

Dickens in *Bleak House* as a Member of the System: An Althusserian Reading*

Sistemin Bir Üyesi Olarak Kasvetli Ev’de Dickens: Althusser Yaklaşımıyla Bir Okuma

Aytül ÖZÜM**

Abstract

Charles Dickens’s critique of the defects of the British judiciary system in *Bleak House* (1852-53) derives from his own experiences as a law clerk trying to own copyright for his earlier works. According to Althusser, the state creates secure and protected lives for the individuals and warrants their consent, using what he calls ideological state apparatuses. For him, the power of the state is maintained more subtly in capitalistic systems. *Bleak House* not only explicates how ideological state apparatuses devour and in fact falsify the rights of the individuals within the framework of the suit called Jarndyce and Jarndyce but also fictionalises many examples about the interpellation of the individuals by these social institutions in the Victorian Age. These apparatuses in fact interpellate individuals as fixed subjects, which means that they form the individual’s very reality and therefore appear as true or obvious. Two-narrated structure of the novel lays bare the ideological conflict though, thus it becomes evident that Dickens deliberately blends in harmony the ideological inscriptions suggested by the first and the third person narrators of the work. The artfulness of Dickens is a means to display how ideologies change and shape people’s perceptions of reality. Jarndyce and Jarndyce, the suit which lasts for many years and ends by consuming even the property itself, proves that there are fixed roles designed for the individuals and subjects can neither change nor negate their roles and the injustice. When analysed through the Althusserian lens, it becomes obvious that Dickens knew the limits of political and social reform in his age and he had to be politically correct while playing the expected role as a novelist and criticising the fallacies of his age in *Bleak House*.

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** Doç. Dr., Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü
aozum@hacettepe.edu.tr

An Althusserian reading of the novel foregrounds Dickens's attitude towards the condition of the working of the Chancery both as a social reformer and a writer who had already become a part of the system.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Althusser, ideology, Chancery, Jarndyce and Jarndyce.

Öz

Charles Dickens'in *Kasvetli Ev*'de (1852-53) İngiliz adâlet sistemine yönelttiği eleştirisi bir hukuk bürosunda kâtiplik yaparken eserleri için telif hakkı almaya çalışırken edindiği deneyimlerine dayanır. Althusser'e göre, devlet ideolojik aygıtlar olarak adlandırılan mekanizmasını kullanarak bireyler için güvenli ve korunaklı yaşamlar hazırlarken memnuniyeti de garantiler. Kapitalist sistemlerde devlet, gücünü daha kurnazca kullanabilir. *Kasvetli Ev* aslında yalnızca devletin ideolojik aygıtlarının Viktorya Döneminde Jarndyce ve Jarndyce olarak adlandırılan davanın çerçevesinde bireyin hakkını elinden aldığını göstermekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda da o dönemdeki toplumsal kurumlarca bireyin çağırılması, adlandırılması konusunda pek çok örnek kurgular. Devletin ideolojik aygıtları bireyleri çağırma, adlandırma yoluyla sabit birer özne haline getirir ki, bu da aygıtların, bireyin gerçekliğini belirlediği için, doğru ya da net görünmesine sebep olur. Romanın iki anlatıcı üstüne kurulu yapısı romandaki ideolojik çelişkiyi ortaya koyar, böylece farklı iki anlatıcıya ait ideolojik saptamaları Dickens bir uyum içinde harmanlar. Dickens'in ustalığı sayesinde ideolojilerin insanların gerçeklik kavramını algılayış biçimini nasıl değiştirdiği ve şekillendirdiği görülür. Jarndyce ve Jarndyce davası yıllarca sürer ve söz konusu olan mülkü de tüketerek sonlanır. Bu durum bireyler için tasarlanmış değişmez toplumsal rollerin bulunduğunu ve özne konumundaki bireyin bile bunu değiştirip rollerine ve haksızlıklara itiraz edemeyeceğini gösterir. Althusser açısından incelendiğinde Dickens'in aslında kendi çağındaki politik ve toplumsal reformun sınırlarının farkında olduğu ve çağın aksaklıklarını eleştirip, bir roman yazarı olarak kendisinden beklenen rolü oynarken bunu zamanın normlarına uygun olarak yaptığı açıkça görülür. Romanın Althusser açısından değerlendirilmesi hem Dickens'in adâlet mahkemelerinin işleyişi konusundaki tutumunu bir toplumcu reformcu olarak, hem de sistemin bir parçası olan bir yazar olarak incelemektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Charles Dickens, *Kasvetli Ev*, Althusser, ideoloji, adâlet mahkemeleri, Jarndyce and Jarndyce.

Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* in general terms fictionalises the historical issue of the system of law and its situation in the early Victorian period, more specifically the whole novel exemplifies the malfunctioning of the Court of Chancery or the Court of Equity¹ in its complicated plot and subplots coloured in a typical Dickensian attitude with

¹ The term, "Chancery" or "Equity" is explained in Webster's New International Dictionary Second Edition as "the system of law which originated in the extraordinary justice formerly administered by the king's chancellor and was subsequently developed into a body of rules supplementary to or aiding the common and statute law. The original purpose of the extraordinary justice of the chancellors was to overcome or avoid some of the impediments to justice arising from the rigid formality and limitations that rested upon the common-law procedure and administration of justice, and the justice administered was at first understood to accord with natural justice and right.[...] the term equity came to designate the settled and formal system of

a remarkable number of characters. As its name might suggest, one naturally and ethically expects from the law court equal and just treatment of the suits and cases. However, Dickens, as he demonstrates in the novel, does not believe that the system works properly, equally and efficiently. Keeping in mind the fact that *Bleak House* (1852-53) was published earlier than the formal establishment of the Equity in 1873, it is possible to feel in the narrators' tones the vividly portrayed hope for reform and the impatience for just and equal treatment of all the citizens in the country. The aim of this paper is to argue that analysing the novel from Althusserian perspective helps display both Dickens's attitude towards the plight of the Chancery and the plight of those willingly or unwillingly involved in the (un)just system. It is also to lay bare not only the novel's social purpose, but also to demonstrate that Dickens was part of this system he harshly criticises in *Bleak House* by acknowledging the limits of social reform but nevertheless delegating ideologically determined unchangeable roles to his characters and to himself as the writer.

