

Oral Popular Culture, Orality and Writing in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

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In *Bleak House* (1852–3), Esther's nicknames, which identify her with a woman sweeping complicated social disorder away,¹ are borrowed from nursery rhymes and folklore.

“You are clever enough to be the good little woman of our lives here, my dear,” he [Mr Jarndyce] returned playfully; “the little old woman of the Child's . . . Rhyme:

‘Little old woman, and whither so high?’

‘To sweep the cobwebs out of the sky.’

“You will sweep them so neatly out of *our* sky in the course of your housekeeping, Esther, that one of these days we shall have to abandon the Growlery, and nail up the door.”

This was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort, that my own name soon became quite lost among them. (90)

These names have been interpreted variously by numerous critics. J. H. Miller claims that “to give someone a nickname is to force on her a metaphorical translation and to appropriate her especially to oneself” (41) On one hand, Esther's names assign the role of a good housewife or a virtuous woman. On the other hand, the name “Dame Durden” “marks Esther as an outsider,” who observes others. The woman with the name in the original song encourages

and watches the sexual relationships between young men and women (213), as Chiara Briganti notes. She discusses how Esther is an agent who has no sexual sign and at the same time who creates the background of sexual relationships (213). She must be a Victorian ideal woman as Little Old Woman, but due to another nickname, she must confronts sexual guilt, her mother's fornication, which has undermined the patriarchal discourse (Briganti 215–16). Traditional popular songs are embedded in Dickens's printed text as signs that show who Esther is. At the same time, the trace of legacy from oral culture enables her to struggle over the domination of patriarchy.

Numerous arguments have been offered concerning documents in *Bleak House*, too. A lot of writing tools such as papers, ink and pens appear in the chapters. Miller's "Interpretation in *Bleak House*" is notable for its first sentence, "*Bleak House* is a document about the interpretation of documents" (29). This means that the "system of interpretation," that is a pattern with "a stable centre" to be interpreted: it becomes fictional within the circle of signs, referents and metaphors that each character is woven into: such fiction raises "a suspicion that there may be no such centre" (Miller 49). The novel therefore "has a temporal structure without proper origin, present, or end" (Miller 46). There, Dickens creates "an incessant movement of reference" (Miller 46). The indeterminable structure is created only by signs, where "each phrase is alienated from itself and made into a sign of some other phrases" (Miller 46). The structure cannot be constructed without written or printed signs.

This discussion will illustrate how oral popular culture, orality, and writing are interrelated in the novel. First, it shall elucidate the migration of oral materials into each scene of the story; next, an analysis of sounds, which are heard through performances, noises, and voices, will be made. Finally, it will be observed how Dickens describes the act of writing, which transmits the word residing in the living body as well as the word in oral communication.

1. Oral Popular Culture

Dickens loved music. In *Charles Dickens and Music*, James Lightwood points out that Dickens's "knowledge of song and ballad literature was extraordinary, and he did not fail to make good use of it" (51). As to *Bleak House*, however, in *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, Paul Schlicke argues that George's Shooting Gallery and Little Swills's Harmonic Meeting are rare cases of popular entertainment described by Dickens among his works from *The Old Curiosity Shop* to *Hard Times* (137). There are a number of popular materials based on vocal or oral tunes in *Bleak House*, however. These materials are intended to be assimilated into the structure formed by written words while the structure within the circle of signs is constructed to avoid creating the space, which is determined and fixed by written words.

Umberto Eco suggests that "characters migrate" in the context in which it is possible for one to "migrate . . . from oral tradition to book" (8). When the elements of oral culture are written on text, they are to become signs which refer to something as every written word does. Written words have power to assimilate words uttered by voice into its own feature because utterance is passing instantly from speakers to listeners.² In *Bleak House*, the songs of Krook and Skimpole and the nursery rhyme and ballad in the descriptions of Lady Dedlock "migrate" from the traditional material to Dickens's book. However, these songs and ballads do not always assume the same characteristics as those of printed words.

