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Coming Home: *Bleak House* and London's Necessary Return to the Home Sphere

As a novel written during the turbulence of what is often referred to as Britain's imperial century, it is relevant, if not crucial, to examine Charles Dickens's lengthy *Bleak House* through that imperial lens. While Dickens never speaks directly against colonialism or empire in this novel, the suggestions he makes through his characters are clear, and have been toyed with by a few different scholars, like Timothy Carens and David Plotkin. However, these critics do not rely on the conviction that Dickens was mostly, if not entirely, against the notion of empire, and they often focus on the successes of male colonizers in the novel versus the failures of women who attempt foreign endeavors. Despite Dickens's sexism, it is not that black and white. Diving into Dickens's personal writings, it is apparent that he believes all British people, men and women, families and soldiers, should stop wasting their efforts on empire and instead return to the home country they have abandoned and let fall to ruin—and "colonize" that instead. Thus, In *Bleak House,* Dickens suggests both the ruin Britain falls into in its fruitless imperial endeavors, and the domestic reforms necessary to wrangle it back onto the right path. Families like the Jellybys, and situations like Jo's, exemplify the idea that when Britain uses its resources and energy for civilizing faraway places, the abandoned home country becomes more destitute and "savage" than the colonies. It is only by coming home from the colonizing fever-dream—like Allan Woodcourt—and civilizing the domestic sphere—like Mrs. Bagnet and Esther Summerson—that Dickens's real and fictionalized Londons may find success in their true mission.

Part I: Dickens and the Home Mission

Dickens could not have written the ruin and reform of *Bleak House* in such an anti-imperialist manner if he did not have a real cause against the waste of British energies on colonial endeavors. Despite noting his racist tendencies against foreign people he perceived as “primitive,” scholar Grace Moore in *Dickens and Empire* contends that Dickens was fervently against slavery and empire. She notes, “Dickens’s engagements with the empire in his fiction, his journalism, and his own life were far more complex and intertwined” than most consider (*Introduction*). The reasoning for Dickens’s viewpoint is left to speculation. Perhaps Dickens’s supposed prejudice was actually the cause of his anti-imperialism, as Bernard Porter suggests in *Critics of Empire,* and his belief in the British as a superior race made him disapprove of his country digging around in “savage,” unworthy lands. Or, perhaps he had a more personal motive: Philip V. Allingham notes, “A particularly personal influence upon Dickens’s attitudes towards British imperialism and colonialism of course was the position of his son Walter, who left for military service in India” (Allingham). Dickens’s concern for his son in a foreign land and mistrust of India’s native people might have skewed his views even more toward anti-imperialist tendencies. Whatever its cause, Dickens’s sentiment against endeavors overseas is clear.

Dickens’s critique of imperialism—and telescopic philanthropy in particular—commences more explicitly just five years before *Bleak House* began its serial publication. In 1848, Dickens published a review of the *Narrative of the Expedition sent by Her Majesty’s Government to the River Niger in 1841* in *The Examiner,* an act which must have inspired his later depiction of Mrs. Jellyby and her fictional African project, Borrioboola-Gha. In the review, Dickens discusses the zealous and ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful Niger Expedition of 1841 to Lokoja, Africa, led by Captain Allen. Dickens notes in the crew, “the sufferings of all, the deaths of many, the dismal wear and tear of stout frames and brave spirits" (531), and goes on to describe how their missionary and trade intentions were crushed by African illness—leading to "death, death, death" (533) for almost a third of the crew. Eventually, Dickens closes his review with a speech that pervades *Bleak House* and will be at the forefront of this essay:

> To change the customs even of civilized and educated men, and impress them with new ideas is…a most difficult and slow proceeding; but to do this by ignorant and savage races, is a work which…requires a stretch of years that dazzles in the looking at. There is a broad, dark sea between the Strand in London, and the Niger … Believe it, African Civilization, Church of England Missionary, and all other Missionary Societies! The work at home must be completely thoroughly, or there is no hope abroad (533).