The very basic plot of the novel in relation to the Chancery is quite simple. Jarndyce and Jarndyce has been continuing for years. A number of suitors expect fortunes but they never reach a conclusion. The case is so complicated and enigmatic that both the suitors and the lawyers of the suit seem to know very little about what to do with it. However, the suit continues to exist in this way or the other, the only thing which is clear about it is that it continues to harm people related to it:

Innumerable children have been born into the cause; innumerable young people have married into it; innumerable old people have died out of it. Scores of persons have deliriously found themselves made parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, without knowing how or why, whole families have inherited legendary hatreds with the suit (Dickens, 1996, p. 16).

One of the Jarndyces, John Jarndyce is on the side of the good characters and he takes the whole affair very calmly and does not expect anything from the suit. He has a young ward Esther Summerson who is not directly concerned with the Chancery business but she is the other narrator of the text; for this reason she very closely observes the events taking place around. Ada and Richard are the other wards of John Jarndyce but they are on the opposite side of the suit. Richard gets too much involved in the lawsuit and goes crazy. Two other suitors, Miss Flight and Mr Gridley have already gone mad. Illuminated by the lights of these facts readers follow the signs of the book both in detective Bucket's procedures and in Lady Dedlock's investigations. Lady Dedlock is also a beneficiary in one of the wills in Jarndyce and Jarndyce; when the lawyer Tulkinghorn reads an affidavit about the suit, she recognises the handwriting and he notices Lady Dedlock's shock and he seeks to trace the identity of the writer of the document. He discovers through Jo that the name of the copyist is Nemo who has recently died. Lady Dedlock disguises herself as her maid, Hortense and finds his grave. Having been exhausted, she dies near her lover's

legal and procedural rules and doctrines according to which justice would be administered within certain well-defined limits of jurisdiction. In England the body of rules and doctrines of equity were incorporated into the law of the land by the Judicature Act of 1873 [...]” (“Equity,” Webster)

grave. Readers are also informed in Chapter 8 that Tom Jarndyce, the former owner of the Bleak House tried to disentangle the suit, but his efforts were all futile and he shot himself. Miss Flite, Tom Jarndyce, Richard Carstone, Mr. Gridley are the basic preys of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit. In the last Chapter Alan and Esther find out that due to the delays and the costs in the legal case, the entire worth of the estate has been wasted away. But still the novel ends with the happy union of Esther and Alan Woodcourt and Esther becomes the mistress of the Bleak House.

It is striking to observe the parallelism between what Dickens does in content and what Althusser suggests and then posits as an “investigation” in political and cultural studies. While Dickens writes about his age, early and mid-Victorian Age, and explains how the ways (both negative and positive) of Victorian ideology are put into practice, Althusser does not specify the type of regime, furthermore he asserts that “ideology has no history” (1971a, p. 159) and he explains it as “ideology has no history, which emphatically does not mean that there is no history in it (on the contrary, for it is merely the pale, empty and inverted reflection of real history) but that it has no history of its own [...] not in a negative sense [...] but in an absolutely positive sense” (1971a, pp. 160-61). This positive sense of ideology is that it belongs to all ages in “omni-historical reality” (Althusser, 1971a, p. 161). More importantly he highlights the practice of exploitation and associates it with the ways through which one understands that positive connotation of ideology stumbles. Another parallelism between Althusser’s definition and explanation of ideology and Dickens’s portrayal of it is verbalized in Althusser’s formulation which is: “Ideology is a ‘Representation’ of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence” (Althusser, 1971a, p. 162). The target of ideology is unknown, for this reason, the state of being that an ideology draws is blurred. If one is asked to take Dickens’s *Bleak House* realistically or as a historically accurate text, the above mentioned formulation reminds one of Dickens’s innuendoes about the sly and wicked practices of the law. Ideology might have various faces and means of subjectifying and conditioning the individuals.

For Althusser, the power of the state is maintained more subtly in capitalistic systems. The state seems to create secure lives for the individuals and to warrantee their consent, using what Althusser calls ideological state apparatuses. These apparatuses in fact interpellate individuals as fixed subjects, which means that they form the individual’s very reality and therefore appear as true or obvious. Althusser explains the role of ideology as “[i]t is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are ‘obviousnesses’) obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognise and before which we [cry] out [...]: ‘That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!’” (1971a, p. 172) Althusser accepts individuals as “always-already subjects” (1971a, p. 176) and Dickens himself is one of the “hailed” subjects of the Victorian Age. *Bleak House* mirrors Dickens’s interpellation as subject and his interpellating his characters as subjects. Furthermore, the novel not only explicates how ideological state apparatuses devour and falsify the rights of the individuals but also offers many examples about the interpellation of the individuals by these social institutions in the Victorian Age.

D. A. Miller (1995) in “Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family and *Bleak House*” clarifies the meaning of the system of law in the novel as: “All the evidence of Chancery’s totalizing effects – of its productivity as an all-englobing system of power – is equivocal in such ways, as the text at once claims that this system is and isn’t efficient, is and isn’t everywhere, can and can’t be reformed” (p. 264). Therefore the text seems to be contradictory in its own nature. D. A. Miller continues by stating that this is actually an “ideological conflict” deriving from the two-narrated structure of the novel [one omniscient and the other first person narrator, Esther], and that the consistency is actually embedded in this seemingly incoherent narrative structure of the novel. In “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre,” Althusser suggests that art distances us from ideology, art makes us see, perceive and feel (1971b, pp. 222-223). The artistic means employed by Dickens have similar impacts on the readers. Althusser calls this “internal distanciation” (1971b, p. 223). The shift in focus in the form of narrative appearing as “two incompatible sets of assumptions about the nature of Chancery’s power” (D. A. Miller, 1995, p. 201), is in fact a tool for Dickens. LaCapra (1984) underlines in relation to the novel this concept of “internal distanciation” which “provided the possibility of a space in which a text reworks its social contexts and thus ‘produces’ critical effects to complicate its inscription of ideology” (p. 118).