"The only song [Krook] knows – about Bibo, and old Charon" (398) is sung by Krook before his death caused by spontaneous combustion. Tony Weevle hears him "humming" the song of the drunken ferry passenger (398). Its original lyric is as follows:

When Bibo thought fit for the World to retreat,
As full of Champaign as an Egg's full of Meat,

He wak'd in the Boat, and to CHARON he said,
He wou'd be set back for he was not yet Dead:
Trim the Boat and sit quiet, stern CHARON reply'd,
You may have forgot, You was Drunk when You Dy'd.³

Since he “[thinks] fit for the World to retreat, / As full of Champagne as an egg's full of meat” (1–2), it is possible to argue that Bibo is to be replaced by Krook, who dies of spontaneous combustion due to drinking too much alcohol. As Miller observes, he closes his life without understanding the sign of J, which he has always struggled to write (46); written and printed letters have no meanings in his life. Yet, only the song sung just before his death can explain the cause and effect of his life. According to Miller's discussion, in *Bleak House*, signs are referring to each other incessantly and produce the space of meaninglessness. Krook's death becomes one of these referents to the tangled structure of the society. However, the song, which belongs to the oral popular entertainment, indicates his death clearly and has no relationship with other characters and referents.

Skimpole's “little ballad” entitled “The Peasant Boy” (386), which refers to the miserable life of Jo, was composed by John Parry. Skimpole is, as it were, a man of music, even if he is depicted to be a cheerful yet silly and selfish man. His ballad begins with the lines, “Thrown on the wide world, doom'd to wander and roam, / Bereft of his parents, bereft of his home.”⁴ The song of “The Peasant Boy” is about a poor boy, who has lost his parents, home and joy. This can be applied to the situation of Jo: he “wander[s] and roam[s]” from London to the neighbourhood of Bleak House. Skimpole's song describes the miserable situation of Jo and at the same time forces him to follow the destiny of the protagonist of the song. While Jo takes Lady Dedlock to “the labyrinth” of connections of signs (Miller 34), the popular song connects itself with the presentation of Jo directly. There is no medium between a signifier and its

signified.

The labyrinth within signs and referents is different from the temporal space produced by oral transmission. It is produced by the friction of preserved signs inscribed by written words. The world of oral culture has no such signs and frictions although the place is unknowable and indeterminate because of its fluid characteristics, which do not preserve a thing. When he uses the oral materials in his novel, Dickens makes them migrate into written world, yet his way of the migration prevents oral words from entering the labyrinth of signs and assimilating themselves into literacy. Thereby, Krook's song and Skimpole's ballad are used rather as the direct indication of each character than any signs.

Songs also describe Lady Dedlock. In order to foreshadow the plot of her fall, a lady from a nursery rhyme "migrates" into the description of the rainy scenery of Lincolnshire:

So with the dogs in the kennel-buildings across the park, who have their restless fits, and whose doleful voices, when the wind has been very obstinate, have even made it known in the house itself: up-stairs, down-stairs, and in my lady's chamber. (77)

The last words, "up-stairs, down-stairs, and in my lady's chamber," are borrowed from the nursery rhyme:

Goosey goosey gander,
Whither shall I wander?
Upstairs and downstairs
And in my lady's chamber.
There I met an old man
Who wouldn't say his prayers,
So I took him by his left leg
And threw him down the stairs.⁵

This rhyme associates Lady Leicester Dedlock with the story of Lady Morbury Dedlock, who lived in the reign of King Charles the First.

The legend of the old Lady Dedlock is narrated by Mrs Rouncewell. After her death, Lady Morbury Dedlock has become har ghost which treads on the terrace of the Ghost's Walk with a "crippled" leg. She has been lamed in the hip when her husband has seized her by the wrist on the terrace (84). The lady was born humbly and had "relations of King Charles's enemies." She curses the Dedlocks "after her favourite brother, a young gentleman, was killed in the civil wars (by Sir Morbury's near kinsman)" (84). The sound of the footsteps on the terrace is therefore to be heard "until the pride of this house is humbled" (84).