This final idea, "the work at home must be completely thoroughly, or there is no hope abroad," would echo its way through *Bleak House* just a few years later, both in the portrayal of dismal Chancery and its neglected people, and the attempted reform of such destitution by characters like Esther Summerson and her inner circle. The fierce energy Dickens puts into this review, calling the Expedition a "sad story" and a "failure" (533) repeatedly, soon translates into a prominent theme in the upcoming *Bleak House*. Inspired by Lokoja, Dickens becomes adamant Britain is wasting its time on futile missions when it should be attending to its own people.

Authors and reviewers can see the direct relationship between the Lokoja Expedition and *Bleak House* even a century later. In 1960, Howard J. Pedraza narrates the history of the original Nigerian colony in *Borrioboola-Gha: The Story of the First British Settlement in Nigeria*. The content of the book covers the expedition in fine detail, but the implications of its title and subject matter, caught by reviewers, are that, "the *Bleak House* Borrioboola-Gha of Mrs. Jellyby…was none other than Lokoja" (Kirk-Greene 1), and, "the…expedition incidentally caused Charles Dickens to conduct a personal campaign against the follies of the philanthropists and to burlesque them in *Bleak House*" (Wilkinson 1). There is no mistaking Dickens's purpose within *Bleak House*: not only the "amused ridicule" (Blake 1) of his characters and the fruitless endeavors they represent, but also the real danger of foreign conquests and how they create a desperate situation back at home.

The rest of this essay will demonstrate how disastrous fixation on imperialism inspired not only the ruin of *Bleak House* characters, but Dickens's portrayal of their chance for reformation through "civilizing" the homeland instead of faraway colonies—a focus necessary for all classes, families, and genders. Dickens writes in an 1852 letter to Rev. Henry Christopherson, "I have very grave doubts about whether a great commercial country…can better Christianise the benighted portions of it than by the bestowal of its wealth and energy on…the home, and on the utter removal of neglected and untaught childhood from its streets, before it wanders elsewhere" (*Letters* VI). The threat of "wealth and energy…wander[ing] elsewhere" is London's danger, both within *Bleak House* and outside of it.

Part II: The Ruin of *Bleak House*'s London

The Jellyby family, as preceded by my earlier discussion, is Dickens's first striking metaphor for the neglect of the homeland in favor of abroad endeavors. Upon her first appearance in the novel, Mrs. Jellyby immediately announces, "The African project at present employs my whole time" (*Bleak House* 53), and this obsession with cultivating the fictitious version of Lokoja—Borrioboola-Gha—leaves her with no time or regard for the crumbling home around her. The home is described as "strewn with papers and nearly filed by…similar litter," "very dirty" (53), "excessively bare and disorderly", with "situations of danger" (55), "envelopes in the gravy" (56), and the complete and utter air of chaos. Even Mrs. Jellyby herself "had very good hair, but was too much occupied with her African duties to brush it" (52). The children are no better: we first meet Peepy as "one of the dirtiest little unfortunates" (51) Esther has ever seen, long-forgotten by his mother, his head stuck through a railing; Caddy is "sulky," "bashful," and "biting off her pen" (54); and the rest are "poor little things… to avoid treading on in the dark" (52). Some particular phrases to note are Mr. Jellyby's later remarks that his children are "Wild Indians," (475) and an earlier description of Mr. Jellyby himself: "he might have been a native, but for his complexion" (57). These striking, direct comparisons imply this family is Dickens's attempt to show how dedication to stopping "savagery" abroad only leads to "savagery" in the home country—a home full of natives who Dickens sees as needing to be civilized. It is Caddy Jellyby who tells us, "The whole house is disgraceful. The children are disgraceful. *I'm* disgraceful. Pa's miserable, and no wonder!" (62). Borrioboola-Gha has invaded the Jellyby family and left them with the misused, neglected, filthy remains of what should have been a home. David Plotkin in "Home-Made Savages" wisely notes that when Caddy makes her declaration of her home as "disgraceful," "Dickens seems to speak through her about the state of England" (Plotkin 9). The disastrous Jellybys are a cry for help to English readers: almost a scare-tactic example of what becomes of domestic affairs when they are abandoned for the sake of imperial dreams. Why should English natives suffer on behalf of natives from countries they have never even seen?

