

“The Dreadful Suspense”: Delay and Uncertainty in *Bleak House*

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1. Introduction

“Novels are narratives, and narrative, whether its medium—words, film, strip-cartoon—holds the interest of an audience by raising questions in their minds, and delaying the answers” (14), observes David Lodge in *The Art of Fiction*. Suspense is thus an important aspect of a novel, especially for a popular novelist like Charles Dickens. In his social novel *Bleak House*, however, it is further endowed with a thematic significance as well, for the novel focuses on the notorious delays of the Court of Chancery and those who are tortured by a painful sense of suspense and uncertainty. The objective of this paper is to examine the motif of delay as a unifying element of the novel. Since its publication, not a few critics have regarded *Bleak House* as a structurally flawed novel.² Most significantly, the connection between the two main plots of the novel—the Jarndyce and Jarndyce plot and the Lady Dedlock plot—appears to be so weak that we may even feel that Dickens “has chosen to write two or three novels at once” (J. Hillis Miller 164). A close scrutiny of the text will reveal that apparently irrelevant characters and plots in the novels are actually closely connected through the motifs of delay, suspense and uncertainty. And by doing so this paper will attempt to re-evaluate the structural perfection of the novel.

2. An Analysis of the Opening Paragraphs

The novel’s central concern is Jarndyce and Jarndyce, a court case which has dragged on for so many years and has become so complicated that “no man alive

knows what it means” (*BH* 16),¹ but what is really important is its corrupting influence: “How many people out of the suit, Jarndyce and Jarndyce has stretched forth its unwholesome hand to spoil and corrupt, would be a very wide question. [. . .] no man’s nature has been made better by it. In trickery, evasion, procrastination, spoliation, botheration, under false pretences of all sorts, there are influences that can never come to good” (*BH* 17). Among these bad influences, this paper will especially concentrate on the motif of procrastination, which is repeatedly described as the root of many evils in the novel. Indeed, the thematic significance of delay is undoubtedly clear from the famous opening paragraphs of the novel, although generally overlooked:

LONDON. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another’s umbrellas, in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest. (*BH* 13)

Terry Eagleton argues that “‘London’ links alliteratively with ‘lately’, ‘Lord’, and ‘Lincoln’s Inn Hall’, [. . .]; so the Lord Chancellor is contaminated, not grammatically but poetically, by the idea of lateness (both tardy and perhaps even connected with death)” (xxvii). Indeed, it seems that the idea of lateness is the general impression produced by this universally admired opening paragraph. This does not necessarily mean that the whole world in *Bleak House* stops running—rather, the society is actually in motion, but “does not move anywhere” (J. Hillis Miller 165). Robert Newsom calls this state of being “suspended animation” (25),

observing that “[r]eading the opening chapter is like watching the working of a complex machine when all the gears have been disengaged, but continue to turn under their own momentum” (25). The reader sees that London is in the opposite condition to smoothness due to the mud covering the whole surface of the earth, and under such circumstance, the narrator says, it is no wonder one would meet “a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill”. Significantly, similar images are later associated with the English legal system itself, which John Jarndyce calls “this monstrous system” (*BH* 251), and Miss Flite simply refers to as “the Monster” (*BH* 567). Moreover, like this waddling Megalosaurus, the slow, sluggish procedure of Chancery is frequently connected with physical movement in the novel: the Court is “jogging on” (*BH* 78) serenely and vainly, Jarndyce and Jarndyce “drags its dreary length” (*BH* 17), and the lawyers are “tripping one another up on slippery precedents” (*BH* 14).

It is also notable that the first paragraph above cited lacks the finite verbs, because it suggests “action has no place in the Court of Chancery” (Gravil 49). Likewise, the grammatical structure of the sentences in the third paragraph in which the Lord High Chancellor is introduced also appears to stress the thematic importance of delay:

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln’s Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery. (*BH* 14)

The third-person narrator prolongs the first sentence by withholding the name of the place “Temple Bar,” and similarly it is not until the very end of the paragraph that the subject of the second sentence is clarified for the reader. D.A. Miller claims that “like the larger structure of suspense, even individual sentences will frequently derive their effects from the lengths to which they will go in

withholding predication” (88). Such tendency may not be so prevalent throughout the novel as Miller suggests, but surely the reader is captivated by the feeling of being suspended from the opening scene of the novel, not only because of the content, but also because of the form of the novel itself.

