

**The Revenge of the Poor:**  
**‘The Structural Relationship’ between Hortense and Jo**  
**in *Bleak House***

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**1. Introduction**

*Bleak House*, Charles Dickens’s ninth novel, which has ‘most often [been] described as Dickens’s best’,<sup>1</sup> is particularly rich in colourful characters. It includes Esther Summerson, the quiet heroine who seems to represent modest Victorian women; John Jarndyce, the owner of Bleak House who retreats to the room called Growlery whenever something puts him out of humour; Mrs Jellyby, the telescopic philanthropist whose only concern is with Africa and who neglects her domestic responsibilities; Harold Skimpole, the dilettante, artist, and musician who pretends to be an irresponsible child; and Inspector Bucket, the eminent police detective who has occasionally been regarded as ‘the progenitor of the detective in British Fiction’.<sup>2</sup> Among them, it is undoubtedly Mademoiselle Hortense who stands out due to her violence. She is the French maid of Lady Dedlock who murders Tulkinghorn, the great lawyer, in the middle of the novel. No sooner does she appear in the novel than her inner violent energy becomes apparent and strongly attracts our attention. My aim in this paper is to explore Hortense’s violent character and reveal the full significance of her murder of Tulkinghorn. First, I intend to demonstrate Dickens connects her violent

character with the image of the French Revolution throughout the novel. Second, I will describe what I call 'a structural relationship' between Hortense and Jo, the illiterate crossing-sweeper, and suggest that the murder of Tulkinghorn can be interpreted as revenge on behalf of the oppressed poor. Third, I would like to consider Guster, a minor character who may be seen as Hortense's other self, and address how they contrast each other in the novel.

## **2. Hortense and the Image of the French Revolution**

Hortense appears for the first time in Chapter 12 of the novel; at that moment, the reader immediately forms an ominous impression of her:

My Lady's maid is a Frenchwoman of two-and-thirty, from somewhere in the Southern country about Avignon and Marseilles - a large-eyed brown woman with black hair; who would be handsome, but for a certain feline mouth, and general uncomfortable tightness of face, rendering the jaws too eager, and the skull too prominent. There is something indefinably keen and wan about her anatomy; and she has a watchful way of looking out of the corners of her eyes without turning her head, which could be pleasantly dispensed with - especially when she is in an ill-humour and near knives. Through all the good taste of her dress and little adornments, these objections so express themselves, that she seems to go about like a very neat She-Wolf imperfectly tamed. (*BH*, 144) <sup>3</sup>

First, her different nationality, or otherness, is strongly emphasized. Then, her dangerous appearance is shown emphatically through the use of adjectives such as 'feline', 'eager', 'keen and wan', and 'watchful', which gives the readers a sense of unease. Finally, she is compared to a 'She-Wolf imperfectly tamed', and we come to see her as a dangerous Frenchwoman, whose great energy is now controlled by the order of English society but may burst forth in the future. Upon encountering such a threatening Frenchwoman, the present-day reader of

Dickens would naturally recall Madame Defarge, a vengeful woman who leads rioters in the French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Indeed, there are many similarities between these two women. First, Hortense has 'black hair', while Madame Defarge has 'dark hair'(*TTC*, 363).<sup>4</sup> Second, Dickens writes an impressive scene in which Hortense walks on the wet grass without wearing shoes at all. She has been supplanted by Rosa as lady's maid and becomes absolutely furious, so she slips off her shoes and walks 'through the wettest of the wet grass' as if 'it is to cool her down', and 'she fancies it's blood'(*BH*, 236). As John Sutherland notes, this mirrors the image of a rioter of the Revolution walking through the street of Paris stained with blood.<sup>5</sup> There is a similar description of Madame Defarge: 'The basin fell to the ground broken, and the water flowed to the feet of Madame Defarge. By strange stem ways, and through much staining blood, those feet had come to meet that water'(*TTC*, 367). Furthermore, both are compared to tigresses. When arrested by Inspector Bucket, Hortense becomes incensed and 'pant[s] tigress-like'(*BH*, 673). On the other hand, with reference to Madame Defarge, we are told that 'opportunity had developed her into a tigress'(*TTC*, 363).<sup>6</sup> In addition to these more subtle similarities, Hortense is directly compared to a female rioter in the French Revolution. When she comes to Esther to ask for a job as a maid, Esther sees Hortense as resembling 'some woman from the streets of Paris in the reign of terror'(*BH*, 292). Esther also observes that 'there [is] a lowering energy in her face'(*BH*, 292), which suggests Hortense's violent nature. Thus, we may safely say that Hortense is a predecessor of Madame Defarge, and that Dickens imbues

