The Architecture of Containment in *Bleak House*

**Keywords:** house, deconstruction, space, containment, architecture

**Abstract**

Charles Dickens’s most ambitious work as a novelist both centres around and subverts notions of physical space and solidity. This essay examines the architectural function of *Bleak House*’s buildings in respect to concepts of containment, and alongside the related notions of displacement and naming. The title is taken as a starting point for examining the significance of physical structures in the book, with an in-depth reading of Bleak House as a building, a title, and a lens through which we access all of the action of the novel. From there it looks at the other structures (Chesney Wold, Chancery etc) as physical edifices as well as centres, around which concepts such as law and fashion revolve, yet which are also vulnerable to spatial intrusion. The Victorian expansion of institutional power through Foucauldian structures of containment and isolation provides historical context for Dickens's representation of such buildings. Thirdly, the essay considers the movements in this book away from the centre, in a post-structuralist sense. Following Steven Connor's observation that everything everyone is being made to 'move on', it analyses in detail the importance of Jo, and how the concept of a 'resting place' - regarding houses, language, law or narrative - is undermined in the novel. Drawing on both theoretical frameworks and close textual reading, this study ultimately highlights how Dickens’s aim to deconstruct society’s architecture of containment is fully realised throughout the themes and subtext of *Bleak House*.

Arguably some of the more memorable products of Dickens’s idiosyncratic imagination in *Bleak House* are the birdcages of Mrs Flite. They house the creatures Dust, Ashes, Waste, Ruin as well as Hope, Joy, Youth, Words and more. These symbols of the dangerous optimism and destructive power of Chancery remain captives, behind bars that seem to offer a glimpse at freedom (in their place by the window), yet barely afford protection from the world’s evil beyond (Krook’s ravenous cat). In this sense they can tell us much about the problematic nature of structures and containment in a book that derives its very name from such concepts. Indeed the metaphor of the cage is easily – perhaps too easily – transplanted onto not only institutions but the buildings that accommodate them. Structures,
buildings, houses and physical places assume a significance in this novel beyond their allegorical or domestic function. They confine our reading to particular spaces and form a world where contagion breeds and seeps through society’s boundaries. Too many critics of Dickens conflate the Victorian household ideology with its immediate surroundings, but it should be noted that ‘household’ is not a signifier for the ‘house’ itself, or vice versa. This essay proposes to consider the architectural function of buildings in respect to concepts of containment, alongside the related notions of displacement and naming. These are integral aspects to any examination of containment and provide the antithetical momentum which propels the course of the narrative. Dickens certainly paid close attention to the structural blueprint of his novels, and mapped the course of his characters’ development in their movements through space. But just as personal and institutional integrity is poisonously eroded by the London fog and mud, so is our confidence in the architectural security of buildings undermined and deflected consistently throughout Bleak House.

The title here acts as an effective starting point. It stands, literally, above and outside the text presented to readers and is thus afforded an elevated significance. It is the first impression we receive of the ensuing action, and is generally intended to embody the essence of the novel. It signifies stability, security and a guaranteed identity of the text.¹ And yet, as post-structuralists from Derrida to J. Hillis Milller have stressed, a text’s title will always remain external to our understanding of the literary creation. The act of naming in some ways distances the reader from the content, by providing a gatekeeping service and regulated access to meaning. This power in naming a text, especially such a monolithic one as Bleak House, was not an issue that was lost on Charles Dickens. His surviving notes show an intense awareness of the importance of choosing a ‘correct’ title, a process which was on-going for the author throughout the period of creation. Some of the revised and discarded working titles included ‘Tom-all-alones’, ‘The Ruined Mill and ‘The Solitary House’.² Dilapidated structures clearly featured heavily in his imaginative preambles. But for many first-time readers, not least this