3. The Exploitative Characters and Procrastination

Many characters in the novel make a profit by delay, and in other cases, purely enjoy the power generated by it. And what is notable about these characters is that their personalities almost unexceptionally internalise the corrupting features of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. From their voice, speech, or demeanour, the negative influence of the Court of Chancery reveals itself. For instance, Mr Vholes, a shrewd, self-interested attorney who exploits the fortune of his client Richard Carstone, is characterised by his “slowly devouring look” (*BH* 976), as if it reflects the tardy process of the court of Chancery. Another form of procrastination is eloquence, an inclination to evade or withhold giving a definite answer. Conversation Kenge is, as its appellation indicates, distinguished for his meaningless loquacity. Similarly, William Guppy, a clerk at Kenge and Carboy office, “likes nothing better than to model his conversation on forensic principles” (*BH* 312), and his inquisition is characteristic “both in respect of its eliciting nothing, and of its being lengthy” (*BH* 311). Sandra K. Young points out that “rarely in his novels do minor characters who speak well mean well” (78), and this general rule applies to other characters in the novel who are not directly involved in the Court of Chancery. Chadband, a hypocritical preacher, has “the gift of holding forth for four hours at a stretch” (*BH* 303) and of whom his “persecutors” (*BH* 314) comment that “the wonder rather is that he should ever leave off, having once the audacity to begin” (*BH* 314). Many of the self-righteous charitable people in the novel have the same talent—the chairman of the Infant Bonds of Joy gives “a

fervid address of two hours” (*BH* 126), and Mr Gusher, “a very fervid impassioned speaker” (*BH* 127), “would improve almost any occasion you could mention for hours and hours” (*BH* 127). Likewise, greedy, relentless moneylender Grandfather Smallweed is “wrought up to the highest pitch by his own eloquence” (*BH* 530). Besides this, in his case it should not go unnoticed that his profession is described as “the archetype of parasitic activity in the novel” (Daleski 163); that is, Smallweed profits by the protraction of debtor’s repayment, just as lawyers gain benefit by the delay of Chancery. His way of torturing his debtor George Rouncewell is exactly the same as what is said about Jarndyce and Jarndyce, too: “it’s being ground to bits in a slow mill” (*BH* 71).

The character of Tulkinghorn, the legal adviser of Sir Leicester Dedlock and the blackmailer of lady Dedlock, is more fathomless than the other characters, and his hostile obsession with Lady Dedlock has long been a subject of debate among critics.³ Whatever ambition he possesses (if any), we should note that Tulkinghorn uses exactly the same method as the Court of Chancery which he represents for his purpose: the power gained by delay and suspense. Like the solicitors’ boys who keep their wretched clients at bay “by protesting time out of mind that Mr Chizzle, Mizzle, or otherwise, was particularly engaged and had appointments until dinner” (*BH* 17), Tulkinghorn often intentionally leaves affairs unsettled and keeps his target in indefinite suspense, and by doing so he torments people and establishes superiority over them. For instance, he teases Hortense by repeatedly refusing to meet her on pretence of being out or engaged, and causes George Rouncewell distress by keeping him “prowling and dangling about him” (*BH* 727).

This propensity becomes most evident when he begins torturing Lady Dedlock. By insinuating to her that he is secretly investigating her past, Tulkinghorn makes her “very restless” (*BH* 254). While staying in Chesney Wold, Lady Dedlock is threatened by the lawyer’s presence, until his absence itself becomes her constant source of anxiety:

Only one room is empty. It is a turret chamber of the third order of merit, plainly but comfortably furnished, and having an old-fashioned business air. It is Mr Tulkinghorn's room, and is never bestowed on anybody else, for he may come at any time. He is not come yet. [. . .]

Every day before dinner, my Lady looks for him in the dusk of the library, but he is not there. Every day at dinner, my Lady glances down the table for the vacant place, that would be waiting to receive him if he had just arrived; but there is no vacant place. Every night my Lady casually asks her maid:

‘Is Mr Tulkinghorn come?’

Every night the answer is, ‘No, my Lady, not yet.’ (*BH* 191)

This uncertainty is Tulkinghorn's favourite method of torturing his prey. Even when he finally acquires all information necessary, Tulkinghorn appears (or pretends) not to know what to do next. He tells her that “I have not yet been able to come to a decision satisfactory to myself, on the course before me. I am not clear what to do, or how to act next. I must request you, in the mean time, to keep your secret as you have kept it so long, and not to wonder that I keep it too” (*BH* 656-57).