Dickens adapts the nursery rhyme for the story of the old Lady Dedlock and her husband. The lady is to avenge her death on her husband and force him out of his social position. As the footsteps of the ghost rise, the legend is revived by Lady Leicester Dedlock and her husband. "An old man" in the rhyme could be Sir Leicester. He is not God, but can pretend to be the sun presiding over the fashionable world. The "old man" is pulled by his left leg down the stairs, which symbolises his downfall in terms of the social hierarchy. He and the Dedlock's mansion are to be pulled "down" by Honoria's disgrace as shown in the title of the chapter where he makes his last appearance. The future is thus foreshadowed in the reference to the nursery rhyme.

Another ballad, referring to a "Lady," is cited in the chapter after Lady Dedlock's flight from the Dedlocks.

Carriages rattle, doors are battered at, the world exchanges calls; ancient charmers with skeleton throats, and peachy cheeks that have a rather ghastly bloom upon them seen by daylight, when indeed these fascinating creatures look like Death and the Lady fused together, dazzle the eyes of men (667).

"Death and the Lady" is a title of a ballad called "The Messenger of Mortality; or Life and Death Contrasted in a Dialogue Between Death and a Lady." The piece was composed by Charles Lamb, and its tune was set in Chappell's music and had been popular since the eighteenth century.⁶

The readers could predict two things from the ballad: the lady, Honoria, is destined to be invited to her death and is concerned about her beautiful daughter. The ballad is a dialogue between Death and a Lady. Death "come[s] to summon" (4) the Lady, who offers resistance to him firstly with her glory and pride, and finally by a sort of entreaty; "I have a daughter beautiful and fair, / I'd live to see her wed whom I adore; / Grant me but this and I will ask no more" (44-47). Despite her earnest appeal, Death takes the lady to his world because "While [she] flourish here with all [her] store, / [She] will not give one penny to the poor; / ..." (68-69). She resembles Lady Dedlock exactly in her pride and arrogance and in having a "beautiful" daughter, who is to be married. Honoria does not plead with Death, nor does she express a wish to see her daughter's wedding. However, she almost commits suicide, as she writes to Esther, in order to protect her daughter's life from her sin. The ballad seems to suggest the secret of Lady Dedlock to the reader. For indicating the destiny of Lady Dedlock, the rhyme and ballad from traditional oral culture are used in the printed text.

Strikingly, the novel as a system of printed signs attempts to disrupt the form of the traditional narrative. The legend of the Ghost's Walk has been handed down in the Dedlock family, yet it substantially comes to an end when Lady Dedlock overlays her own story upon it. The footstep in the Ghost's Walk "has been many a day behind her, now it will pass her and go on" (693), Mrs Rouncewell says. The old story creeps towards the actual event and makes its own legendary story real. A legend is defined as "an unauthentic or non-historical story, esp. one handed down by tradition from early

times and popularly regarded as historical.” (OED “legend,” def. 6a). The legend of the Ghost’s Walk has been transmitted by words of mouth for a long time only in the family whether it is authentic or not. The familiar and private story, nevertheless, establishes its authenticity. The sound of the strange footstep of the ghost of the past, therefore, fades away from the terrace at the moment when the legend comes to turn to reality.