one, the finalised name of the book presents itself as somewhat incongruous. Why exactly is this text called *Bleak House*? The plot intrigues do not circulate around the titular building; indeed, its location is significantly removed from the imperial and textual centre of metropolitan London of the book’s opening passages. None of the characters use Bleak House as the locus for their activity, unless we count the restricted domestic energies of Esther. It is not really a book *about* houses either, unlike, for instance, the somewhat more aptly-named *Wuthering Heights*. Nevertheless, the presence of the title cannot help but refocus our attention onto the role of buildings – and one building in particular. There is no doubt that *Bleak House* carries much metaphorical weight as a title, referring most openly to the degraded state of English society in Victorian times. The rich potential of a house as symbol is perhaps the most striking consideration, and has led G.K. Chesterton to label it ‘one of the few books of the world of which the name is really appropriate’. 3 But for a novel just short of a thousand pages, it also needs the solidity of the title’s referent, as it were. Of course the house itself, when we encounter it, is far from bleak – leaving us with the tantalising question as to why the book was named after some vague historical precedent. One critic has posited the notion that Dickens deliberately settled on one of the less-obviously miserable structures precisely because of its remove from the bleakness of life, that any single other ‘deteriorating building in the story could not encompass the vast range of sorrow and decay which *Bleak House* contains’. 4 Whether or not this is strictly accurate – we know that Dickens toyed with possibility of Tom-All-Alone’s – it is unquestionably the case that his choice of title was meant to allude to the physical structures of the story. And perhaps not just on a literal level, as the plurality of structures is echoed in the way narrative form is doubled within the book. For Victorian authors, the physical edifice was vital for housing depictions of comfortable domesticity, the promotion of which was also a key theme for Dickens. Architecture in this sense is a container of integrity, mirroring the wholeness of self within the family structure, but conversely also standing as a blank or empty space, much like the role of a text’s title.

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Bleak House (as much as *Bleak House*) is a ‘delightfully irregular’ structure. Welcomed into it by the ebullient Mr Jarndyce, blazing fires and ‘gush[es] of light’, Esther and her companions are almost at once absorbed into its make-up of conviviality and connectedness. Each room is somehow joined to the others, it seems, by mysterious stairs, passages and by-ways. Esther’s role in its maintenance is also prefigured and quickly established: they are hardly within the door of their new house before she castigates Mrs Jellyby for being ‘unmindful of her home’. Mr Jarndyce’s response to this gross outrage is itself highly suggestive: ‘Floored!’ The virtue of the housekeeper is thus highlighted by contrast to an ‘extrinsic’ woman, whose preoccupation with social and public positioning places her outside the traditional bounds of the house(hold). But the first impressions of Bleak House merit close inspection on other fronts. Within the house references to aviaries abound; there is a chair that appears like a ‘great bird-cage’ while Ada’s sitting room contains, ‘framed and glazed upon the walls, numbers of surprising and surprised birds, staring out of pictures at a real trout in a case’. These are hardly accidental allusions. Structures of containment within a house that seeks to keep a close hold on its inhabitants bring to mind a Russian-doll type of dwelling. Even Richard’s room is in fact ‘part library, part sitting-room, part bed-room, and seemed indeed a comfortable compound of many rooms’. Things are not entirely what they would appear, which may explain Richard’s growing disillusionment with the house and its ethos of wilful ignorance. Esther ends her lengthy description of its interior by ‘wondering how you got back there, or had ever got out of it’ (p. 63).

But the very real, physical solidity of the place is slightly undermined by its parallel function as a lens for the reader. *Bleak House* (as a title) is the gate by which we enter the text, and therefore has a sense of transparency while simultaneously controlling our viewpoint. It has a centralising focus, bringing disparate elements of the story together under one heading, yet also manages to be just outside our, and the omniscient narrator’s, vision. As stated before, this is mainly due to its location

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significantly outside London. There is essentially something lacking at the heart of the book because of this. In deconstructive terms, the centre is not actually the centre after all, rather pulling constantly at our desire to locate the textual locus in plain sight. As Jacques Derrida wrote in regard to another problematic text, we are forced to accept that ‘the title belongs to literature even if its belonging has neither the structure nor status of that which it entitles’.\footnote{Derrida, ‘Before the Law’, p. 188.} We might draw constructive parallels here with *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Dickens’s earlier picaresque tale takes its title from the building that most of the main characters (including its inhabitants) want to flee or avoid. The tangent of the narrative in no way draws us towards its titular shop; indeed, the travels of Little Nell and her grandfather mirrors its increased isolation and the building is eventually let fall into ruin and disrepair. But like *Bleak House*, we are never fully allowed to neglect the fact that this edifice is the keystone to our reading of the novel. If we then view its plot as a store of ‘curiosities’, a variety of interpretative possibilities are opened up. Likewise, perhaps *Bleak House* shouldn’t be too easily disregarded for being un-bleak. For one, its lord and master is the patriarchal Mr Jarndyce, who although benign, still insists on the proper placing and order of his mansion, and could be argued to have coerced Esther into marriage. The house also accommodates the ‘finest creature on earth – a child’, who turns out to be neither the finest of creatures nor indeed a child (p. 64). We are left with the nagging sense of a house slightly at odds with what such a domestic haven should be.