The origins of Mrs. Jellyby as a character further highlight her and her family as a manifestation of Dickens's own views on empirical concerns. Most sources agree that Mrs. Jellyby's characterization is a satire of both Mrs. Caroline Chishold of the Family Colonization Loan Society—an organization sponsoring emigration to Australia (Carens 123)—and of the

1841 Niger expedition (Gold 35). However, two contrasting origins to the name “Jellyby” come up, offering separate insights to Mrs. Jellyby as a character. Scholar Rodger L. Tarr believes Dickens was influenced by Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle—whose work he was familiar with—and Carlyle’s reference to his butler as “Jellysnob” in “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” (Tarr 279). This is a logical answer, but Joel J. Gold offers a more unique interpretation: that “Jellyby” is a reference to journalist James Augustus St. John’s work in *Egypt and Nubia,* where he describes, “a caravan of Jellabi, or slave-pedlars, who are in the habit of trafficking” (qtd. in Gold 37). While Gold admits St. John’s book was not in Dickens’s library, he cannot imagine Dickens accidentally deciding on a name meaning “slave-trader” for a character so improperly concerned with the African plight. Gold does not analyze further, but in terms of characterization and metaphor, likening Mrs. Jellyby to a slave trader only intensifies her disconnect from the homeland. She and her foreign name are almost off in some faraway country altogether. She believes herself to be a liberator of lands, when in actuality, her family is enslaved by the chaotic wilderness of the household around them.

Mrs. Pardiggle, *Bleak House*’s other notable telescopic philanthropist, goes about her work much differently than Mrs. Jellyby, but achieves much the same result in abandoning her people for foreign concerns and creating an untamed wilderness within her home sphere. Dickens introduces Mrs. Pardiggle as a woman who donates her children’s allowance to far-off charities like “the Tockahoopo Indians” and “the Great National Smithers Testimonial” (*Bleak House* 124), and spends her days taking the poor brickmakers into “religious custody” (132) by forcefully reading them Bible verses. This may almost make Mrs. Pardiggle seem as though she is attempting to “civilize” the home people—which would place her in the second half of this essay as the solution to foreign focuses—but she is in fact just as much a contributor to the ruin of *Bleak House*'s London as Mrs. Jellyby in her false, imperial-esque concerns. Her attention to the Tockahoopo Natives brings to mind Mrs. Jellyby's Borrioboola-Gha, for starters. Next, Mrs. Pardiggle expresses "her hope that the brickmaker and all his house would be improved when she saw them next" (133), yet when she is with these people, Esther narrates the encounter as "not…friendly," "much too business-like and systematic" (130), "uncomfortable," "intrusive and out of place" (132), and finally, more like Mrs. Pardiggle wants to take "possession of people" (133) rather than provide actual assistance. A. Abott Ikeler in "The Philanthropic Sham" adds, "she interrogates the poor instead of comforting them" (506), alienating her own people. Mrs. Pardiggle has no concern for the people of her homeland—she is not their friend and supporter, but rather a parody of Dickens's idea that Britain must "Christianise the benighted portions of it[self]." She reads the Bible to the poor, but her family's actual money and care goes to faraway concerns, such as the Tockahoopos. Her priorities, as Dickens believes, are backwards.

