Chapter Abstract

The Inequalities of Equity and the Search for an Ethical Professional in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852-3)

The period in which Dickens wrote *Bleak House* was one in which England was heatedly engaged in a dialogue about what *kinds* of legal and social organization were best. These debates revolved around a series of mutually constructing juxtapositions: national tradition and Benthamite reform, families and the state, and the public and private. The solicitor, as a literary character whose profession historically demands continual movement between these realms, puts into focus the tensions between individual agency and institutional power. Dickens’s portrayal of solicitors is famously excoriating, but while several critics have argued that Dickens provides an alternate model for institutional authority by drawing on individuals in the domestic sphere, I argue that Dickens locates a model for the solicitor that, while emulating traits such as empathy and caretaking, is firmly rooted in the institutional world, that of the doctor Woodcourt. Dickens’s turn, however, is really an attempt to resuscitate Chancery’s origins: Woodcourt carries forth his professional work in ways that mimic Chancery’s original mandates. My argument begins with a revisiting of Foucaultian analyses of the Victorian state and novel, explores “character” as a literary and ethical concept, and draws on Dickens’s relationship to utilitarianism in sociopolitical and creative, literary contexts.