Hortense with the image of a rioter in the French Revolution throughout the novel.

How does this comparison to a French Revolution rioter work in relation to the murder of Tulkinghorn? Hortense kills the lawyer mainly because he declines to write a reference letter for her. After she has lost her place as Lady Dedlock's maid, she begins to work for Tulkinghorn with the purpose of receiving a reference from him. Although she performs just as he orders, he still refuses her request, and this triggers her murder of him. We can naturally interpret Hortense's murder of Tulkinghorn as revenge, and her image as a female rioter strongly emphasizes this aspect, particularly since Dickens consistently viewed the French Revolution as the revenge of the oppressed. For example, in 'Judicial Special Pleading', the article he contributed to the *Examiner* in 1848, Dickens regarded the French Revolution as 'a struggle for vengeance against intolerable oppressors' and 'a struggle for the overthrow of a system of oppression'.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Madame Defarge is roused to action by a strong desire for revenge upon the Evremondes, who ruined her family. The fact that Dickens imbues Hortense with the image of a French Revolution rioter suggests that he intends to emphasize the vengeance aspect of the murder she commits.

### **3. 'The Structural Relationship' between Hortense and Jo**

I have shown the relation between Hortense and the image of the rioter in the French Revolution and suggested that by so describing her Dickens tries to

underline the vengeful side of the murder she commits. However, this murder is not merely private revenge. Tulkinghorn is a particularly important character, integral to the main plot of the novel, and his murder inevitably bears symbolic meaning. He is an esteemed lawyer for the Dedlocks and other important families; because of his profession, as well as his cold, cruel character, he is often viewed as a symbol of the oppressiveness of the law, or 'System', which 'threatens creature comforts and domestic happiness'.<sup>8</sup> In light of this interpretation of Tulkinghorn, we can construe Hortense's murder of him as revenge against tyrannical laws.

If we interpret Hortense's murder as revenge in this manner, we cannot help thinking about Lady Dedlock because she is another and perhaps more important victim of Tulkinghorn. The cruel lawyer, who has learned of her relationship with Captain Hawdon and of their illegitimate daughter, Esther Summerson, blackmails her. If Tulkinghorn divulges this secret to her husband, it will ruin her. Consequently, she seemingly has the strongest motive for murdering Tulkinghorn and circumstantial evidence points to her. In Chapter 48, Tulkinghorn warns her that he will inform Sir Leicester of her secret. When he leaves her, she suddenly asks him of his whereabouts the upcoming night. Then, we are told that she goes out that night, a shot rings out sometime later, and the next morning, the lawyer is found dead. The circumstantial evidence undoubtedly misleads us to conclude that Lady Dedlock is the killer. This misunderstanding becomes more thought-provoking when we consider another crime that occurs in *Great Expectations*. In that novel, Orlick, a journeyman,

