only acknowledges that “infinite distances,” or Great Gulfs, exist between Caucasians and blacks, England and Africa, men and women, and people who have privilege and people who do not, but he draws readers’ attentions to these disparities. Dickens shows in Bleak House that he, like many other Victorians, does not even consider “living side by side” (Rilke 1) with the people of African descent because he does not yet feel that the English are “living side by side” (Rilke 1) with their own indigent, uneducated people. The novel does, indeed, draw attention to the distance between
Africa and England; in fact, the language in it encourages the distance and, intentionally or unintentionally promotes more distance. This distance, however, is not born through the love that Rilke writes about. Dickens' writing does not wish the Africans well on the other end of their Great Gulf. It encourages the distance because it keeps English money from going to and saving Africa. According to the writing in *Bleak House*, it would be better if the English never even knew that Africa existed under that "wide sky." The author's words suggests that he wants no strength given to Others. The only strength that Dickens wants in his writing in *Bleak House* is for England's socially crushed to find its own solitude by living a better life.
Works Cited