Dickens creates a playful harmony between the stories of two narrators and allows himself to adopt the same distance Esther and the omniscient narrator form between themselves and Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit. He is more cautious and informed about the real situation of the law in the country and lets his art fulfil his aim of criticism. Of course this is not the sole ideological stance that Dickens seeks to embody in the novel, there are also other ideological codes of the age that he strongly foregrounds in the text such as education, police, family and marriage. But the dominating thematic web is realistically constructed around the ironic repercussion of the malfunctioning of the law of Equity. Dickens sheds light on the passivity of the Court of Chancery through the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce in the novel. He also shows the impossibility of ameliorating the system, thus with his usual caricaturising manner, he displays the impossibility of changing certain social structures. This perspective draws a Dickens who is the part and parcel of this slow moving judicial system and rather hypocritical tendencies of the authorities. In fact the novel discursively parodies the slow and futile administration of justice and shows how and at what costs the cases can last for so many years and in the meantime how the lawyers can benefit from this slow moving process. However, Dickens does not offer any solution to change this corrupt web of relationships. Thus it is not wrong to state that Dickens by formulating the ironic distance between himself and his text displays how individuals can be the subjects of certain “state apparatuses,” in other words, “repressive structures” which include, in Althusserian terms, law courts, the police force and the army. It is not wrong to state either that these “structures” are fixed for Dickens, and tend to remain as they are no matter how emphatically Dickens claims to be a reformist. Mr. Jarndyce comments on Richard’s situation in relation to the suit and it exemplifies this fixity as, “It procrastinates, disappoints, tries, tortures him; wears out his sanguine hopes

and patience, thread by thread; but he still looks to it, and hankers after it, and finds his whole world treacherous and hollow [...]” (Dickens, 1996, p. 561).

Acknowledging this perspective enables readers to take Dickens’s social pictures about the families, characters and the system of Court realistically. Holdsworth in *Dickens as a Legal Historian* stresses this referential status of Dickens’s novels. According to Holdsworth (1929),

[t]here are two major reasons why Dickens’s pictures of the courts, the lawyers, and the law of his day have unique value. In the first place, they give us information which we can get nowhere else. In the second place, these pictures were painted by a man with extraordinary powers of observation (pp. 2-3).

In 1850 in his article entitled “The Martyrs of Chancery” published in *Household Words*, Dickens deals with the delays in the lawsuits and with “the hopeless lot of persons committed for contempt of court, who were forgotten, and left to die in prison” (Dickens, 1850, as cited in Holdsworth, 1929, pp. 80-81). Dickens fictionalises this in his use of two narrators. There are occasional clashes that readers can observe in *Bleak House* between the discourses of the first person narrator and the omniscient narrator. This clash foregrounds the latter’s overreaching and hegemonic power over the former. For instance, while describing the condition of Jo, the writer-narrator can hardly empathise with him. He comments on the situation of Jo:

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols [...] To see people read, and to see people write, and to see postmen deliver letters, and not, to have the least idea of all that language [...] (Dickens, 1996, p. 257).

This voice sees Jo only as the object of his observation. It does not promise any progress about Jo. On the other hand, Esther’s narration gives voice to the feelings of someone who really wants to help Jo and thus gets involved in his life: “‘I come to see if I could do you any good’ said I. ‘What is the matter with you?’” (Dickens, 1996, p. 490). Of these discourses the former is dominantly built over the latter.

This duality between the discourses of the narrators can be linked to the major argument of this study in that Althusserian approach to the text highlights the importance of the patriarchal voice of the omniscient narrator and this approach clarifies the critical approach of Dickens towards the practice of the law in the early and mid-Victorian periods and its impact on the plight of the poor. Dickens’s personal voice hidden in the tone of the omniscient narrator fills the gap between how politics and the law were rightfully imposed on the human beings as subjects and how the impacts of this situation were experienced. This approach also foregrounds the historical value of the novel as a realistic document informing readers of the age about the relationship between the state and the

individual and about the system of law. Polarised in tone but coherent in sequence, the use of two narrators practically enables Dickens to portray only a seemingly critical, actually an objective stance towards these apparatuses without which he appears to believe that life in Victorian society would turn into a chaos.

Readers are used to Dickens's satirical approach and harsh criticism, however this does not make him a person against the system unless he proposes challenging and constructive ways in politics and economy. When read from Althusserian perspective, the question which comes to mind is: Is it the system or is it the lethargic individuals whom Dickens criticises? It is difficult to decide. Here the focus is mostly on the moral corruption of the representatives of the court, in other words, Dickens means to satirize both the people as subjectified beings and the legal system as the magnanimous subject or the doer. Althusser refers to the "ambiguity of the term subject" as well. This ambiguity is quite applicable to the novel. It further enables readers to make sense of the ambiguities in Dickens's aim of writing the novel and deciding where he stands when the Victorian ideologies are at stake. Accordingly,

In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: (1) a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission (Althusser, 1971a, p. 182).

The law suit also presents Dickens both as an Althusserian subject and Subject especially when the omniscient point of view takes over the narration Dickens makes an interesting comment on his own subject position shaping the historical reality according to his own personal and artistic benefits. The rhetorical question he asks in the novel is, "Who would make the Vulgar very picturesque and faithful, by putting back hands upon the Clock of Time and cancelling a few hundred years of history" (Dickens, 1996, p. 189). He makes detailed descriptions in such a realistic manner that readers might agree that hundreds years of history have been really wasted away in Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit. Dickens becomes an Althusserian material in this interpretation. His use of symbols is quite helpful in emphasizing the situation of the practice of law in that period.