savagely attacks Mrs Joe, the blacksmith's wife; he later says to Pip, the protagonist, 'I tell you it was your doing – I tell you it was done through you'.<sup>9</sup> Discussing this case in a famous essay, Julian Moynahan argues that Orlick's attack is symbolic wish fulfilment for Pip because Orlick is his 'distorted and darkened mirror-image'.<sup>10</sup> Considering that the two cases are similar, we may apply Moynahan's theory to the murder of Tulkinghorn. Indeed, Hortense kills Tulkinghorn while disguised as Lady Dedlock to pin the guilt on her, a fact that also suggests a close connection between these two women.<sup>11</sup> However, we must remember the biggest difference between Hortense and Orlick. Orlick attacks Mrs Joe because he has a grudge against her, but it is not clear what sort of grudge he has. However, as mentioned earlier, Hortense murders Tulkinghorn for a clear and definite reason: she kills him because he declines to give her a reference. Unlike Orlick, Hortense has a strong personal motive for murder, and it is not wise to regard her murder of Tulkinghorn in the same light as his attack on Mrs Joe.

In order to understand the full meaning of her murder, we must examine another important character: Jo, the illiterate crossing-sweeper. It is true that we can find almost no relationship between Hortense and Jo within the plot. Still, it seems to me that they have what may be called 'a structural relationship'. Dickens often introduces these two characters in either successive chapters or the same chapter, and from the way he describes them in each chapter, a thematic link can be sensed between them.

Jo first appears in Chapter 11, when he is summoned to the Coroners'

Inquest as a witness. However, due to his illiteracy and shabbiness, it is regarded 'out of the question'(*BH*, 136) for him to speak in front of the coroners and he is quickly dismissed. He suffers from his poverty so much that he cannot even give testimony about Nemo, a man who had been good to him. Just after Jo's scene of suffering, we see Hortense's agony depicted in Chapter 12. Although she has worked for Lady Dedlock for five years, her mistress is greatly charmed by the beauty of Rosa, a young English maid, and Hortense is tormented by bitter jealousy. Thus, Dickens successively portrays the hardships of these two characters.

The more similar and impressive scenes occur in Chapters 18 and 19. At the end of Chapter 18, because of her anger against Lady Dedlock, who has replaced her with Rosa, Hortense walks through the wet grass wearing no shoes at all, as noted previously. The chapter ends with a memorable description of her walk: 'Still, very steadfastly and quietly walking towards it, a peaceful figure too in the landscape, went Mademoiselle Hortense, shoeless, through the wet grass'(*BH*, 236). Chapter 19 begins with the highly suggestive title, 'Moving on', and since the former chapter ends with the impressive scene of Hortense's barefoot movement, initially it seems that this chapter will be a continuation of the former. This is not the case, and we soon realize that this chapter chiefly addresses the adversity Jo faces. Jo is subjected to Chadband's lengthy preaching and finally ordered by the constable 'to move on'(*BH*, 243) without having had any chance to rest. The structure of these two chapters makes it seem that Jo takes over Hortense's suffering in moving on. Dickens's working

memoranda also support this interpretation:

chapter XVIII.  
[. . .]  
Hortense. walking barefoot home  
chapter XIX.  
Moving on.  
The great remedy for Jo, and all such as he. Move on!<sup>12</sup>

It is evident that Dickens intentionally arranged these two characters in this manner in order to imply their connectedness.

In Chapter 22, these characters meet for the first and last time in the novel through Tulkinghorn, when he temporarily hires them to uncover Lady Dedlock's secret. Although they are different in most respects, they are similar in that both are utilized and then deserted by Tulkinghorn. As stated before, Tulkinghorn refuses to write a letter of recommendation for Hortense, which robs her of the opportunity to obtain a respectable job in the future. Jo's case ends much more tragically. Esther has been taking care of him in Bleak House because he is terribly ill. However, before he fully recovers, Inspector Bucket forcefully takes him out of the house and Jo dies. Importantly, Bucket later suggests to Esther that he has done this for the benefit of Tulkinghorn (*BH*, 703), which implies that Tulkinghorn indirectly deprives Jo of shelter and causes his untimely death.

Jo dies at the end of Chapter 47, and Dickens writes,

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (*BH*, 588-89)

The repetition of the word 'dead', coupled with Dickens's tone, causes this



passage to sound not only mournful but also contemptuous toward people responsible for Jo's death. Dickens even generalizes Jo's death to reproach a society that allows terrible suffering such as his.