When Lady Dedlock is forbidden to flee from Chesney Wold and forced to continue her life as usual, she questions Tulkinghorn, saying, “I am to drag my present life on, holding its pains at your pleasure, day by day?” (*BH* 659). The word “drag” is important, because it reminds us of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, which “drags its dreary length before the Court, perennially hopeless” (*BH* 17), and is marked by its “dragging years of procrastination and anxiety” (*BH* 602). Richard himself is “dragging on” (*BH* 625) his dislocated life, and Gridley also has been “dragged for five-and-twenty years over burning iron” (*BH* 250). This similarity suggests that Lady Dedlock's circumstance becomes analogous to the protracted, suspense-causing legal case (of which she is actually one of the parties). After she breaks the agreement with Tulkinghorn, he declares he will take his own course, yet still he refuses to tell her exactly when he will take action:

‘Do you contemplate undeceiving Sir Leicester to-night?’

‘A home question!’ says Mr Tulkinghorn, with a slight smile, and

cautiously shaking his head at the shaded face. 'No, not to-night.'

'To-morrow?'

'All things considered, I had better decline answering that question, Lady Dedlock. If I were to say I don't know when, exactly, you would not believe me, and it would answer no purpose. It may be to-morrow. I would rather say no more. You are prepared, and I hold out no expectations which circumstances might fail to justify. I wish you good evening.' (*BH* 746-47)

Immediately after this meeting, Lady Dedlock follows him to "make one last petition that he would not protract the dreadful suspense [. . .] but would mercifully strike next morning" (*BH* 855), but in vain. For her, the present suspense is even worse and more unbearable than the certain, inevitable catastrophe. Nothing could be more convincing, because by this point in the novel we already know the devastating effect of being held in suspense on one's mind through the description of the Court of Chancery. Thus, what Tulkinghorn tries to do with the power bestowed upon him by the acquired information is to reproduce and repeat what is going on in Chancery: he creates a situation similar to Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and torments his victims by the deliberate delay and procrastination, without relying on the existing system, like Kenge and Vholes. In this sense, it is safe to say that he not only serves Chancery, but he *is* Chancery.⁴

Inspector Bucket is characterised by swiftness, competency as well as human touch, and thus appears to be quite contrary to the legal characters in the novel. However, a closer examination will reveal that his character is not so simple. As Ian Ousby claims, the treatment of the police detective in *Bleak House* is not "an extension of the uncritical hero-worship revealed in the journalism" (90), and he states that "[i]t is to the quality of inconsistency, if not paradox, that the reader reverts in his own estimate of Bucket, for the policeman's actions show him to be both good and bad" (101). And the controversial aspect of Bucket is closely related to delay, however quick and swift his action in general may seem. Bucket causes delay by not imparting information, "[s]adistically enjoying his power over a person" (Toker 76). His manner of walking as perceived through the eyes of Mr

Snagsby symbolically demonstrates this disposition: “As they walk along, Mr Snagsby observes, as a novelty, [. . .] that whenever he [Bucket] is going to turn to the right or left, he pretends to have a fixed purpose in his mind of going straight ahead, and wheels off, sharply, at the very last moment” (*BH* 357). He does not reveal his intention until the very last moment.

The typical example of Bucket’s withholding information can be seen in his treatment of Sir Leicester Dedlock when he arrests Hortense. Bucket creates unnecessary suspense and tortures Sir Leicester Dedlock immensely. To begin with, Bucket says that the murderer is “a woman” (*BH* 818), then mentions the name of Lady Dedlock: “What I have got to say, is about her Ladyship. She is the pivot it all turns on” (*BH* 819), and thus hints she is deeply involved in the murder of Tulkinghorn. Then he reveals Tulkinghorn discovered Lady Dedlock’s secret, and they “had bad blood [. . .] upon the matter, that very night” (*BH* 821), and immediately after that she was witnessed to go down to his chamber. During this disclosure, a striking change in appearance of Sir Leicester Dedlock is observed: “Something frozen and fixed is upon his manner, over and above its usual shell of haughtiness; and Mr Bucket soon detects an unusual slowness in his speech, with now and then a curious trouble in beginning, which occasions him to utter inarticulate sounds” (*BH* 821). Yet, for all his cruel treatment, Sir Leicester cannot reprimand Bucket’s circuitous behaviour. He has no choice but to continue to listen to his narrative until everything becomes clear. Thus Bucket’s influential power over him grows even stronger through this protracted agony. The suspense reaches its peak when Bucket declares he will capture the murderess before Sir Leicester Dedlock’s eyes:

‘The party to be apprehended is now in this house’, proceeds Mr Bucket, putting up his watch with a steady hand, and with rising spirits, ‘and I’m about to take her into custody in your presence. Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, don’t you say a word, nor yet stir. There’ll be no noise, and no disturbance at all. I’ll come back in the course of the evening, if agreeable to you, and endeavour to meet your wishes

respecting this unfortunate family matter, and the nobbiest way of keeping it quiet. Now, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, don't you be nervous on account of the apprehension at present coming off. You shall see the whole case clear, from first to last.' (*BH* 829-30)

At this point, Sir Leicester is finally informed that Lady Dedlock is not guilty, but her maid Hortense is the culprit. Nevertheless, his suffering is so intense that he falls in an abstracted state, and "remains in the same attitude as though he were still listening, and his attention were still occupied" (*BH* 838). This state testifies Sir Leicester's heavy dependence on Bucket as well as his great mental suffering through the protracted conversation with Bucket.

Another example of delay caused by Bucket can be found in his inexplicable unwillingness to share information with Esther Summerson during the long chase after Lady Dedlock. During the chase, Esther has no idea where she is going because Bucket refuses to tell her the information he acquired, only telling her that there is "[n]one that can be quite depended on as yet" (*BH* 870). Esther, knowing that she should not disturb Bucket, stays still, yet the circumstance causes her great pain: "I had no need to remind myself that I was not there, by the indulgence of any feeling of mine, to increase the difficulties of the search, or to lessen its hopes, or enhance its delays. I remained quiet; but what I suffered in that dreadful spot, I never can forget" (*BH* 869). Her suffering increases when the direction of the search is suddenly changed in the midst of the chase. This is because Bucket shrewdly perceives that Lady Dedlock has changed her cloth on the way and returned to where she has come from, but again Bucket obstinately withholds this information and only tells Esther to trust him:

'My dear,' said Mr Bucket, jumping to his seat, and looking in again—'you'll excuse me if I'm too familiar—don't you fret and worry yourself no more than you can help. I say nothing else at present; but you know me, my dear; now, don't you?'

I endeavoured to say that I knew he was far more capable than I of deciding what we ought to do; but was he sure that this was right? Could

I not go forward by myself in search of—I grasped his hand again in my distress, and whispered it to him—of my own mother.

‘My dear,’ he answered, ‘I know, I know, and would I put you wrong do you think? Inspector Bucket. Now you know me, don’t you?’

What could I say but yes! (*BH* 885)

At such point, the role of Inspector Bucket appears to be almost identifiable with that of the narrator, because Bucket’s withholding information—whether from Sir Leicester or Esther—exactly coincides with the definition of “delay” as a narrative technique given by Rimmon-Kenan, which “consists in not imparting information where it is ‘due’ in the text, but leaving it for a later stage” (125). Therefore, the relationship between with Bucket and his audience parallels to the relation between the author and the reader:

‘[I]t ain’t easy to answer those questions at the present moment. Not at the present moment. [. . .] I *could* answer your questions, miss, but duty forbids it. Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, will very soon be made acquainted with all that has been traced. And I hope that he may find it;’ Mr Bucket again looks grave; ‘to his satisfaction.’ (*BH* 809-810)

Karen Chase claims that Bucket “might be seen as the *precipitate* of the narrative form, the human embodiment of its mechanics of plotting. Bucket can assume the narrator’s role because their tasks resemble one another. The detective, like the narrator, serves as an impresario of plot and resolution” (109). Similarly, Andrei Baltakmens states that “[s]teadily, Bucket approaches identification with the voice of the recorder [the third-person narrator] as his command over the mystery extends” (13). At the same time, however, it also certainly can be said that by keeping others in a state of suspense and uncertainty, Bucket ruthlessly enjoys his power over them, and in this respect, he has “an analogous motivation and an analogous significance” (Toker 76) to Tulkinghorn and the Court of Chancery itself.

4. “Moving On”: Delay and Displacement

As we have seen, in *Bleak House* those who exploit others chiefly use delay in order to establish superiority over others, or just to gain more money. Likewise, those who are exploited or oppressed in the novel often internalise the habit of procrastination—an indisposition to evade and avoid reality, and wallow in vain expectations that will never come true. The most pathetic example is Richard Carstone, a ward in Chancery who gradually gets absorbed in Jarndyce and Jarndyce with hopeless expectation, and finally dies a wretched death. John Jarndyce notes that the case “has engendered or confirmed in him a habit of putting off—and trusting to this, that, and the other chance, without knowing what chance—and dismissing everything as unsettled, uncertain, and confused” (*BH* 197). Similarly, Esther observes, regarding his habit, that “[e]verything postponed to that imaginary time! Everything held in confusion and indecision until then! (*BH* 599)”. This “imaginary time” of course never comes, nor would Richard restart what he has postponed, like Harold Skimpole, who occasionally betakes himself “to beginning some sketch in the park which he never finished” (*BH* 294).