In the very first chapter of the novel, the fog, Lord High Chancellor and Chancery are interrelated as following: "Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all around them, as if they were up in a baloon, and hanging in a misty clouds" (Dickens, 1996, p. 13). The fog symbol is very direct and clear: "Thus, in the midst of the mud and the heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery" (Dickens, 1996, p. 18). It stands for the prolonged and blurred status of the cases and for "the moral fog which enveloped the procedure of the Court of Chancery" (Holdsworth, 1929, p. 85) and also for those who represent the so-called seriousness of the Chancery courts. Dickens, who spent most of his childhood in financial difficulties, wholeheartedly believes in social reform and sheds a critical light

to the workings of the Court of Chancery. Although he becomes the voice of the paupers (Davis M.), he does not signal any solution to solve the problems about the lethargic representatives of the legislation and usurpation of the economic system.

Dickens in his novel exemplifies that while interpellating the individuals, the ideological state apparatuses do not function properly due to the lack of a controlling mechanism. His characters either become manipulators and opportunists or preys of the system. Dickens's emphasis is more on the individuals than on the ideal status of the Courts which should be in fact the mechanisms for seeking justice for the members of the bourgeois society. For some Dickens readers he is not interested in creating characters but in creating effect on his readers. George Brimley comments that "The love of strong effect, and the habit of seizing peculiarities and presenting them instead of characters, pervade Mr Dickens's gravest and most amiable portraits [...]" (qtd. in Collins, 1971, p. 285). Tulkinghorn, the Dedlock family lawyer is a scheming and manipulative person. He seems to defer to his clients but in fact he abuses the power granted to him by knowing about their secrets. Conversation Kenge is a Chancery lawyer and prefers using empty rhetoric. Krook is illiterate but ironically enough he obsessively collects papers and he is the key figure through whom the secrets about the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit are resolved. Richard who is one of the wards of the suit is an honest person but at the same time he is a very irresponsible character. He is too much involved in his financial expectations from Jarndyce and Jarndyce and dies at the end of the book because of mental exhaustion just after the case finally reaches a resolution. These characters are exaggeratedly portrayed but their existence in the Victorian society is quite probable. They are the realistic tokens through which readers are assured of Dickens's being the Subject of the Victorian society. So any single step Dickens takes towards social criticism and satire brings him closer to being a "concrete individual" and "concrete subject" (Althusser, 1971a, p. 173) of the Victorian ideology of the ruling class.

Althusser puts forward in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" that "[w]hat is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (1971a, p. 165). So there is a correlation between the fact and the ideal. For Althusser ideology is something constructed by the ruling class over the subjects and the ruling class must maintain a degree of control over the ideological state apparatuses in order to warrant the unchangeability of repressive state apparatuses. Controlling the ideological state apparatuses which vary and show autonomy from time to time is almost impossible, for this reason this leads to hegemonic clashes between the ruling class (in the novel it is represented by the Court of Equity and the lawyers of the system) and those victimised or somehow pushed to various financial struggles in the society. In other words, Althusser very clearly and in a parallel manner theorises what Dickens practically does in *Bleak House*. One of the crucial explanations Althusser makes in the article mentioned above is that "it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men' represent to themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there" (1971a, p.

164). This notion of representation brings to mind various relationships Dickens presents with the vast realistic panorama of his age. Both Dickens and his characters as subjects live with the conditions either reluctantly or non-reluctantly. The persistent social purpose embedded in the Victorian ideologies were respectability and propriety. Thus, Dickens offers remarkable criticism to the malpractice of the ideologies represented through the grave notions of propriety and respectability.

In Althusser's words: "men live their actions, usually referred to as freedom and 'consciousness' by the classical tradition, in ideology, by and through ideology; in short, [...] the 'lived' relation between men and the world [...] passes through ideology, or better, is ideology itself" (emphasis in original) (Althusser, 1971a, p. 233). Althusser in *For Marx*, goes back to the eighteenth century and affirms that the roots of bourgeoisie lie in the eighteenth century. He comments that

[w]hen [...] the 'rising class', the bourgeoisie, developed a humanist ideology of equality, freedom and reason, it gave its own demands the form of universality, since it hoped thereby to enroll at its side, by their education to this end, the very men it would liberate only for their exploitation (2005, p. 234).

The Althusserian approach to the novel focuses more on the negative consequences of the society's control on the individuals and thus on the fabrication of a group of helpless individuals. Being the voice of the 'proper' middle class ideologies and codes, Dickens wants to demonstrate the deplorable and hypocritical situation of the individuals who represent the bourgeoisie, in other words, social institutions claiming to be just and caring for each citizen of the country regardless of class. However what he does, in fact, in *Bleak House* is to exemplify how the subjects (individuals, poor or wealthy, evil or good) are interpellated. Lady Dedlock, one of the key characters in the novel, drives a big part of the plot. Her past links her to the presence of the novel. Readers find out that she had an affair with a man before she married Leicester Dedlock. She had given birth to his child and in the course of the novel she discovers that Esther, the other narrator of the story, is her child. Thus she, too, is linked to Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Tulkinghorn wants to find out the truth about her past so that he can control his client, Sir Leicester. This is an example for the threatening control of the powerful over the weaker. Meanwhile Tulkinghorn himself is another product of the same society, however, he is situated in the upper level of the hegemony. Another complicated issue which can be seen as a repercussion of the social oppression is that Lady Dedlock wants to be forgiven by her husband and dies not knowing that he had actually forgiven her. The way Dickens presents the relationship between Lady Dedlock and Sir Leicester makes readers feel the established and respectable sense of authority of the male over the female in the family. This example, in Althusserian terms, materialises (Althusser, 1971a, p. 166) one of the ethical ideologies within the family. The Jarndyce case, which will be further illustrated, materialises how the familial conditions and the political and legal ideologies work in practice.