And just as we see with Mrs. Jellyby and her children, Mrs. Pardiggle's "dissociation" (Tarr 278) from domestic concerns creates a family wild and savage—in need of the real civilizing and attention instead of the international lands Britain turns to and colonizes. Esther notes upon meeting the Pardiggle family:

> We had never seen such dissatisfied children. It was not merely that they were weazen and shriveled—though they were certainly that too—but they looked absolutely ferocious with discontent. At the mention of the Tockahoopo Indians, I could really have supposed Egbert to be one of the most baleful members of that tribe, he gave me such a savage frown (*Bleak House* 125)

The children become "ferocious," "trib[al]," and "savage" at their mother's neglect. Dickens scholar Timothy Carens suggests both Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle "produce darkened savages in their own families by sympathizing with peripheral savages" (126), but Mrs. Pardiggle goes even a step further. She not only abandons her country's people for the sake of faraway "savages," but abandons her own children—a more personal definition of "home"—for the sake of going out into the streets to feign philanthropy to the brickmakers. In both regards, "home" becomes ruined and desolate as "foreign" gains attention—allowing Dickens to thoroughly critique the attention of Britain on its empire.

Critics before me have discussed Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle's unsuccessful philanthropy and empirical implications, but there seems to be next to no analysis on a third *Bleak House* woman who embodies Dickens's negative feelings on foreign concerns in a more abstract way: Miss Wisk. Miss Wisk may seem to be primarily a rude caricature of early feminism, but she can also be seen through an anti-imperialist lens. It is once again, all about Dickens's language. Miss Wisk introduces the idea of "mission" and proclaims "that the idea of woman's mission lying chiefly in the narrow sphere of Home was an outrageous slander" (*Bleak House* 482). Ultimately, she advocates for "the emancipation of Woman from the thralldom of her Tyrant, Man" (483). Miss Wisk presents women as if they were a faraway colony in need of liberation—which should be a radical but arguable position, except that "Dickens does not validate Miss Wisk's opinions" and gives her "absolutely no redeeming qualities" (Seman 16-17). This suggests that, just like Borrioboola-Gha and the Tockahoopos, Dickens doesn't see this "colony" as worth investing in, either. Instead, women like Miss Wisk become for him another example of the ruined, "savage" home sphere that needs to be reformed first—by getting these women to return to their "domestic mission" (*Bleak House* 482). Of course Miss Wisk's character is a misogynistic jab against women "stepping out of their place," but these anti-colonial undertones exist as well, with radical women as a catalyst. This is further made clear by

Mr. Jellyby's comment to Caddy to, "Never have a Mission, my dear child" (481). The idea of "Mission" represents all foreign concerns—Miss Wisk's, Mrs. Jellyby's, and Mrs. Pardiggle's. Mr. Jellyby, trapped in the middle of it, knows all too well that these "Missions" wreak destruction in the home sphere. Thus, as Caddy prepares to enter her domestic life, her father cautions her to be the opposite of Miss Wisk, and to nourish a London home life rather than caring about any literal or metaphorical foreign concerns—as Miss Wisk is another of Dickens's cautionary tales.

However, vilifying these women is not the only method Dickens uses to portray Britain's neglect of its homeland—and their families are not the only people who embody this ruin, either. Jo, a poor street-sweeper, also presents a key piece of the argument. The irony of Jo, as Plotkin puts it, is that "although [he] is home-made…'grown' in the English homeland, he is without a home" but yet covered in "homely filth…England's filth" (17). To take that idea further, Jo is the very representation of the abandoned, savage-ized homeland Dickens sees in his own London. He is "poor," "wretched" (*Bleak House* 178), "rejected" (181), and "scarcely human," more akin to "horses, dogs, and cattle" than "superior beings" (258)—all language that might have been used by imperialists to describe the primitive peoples they saw as savage. The scene of Jo's death is Dickens's ultimate cry against the foolishness of Britain's foreign endeavors:

> [Jo] is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle's Tockahoopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby's lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borrioboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article… Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him: native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish (724).

Dickens shouts it loud and clear: because Jo is not a “foreign-grown” savage but a home-grown one, no attention is paid to him; “native ignorance” is the cause of his wretchedness, and thus the cause of his death. Dickens even breaks the fourth wall to note upon the boy’s last breath, “Death, men and women… dying thus around us, every day” (735). This direct use of “us” takes the problem into not just *Bleak House*’s London, but the real Victorian city. Dickens directly accuses the real Mrs. Jellybys, Mrs. Pardiggles, and their imperialistic peers for causing not just the disorder of their individual families, but the deaths of their native people. He sees the homeland falling into ruin for the sake of foreign concerns thousands of miles away and scorns Britain for it—for when “the work at home” is not “completed thoroughly,” the result is a destitute, savage wasteland in lieu of a country.