The time for revenge has come. It is of great importance that Tulkinghorn's murder occurs in the next chapter and that its description is completely different:

Mr Tulkinghorn's time is over for evermore; and the Roman pointed at the murderous hand uplifted against his life, and pointed helplessly at him, from night to morning, lying face downward on the floor, shot through the heart. (*BH*, 603)

Contrary to the description of Jo's death, this passage is cold and monotonous and we feel no sympathy for the dead man. It is obvious that Dickens attempts to create a sharp contrast between these two scenes of deaths, and, considering 'the structural relationship' between Hortense and Jo, we might go as far as to say that Hortense avenges the boy's death by killing Tulkinghorn.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that Hortense deliberately takes revenge on Tulkinghorn for the death of the poor boy, whom she has met only once. What I mean is that the arrangement of events and characters in each chapter gives us the impression that Jo's and Tulkinghorn's deaths are somehow connected, and that we might even view Hortense's murder of Tulkinghorn as revenge for Jo's death.

This interpretation suggests a new possible interpretation of her motive for murder, which is Tulkinghorn's rejection to write her a recommendation. In considering the social hierarchy, there seems to be a great gap between Hortense, an ex-lady's maid, and Jo, a mere crossing-sweeper. However, Tulkinghorn's

refusal to give her a reference deprives her of any chance of obtaining a respectable job in the future. As Megumi Arai notes, in the Victorian era, a maid without a reference would often become a prostitute or enter the workhouse if she could not return to her parent's home.<sup>13</sup> Considering her foreign nationality and violent nature, we can easily infer the difficulty Hortense would have in finding a new job. The dismal future that awaits her is not so different from that of Jo, and the difference between their social ranks is not as vast as it first appears. From this perspective, we can see her murder of Tulkinghorn as representing the revenge of the oppressed poor against cruel laws.

Hortense and Jo seem so different that it may be difficult to believe a connection exists between them, even if it is mainly a structural one. However, we must remember what Mr Jarndyce says in the middle of the novel when he realizes that Lady Dedlock and Esther are mother and daughter. He notes, '[they] are the two last persons on earth I should have thought of connecting together!'*(BH, 549)*. *Bleak House* is a novel in which many plots and characters are inextricably entangled; thus, if there is 'a secret structural relationship' between Hortense and Jo, it is no surprise at all.

#### **4. Hortense and Guster**

I have argued that 'a structural relationship' connects Hortense and Jo and that Hortense's murder of Tulkinghorn signifies the revenge of the oppressed poor against oppressive laws. In order to push my argument further, I would like to consider one more character: Guster, Mrs Snagsby's maid. She is a minor

character who does not play any important role in the main plot of the novel and has almost no apparent connection with Hortense. Nonetheless, if we read the novel carefully, we recognize striking similarities and differences between them, and it becomes possible to see these two maids as a pair.

I would like to begin with their similarities. First, both Hortense and Guster work as maids for English families. Second, both are outsiders. Hortense is a Frenchwoman, and her status as an outsider in English society is clear. Although Guster is English, she is ‘from a workhouse’(*BH*, 119) and has an entirely different social background from her master and mistress. Third, to a certain extent, both women serve the law. Hortense works for Tulkinghorn, a great lawyer who represents the oppressiveness of the law in the novel, while Guster works for Mr Snagsby, a law stationer. I do not mean to regard Tulkinghorn and Snagsby as equivalent, but in that both their professions pertain to the law, they may at least be considered similar, although Snagsby may have a much lower position than Tulkinghorn in the legal hierarchy. Lastly and most importantly, these two women are both violent. Hortense’s violent character is obvious, as we have already seen. Guster’s violence is revealed through her terrible fits. When she appears for the first time in the novel, we are impressed with the fact that she has ‘unaccountable drawback of fits’(*BH*, 119), and we repeatedly see her falling into these violent fits. For example, when she hears from Mr Snagsby about the terrible death of Nemo, a solitary law writer, she ‘[falls] into a fit of unusual duration’(*BH*, 138) and becomes sleepless. Here, the narrator says, ‘Guster murders sleep’(*BH*, 138), comparing her to