Dickens deliberately picks the Chancery Courts for his exemplification because they deal with wills and estates and private properties of the middle class. For Sedgwick (1999), Althusser presupposes that “ideology functions to construct the subjectivity of individuals and in so doing allocates them particular roles within the capital system of production” (p. 188). The way Dickens depicts the arbitrary working of the law in fact displays that Courts have very important but negative roles in the lives of the citizens in the Victorian age. Generally people are hurt especially by the negligence of the judges. Dickens fictionalises this situation by creating various characters whose lives are negatively influenced by laws, suits and delays in legal cases.

Althusser’s claim that “ideology [...] ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals [...] or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects [...] by [...] interpellation” (Althusser, 1971a, p. 174) is explained by Ferretter (2006) as follows:

Ideology addresses me, as it were, before I am even born, as I grow up and throughout my life, as an ‘I’, as a subject, as a site of identity, thought and action [...]. [I]deology calls me into being as subject, as if it were calling me by name in the street. It causes me to believe I am a subject, although in the reality of the capitalist mode of production, I have none of the attributes of that ideological concept (p. 89).

Thus, interpellation creates positions for individuals, “making them understand [...] how their society works, and why; helping therefore, to make them into functioning members of their society” (Blake, 1989, p. 20). Through ideology, interpellation creates for the individuals the illusion that they are unique subjects. In *Bleak House* all the characters especially the victims of the suit are subject to the system’s interpellation. It can be observed that Dickens demonstrates the consequences of this interpellation and of the rivalry sharpened by hegemonic struggles. The following extract taken from Chapter 11 exemplifies this duality:

while our dear brothers and sisters who hang about official backstairs – would to Heaven they had departed! – are very complacent and agreeable. Into a beastly scrap of ground which a Turk would reject as a savage abomination [...] they bring our dear brother to receive Christian burial [...] sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption [...] a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilization and barbarism walked this boastful island together (Dickens, 1996, p. 180).

The passage above is one of the references to infection that illustrates Dickens’s portrayal of Chancery as a source of decay. Chancery is responsible for and integrated into various undesired ends of the characters. Some of these are: Tom-All-Along’s poverty, property locked and wasted in the Jarndyce case, psychological deterioration of Miss Flite, Gridley’s death, and also Richard’s death. Dickens exhibits the abominable consequences of the system in his fiction. He does not personally protest against the law’s interpellating the individuals because he does the same thing to his characters, he interpellates them, however there is still a search for morality among the conflicting social units.

Althusserian way of looking at Dickens might lead readers to visualize a writer, who is both a member of the system and critical of the people living in the same system. Dickens's sarcasm and irony make readers doubt his position in the same system. Dickens actually knew about how far he could extend his social and institutional criticism due to his belief in the inefficiency of the vehicles to better the conditions. Dickens's social awareness does not cover all ages, on the contrary he is exhibiting a time bound analysis of the society he lives in for the evaluation of the readers of the Victorian Age. Some of Dickens's characters in the novel display their helplessness, some display their pleasure. All of them are subjects of the system. In his article entitled "Contradiction and Overdetermination," Althusser states that contradictions are inseparable from the concept of a social whole. Accordingly, changes in social structure lead to various contradictions, this turmoil or chaos is illustrated in the melodramatic and tragic relationship of Esther and Lady Dedlock, and in their social and private lives related to the Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Althusser in his article describes these changes that happen to the individuals as "overdetermined" (2005, p. 209).² The microcosmic world presented in the novel and covering both high and low classes in the early Victorian Age actually represents the "dominance" of "the complex structure" (Althusser, 1971a, p. 210) over the people. It seems that there is no room for free will as the working of the capitalist system is partly determined both by the law which had not been legally structured and settled yet, and also by some other social norms.

Within the ideological norms of the Victorian society Lady Dedlock's giving birth to an illegitimate child is definitely categorised as immoral. The concept of ideology is society-centered and the system controls and gives roles to people. Although economic mobility does not seem to depend on the individuals' personal choices, for Dickens not obeying the ideologically determined moral codes of the society might be catastrophic. The interesting feature about his discourse is that he employs satire as a device to avoid didactic intrusions into the political and economic matters of the age. This is one of the methods Dickens finds appropriate while teaching his readers the meaning of vice and virtue. In his satirical attitude he advocates that it is the law which is abused by those who are responsible for putting legal procedures into practice. This reading enables readers to conclude that Dickens implicitly defines the good and the bad, because his method is to explicitly show that the good are mostly rewarded and the bad are mostly punished, but he also underlines that above these concepts there is a social mechanism defining the limits of comfort or discomfort, happiness and misery, however unable to diminish the hegemonic turmoil between the strong and the weak.

² Althusser in *For Marx* explains "overdetermination" by stating that it is "reality which is forced on us by the political practice of Marxism as well as by its theoretical practice [...]. Only overdetermination enables us to understand the concrete variations and mutations of a structured complexity such as a social formation [...] not as the accidental variations and mutations produced by external 'conditions' in a fixed structured whole, in its categories, and their fixed order (this is precisely mechanism) – but as so many concrete restructurations inscribed in the essence, the 'play' of each category, in the essence, the 'play' of each contradiction, in the essence, the 'play' of articulations of the complex structure dominance which is reflected in them.[...]" (210)

When interpreted from the perspective of the ideological state apparatuses, an individual can hardly change the movement of the social units, the most prominent of which is the economic practice in the capitalist societies. In *Bleak House* economic forces and the law are closely interrelated. The novel mirrors the idea that in laissez-faire economies the abuse of economic power attained in whatsoever way becomes one of the common social evils unless there are supervising mechanisms in the law. To illustrate, Grandfather Smallweed is a moneylender. Mr. George is driven into bankruptcy as Smallweed calls in his debts unexpectedly and threatens him. His role in the novel, along with the other examples, is to personify the Victorian social evil by creating both emotional and financial oppression on the lower middle class men.