To close this section, there is one final example of how London’s ruin intensifies when it is abandoned for the sake of abroad affairs: London itself. The place where Jo lives before his death, Tom-all-Alone’s, is described as “a swarm of misery”—“a black, dilapidated street” with “far advanced [decay]” (256). The destruction of this place is over-emphasized: “these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards…fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than…all the fine gentlemen in office…shall set right in five hundred years—though born expressly to do it” (257). Here Dickens examines the poorest streets of the city, and how “all the fine gentleman in office” are there “expressly” for the purpose of healing them, but they “shall” not do it. Not “cannot”—“shall” not. For their attention is fixed elsewhere, overseas, beyond the people. And because of that, not just the people, but the city itself, is savage. Dickens directly claims that “civilization and barbarism [walk] this boastful island together” (180). Plotkin also adds that the “fog everywhere,” “water wide pollutions of a great (and dirty) city,” and “crust upon crust of mud" (13) that introduce *Bleak House's* setting "are the physical results of corruption" (Plotkin 21) and thus a loss of national identity. Through the haze of fog and misery, we see Dickens's London as a place that has utterly lost its sense of self to foreign affairs—and must find a way of reformation before it sinks further into its own destruction.

Part III: Reform through Returning to the Home Sphere

This reformation is something Dickens provides an answer to within the novel as well. Through characters like Esther Summerson, Mrs. Bagnet, and Allan Woodcourt, he insists that Britain must "come home" from its imperialistic dreams and civilize the domestic sphere instead of the foreign one. London must fix the savage, destitute Jos, the Tom's-all-Alones, the Jellyby and Pardiggle children; that is the only hope Dickens provides for the country's loss of self. One other critic, Timothy Carens, has discussed this necessary reformation within *Bleak House* before, but he does so in a rather gendered way. Carens suggests Dickens has only an "approved model of female reform" (127) when it comes to reversing colonial afflictions—believing Dickens "justifies" men's careers abroad, demonstrating that "imperial experience both permeates their charity and reinforces their masculinity" (132). However, despite how Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, and Miss Wisk are persecuted for their foreign afflictions while Allan Woodcourt and the Bagnets seem to come home heroes from theirs, I believe Dickens fervently insists that everyone in the novel, not just the women, need to return to their home sphere and attend to domestic matters. It is not because of "imperial experience" that these male characters can do successful charity work back at home; it is in spite of it. No matter their foreign concerns, they are only truly useful in fixing England's growing savagery by abandoning their military lifestyle and returning to intimate domestic circles.

Nevertheless, Dickens still presents a bias toward women reformers, in particular his narrator, Esther, who demonstrates through her actions toward the Jellyby household and Mrs. Pardiggle's brickmakers that the growing darkness of Britain can be healed through gentle care of the home sphere. Esther immediately sets about attempting to restore order to the Jellyby house: she "carrie[s] [Peepy] upstairs and lays him on [her] bed" (*Bleak House* 55), and "occupie[s] [her]self in making [their] room a little tidy, and in coaxing a very cross fire that had been lighted, to burn" (58). She makes a valiant effort to "understand" the workings of the household, to which her companion, Ada, remarks, "You are so thoughtful, Esther… You would make a home out of even this house!" (58). In the darkened, "savage" wilderness of the Jellyby home, Esther quite literally "lights" up the household with her civility and care, attempting to restore its true mission: caring for itself. She does not get a chance to fully carry out any reforms, but Ada's insistence that she "would" be able to is enough to get Dickens's message across. Only efforts focused inward, not outward, will heal England.