Hopeless expectation of settlement is what restless characters like Richard cherish. According to Geoffrey Thurley, *Bleak House* is “a critique of the Dickensian expectations, their ultimate illusoriness and destructive power” (200) and he concludes that the novel argues that “human existence is most like a protracted waiting for a legacy that bequeaths us nothing” (202). In spite of the long years of disappointment, Miss Flite, a half-crazed suit in Chancery, still cannot abandon hope completely, and repeats her refrain: “I expect a judgment. Shortly” (*BH* 47). The litigants are all deluded by the false logic that “the longer it goes on, [. . .] the nearer it must be to a settlement” (*BH* 215). Tom Jarndyce, on the day of his suicide, thinks “I’m nearer judgment than I ever was” (*BH* 72). Richard persuades Esther and also himself that “it can’t last for ever” (*BH* 371) and that “[a]s to years of delay, there has been no want of them, Heaven knows! and there is the greater possibility of our bringing the matter to a speedy close” (*BH*

371-72). Thus they are obsessed with a notion that their wishes must be fulfilled shortly, not despite the delay, but because of the delay.

This “sickness of hope deferred” (*BH* 396) spreads among all classes, and even contaminates those who are apparently not concerned in Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Mrs Jellyby, for instance, bears a strong similitude to Miss Flite in terms of expectation. Her telescopic philanthropy makes her postpone her household work indefinitely, and her statement pertaining her charity work for Africa is exactly what Miss Flite is likely to say about Jarndyce and Jarndyce: “It involves the devotion of all my energies, such as they are; but that is nothing, so that it succeeds; and I am more confident of success every day” (*BH* 53). In the end she is disappointed in her charity work, but she soon finds another vent for her philanthropic enthusiasm, which is “the rights of women to sit in Parliament” (*BH* 987), and her act of expecting still goes on.

Volumnia is another comic variation of this kind of people. As Mrs Jellyby expects the success of her charity work, so Volumnia expects the inheritance of the fortune of her cousin, Sir Leicester. When Sir Leicester is confined to bed, she stays by his side constantly, out of “a horror of what may befall her little income, in the event [. . .] ‘of anything happening’ to Sir Leicester” (*BH* 898). Accordingly, she finds “she cannot go to bed [. . .] and parade the mansion like a ghost” (*BH* 898) and refuses to return to her room, because “[s]he may be asked for, she may be wanted at a moment’s notice. She never should forgive herself ‘if anything was to happen’ and she was not on the spot” (*BH* 899). Thus she postpones withdrawing to her room insistently, until “it comes to four o’clock, and still the same blank, Volumnia’s constancy begins to fail her, or rather it begins to strengthen; for she now considers that it is her duty to be ready for the morrow, when much may be expected of her” (*BH* 899). She strikingly resembles to Miss Flite, who is “always in court, from its sitting to its rising, and always expecting some incomprehensible judgment to be given in her favour” (*BH* 15), and whose residence is adjacent to

the Lincoln's Inn "[i]n consequence of the necessity of attending on the Chancellor" (*BH* 73). Finally it turns out that Sir Leicester will bequeath her his fortune, but by that time Chesney Wold becomes so bleak a place that "passion and pride, even to the stranger's eye, have died away from the place in Lincolnshire, and yielded it to dull repose" (*BH* 985).

Even the first-person narrator, Esther Summerson, cannot remain untainted from this social evil. It is true that generally she is, unlike Richard, free from the habit of putting things off, and appears not to be contaminated by Jarndyce and Jarndyce at all. Indeed, her virtue of disinterestedness often takes form of swift action in the novel—and this is what she learned in her childhood at Greenleaf: "There was a time for everything all round the dial of the clock, and everything was done at its appointed moment" (*BH* 39).