However, Charley, the maid, who was sent by John Jarndyce to accompany Esther for a while depicts a rather uncontrolled and arbitrary mechanism of Chancery. Esther wishes in an emotional manner that

I would rather restore to poor Rick his proper nature, than be endowed with all the money that dead suitors, broken, heart and soul, upon the wheel of Chancery, have left unclaimed with the Accountant-General – and that's money enough, my dear, to be cast into a pyramid, in memory of Chancery's transcendent wickedness (Dickens, 1996, pp. 559-560).

As can be inferred from this passage Chancery is also the symbol of oppression. This oppression and the tyranny of some of the characters are closely related. Dickens in this novel shows that he believes this tyranny can be overcome only if the majority of the citizens agree on the necessity of abolishing the oppression in the Victorian age. It is pathetic that the people, including Dickens, who witness the unrestrainable control of Chancery over the individuals are well aware of the fact that they comprise only a small part of “a System that refuses to take account of human needs” (Hobsbaum, 1998, p. 149). Deliberately Dickens does not erase darkness and fog at the end of his book, as he does at the end of most of his books. This is because Dickens believes in the seriousness of the malfunctioning of the law and its impact on the citizens as subjects although he does not propose any suggestions for better conditions. Chancery lays before its suitors such a complicated trap that they either get lost in it or see the futility of being involved in it. Richard Carstone who hopes to get a profit from the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit can get out of Chancery only by death.

More importantly, Althusser points out that “if we are to fully understand the meaning of a cultural text, we have to be aware of not only what is in the text but also the assumptions which inform it [...]” (qtd. in Storey, 2001, p. 96). These assumptions are the social facts or the context covering the writer's personal history which the text fictionalizes. *Bleak House* in this new historical sense can be valued as a cultural text and to some extent a historical document. By referring to the comments of an unnamed critic who wrote in *Ecclesiastic and Theologian* published in October 1855, Philip Collins states in *Charles Dickens: A Critical Heritage* that “[o]ne critic saw *Bleak House* as a prime example of Dickens's skill in combining purpose with art” and he quotes from the critic

as, “[t]he whole book bristles with social questions. Education, sanatory reform, the Court of Chancery are all introduced, yet all rise so naturally out of the natural course of the story, that no single allusion to them seems out of place” (p. 273). One of the most serious Althusserian “assumptions” that can be paralleled to the text is the fact that the Court of Equity in the Victorian Age was not able to sustain equality, propriety, functionality and it is fictionally demonstrated in Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The opinion of an ordinary suitor about Jarndyce and Jarndyce is given as follows: “Equity sends questions to Law, Law sends questions back to Equity; Law finds it can’t do this, Equity finds it can’t do that [...]” (Dickens, 1996, pp. 118-119).

As can be seen, in the context of the novel these “assumptions,” most of which are not benign at all, are very well known by Dickens. Ferretter’s comment made on Althusser through structuralist perspective justifies the reasons for the Althusserian reading of Dickens’s novel to make a better sense of it:

So a society’s literary products (let’s say, the Victorian novel) can only be understood in their relationship to all other kinds of social activity that comprised the society that produced them – Victorian society’s economy, political life, legal system, education system, marriage and family practices, [...] (Ferretter, 2006, p. 33).

These social activities can be interpreted as the “assumptions” Althusser associates with real, practical life. All the fragments including literary products fabricating the essence of the Victorian society as exemplified in the novel, are connected to each other. Furthermore *Bleak House* epitomises the web of most of these units. Dickens attacks the mismanagement of the law, one of the most conspicuous weaknesses of the public.

In Esther’s narrative, the ironic touch of Dickens’s voice about Sir Leicester’s belief in the truth of the Chancery is quite noticeable:

Sir Leicester has no objection to an interminable Chancery suit. It is a slow, expensive, British, constitutional kind of thing.[...] But he regards the Court of Chancery, even if it should involve an occasional delay of justice and a trifling amount of confusion, as a something, devised in conjunction with a variety of other some things, by the perfection of human wisdom, for the eternal settlement (humanly speaking) of everything (Dickens, 1996, pp. 25-26).

Dickens here does not mean what he literally means when he makes Esther report these. Sir Leicester who is an indifferent but proud mouthpiece of the system is in fact indirectly affected by the case due to his wife’s involvement in Esther’s life. The words “occasional” and “trifling amount” used in relation to the confusions in the Court are Dickensian ironies. Sir Leicester is not aware that his orderly life will be seriously threatened soon and that he is in effect subjected to the system that he respects and believes to be right.

Dickens locates the injustice and hypocrisy in the Victorian ideologies, for this reason he puts forward the interpellating ideologies in a fictional format. For him, it seems that

there is nothing to be done except for being aware of these problems embedded in the legal procedures in the Chancery. When applied to the novel, John Jarndyce, one of the rare, wealthy, good hearted and generous men of the age is the best example for this. For John, the suit is only “a family curse” (Dickens, 1996, p. 389). He does not strive to take any advantage of it. He also tries to persuade Richard not to expect much from it. As a matter of fact, it would not be of any use if he did. Althusserian reading of the novel aptly works when one notices the characters’ struggles to find meaning for things, to solve the murder mystery and the fact that there is another subject, the law, which is unique and controlling. Dickens puts forward the idea that the age is full of evil and he loads the novel with characters striving to benefit from it and with those victimised by it.