After completing *Bleak House*, Dickens again attempted to use a legend in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), in which Sydney Carton dies in the place of Charles Darnay for his love of Lucie Manette. On the scaffold just before his execution, he imagines that he will become a part of a legend told at the Darnays’s hearth after his death: “I hear him tell the child my story, with a tender and faltering voice” (390). Drawing on this inner voice of Carton, Stewart notes that “since Carton’s is a story to be conveyed in an oral version whose chosen words are not specifically anticipated, the hero exists the novel, textuality per se . . .” (228). Where Carton makes himself to be “part of the interchange of vocal storytelling,” Dickens weaves Carton’s story “in the historical continuum of literary narrative” (Stewart 230). The domestic situation of reading aloud is inherited by the novelistic form. On the other hand, the plot of *Bleak House* follows a different direction from the storyline of *A Tale of Two Cities* because the legend of the Ghost’s Walk is incarnated in Lady Dedlock. While Carton’s death is expected to be handed down in Lucie’s family and by the readers of the novel, the old legend is completed by Lady Dedlock’s death and the decline of the house of the Dedlocks in *Bleak House*. However, the new legend of Lady Dedlock and her husband starts to be whispered as “a portion of the family history” although “it is a lame story, feebly whispering and creeping about” (763).

A symbolical power, which interrupts the storytelling of the legend, is attained by the lawyer, Tulkinghorn, who associates the oral story in the family

with the present life of Honoria. When he exposes her past affairs in front of Sir Dedlock and other relatives, Volumnia cries, "A story! O he [Tulkinghorn] is going to tell something at last! A ghost in it, ..." (505). Although she expects to be told a story like the legend of the Ghost's Walk in the family circle, he rejects her hope, "No. Real flesh and blood, Miss Dedlock" (505). He makes the ghost story a real story with "real flesh and blood." In other words, he "authenticates" the reality of Lady Dedlock's disgrace.

Compared with Carton, who produces his legend for Lucie's family and the readers in the novel, Tulkinghorn is engaged deeply in defining the contrast between oral storytelling and literary formation. He is a representative of professional men, who has been engaged in "the practice of writing": "New forms of busi-ness - . . . the advent of modern professionalism - helped to fuel this increase in the practice of writing . . . (Siskin 3). In the nineteenth century, writing had become a part of economical and social activities for earning a living. The word "professional" was itself a part of the "new vocabulary" which is argued to be "part of a new way of writing about work" (Siskin 108). Tulkinghorn's power as a professional lawyer represents the emerging one. It breaks the legend, which has been uttered orally, by collecting written statements as evidence of the actual life of Honoria Dedlock. However, finally, the power is terminated by his death and his investigation is frustrated by Lady Dedlock's death.

The legend, which has not been regarded as an authenticated story, is overlaid by the actual life of the character. Tulkinghorn's investigation, which depends on documents, is left imperfect to the contrary. The Dedlock mansion with few residents and falling into a decline is filled not with the ghostly footsteps from the old legend but with the new sound, "echoing and thunderings which start out of their hundred graves" (763). In spite of the world tangling signs and referents with each other as shown in the descriptions of legal doc-

uments and papers, orality echoes in the end of the novel again. The new sound in the Dedlock mansion may indicate the beginning of a new legend of Sir and Lady Dedlock.

2. Voice and Sound

This use of songs and ballads in the novel is enabled by the text's function of preservation. The theory propounded by Julia Kristeva is highly suggestive. A text makes the juxtaposition of one space and another possible (45–46). The textual mode “admits the existence of an *other* (discourse),” and so it “did not exist in the epic” which was constructed by “the speaker's utterance” (Kristeva 46). The appearance of oral materials in the depictions of Lady Dedlock is achieved by the production of a text. It does not substantially belong to the world of orality. Using the production of a text, Dickens attempts to make his novel “admit the existence” of words that are articulated through sound and voice other than written words.

Throughout the novel, a sound always has some significance worth considering. One of the sounds is street noise. In the 1850s and 1860s, according to John Picker, professional writers such as Thomas Carlyle and Dickens were annoyed that the music on the street, which the lower classes made, disturbed the space and time of the intellectual classes (55–57). The street noise became a disrupting intruder for “one's domestic propriety, respectability and identity” (Picker 53). In the world of the Cook's Court, there is no middle-class “respectable” distinction between private and public spaces, or home and business. Despite enduring the hottest summer in many years, “the people turn their houses inside out and sit in chairs upon the pavement” in the Court (233). Their private homes do not differ from the public street and they give rise to the noisy sounds disturbing the middle-class domestic sphere.