Esther's mentoring of Caddy Jellyby further demonstrates this point, as with Caddy, she is fully able to reinstate a home-sphere focus and remove that which is "dark" and "foreign" about her. Caddy begins as a gloomy, impolite girl, but after meeting Esther, decides, "I won't be a slave all my life," and rejects the idea of marrying a philanthropist and letting foreign concerns dominate her home life like her mother. Instead, she thinks should "learn anything…useful for Prince's wife to know, in *our* house" (231)—meaning a literal house but also perhaps meaning London—to which Esther agrees: "Let us be friends from this time and let us often have a chat about these matters, and try to find the right way through them" (232). Later Esther "show[s] her all [her] books and methods" (477), and together, "Caddy and [Esther] attempt to establish some order among all this waste and ruin" (480) of the Jellyby household before Caddy moves onto her own domestic life. In the end, Caddy is “softened” (85) by Esther, becoming a successful wife, dance instructor, and a mother who Esther cannot imagine being more successful or heartfelt (987). Caddy herself says it best: “You recollect that first night, when I was so unpolite and inky? Who would have thought, then…of all other possibilities!” (612). Caddy transforms from “inky” to “softened,” from embodying Dickens’s perception of a foreign “savage” to becoming a successful woman who can continue these home-sphere reforms in her own family as a mother and instructor. Esther’s patient and persistence in “civilizing” Caddy is a successful example of Dickens’s claim that the “work at home must be completed thoroughly” before any attention should be given to foreign affairs.

Esther’s final attempt to complete the “work at home” and reform an uncivilized London comes when she and Ada Clare return to the brickmakers Mrs. Pardiggle failed to assist. They stay behind to offer sympathy to a brickmaker’s wife whose baby dies in her arms, and Esther notes of Ada’s efforts, “Such compassion, such gentleness, as that with which she bent down weeping, and put her hand upon the mother’s, might have softened any mother’s heart that ever beat” (134). Carens sees that this verb, “softened,” is the same as that which “conveys Esther’s effect on Caddy;” however, Carens also suggests that here, Esther and Ada “attempt to carry the torch [of reform] too far beyond the…locus of their concerns” (129). He recognizes the pair’s efforts to bring reform to the “darkened” brickhouse people, but believes as domestic women, Dickens “curtails” their influence in this “outer circle” place and gives their efforts “no lasting effect” on principle (129). While it can be argued that Esther and Ada do not “reform” Jenny and the brickmakers in any lasting way, this is not a place outside of the home sphere, somewhere Dickens would have seen as too brutal for Esther’s efforts. This *is* a home sphere: mothers, fathers, sisters, husbands (*Bleak House* 135). This is a place where infants are dying and mothers are given “discoloured eye[s]” (134) by their husbands. It is a domestic realm turned savage—it is England, exactly the place Dickens knows needs reformation and direction on how to be civilized. Esther already demonstrated with Caddy that these savage home spheres can be “softened”—and if she and Ada could have stayed with the brickmakers, it is implied that their civilized gentleness would be a more effective tool than Mrs. Pardiggle’s heartless endeavors. Dickens may not offer a resolution for Jenny and the brickmakers, but he gives the suggestion that more “compassion” toward these homeland victims could give them comfort and change their conditions. And that is a reflection of Dickens’s real London: the actual brickmakers and impoverished families he knew had no resolution yet, either, still abandoned by their foreign-reaching government. Thus, Dickens revealing how this destitute condition could be fixed for a larger population than just the Jellyby family, but not completing the actual reform itself within *Bleak House*, gives a sense of realism and urgency to Britain’s prevalent issue.

Esther Summerson and Ada Clare are not Dickens’s only demonstrative reformers of London in *Bleak House;* the methodical Bagnet family, and Mrs. Bagnet in particular, are also examples of how London’s savagery and imperial daydreaming might be healed through restoring the order of the home sphere. The Bagnet household, unlike the Jellybys, runs entirely on establishing order and care. Mr. Bagnet is “hardworking, steady-going” (541), their son Woolwich is the “best of boys” (540), and as for Mrs. Bagnet, “she’s as sweet and mild as milk. But touch her on the children—or [Mr. Bagnet]—and she’s off like gunpowder” (544). Mrs. Bagnet is further described as caring for the house in an almost military way, as her husband notes, “When she took me—and accepted of the ring—she ‘listed under me for life. She’s that earnest…and that true to her colours—that, touch us with a finger—and she turns out—and stands to her arms. If the old girl fires wide…at the call of duty—look over it” (544). Mrs.