Taken together, the buildings of *Bleak House* form an anatomy of the book, and on broader terms, of society itself. The blueprint of the novel is mapped onto architectural spaces as the characters circulate between their London haunts and country piles. Society’s collective and cohesive identity is brought into the spotlight through these structures, where each forms a part of a system of signification. Tom-All-Alone’s, Chesney Wold, Chancery and the Jellyby’s house each enclose spaces and personalities that function on their own terms, but can be more usefully understood in relation to the others. Among the more obvious of these interrelations is that between Chancery and Tom-All-Alone’s; we are told that the former actually owns the decrepit streets and structures of London’s pauper town. Should we assume, then, that if Chancery ceased to exist its dependant tenant
would improve its situation in life? Dickens, although desirous of such a solution, paints a somewhat more complicated picture of cause and effect. Tom-All-Alones is equally bound up with the fate of the Jellyby household in its offering of a pestilent and disease-ridden view of society that Mrs Jellyby chooses to ignore. In many ways these houses manage to negotiate the divide between such private and public worlds around them – not unlike the novel form itself.

D.A. Miller has articulated this theory in an influential piece that examines how so many Victorian novels seem to replicate those very structures that are represented within the texts. He notes how the process of novel-reading denotes a withdrawal to the private, domestic sphere, while in its sheer length and need for interruptions ‘it equally presupposes so many matching returns to the public, institutional one’. This dialectic between the individual and social arenas takes place as much within the novel’s buildings as anywhere else. In many instances it is an unsettling reminder of their essential instability. The security of locked rooms is often breached, as when Tulkinghorn’s austere chambers become the site of his own demise. A similar, singular type of trespass occurs at the deserted Chesney Wold at sunset. Through the nominal omniscient narrator we are given a view into the long gallery of portraits, yet the description seems soaked in consciousness – not least in the remarkable slip into the first person when the room is depicted ‘as I see it now’ (p. 496). Who is really looking in? If this (mostly) third-person narrative can be taken to represent the world of fashionable society, it is a perplexing incongruity. It invokes a single authoritative figure whose knowledge is a form of social control, a power reminiscent of Bentham’s Panopticon. This defining feature of Victorian carceral institutions and prisons foregrounded unseen observation from a central watchtower, and led to increased social surveillance, an aspect that some critics have seen traces of in the omniscient narrator. Yet all the more startling is that we as readers, in our reliance on its authority, may be implicated in this violation of personal property. The voyeuristic nature of such observations goes

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9 Ibid., p. 145.

10 Audrey Jaffe, “‘Never Be Safe but in Hiding”: Omniscience and Curiosity in The Old Curiosity Shop’, NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction, 19.2 (Winter, 1986), p. 120.
beyond the remit of narrative omniscience in self-consciously invading space meant to contain and protect its inhabitant’s secrets.