In the novel, Dickens describes two scenes of public uproar. The lower-class people on the street create the noisy embroilment. When the news of the case of Nemo's death is spreading through the Cook's Court, the noise of the inhabitants can be heard. As soon as they hear the news, "groups of its inhabitants assemble" under "Mr Krook's window" and "people talk across the court out of window" (130). The clamour rises due to "the sensation" as if they were in "a fair" as Mrs Piper says (131). This noise is part of the absurdness of the situation. When this abnormal sensation is created in the Cook's Court after Krook's spontaneous combustion, "the wisest" authorities throng to the Sol's Arms to attend the inquest of his death. In the midst of their empty discussion, "the less the court understands of all this, the more the court likes it" (414). The totality of their embroilment is devoid of meaning save that of public enjoyment. The noise on the street is caused by the empty discussion of the authorities and the people's pointless chats about it. It is clear that Dickens's description distinguishes the noise from the quiet, private space of the respectable middle-class form. As a result, the people's sound is separated from the Victorian ideal domestic sphere.

The other sound represented in the novel is a voice, that of someone reading aloud to another. As Deborah Vlock notes, Dickens's public reading legitimated theatrical plays, which was regarded as a dangerous and questionable performance, by reproducing the ideal family in which a father reads aloud for his family in front of a hearth (60–61). In *Bleak House*, nevertheless, the act of reading aloud is not always involved with the authorized power of patriarch and the benevolent connection between readers and listeners.

Firstly, in Lady Dedlock's room, Sir Leicester "read[s] [some congenial remarks in his newspaper] aloud," sitting "before the fire" with his wife (358). In spite of his reading voice having the qualities of "infinite gravity and state," his lady "becomes distraught" and ceases listening to him (358). Secondly, Es-

ther cannot fill the gap between herself and her godmother even when she has to read the Bible aloud to her “at the fireside” just before her death (20–21) because the godmother rejects her as an illegitimate child. When Esther is “reading and she [is] listening” to the story of the “sinful woman” from the Bible, she falls down and dies soon after (20). Reading aloud does not have effects in narrowing the distance between Esther and her godmother. The other reader, who fails to make a benevolent relationship with others, is Mrs Pardiggle. Esther and Ada watch in the brickmaker’s house while she reads a philanthropic book aloud and exhorts his family. She talks with a “business-like and systematic” voice (98), so the voice never draws the attentions of the “auditors” (99). As if intentionally trying to be drawn her voice, “the young man [makes] the dog bark, which he usually [does] when Mrs. Pardiggle [is] most emphatic” (99). All of these three voices do not reach their audience.

These scenes of reading have features in common with each other. Sir Leicester, Esther and Mrs Pardiggle read an authoritative paper or books aloud. The authoritativeness of the paper and books force the others to obey the absolute notions. The voices of Sir Leicester and Mrs Pardiggle assume the power of controlling the others by means of documents. To make the matter more complicatedly, when Esther is made to read the Bible, her voice drives her godmother to death. In using the voice, she gains the power of excluding the oppressor from her own life because it liberates her from her rule. What is important is the authority of the documents being read aloud. The fashionable gentleman’s “infinite gravity and state,” the Bible’s authority, and the philanthropist’s obtrusive preaching do not allow freedom of others. Sir Leicester reads the newspaper, which addresses “some congenial remarks bearing directly on the floodgates and the framework of society” (358). This remark makes a clear distinction between his upper-class world and the emerging middle and working classes. As Esther’s existence itself is not ac-

knowledgeed by her godmother, who believes in the Bible because of her illegitimacy, she is alienated from the world of her friends in school by her orders. The brickmakers are exhorted to live the life as it is prescribed in Mrs Pardiggle's pamphlet. Their acts of reading overturn the ideal of a domestic scene at a hearth due to the documents.