Bagnet represents the kind of force Dickens wants in London: someone who does not waste their services on faraway colonies, but takes that force and precision to reforming and domesticating London's interior. Someone who, even on her birthday, "itch[es] to prevent what she sees going wrong" (754), and calls sitting still while others clean the house for her to be "another trial" (756). The Bagnet household, founded on the "discipline must be maintained" (544) philosophy, demonstrates how orderly London could be if it shifted its efforts inward. There is no fear of their domestic sphere becoming a wilderness—and perhaps Mrs. Bagnet's next step should be to take her command and discipline to the rest of her home country.

However, this is where I turn away from the conclusions of Timothy Carens, the other critic who has played with the idea of reformation in *Bleak House*—both on the subject of the Bagnets, and about how Dickens represents all characters who attempt to reform their people after returning from abroad. Carens believes it is because of the Bagnet family's military success that they are able to discipline their household so thoroughly. He praises "the utility of experience [Mr. Bagnet] gained as an imperial soldier," and believes "the duties Mrs. Bagnet learns abroad serve her well when attending to the…well-being of her household" (Carens 130). I believe the exact opposite, aligning with David Plotkin, who claims, "Mrs. Bagnet has persevered despite, and not because of, her husband's former operation" (Plotkin 26). The most important feature of the Bagnets is not that they once went abroad, but that they "made [their] way home…from another quarter of the world" (*Bleak House* 802), that Mr. Bagnet knows "happiness…must be sought within the confines of the domestic sphere" (764), and that their son is "a Briton" (440) before anything else. Carens ultimately determines that while women are encouraged to stay at home to conduct reforms on their people, Dickens encourages his male characters, like Mr. Bagnet and Allan Woodcourt, to first go overseas and experience empire themselves so that they may use that civilizing knowledge to repair the home sphere. But this implies Dickens believes empire to be a useful teaching tool for men, and further, that men must complete some work abroad for there to be hope for them to repeat that work at home—when Dickens literally says the opposite in the previously-discussed letter to Rev. Christopherson. What is most important is that these characters *did* come home, that they learned through their time abroad that no place in the world needs their attention like London does. The Bagnets and Woodcourt came back to civilize their people, while characters like Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle never really "come home" from their far-off philanthropic dreams. Perhaps Dickens presents this distinction in a rather sexist way, but that is not the purpose of this essay. Both men and women are still encouraged to reform domestic London within the novel.