In Chapter 15, Mr. Gridley, the involuntary party in the suit, tells Mr. Jarndyce that the delay of the Court destroyed the inheritance that belonged to him:

My whole estate, left to me in that will of my father’s has gone in costs. The suit, still undecided, has fallen into rack, and ruin, and despair, with everything else – and there I stand, this day! Now, Mr. Jarndyce, in your suit there are thousands and thousands involved where in mine there are hundreds. Is mine less hard to bear ...

and he continues by putting the blame on the system, “The system! I am told, on all hands, it’s the system. I mustn’t look to individuals”, (Dickens, 1996, p. 251) however he also accuses the individuals while protesting as “I will accuse the individual workers of that system against me, face to face, before the great eternal bar” (Dickens, 1996, p. 252).

Like Dickens’s, Esther’s position as subject is doubled as well. She is one of the tellers of the story and thus she becomes the sole free subject of the novel. Moreover, she is the unifying character, she combines Chancery plot and the tragedy of her mother. Her link to Chancery is only through her guardian John Jarndyce’s negation of Chancery. Moreover, she is the one who reports most of the crucial events of the plot. Her narrative can not be detached from the overall text since she is the one who meets the significant characters situated in the mainstream of the action. As the subjective teller of her own story, she increases the credibility of her account about general chaos in the law and the politics through symbolic and satirical means. Esther describes Bleak House as “It was one of those delightfully irregular houses where you go up and down steps out of one room to another [...] and turned up a few crooked steps that branched off in an unexpected manner from the stairs, you lost yourself in passages, with mangles in them [...]” (Dickens, 1996, pp. 85-86). More striking than this description is the following one which “parodies the chaos that followed the defeat of Lord John Russell in 1851”³ (Hobsbaum, 1998, p. 157):

³ After Lord John Russell’s government failed in 1851, they could not form a new one for a while. Russell could form a second government two weeks later but it was weaker than the first government. (See John Prest. *Lord John Russell*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1972.)

There is my Lord Boodle who [...] perceives with astonishment, that supposing the present government to be overthrown, the limited choice of the Crown, in the formation of a new Ministry, would lie between Lord Coodle and Sir Thomas Doodle – supposing it to be impossible for the Duke of Foodle to act with Goodle, which may be assumed to be the case in consequence of the breach arising out of that affair with Hoodle. Then, giving the Home Department and Leadership of the House of Commons to Joodle, the Exchequer to Koodle, the Colonies to Loodle, the Foreign Office to Moodle; what are you to do with the Noodle? [...] What follows? That the country is shipwrecked, lost and gone to pieces (as is made manifest to the patriotism of Sir Leicester Dedlock), because you can't provide for Noodle! (Dickens, 1996, pp. 189-190).

This parody accompanies the satire on the irresponsible manners and ethics of the laissez-faire politicians who represent the overall collapse both in morality and in the law.

Dickens's displaying this social panorama shaped by his concentration both on the subject, Esther, the author of her own story, and also on the rest subjected to the chaos portrayed in the novel, points to the Victorian ideology which supported the idea that everything related to domestic and social sphere should be properly ordered in a respectable manner. As Asa Briggs (1990) puts in *Age of Improvement: 1783-1867*, Victorian values emphasised “the gospel of work, ‘seriousness’ of character, respectability and self-help” (p. 450). Dickens shows in the novel that the application of this ideology is rather false, in other words, hypocritical. Dickens, as an “ideologue of patriarchy” (Bloom, 1994, p. 312) and as the satirical voice of the Victorian bourgeoisie, was interested in social reform and had aspirations for improvement in the spirit of benevolence. This belief created the general optimism of the early Victorian period to cope with the corruption in gradually urbanising England. Although he is quite harsh while positing his criticism to the defects of the system, Dickens keeps alive his belief in Victorian ideologies and the necessity to put these ideologies into practice through certain means (ideological state apparatuses) in *Bleak House*. Due to his belief in social amelioration, he creates characters subjectified to the bourgeois ideology that in fact creates the false image of welfare in practice. However this does not mean that Dickens was against traditions.

Dickens reveals that he was very well aware of the necessity of the social and legal codes and institutions. He has to be deeply and of course critically interested in the impact of the slow moving procedures of the legal system on the fate of the individuals. He emphasizes both the paper work that should be dealt with and lethargy of the members of the bar:

Below the table, again, was a long row of solicitors, with bundles of papers on the matting at their feet; and then there were the gentlemen of the bar in wigs and gowns – some awake and some sleep, and one talking, and nobody paying much attention to what he said. The Lord

Chancellor leaned back in his very comfortable chair, with his elbow on the cushioned arm, and his forehead resting on his hand some of those who were present, dozed; some read newspapers; some walked about, or whispered in groups; all seemed perfectly at their ease, by no means in a hurry, very unconcerned, and extremely comfortable (Dickens, 1996, p. 396).

Dickens never gives us any information about the source of John Jarndyce's income. He figuratively performs an action that suits him in the Victorian format through the ritualistic deeds of John Jarndyce and Esther which are compatible with the norms of the age. Althusser theorises such human actions which he calls "practice" by linking it with his/her ideas thus to ideology. He observes that

the "ideas" of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions, and if that is not the case, it lends him ideas corresponding to the actions (however perverse) that he does perform. This ideology talks of actions. [...] these practices are governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed [...] (Althusser, 1971a, p. 168).

For Bloom (1994), "[t]he prime function of John Jarndyce in *Bleak House* is not that he be the most amiable and ultimately selfless of patriarchs (and he is), but that his absolute dismissal of Chancery be maintained consistently, so as to prove that a labyrinth made by a man can be dissolved by man" (p. 312). Readers might visualise Dickens performing a ritual through fabricating such character. Jarndyce, as a typical stock character, represents Victorian generosity and benevolence.

