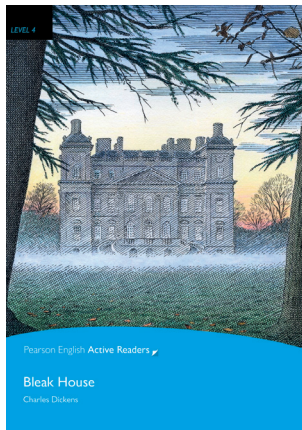


Bleak House

Charles Dickens



About the author

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 in Portsmouth, England. His childhood was not a very happy one. His father was imprisoned for debt and the twelve-year-old Dickens was sent to work in a factory. The experience had a profound effect on him, and throughout his life Dickens had a fear of the lack of money and this drove him to undertake increasingly debilitating workloads. Despite receiving little formal education, he worked hard, first as a solicitor's clerk and then as a parliamentary reporter. Dickens followed his first book, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–7), with the classics *Oliver Twist* (1839) and *A Christmas Carol* (1843), both of which have been made into films. Towards the end of his life his novels became increasingly sombre, full of biting social criticism and savage comedy. *Bleak House* (1853), *Hard Times* (1854) and *Little Dorrit* (1857) are examples of this change of mood. Dickens was married to Catherine Hogarth, but separated from her in 1858. They had ten children. Dickens died in 1870, and despite his insistence that he wanted a normal, quiet family funeral, was buried in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey in London.

Summary

There are essentially two stories in the book. The first involves a legal battle over several wills, which has been going on for many years. The case finally ends, but no one receives any money because the legal system has absorbed all of it. The second concerns the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy aristocratic woman, her love affair with the father and her eventual self-destruction under the strain of sadness and fear of the public disgrace she could cause her husband.

Chapter 1: A group of lawyers are discussing the interminable case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. One of them, Mr Tulkinghorn, visits a rich client of his, Sir Leicester Dedlock. When Sir Leicester's wife, Lady Dedlock, recognises some handwriting on a legal document that Tulkinghorn shows her, she suddenly becomes ill. Meanwhile back in London, the Lord High Chancellor allows cousins Richard Carstone and Ada Clare, both orphans and both interested parties in the case, and Esther Summerson, another young girl, to live with Richard and Ada's older cousin Mr Jarndyce at Bleak House.

Chapter 2: Esther recalls her sad childhood at the hands of her godmother (later revealed to be her aunt) and the shame brought on her by her unknown mother. She continues with an account of her introduction to John Jarndyce, and her happiness at being made housekeeper to him.

Chapter 3: Back in London, Tulkinghorn discovers that the writer of the document that so affected Lady Dedlock is Nemo (Captain Hawdon), who rents a room from the strange Mr Krook. Tulkinghorn looks for him and finds him dead from an opium overdose. At the inquest into his death, a young street boy called Jo is questioned by Tulkinghorn about his relationship with the dead man. He then informs Lady Dedlock of the death. She goes to London, disguised as a servant, and persuades Jo to show her where Nemo is buried. She rewards him with money.

Chapter 4: Richard and Ada tell John Jarndyce about their plans to marry. Everyone is worried about Richard's constantly changing career decisions and his unfounded optimism in the result of the case. Ada and Esther go to Lincolnshire and it is there that Esther sees Lady Dedlock for the first time. Mr Jarndyce and Richard have a big argument about Richard's obsession with the legal case.

Chapter 5: Tulkinghorn and a policeman, Mr Bucket, discover that the woman who gave Jo the money was dressed in the same clothes as Lady Dedlock's maid. Tulkinghorn tries unsuccessfully to get a piece of Hawdon's writing to match it with that on the legal document. Mr Guppy, a junior lawyer, visits Lady Dedlock and tells her that Nemo's name was Hawdon and that Esther's surname was Hawdon, and that Hawdon had left some letters when he died. He offers to bring the letters to her. Lady Dedlock now knows that her daughter is Esther Summerson.

Bleak House

Chapter 6: Esther finds Jo in a feverish state and takes him back to Bleak House. She then catches the fever herself and nearly dies. When she recovers, her face is terribly disfigured. One day she meets Lady Dedlock who tells her she is her mother and that they must never meet again so as not to reveal the secret.

Chapter 7: Tulkinghorn forces Rouncewell, an old colleague of Hawdon, to give him an example of Hawdon's handwriting. He then goes to the Dedlock's house and makes it clear to Lady Dedlock that he knows her secret. Mr Woodcourt, a young doctor who is in love with Esther, returns from India and meets young Jo again. He arranges for Jo to stay with his friend, Mr Rouncewell, but the boy dies.

Chapter 8: Esther has another worrying conversation with Richard about the legal case. Mr Jarndyce declares his love for Esther in a letter and she agrees to marry him. Esther meets Mr Woodcourt by chance one day and confides in him her worries for Richard.

Chapter 9: Tulkinghorn tells Lady Dedlock he is going to tell her husband her secret. Later that night he is murdered in his office. Bucket arrests Rouncewell on suspicion of murder. Rouncewell admits he was at Tulkinghorn's office the night he was killed, and that he had seen a lady there too, but couldn't identify her. Bucket tells Sir Leicester the truth about his wife. He then proves that the maid, Miss Hortense, had killed Tulkinghorn over a disagreement.

Chapter 10: Ada and Esther visit Richard who is very ill and living in squalor. Ada admits she and Richard are now married. When Esther returns to Bleak House, she joins in a search for Lady Dedlock, who has gone missing. After looking everywhere they eventually find her dead body close to the grave of her lover, Hawdon.