Thus, in finally discussing Allan Woodcourt—London physician and Esther's love interest—and the reforms he attempts on the home sphere, it is important to not only note his accomplishments as a caregiver, but also how he abandoned his military lifestyle to be that successful. Admittedly, Woodcourt is first praised for his efforts in "a terrible shipwreck over in those East-Indian seas" (568) when he is abroad. Miss Flite notes, "My dear physician was a hero. Calm and brave, through everything. Saved many lives…took the lead, showed [people] what to do, governed them, tended the sick, buried the dead, and brought the poor survivors safely off at last" (569). However, when Woodcourt is abroad is when Esther feels the most removed from him on her "path of duty," relieved he did not confess his love to her when he was only going to leave to a "broader road" (570). Esther, as a symbol of domestic reform, cannot imagine a successful relationship with Woodcourt until he returns home and resumes work as a London physician. And in fact, when Woodcourt decides to stay home despite seeming "half inclined for another voyage" (776), that is when he comes into the forefront of the novel, out of the background shadows, and steps into his role as reformer of London and future husband to Esther. That is Dickens's direct way of saying that while heroic to some overseas, Woodcourt becomes only truly valuable and relevant as a character when he leaves empire behind and focuses on what truly matters: his suffering people at home. Specifically, Woodcourt becomes "Caddy's regular attendant…so gentle, so skillful, so unwearying" (774), comes to stay with Richard when his health fails (916), and visits the "pestilential" (710) world of Tom's-All-Alone to provide wellness services to the poor. He lets Mrs. Pardiggle's brickhouse workers know, "I wouldn't hurt you for the world" (711). Woodcourt healing the poor becomes a metaphor for domestic care healing the country, and his declaration of not hurting them "for the world" implies a direct choice of the destitute home over the foreign world he just came from. In the novel's closing section, Woodcourt decides indefinitely to not "give a long trial to another country" and to instead take a permanent position as "a medical attendant for the poor" (919), which cements Esther's ability to marry him as their paths both head toward correct reform once more. Dickens portrays men and women working together to salvage civilization in areas foreign philanthropists and proponents of empire have let go to waste. Carens interprets that in Woodcourt's case, "the adventure abroad prepares the hero for the…mission which awaits him at home" (132), but once Woodcourt returns, he does not use his adventure abroad as a tool; he simply decides that his old profession as a physician is what he should remain doing in order to "cure" London's savagery. He did not need to go abroad to learn this lesson, but Dickens emphasizes that he did in fact learn it, and made the decision to come home and perform the duties that truly matter for London's future. Woodcourt, just like Esther, functions as a reformative presence for the home sphere, no matter his endeavors abroad.

One final reform attempt to consider is actually an unsuccessful one, though Dickens still insists through it that London's only hope is to return to the home sphere: its object is Ada's love interest, Richard Carstone. Three of Dickens's primary reformers—Esther, Ada, and Allan Woodcourt—all participate in an attempt to save Richard's home life and physical life by persuading him away from the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case he is fixated on. Throughout the novel, Richard struggles finding his vocation, and makes it clear that he feels he can never "be in a settled state" (*Bleak House* 370) the way Esther can. He bounces between jobs, even suggesting to Esther he join "a pursuit which is in its nature more or less unsettled…the army!" (372) to her utter dismay, further equating abroad affairs with disillusion and a fruitless focus. But despite Esther's efforts, despite how "Richard is never so well…as when he is with Allan Woodcourt" (927) and how Ada "had some little hope that [she] might be able to convince him of his mistakes" (928), Richard withers and dies. Their efforts at reforming a man in their home sphere might have been unsuccessful, but that is because Richard resists those efforts in an oddly-similar way to Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, or Miss Wisk. Carens claims Richard's "pathetic end" is due to his lack of masculine development as a result of having no "imperial adventure" to make him a colonizing hero like Woodcourt (138)—but truly, wasn't Richard "abroad" in a way? He pursues the distant, foggy, impenetrable Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit the same way Mrs. Jellyby pursues Borrioboolag-Gha, the way the Niger Expedition pursued Lokoja: tirelessly and to no avail, while the home life—in Richard's case, his marriage to Ada and his own body and well-being—crumbles. He is unable to "come home," and thus, unable to be reformed. Ultimately, the suit Richard dedicates his life to is just as wasteful a pursuit as England's imperial attempts, and that foreign dedication is what costs him his life. Dickens teaches, one last time, the dire need for London's return to internal affairs, before it withers and dies in its faraway dreams just like Richard.

Bleak House is Dickens's cry for help on behalf of a people too weakened and darkened to cry for it themselves. His strident critique of imperialism before writing the novel insists that the theme will not be forgotten between its pages. It is clear from the utter ruin and savagery of *Bleak House's* poor streets and misguided families that Dickens is portraying a purposeful version of his own London to showcase its need for a change. That change can only come about through the efforts of those willing to turn away from the briny seas and the lands across them and set a course for their own distressed people. When the home sphere is abandoned for the sake of colonial zest, Britain becomes the place in most need of a "civilizing" hand in Dickens's eyes. He insists of the subject, "Believe it, African Civilization, Church of England Missionary, and all other Missionary Societies!" *Bleak House* makes sure they do believe it.

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