Nevertheless, this is not the case with Esther as a narrator. From the very first sentence, Esther hesitates writing about her own life—in other words, she creates a narrative delay: "I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever" (*BH* 27). Her unusual self-contempt and reluctance to express herself can be attributable to her sense of guilt about her illegitimate birth imprinted in early childhood. Esther is so insecure about her writing ability that she is often at a loss for words, digresses from the main subject, and resorts to concessive or contrastive conjunctions when she expresses her opinion with diffidence. This characteristic can be observed in sentences such as "I have not by any means a quick understanding. When I love a person very tenderly indeed, it seems to brighten. But even that may be my vanity" (*BH* 28) or "I have mentioned, that, unless my vanity should deceive me (as I know it may, for I may be very vain, without suspecting it—though indeed I don't), my comprehension is quickened when my affection is" (*BH* 29) and "I don't know what it was. Or at least if I do, now, I thought I did not then. Or at least—but it don't matter" (*BH* 470). As Newsome points out, Esther's thought is "the same kind of stop-and-go, circular

motion that seems to be the external condition of things in the worlds of Chancery” (34). Even Esther, who seems to remain morally intact, does internalise Chancery-like propensity which is so prevalent in the world of *Bleak House*. Her reticence about expressing her opinion or emotion is especially striking when she has to mention Allan Woodcourt, a young physician and her future husband. Whether it “stems from her fear that she is tainted and her consequent belief that marriage with him would be a violation of caste” (Stoehr 150), or it is simply because she is “so terrified of losing him that she can hardly bear to mention his existence” (Zwerdling 434), her reluctance and consequent delay regarding to write about herself or her husband are inseparable from her illegitimate birth, which is not her sin nor her fault, but she inherited it from her parents regardless of her will. In this sense, she is “a victim of that whole dead-locked system of institutionalized muddle, prejudice and injustice” (Slater 256) like many other characters in the novel. Indeed, her obsession with past echoes with those of the parties to the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, “the inheritance of a protracted misery” (*BH* 72), and also with John Jarndyce’s indignation at his cause: “for whose sins these young people ever fell into a pit of it, I don’t know” (*BH* 122).

And it is such a psychological state that makes her closing narrative very undecided, and therefore, quite puzzling. In the final chapter “The Close of Esther’s Narrative,” Esther and Woodcourt have been married for “[f]ull seven happy years” (*BH* 985), and they talk about Esther’s old looks in the controversial final passages. Her husband asks her, in spite of her disfigurement through the disease, “don’t you know that you are prettier than you ever were?” (*BH* 989), and with Esther’s unfinished final sentence, the novel finishes.

I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—. (*BH* 989)

Thus, "*Bleak House* ends, as it begins, in ambiguity" (Frank 111). By Esther's stopping her final sentence halfway, the reader of the novel is left in eternal suspense and uncertainty.

The reason Esther's final utterance makes us very unsettled is probably that we expect her to grow out of her self-censoring habit through love and devotion for others. As Torgovnick puts it, "[r]eaders could excuse Esther's early sentimentality and coyness as a convention of retrospective first-person narrator at the time, and reflect the narrator's growth during the novel. But such a narrative perspective demands that Esther tell the end of the novel with the maturity and depth shown during the Lady Dedlock sequence" (55-56). Nevertheless, this final passage is probably a sign of her regression to her old self, a timid, modest, self-denying Esther. Even at the very end of her narrative, Esther is obsessed with the past, suspends the ultimate judgement about herself and postpones her conclusion eternally, as if she is still a victim of social evil.

The ending is all the more disturbing when we consider that her final word in the novel is "supposing". It is true that here Esther is just reflecting upon her old beauty, but in this novel the act of expecting or supposing is usually regarded as vain, fruitless, or self-deceptive, as we have already seen. Indeed, many expectations and suppositions are destined to end unrewarded. In her miserable childhood, Esther used to say to her cherished doll, "you dear faithful Dolly, I knew you would be expecting me!" (BH 28) when she came home from school, knowing it actually stares "at nothing" (BH 28). Likewise, while Sir Leicester Dedlock is sick in bed, the hope for return of his wife brightens him: "these allusions to her being expected keep up hope within him" (BH 897), but it is, after all, a mere "fiction" (BH 896). For the most part, the act of presuming is associated with Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Miss Flite observes that once attracted by the Court of Chancery, "[y]ou *can't* leave it. And you *must* expect." (BH 566). And this is what

John Jarndyce dreads most. He sternly warns Richard not to “entertain the supposition that any real success, in great things or in small, ever was or could be, ever will or can be, wrested from Fortune by fits and starts” (*BH* 213). As Richard yields to the charm of Chancery, he begins to indulge various suppositions which eventually come to nothing: he tells Esther that “nothing could be plainer than that the will under which he and Ada were to take [. . .], must be finally established, if there were any sense or justice in the Court of Chancery” (*BH* 369), but Esther cannot help adding her sentiment: “O what a great *if* that sounded in my ears” (*BH* 369). He also shows her that “supposing he had contracted, say, two hundred pounds of debt in six months out of the army; and that he contracted no debt at all within a corresponding period, in the army [. . .]; this step must involve a saving of four hundred pounds in a year, or two thousand pounds in five years” (*BH* 372). All of these vain presumptions are proved to be failures.