Furthermore, it is striking that Caddy's little daughter is "deaf and dumb" (768). The congenital disability of the child seems to be connected to her mother's previous life to her marriage. Caddy has been a reluctant amanuensis of the letters to Africa dictated by her mother in her girlhood and later supports her helpless husband. She has always been surrounded by sounds, the dictating voice of Mrs Jellyby and the music of her lame husband's dancing-lesson. Her distorted life is filled with an excess of sounds, which seems ironically to cause a lack of the capacity of understand sound in her child. By the end of the novel, her "deaf and dumb" baby constitutes as a lacuna with the completely happy ending to Esther's narrative. Hills Miller defines the heroine, who creates the orderly system (49), but even in her world, there is a flaw, which is caused by sounds.

In *Bleak House*, through the descriptions of sound and voice, Dickens addresses the problem of the world dominated by written words. The noise of the people is distinguished from the middle-class value, in which the silent, orderly and domestic space is preferred. The reading voices disturb the ideal quiet of the Victorian home because they play the authority of documents. Although Esther's writing of her "portion" of the novel (17) has a coherent plot and "creates the orderly system" (Miller 49), the description of Caddy's deaf child introduces a discordant note into Esther's happy ending. Sound and voice prevent or alter the dominant power of written words.

3. The Act of Writing

What make written words distinguished from sounds are the faculties by which a body perceives them. The former is received by sight and the latter by hearing. What Ong refers to the difference between two bodily senses is suggestive: "Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he view, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer" (71). Sound gets deeply into a person's consciousness, the inside of his/her body, through hearing it.

Because in its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups" (Ong 74)

Spoken words seem to break the circle of signs and referents, which indicate the outside of things and persons. They originate from "the human interior" and flow into the other's consciousness through the bodies.

Whereas Ong makes a division between orality and literacy, this paper discusses another production of language: the physical act of writing. In the novel, a lawyer's clerk, Guppy, shows his bodily act when the impossibility of arranging documents in order is revealed. He works at the office of Kenge and Carboy, in which one can find "a bookcase full of the most inexpressive-looking books that ever had anything to say for themselves" (30). Ironically, in spite of his business of putting the society to order, he must be engaged with the world of "inexpressive" documents.

He pries around Lady Dedlock's past affairs and the origin of Esther in order to get married with Esther. Because the detective story is one of the completed forms, with a climactic form of written narratives (Ong 147-49), as a detective he is a character who represents in the culmination of history of written literature. However, Guppy fails to complete his investigation as to Esther. Looking at Esther's disfigured face, he encounters an unforeseen cir-

cumstance. He has to withdraw his offer of marriage due to her face. In “such faltering, such confusion, such amazement and apprehension” (478), “he put his hand [to his throat], coughed, made faces, tried again to swallow it, coughed again, made faces again, looked all round the room, and fluttered his paper.” Then, when he tells the dismissal of his proposal to Esther, he “[measured] the table with his troubled hands” (478). His body starts to move immediately when his investigation is frustrated. In “fluttering” his papers, he attempts futilely to find out something in which to record Esther’s disfigurement. His hands used for measuring may reflect writing hands, which inscribe some values in papers. “[M]easuring” something futilely, he tries to regain his legal, logical world. This action is induced by the conflict between the failure of the logical plot with a happy ending, in which he is to marry Esther after his investigation is completed, and the world legal, in which he believes he has been immersed. The physical act represents a lacuna within the world of documents.