Chapter 11: Lady Dedlock had been informed that incriminating love letters had been discovered in Tulkinghorn's office. To avoid bringing disgrace on her husband she had left the house. Sir Leicester suffers an attack and is gravely ill. Later, Lady Dedlock is buried near her house.

Chapter 12: Richard's obsession with the case is getting worse and his health is deteriorating. Esther admits to herself that she is in love with Mr Woodcourt. Mr Jarndyce tells Esther that he realises that the two are in love and makes a present of the second Bleak House for them to

live in. The Jarndyce case finally ends but all the proceeds have gone in legal costs. The shattering news brings on the death of Richard. Everything ends happily for Esther and Woodcourt, and Mr Jarndyce and Ada.

Background and themes

Appalling living conditions of the Victorian poor: The people who inhabit the poor areas of London live in squalor. The weather is perpetually foggy, cold and rainy and the streets are full of mud. Dickens was one of the authors of his time who wanted to bring this to the attention of the authorities.

Secrets: The one great secret of the book is the identity of Esther's parents. The one overriding concern amongst the Victorians was to avoid disgrace at all costs. At the beginning, both Lady Dedlock and Esther are told lies in order to hide the awful truth of a child born out of wedlock.

The injustice of the legal system: In his early works, Dickens often poked fun at the legal system for being incompetent. However, as he aged, he realised that it was more than just incompetent, it was corrupt and self-serving.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- Discuss:** Put the students in small groups and ask them to think about how life was different in 1853 compared with life today. Ask them to consider the following: *What was the food and drink like? Did people eat more or less than today? What types of transport did they use? What type of houses did they live in? How did they communicate over distances with each other? What did they do for entertainment? What types of work did they do?*

Chapters 1–2

While reading (p. 11, after 'I love you.')

- Role play:** Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Mr Guppy and Esther. Student A (Guppy) gives all his reasons for wanting to marry Esther and why she should accept, and student B (Esther) gives her reasons or excuses for not wanting to. See Discussion activities key for an example start.

After reading

- Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapters 1–2. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

Bleak House

Chapters 3–4

While reading (p. 20, after 'I am sure I would like to be a doctor!')

- 4 Write and discuss:** Ask the students to think of all the professions they know in English. Put their suggestions on the board and add some of your own. Then ask them to choose a profession they would like to do and to write a description of what you have to do in that profession. Put them in small groups to discuss why they have made their choices.

After reading

- 5 Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *soldier, opium, jealous, rings, flowers, hut, debt, army*. Have the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapters 3–4.

Chapters 5–6

While reading (end of Chapter 5)

- 6 Research:** Explain to the students that Krook died from spontaneous combustion. Ask them to look for information on the Internet about other strange ways that people have died. Students then read out their findings in class and they decide which they think is the strangest way.

After reading

- 7 Write and guess:** Write *Mr Rouncewell had lent money* on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (borrowed not lent). Now students choose a sentence from Chapters 5–6 and rewrite it changing one word. Students interact, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

Chapters 7–8

Before reading

- 8 Predict:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to predict the answers to these questions: *Why does Mr Rouncewell give Mr Tulkinghorn a letter from Hawdon? What happens to Jo? Why do Richard and Mr Jarndyce have an argument? What does Mr Jarndyce say in a letter he writes to Esther?*

While reading (p. 54, after 'Mr John Jarndyce asked me to be his wife, the lady of Bleak House.')

- 9 Write:** Ask the students to write Mr Jarndyce's letter to Esther. Then, they all read out their letters and the class votes for which letter they think is the best.

Chapters 9–10

Before reading

- 10 Discuss:** Put the students into groups and ask them to talk about the following questions: *Have you ever told a lie? If so, when? Do you think it is sometimes better to tell a lie than to tell the truth and if so in which*

situations? Do you think politicians tell lies to get votes? Do you think doctors tell lies to their patients? Do you think parents tell lies to their children? And children to their parents?

While reading (p. 64, after 'Miss Hortense wanted to blame Lady Dedlock for the murder.')

- 11 Discuss:** Ask the students to think of all the crimes they know in English. Write their suggestions on the board, adding some of your own. Then put the students in small groups and ask them to put the crimes in order of seriousness. See Discussion activities key for suggestions.

After reading

- 12 Write and ask:** Write *Where did Bucket arrest Rouncewell?* on the board and elicit the answer (At his friend's birthday party.). Ask students to write another question about something in Chapters 9–10. Now have students stand up and interact, asking and answering each others' questions.

Chapters 11–12

While reading (bottom of page 76.)

- 13 Role play:** Tell the students to imagine that Lady Dedlock hadn't written to her husband but had talked to him before leaving. Put them into pairs to act out a conversation between the two people. Lady Dedlock explains why she must go and Sir Leicester tries to make her stay.

After reading

- 14 Discuss:** Put the students in small groups and ask them to make a list of all the main characters in the book. Then ask them to talk about each character, their personalities and what they did, and to grade them 1 to 10 on whether they were a good person or not.
- 15 Game:** Remind students that one of the main themes of the book is truth and lies and tell them they are going to play a lying game. Put the students in teams of three. Each team, with the help of a dictionary, chooses a word that they think the other team will not know the meaning of. If you don't have a dictionary, the teacher gives the teams their words. Check that each team does not know the meaning of the other teams' words. Each team then has to write three definitions of their word. Two of the definitions are false and one is true. Encourage the students to be imaginative when writing their definitions. The teams then read out their definitions and the other team has to decide which definition is correct. Then they reverse the roles. The teams try to guess the correct meaning. They can ask questions about the definitions.