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Bleak House

Charles Dickens · *1852–53 · original English text*

The great suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce grinds on in the fog of Chancery, eating the lives and hopes of those who wait on it. Beside that public wrong, Dickens sets Esther Summerson's quiet faithfulness, a secret of birth, and the death of a crossing-sweeper the great world will not see. Law without justice is the book's target; constancy and Providence are its stay.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a law that only feeds itself do to the innocent — and what can faithful charity still save?

"The one great principle of the English law is to make business for itself."
The narrator · Chapter XXXIX, "Attorney and Client"

Chancery does not give Richard a future; it consumes the estate in costs and leaves him dying when the suit, at last, is found to be empty. Jo dies unseen by the powers that should have cared for him. What is saved is saved by personal constancy: Jarndyce's generosity, Esther's duty, Woodcourt's care — "Providence and your own efforts," never separated.

KEY CHARACTERS

Esther Summerson
duty, humility, a hidden birth

John Jarndyce
generosity that will not feed on the suit

Richard Carstone
hope wasted on Chancery

Ada Clare
constancy beside Richard

Lady Dedlock
pride, a hidden past, flight

Tulkinghorn
the lawyer who collects secrets

Jo
the crossing-sweeper the great ignore

Inspector Bucket
the detective; earthly inquiry

Allan Woodcourt
the physician; care that acts

Sir Leicester
rank humbled into loyalty

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
In Chancery
CHAPTERS I–V

Fog in the court, and a house that tries to be a home.

- The Court of Chancery sits in fog; the suit of **Jarndyce and Jarndyce** has outlived generations
- **Esther Summerson**, a child who thinks herself a disgrace, is taken under John Jarndyce's wing
- She comes to Bleak House with Ada Clare and Richard Carstone, two other young wards of the suit
- Krook's rag-and-bottle shop, the lawyers, and Miss Flite with her caged birds already hint the end of hope delayed

> *"Fog everywhere."*
> **The narrator** · Chapter I, "In Chancery"

02
Esther's Place
CHAPTERS VI–XVIII

A modest vocation, and a mystery in a proud house.

- Esther becomes the housekeeper of Bleak House, usefulness her chosen honour
- Richard cannot settle to a profession; the suit has taught him to wait on a judgment
- **Lady Dedlock**, fashionable and cold, starts at a piece of handwriting
- The lawyer **Tulkinghorn** begins to watch her; a secret of her youth is still alive in the world
- Jo, the crossing-sweeper, has seen a lady at a pauper's grave

> *"Trust in nothing but in Providence and your own efforts. Never separate the two, like the heathen waggoner."*
> **John Jarndyce to Richard** · Chapter XIII, "Esther's Narrative"

03
The Secret
CHAPTERS XIX–XXXVI

A mother's identity, and a disease that does not respect drawing-rooms.

- The handwriting is that of Nemo, a law-writer who dies in Krook's house — in truth Captain Hawdon, Lady Dedlock's old love
- Esther is their daughter, hidden at birth; she does not yet know it
- Jo is hounded from place to place; infection passes through him to Charley and to Esther, who is marked by illness
- Lady Dedlock and Esther meet and know one another, in a grief that must stay mostly secret
- Krook dies in the famous spontaneous combustion — a grotesque emblem of a system rotting of its own grease

04
The Hunt
CHAPTERS XXXVII–LV

Tulkinghorn will have the secret; the secret will have blood.

- Tulkinghorn tightens his hold on Lady Dedlock; he is later found murdered
- Suspicion falls in the wrong places; Inspector Bucket unravels the crime
- The maid Hortense is guilty of the lawyer's death; Lady Dedlock is guilty of a different flight
- Richard, now married to Ada, is more and more the suit's creature, pale and certain of a fortune that recedes

05
The End of the Suit
CHAPTERS LVI–LXVII

Costs eat the estate; love and duty remain.

- Lady Dedlock flees and is found dead, in her shame, near Hawdon's grave; Sir Leicester's pride is broken into loyalty
- Jo has already died, tended at the last; the narrator charges the great world with that death
- Jarndyce and Jarndyce ends: the estate has been consumed in costs. There is nothing left to win
- Richard dies, seeing too late what the suit has been; Ada and her child are received at Bleak House
- Jarndyce, in a last generosity, gives Esther up to the man she loves, Woodcourt; they keep a second, quieter Bleak House

> *"Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, right reverends and wrong reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day."*
> **The narrator, at Jo's death** · Chapter XLVII, "Jo's Will"

Justice Delayed · Charity · Secrets · Duty · Compassion · Providence

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The book has two narrators: an ironic present-tense voice and Esther's modest "I." Watch what each can and cannot see.
2. Jarndyce refuses to live on the suit. Richard cannot. That difference is the moral plot.
3. Jo's death is written as a charge to the powerful, not as mere pathos. Read the "Dead, your Majesty" paragraph aloud.
4. Esther's disfigurement and her parentage test whether love and usefulness depend on beauty or birth.
5. The suit's "victory" is emptiness: costs have eaten the estate. Dickens's joke is also a verdict.
6. "Providence and your own efforts. Never separate the two." Apply that line to Esther, to Richard, and to the Court.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1023, Bleak House, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/bleak-house/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.