The etymology of the term “suppose” also seems to be closely related to the novel’s ethical theme. To suppose (sub + ponere) means “[t]o place below or beneath” (“supponere” 2076), and John O. Jordan considers it “a form of mental (or perhaps vocal) displacement” (79).⁵ Then it is notable that exactly as Esther’s final sentence remains incomplete, to place, fix or settle something is again a vain attempt in the world of *Bleak House*. Almost all characters are out of their proper places, and roving restlessly, as if the incessant moving is their inevitable fate—in short, they are, both physically and psychologically, displaced indefinitely. As already discussed, the whole society itself is in motion yet leads to nowhere, and a considerable number of characters are in similar circumstances. John Jarndyce compares being a party in Jarndyce and Jarndyce to dancing endlessly: “We are always appearing, and disappearing, and swearing, and interrogating, and filing, and cross-filing, and arguing, and sealing, and motioning, and referring, and reporting, and revolving about the Lord Chancellor and all his satellites, and equitably waltzing ourselves off to dusty death, about Costs” (*BH* 118). Due to the

protracted case, Tom Jarndyce gets into “a restless habit of strolling about” (*BH* 71). Richard Carstone is “one of the most restless creatures in the world” (*BH* 137) and he thinks that he cannot lead a very settled life “with nothing settled” (*BH* 601) about Jarndyce and Jarndyce. And again, the condition of being restless is not limited to the parties to Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Lady Dedlock’s movements are, from her first appearance, described as “uncertain” (*BH* 20), and this lack of stability increases as the story progresses: “My Lady Dedlock is restless, very restless. The astonished fashionable intelligence hardly knows where to have her. To-day, she is at Chesney Wold; yesterday, she was at her house in town; to-morrow, she may be abroad, for anything the fashionable intelligence can with confidence predict” (*BH* 254). George Rouncewell is a “roving, unsettled” (*BH* 845) creature because he feels insecure about himself. The self-complacent philanthropists are “restless and vain in action” (*BH* 239). In the world of fashion, where “its appointed place” (*BH* 20) is obscured by “too much jeweller’s cotton and fine wool” (*BH* 20), even the dogs in Chesney Wold have “their restless fits” (*BH* 104). The most memorable example for readers is perhaps Jo, the crossing-sweeper boy, who is presented as “a symbol of society’s wicked neglect of such waifs (Collins 204). He is repeatedly told to “move on” (*BH* 315) by a police constable without knowing why and whither: “I’m always a moving on, sir, [. . .] I’ve always been a moving and a moving on, ever since I was born. Where can I possible move to, sir, more nor I do move!” (*BH* 308). The end of Chapter 19 shows the incessant movement Jo and everything around him are doomed to continue ceaselessly: “There he sits, the sun going down, the river running fast, the crowd flowing by him in two streams – everything moving on to some purpose and to one end – until he is stirred up, and told to ‘move on’ too” (*BH* 315). These characters float from place to place, and nothing is in its proper position, like Mrs Jellyby’s house, where the curtain is “fastened up with a fork” (*BH* 55), Richard has to wash his hands in “a pie-dish” (*BH* 56) and finds a kettle “on his dressing table” (*BH* 56).

The prevailing image of fog in Chapter 1 foreshadows the general lack of stability in the world, and thus highlights the theme of displacement:

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds. (*BH* 13)

Therefore, it appears that Esther's incomplete final sentence ominously reminds us of the world's fundamental condition which perhaps will never change nor improve—a ceaseless displacement, an uncertain yet unstoppable movement.