Macbeth. Seeing the girl's terrible condition, Mr Snagsby even notes, 'I thought you was dead, I am sure!'*(BH, 138)*. Furthermore, when she meets Hortense, she is so shocked by Hortense's grating manner that she 'tumbled down the kitchen stairs out of one into another, such fits as [Mr Snagsby] [does] sometimes think are never gone into, or come out of, in any house but [theirs]'*(BH, 531)*. Since the descriptions of Guster's fits are comical, George Gissing says that they 'supply us with such strange matter for mirth.'<sup>14</sup> However, as the comparison of her condition to Macbeth's suggests, they are not just funny, but also extremely violent and thus indicative of her latent violent energy.<sup>15</sup>

The most significant difference between Hortense and Guster is, of course, the nature of their violence. While Hortense directs her violence outward and it culminates in murder, Guster directs hers inward and it harms no one. On the contrary, Guster is notably charitable and does good for others, particularly Jo. She pities Jo's terrible condition and gives him 'her own supper of bread and cheese'*(BH, 330)*. When she 'pat[s] him on the shoulder,' he is rather surprised because 'it is the first time in his life that any decent hand has been so laid upon him'*(BH, 330)*. I have argued that there is not a direct link but 'a structural relationship' between Hortense and Jo, and that Hortense symbolically avenges his death by killing Tulkinghorn. On the other hand, Guster has a direct link with Jo and treats him well. Both women act on his behalf, but the natures of their deeds are completely different. Where does this difference come from?

The answer to this question lies in their masters. As I have stated earlier, both Tulkinghorn and Mr Snagsby have legal professions, but their characters

are entirely different. Like a tyrant, Tulkinghorn uses others as tools for his purposes, and, as a result, causes Jo's death and leads Hortense to murder him. If he had been good to her, she would not have become a murderer, and it could even be said that he provokes her to commit the violent crime. On the other hand, Mr Snagsby is particularly considerate to lower-class people like Jo and Guster. He often gives the boy some money and food, and, at one point, he 'loads him with some broken meats from the table'(*BH*, 248). Mr Snagsby's kind deeds help Jo survive, while Tulkinghorn's cruel deeds indirectly kill him. Furthermore, with regard to Guster, Mr Snagsby 'thinks it a charity to keep her'(*BH*, 120) and is very kind to her. She appreciates his kindness and believes that his house is 'a Temple of plenty and splendour'(*BH*, 120). She is from Tooting, one of the most notorious orphanage-farms in London, and her violent fits are due to her maltreatment there.<sup>16</sup> This fact indicates the terrible condition of the farm; however, it also implies her susceptibility to emotional distress to a certain extent. A girl reared at the infamously harsh Tooting obviously cannot be expected to be kind-hearted; however, as noted before, Guster is actually a very kind girl. It is not preposterous to assume that Mr Snagsby's kindness cultivated an affectionate heart in her. Thus, there is a complete disjunction between Mr Snagsby's responsible and caring attitude towards his subordinates and Tulkinghorn's irresponsible and careless employment of them. This difference becomes particularly important when we consider the fact that both men work within the realm of the law. They symbolize both the oppressive system that furthers death and violence among the oppressed poor and the way