The moment of Esther’s writing releases her from the confinement of her imposed identity. Her act of writing is provoked by her desire for gaining her own subjectivity. She has had her identity demarcated by the handwritings of her father, Hordon, and her mother, Lady Dedlock. Her parents hide their past selves from the public, yet they are ironically exposed in their own letters of handwriting. Lady Dedlock first made aware of that her former lover is alive by Nemo’s handwriting. On the other hand, her letter, which reveals Esther’s past life, determines Esther as a deceased child: “I [Esther] never, to my mother’s knowledge, breathed – had been buried – had never been endowed with life – had never borne a name” (452). Dever comments that “Esther Summerson is produced in this text by writing, by the commingling of the handwriting of her two parents” (95). Esther’s identity is contained and bounded by the text produced of her mother. However, she writes her life in

the novel. The result of her writing is to publicise her mother's letters and expose the secret of her birth. Esther, whom her aunt hides from the world and her mother defines as a dead child, searches for her own subjectivity, trying to revive herself from the state of death in using the power of writing. Dever asserts that she struggles with the letters which constrain her life (85). Her "struggle" is projected into her act of writing. The process of writing is itself an active and powerful act, which releases her from the identity constructed by others.

Carey McIntosh states that language is audible even when it is written on pages because we read a passage in prose through reading aloud (120). Although McIntosh observes the transformation of English in prose from the polarity between languages of speech and academic writing to the ordering of written English in the unity with speech in the 1700s, Esther, who "write[s] [her] portion of these pages" in the novel (17), may be a character who embodies such a unification of speech and writing. Both her speech and writing are made by her in order to let others listen to her story. In the opening chapter of Esther's narrative, she seems to be telling a loud to an audience an episode from her childhood; she has told all of her secrets to her doll. "While [she] busily stitch[es] away," she "[tells] her all [she] had noticed" in her school life (17). Stitching and picking up the threads of her daily lives are inseparable from each other for her. It is therefore not surprising that her storytelling for Dolly is replaced with her "text" in which she narrates her daily life for her audience, or the readers of the novel. The moment when she feels "a relief" in front of Dolly (27) can be substituted by the moment when she makes a record of her personal history. Writing is not different from storytelling for her.

Another person who is committed to writing is Richard. He always prepares himself for writing something such as legal documents, yet keeps losing

his power thereby until his death. The world of documents in *Bleak House* is connected with a sense of confinement, as many critics have argued. Although Miller does not make special mention of the act, he recognises a characteristic of documents. His consideration of “interminable linguistic substitutions replacing one declaration by another and never getting closer to the end” (Miller 43) agrees with the feature of confinement that a text has. The main argument of D. A. Miller is also one of the social disciplines and the “places of confinement” of the Court of Chancery (58). The world dominated by documents forces Richard to be fixed on the legal papers of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The sense of confinement, which arises from the rule of documents, is demonstrated in Dickens’s representation of Richard proceeding to his death, yet there is the notable difference between the act of writing and the world of texts.

Richard has gradually lost his power of writing and sunk into reading in the course of the novel. When he falls into the world of the Court, he cannot write something but shuts himself up within the fixed space of legal documents. Firstly, he “fails in his letter-writing” (204) though he has promised to post letters habitually to Ada and Esther before he is apprenticed to Mr Badger. Soon after that, he resigns his first apprenticeship because of his “careless spirit.” The second step to his tragedy is resulted from his overenthusiastic reading of legal statements in Kenge and Carboy. As an apprentice in a lawyer’s office, the more he “reads” the statements of the case, the more firmly he persuaded himself, adhering to “the happy conclusion” that is to come sooner or later (287). It is not by writing but by reading the documents that has made him being “to haunt the Court” (287). He ceases writing and confines himself within legal documents. As a result, he falls deeply into the Chancery world and has no way of going out from this world.