5. Conclusion: Social Reformation and Individual Morality

By focusing on the motif of delay, we have revealed that in the novel the Court of Chancery functions as an epitome of the outer world, or rather, the whole world is merely a sort of extension of Chancery, a repetition of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The characters can be roughly categorised into two groups—those who manipulate delay, and those who are left in suspense and uncertainty. The whole society in *Bleak House* is contaminated by the lateness, and the people live there, from Lady Dedlock in the world of fashion to Jo in Tom-all-Alone's, almost unexceptionally lose their own proper places, and rove restlessly, exactly like the fog covering all over London. Curiously, however, this unifying theme of displacement and restlessness seems to be dealt with a slight ambiguity near the end of the novel, for we see that it is the same constant movement that defines liveliness and vivacity of the characters in the final chapter, where Esther herself

is “bustling” (*BH* 989) about preparing her friends’ visit, and Caddy Jellyby is “perpetually dancing” (*BH* 987) with her children—which gives an impression quite opposite to the victims of Chancery, who are “equitably waltzing [themselves] off to dusty death” (*BH* 118). Moreover, it reminds the reader of the fact that in *Bleak House* the total lack of motion is often associated with death—like the “immovable composure” (*BH* 750) of Tulkinghorn’s dead body, or the decayed Chesney Wold, which is “so sombre and motionless always” (*BH* 985).

The same ambiguity can also be seen in Dickens’s treatment of delay and suspense. In Chapter 66 (“Down in Lincolnshire”, the final chapter told by the third-person narrator), Dickens affirms conditionally endless legal battle which he has criticised so fiercely throughout the novel. In the earlier part of the novel, the legal dispute between Boythron and Sir Leicester Dedlock over the right of way appears to be a mere variation of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and only proves that “litigation is the essential characteristic of fallen mankind” (Q.D. Leavis 134). Nevertheless, in Chapter 66, it is revealed that this suit still goes on even after Jarndyce and Jarndyce has exhausted itself, and assumes a quite different significance:

War rages yet with the audacious Boythorn, though at uncertain intervals, and now hotly, and now coolly; flickering like an unsteady fire. The truth is said to be, that when Sir Leicester came down to Lincolnshire for good, Mr Boythorn showed a manifest desire to abandon his right of way, and do whatever Sir Leicester would: which Sir Leicester, conceiving to be a concession to his illness or misfortune, took in such high dudgeon, and was so magnificently aggrieved by, that Mr Boythorn found himself under the necessity of committing a flagrant trespass to restore his neighbour to himself. [. . .] But it is whispered that when he is most ferocious towards his old foe, he is really most considerate; and that Sir Leicester, in the dignity of being implacable, little supposes how much he is humoured. As little does he think how near together he and his antagonist have suffered, in the fortunes of two sisters; and his antagonist, who knows it now, is not the man to tell him. So the quarrel goes on, to the satisfaction of both. (*BH* 981)

It seems that as long as there exist goodwill and compassion for others, even delay and suspense have proper function, and therefore can be justified. In this respect, George Orwell's famous observation about Dickens's social criticism is perfectly correct and directly applicable to our discussion:

The truth is that Dickens's criticism of society is almost exclusively moral. Hence the utter lack of any constructive suggestion anywhere in his work. He attacks the law, parliamentary government, the educational system and so forth, without ever clearly suggesting what he would put in their places. Of course it is not necessarily the business of a novelist, or a satirist, to make constructive suggestions, but the point is that Dickens's attitude is at bottom not even *destructive*. There is no clear sign that he wants the existing order to be overthrown, or that he believes it would make very much difference if it *were* overthrown. For in reality his target is not so much society as 'human nature'. (22)

After all, the reformation of the corrupted system is beyond human power, and what really matters in the ending of the novel is not the fate of the Court of Chancery, but how to live in the uncertain, restless world without losing humanity. If one can change his or her way of life, the world would be less intolerable—to use the Orwell's words again, "If men would behave decently the world would be decent" (23).

Notes

※This paper is a revised version of the thesis presented to Kobe University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in January 2018. In addition, part of the discussion in the third section was published as work-in-progress report ("Delay and Suspense in *Bleak House*") in *Kobe Studies in English*, no. 31, 2018.

¹. *BH* is the abbreviation used for the title of *Bleak House*.

². For example, Angus Wilson criticises that "Lady Dedlock's fall from virtue has nothing to do with her being a claimant in the case" (234).

³. According to D. A. Miller, Tulkinghorn "finds his sexual resentment justified in a story of female error and deceit" (71). Eugene F. Quirk points out that his major motivation is "his resentment of the fashionable world and the price he has had to pay to serve as its legal representative" (529). J. Hillis Miller argues that he wants "solely the power over other people which his knowledge of their secrets will give him" (172).

⁴. See Toker.74.

⁵. Though from a different point of view, Jordan also gives close attention to the word "supposing". He analyses Esther's usage of the verb "suppose" on previous occasions

in the novel, and asserts that by the act of supposing, “Esther has begun to think more boldly and more critically” (79), and concludes “[t]he Esther who remains open to ‘supposing’ retains at least the possibility of recovering” (79) such voice.

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