in which a kind approach to law not only cultivates kindness but also tamps violence among the poor. By deftly describing the relationship between Hortense and Jo, the contrast between Hortense and Guster, and the contrast between Tulkinghorn and Mr Snagsby, Dickens attacks oppressive, cruel laws and emphasizes the importance of establishing a considerate legal system.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have mainly addressed Hortense's violence and its implication. Hortense's violent character is connected with the image of the French Revolution, and her murder of Tulkinghorn represents revenge of the oppressed poor against oppressive laws. 'The structural relationship' between Hortense and Jo emphasizes this view. Dickens relates his descriptions of Hortense's and Jo's sufferings so effectively that we even begin to believe that Hortense kills the lawyer in order to avenge the boy's death, although there is no actual relationship between these two totally disparate characters. The contrast between Hortense and Guster is also important. Both of them represent different kinds of violent women: the former directs her violence outward and finally kills the lawyer while the latter directs hers inward and harms no one. The different natures of their violence partly stem from the differences between their masters. Tulkinghorn represents cold, oppressive laws, while Snagsby represents kind, considerate laws. By making good use of these contrasts and connections, Dickens emphasizes the importance of creating kind and considerate laws and denounces cruel, oppressive laws.

## The List of Abbreviations

*BH* . . . *Bleak House*

*TTC* . . . *A Tale of Two Cities*

## Notes

- 1 Paul Davis, *The Penguin Dickens Companion* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 44.
- 2 David Paroissien, 'Detective Fiction', *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 151.
- 3 All references to *Bleak House*, appearing parenthetically, are to the Everyman Paperback edition (London: J. M. Dent, 1994), edited by Andrew Sanders.
- 4 All references to *A Tale of Two Cities*, which appear in parentheses, are to the Everyman Paperback edition (London: J. M. Dent, 1994), edited by Norman Page.
- 5 John Sutherland, *Inside Bleak House* (London: Duckworth, 2005) 131-32.
- 6 Occasionally, Dickens compares characters to tigers, but among the many female characters in his novels, it is only Hortense and Madame Defarge that Dickens compares to tigresses. Among all his novels, the word 'tigress' occurs only three times, in reference to either Hortense or Madame Defarge. This further suggests the close connection between these two characters.

In order to collect this data, I used 'A Hyper-Concordance to the Works of Charles Dickens' in *The Victorian Literary Studies Archive*, ed. Mitsuharu Matsuoka, <<http://victorian.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/concordance/dickens/>>.

- 7 Charles Dickens, 'Judicial Special Pleading', *The Examiner* 2134 (23 December 1848), reprinted in *Dickens' Journalism: The Amusements of the People and Other Papers*:

*Reports, Essays and Reviews 1834-51*, ed. Michael Slater (London: J. M. Dent, 1996) 140-41.

8 Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) 137-38. Pam Morris also notes, 'Mr. Tulkinghorn is represented at the center of a system of investigation, centralized information, police practice, and mechanisms of discipline and control' in his '*Bleak House* and the Struggle for the State Domain', *ELH* 68:3 (2001): 688.

9 Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Robin Gilmour (London: J. M. Dent, 1994) 381.

10 Julian Moynahan, 'The Hero's Guilt: The Case of *Great Expectations*', *Essays in Criticism* 10 (1960): 67.

11 Critics have pointed out the close relationship between Hortense and Lady Dedlock. For example, Robert Newsom argues that Lady Dedlock, Hortense, and Esther are 'oddly connected, as if each represented hidden sides of the others'. See *Dickens: On the Romantic Side of Familiar Things: Bleak House and the Novel Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) 90.

12 Charles Dickens, *Dickens's Number-plans for Bleak House*, reprinted in the Penguin Classics edition of *Bleak House*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (London: Penguin Books, 2003) 998.

13 Megumi Arai, *The Two Sides of Butlers and Maids - The Image of Servants in British Literature* (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 2011) 139.

14 George Gissing, *The Immortal Dickens* (1925; Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004) 73.

15 Robert Newsom also places both Hortense's vengeful rage and Guster's fits in the same category (Newsom 72-73).

16 Dickens's indignation towards the infamous baby-farm was so great that he harshly



attacked the school and wrote two articles: 'The Paradise at Tooting' in *The Examiner* (20 January 1849) and 'The Tooting Farm' in *The Examiner* (27 January 1849).

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