Richard writes to Esther once during her illness, yet he shows his disgust

for Jarndyce in the letter “coldly, haughtily, distantly, resentfully” (434). The letter causes the failure of the relationship between himself and Jarndyce. After he has written this letter, he loses the ability to catch the meanings of written words, so even Ada’s letter makes “little change in him” (467). He is addicted deeply to the world of documents, or the legal world of the Court, separating himself from the benevolent sphere. Then, he is discovered to be writing by Esther in the guardhouse: “he was writing at a table, with a great confusion of clothes . . .” (545). “A great confusion” in his room indicates Richard’s own “confusion,” which prevents him from understanding all the meaning of letters. This is his last writing activity in the novel because, seeing him in the same room after the lapse of time, Woodcourt finds that Richard “was not writing, but was sitting with a book before him . . .” (609). Finally, he stops himself from writing in “haggardness” and “dejection” (609) and falls into languishment “as his look wandered over the papers again . . .” (612). In the last part of his life, Esther also finds out the lack of vitality, as he is “poring over a table covered with dusty bundles of papers” (611). Since he cannot write nor do anything anymore up to his death, he is no longer alive so that he turns only his vacant look with his “sunken” eyes to her (612). His seclusion into the space of documents and legislation robs him of his living power, the power of writing. The prostration of his mind and spirit presents some significance of a physical power of writing.

Whereas Richard is caught by the endless circle of signs in documents, there is a figure who avoids entering there in the novel. An inspector, Mr Bucket uses not pens and papers but his fingers to record the details of a case. He does not depend on the power and specifics of documents. His “undercurrent of forefinger” (626) moves instead of a pen in deciphering a complicated case. He accumulates evidence of the case upon his mind by moving his fingers. Recording what he investigates onto papers is rejected by him be-

cause “he has very little to do with letters, either as sender or receiver” (629).

The movement of his forefinger is connected deeply with oral culture such as legends in folklore where demons and familiars appear:

When Mr Bucket has a matter of this pressing interest under his consideration, the fat forefinger seems to rise to the dignity of a familiar demon. He puts it to his ears, and it whispers information; he puts it to his lips, and it enjoins him to secrecy; he rubs it over his nose, and it sharpens his scent; he shakes it before a guilty man, and it charms him to destruction. (626)

“A familiar demon” of his finger appears, charming “a guilty man.” His finger takes on the superstitious mode that is incompatible with the logical and rational system produced by written words in the public and official sphere. Connecting his fingers with the culture of fairy tales, the detective can keep himself away from the fixity of written words.

Continuing to move his forefingers, he seems to have an important factor in common with Esther, who writes endlessly her life; for although she always tries to make herself “[fall] into the background,” her part of the novel is “the narrative of [*her*] life” (27) from the beginning to the end. The physicality of Mr Bucket’s finger and Esther’s act of writing prevent him or her from being sucked into the world of signs while Richard is swallowed up by the storm of legal documents. Esther replaces her storytelling to her Dolly with writing her life to tell her readers it and Mr Bucket uses his “familiar demon” instead of a pen although they are in the world of literacy.

As having been discussed in this paper, Dickens explores the way in which orality is inscribed vividly in *Bleak House*. The presentations of oral popular materials resist the domination of written words because Dickens has recognised that a text preserves only fragments of things in the endless chain, where a sign is forever tangled with another. The sounds and voices also show

the distortion of the world dominated by written words. He reveals an anxiety about the public demand for literacy in popular culture, yet we cannot run away from writing. Thereby, the physical act of writing is represented as one of the ways in which we avoid entering the world of literacy because the act of writing seems to accompany storytelling and uttering. It is through illustrating the physical act that Dickens can go on offering the possibility of escaping out of and liberating us from the fixity of written words.

(Endnotes)

- ¹ See Robert Newsom about disorder in *Bleak House*. He states that the novel is intended to produce “its inherent disorder”: it ceaselessly falls into “insecurity” (150).
- ² About the discussion of argument on orality and literacy, see Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*.
- ³ The original lyric of “Bibo and Charon” is collected in *The Literary Works of Matthew Prior* edited by Wright and Spears (674).
- ⁴ Quoted in *Charles Dickens and Music* by Lightwood (76). The song is used in Chapter 15 in *Our Mutual Friend*, too.
- ⁵ Quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (223–24).
- ⁶ Quoted in *The Annotated Edition of the English Poets* (32–35). All lines of the poem in this paper come from the book.

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