The question of the will is like a puzzle which suits the fictive world of Dickens. The dual narrative at times further complicates it and deliberately creates multiple perspectives about the fates of the different compartments. Who will be "proved right: the apocalyptic narrator or Esther? Whose ideologically informed discourse will prove to be correct?" The omniscient narrator explains in a humorous tone:

Jarndyce and Jarndyce has passed into a joke. That is the only good that has ever come out of it. It has been death to many, but it is a joke in the profession. Every master in Chancery has had a reference out of it [...] such a thing might happen when the sky rained potatoes, [the last Lord Chancellor] observed, or when we get through Jarndyce and Jarndyce [...] (Dickens, 1996, p. 17).

After all, Jarndyce is not taken seriously at all. This is the role that Dickens finds appropriate for the lawyers and other professionals in the court. In one of the passages narrated by the omniscient narrator in Chapter 19, the confrontation between the police and Jo, a very important character in the deciphering of the secrets about the will, is quite meaningful in terms of society's interpellation of the individuals, especially the poor. In the following

example, it seems that the sole concern of the police is to make people work; they are not concerned about whether the conditions are efficient in the production of labour.

“This boy” says the constable, “although he’s repeatedly told to, won’t move on –”

“I’m always a moving on, sir,” cries the boy, wiping away his grimy tears with his arm. “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!”

“He won’t move on,” says the constable, calmly, with a slight professional hitch of his neck involving its better settlement in his stiff stock, “although he has been repeatedly cautioned, and therefore I am obliged to take him into custody. He’s as obstinate a young gonoph as I know. He WON’T move on.”

“O my eye! Where can I move to!” cries the boy, clutching quite desperately at his hair, and beating his bare feet upon the floor of Mr. Snagsby’s passage.

[...]

“My instructions are, that you are to move on. I have told you so five hundred times” (Dickens, 1996, p. 308).

Third person narrator does not leave this bitter and totally unfair confrontation without commenting on it. For the narrator, this issue has nothing to do with Jo personally. But, “[t]he one grand recipe remains for [him] – the profound philosophical prescription – the be-all and the end-all of your strange existence upon earth. Move on! You are by no means to move off, Jo, for the great lights can’t at all agree about that. Move on!” (Dickens, 1996, p. 308). To work and to be mobile is forced upon Jo in a quite unfair way. He is an extremely ignorant boy and the tone of the narrator reinforces his situation as a social fact that the system should feel responsible for: “Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don’t know that everybody has two names. Never heard of sich a think. Don’t know that Jo is short for a longer name. [...] No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. What’s home? [...]” (Dickens, 1996, p. 177). This quite strong sentimentalising tone signals Jo’s being one of the victims of the system of law. But if he moves on he might succeed. He is linked with Jarndyce and Jarndyce because of Tom-all-Alone, a rather filthy place neglected by the politicians. The omniscient narrator describes it while talking about poor Jo: “Jo lives – that is to say, Jo has not yet died – in a ruinous place, known to the like of him by the name of Tom-All-Alone’s. It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people [...]” (Dickens, 1996, p. 256). This street is in fact a property related to the Jarndyce will. Unfortunately before the case reaches a conclusion, the law authorities can not pursue any definitive procedure about the place. It can not be even repaired, Hobsbaum interprets this place which once belonged to the great-uncle Tom as “a microcosm of England decaying while Noodles dispute” (Hobsbaum, 1988, p. 161).

John Jarndyce does not want to preoccupy himself with the condition of Tom-All-Along. In total indifference he withdraws himself from finding a solution for the case. For him,

[...] Bleak House: true. There is, in that city of London there, some property of ours, which is much at this day what Bleak House was then, - I say property of ours, meaning of the Suit's, but I ought to call it the property of Costs, for Costs is the only power on earth that will ever get anything out of it now, [...] It is a street of perishing blind houses, with their eyes stoned out [...] (Dickens, 1996, pp. 119-120).

As can be inferred from these chaotic and tiring issues and the characters' helplessly waiting for the lawyers and other authorities to solve the suits in time and better the conditions, Law projects and, in a way, represents the corrupt system, and it also stands for infection. Jarndyce household takes care of Jo who is infected with the fever due to the living conditions at Tom-All-Along, and this infection nearly kills Charley, the maid of the family. In the end people have to accept the system as it is, it has the supreme power and authority. Those who want to modify it or come against it physically or mentally collapse. But Dickens knew how to appeal to the readers of the age by showing that the strong one should take care of the poor as expected in accordance with the norms of the age.

In the Introduction of the 1996 Penguin edition of the novel, Nicola Bradbury (1996) puts that "Yet *Bleak House* goes beyond reportage. Its world is a construct, grounded in history and ideologically informed, whose topography is conceptually accurate, rather than realistic" (p. xvii). All the events in the novel directly or indirectly demonstrate to what extent ideological state apparatuses can govern and have impact on the characters. Althusserian ideology, for Stuart Hall, is not a false but conceptual framework "through which men interpret, make sense of, experience and live the material conditions in which they find themselves" (Hall, 1995, p. 33). Ideologies shape people's conceptualisations of reality, they become overt not only in language but also in social practices. Likewise, Dickens in *Bleak House* shows not only the versatility of the subject position with the discourses of Esther and the omniscient narrator, but also how futile, wasteful and harmful those ideological practices may be when interpreted and applied casually.

To conclude, Althusserian approach to the text stresses the conceptual accuracy of Dickens's novel, it does not falsify his critical approach but enables readers to reevaluate Dickens in *Bleak House* and his sense of belonging to the age, to the System from an objective perspective. The gentleman in the Westminster Court makes it clear to Esther that Jarndyce and Jarndyce is over for good. Actually it is over because financially it used up everything belonging to the property, including the property itself. So, the novel ends by pointing at how inefficient the System is, and by proving that it is based on a fixed structure including the fixed roles delegated to the individuals. The last chapter of the novel is Esther's narrative which interestingly enough closes with a blissful and thankful tone: "[...] 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” (Dickens, 1996, p. 989). It is thus really hard to accept Dickens as a thoroughly critical voice of the age since his is the voice of an observer knowing about the limits of institutional reform and avoiding radical and innovative solutions.

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