Chesney Wold, however, is a big house that courts fashionable society by placing itself at its centre. In its majestic standing it should not, by rights, object to interested observation through its windows. But when Tulkinghorn begins to pry deeper – and is furnished with a room in the heart of the house – it becomes clear that its social barriers offer insufficient protection from such scrutiny. In effect, the lawyer is an embodiment of omniscience itself. He surveys all those around him with a view to extending his secretive knowledge, not unlike the unseen observer of Panopticon structures. It allows him almost unlimited control over subjects like Lady Dedlock, who are vulnerable to his unavoidable presence within their home. In this sense Chesney Wold is a refuge under attack, not just from the social/political upheavals endlessly denounced by Sir Leicester, but from Victorian ideologies of increasingly sophisticated organisation of social knowledge and the techniques of omniscient overview. Its effort to limit access to certain ring-fenced spaces and perspectives is doubly undermined by Tulkinghorn and the omniscient interloper, or even Tulkinghorn the omniscient narrator. The lawyer certainly possesses traits that seem to surpass merely human capabilities: ‘he walks into Chesney Wold as if it were next door to his chambers . . . [and] he melted out of his turret-room this morning, just as now, in the late twilight, he melts into his own square’ (p. 514). He is, furthermore, ‘like a dingy London bird among the birds at roost in these pleasant fields’, but crucially unrestricted by the ‘birdcages’ that work to contain the novel’s other characters. There is even something architectural to his character. He is ‘in the confidence of the very bricks and mortar’, a repository of family secrets who stores them ‘treasured up within his old black satin waistcoat’ (p. 583). It is a power that threatens the very core and stability of Chesney Wold’s elevated status.

But all buildings are susceptible to such designs, and many in this book are on a quest to uphold, contain and protect their integrity. These efforts, however well-meaning, often fail to prevent intrusion and collapse. J. Hillis Miller has termed the built environment of the novel ‘a junk-heap of

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broken things’, but it is more than just this. Jealousy and suspicion worm their way into Cook’s court, where ‘Mrs Snagsby is so perpetually on the alert, that the house becomes ghostly with creaking boards and rustling garments’ (p. 317). The Smallweed’s is a positive repository of suspicion, along with wealth and therefore power, and seeks to extend its hold by consuming Krook’s abandoned buildings and crushing them into dust. Like a species of reptile or nocturnal creature, Grandfather Smallweed and his kin reside underground ‘in the dark little parlour certain feet below the level of the street . . . closely bricked in on all sides like a tomb’ (p. 258). In the world of Bleak House, power emanates from such enclosed places. Vholes’ office recalls a similar kind of musty spider-web, where the ‘bloodless’ lawyer exerts his influence over Richard Carstone and, nominally, the progress of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Despite his reputation of ‘respectability’, Vholes chambers are ‘unwholesome’ and ‘[take] kindly to the dry rot and to dirt and all things decaying and dismal’ (p. 482). Nor are they dissimilar to the rooms of Krook’s Rag and Bottle shop, which likewise play an interesting role in the narrative proceedings. Much of the intrigue and secrecy revolve around this building, whose ‘disregarded merchandise’ in fact contains the answers to many of the characters’ quests and searches. It also houses most of the social deviants we meet in the novel, from the illiterate owner to the crazy bird-lady to the anonymous drug addict, and is an important pawn in the schemes of Tulkinghorn. Together, these buildings act as a microcosm of society’s structure, circumscribing representations of petty power-breaking and social control.

There are two other structures, however, that enact these themes on a broader scope. Tom-all-Alones is a hyper-realisation of Krook’s shop, a callous institution that destroys many within. It is a physical container, in every sense enclosing those elements of urban society that are dangerous to the moral upkeep of civilisation. The ‘tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery’ (p. 197) that lie far below the concerns of a bastion like Chesney Wold. But while it may be quarantined off from such polite society, as one critic has pointed out ‘the proliferation of misery in Tom-all-Alone’s . . . is a threat to a world that does nothing to contain it’.

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pestilence has pervaded even the aristocratic tragedy. The background to the lifeless figure of Lady Dedlock is the ‘heaps of dishonoured graves and stones, hemmed in by filthy houses’ (p. 713). Sunlight only ‘faintly struggle[s]’ in, but its fumes and disease spread out rather more quickly. This fatal influence is equalled only by that of Chancery, which as we have seen, exists in a strangely symbiotic relation with Tom-all-Alone’s. The courts of law in Lincoln’s Inn are the over-determined heartland of the novel, its products as parasitic and life-draining as the slums of the city. It is the compass that determines the trajectories of most characters’ lives throughout the course of the book, as well as functioning as a hulking structure which leaves surrounding districts in shadows. Yet, like Tulkinghorn writ large, it is a black hole of a structure with only negative, destructive powers. There is a void at its very core which, tellingly, echoes the gaping emptiness of the novel’s title. We should thus exercise caution in conflating this physical edifice of Chancery with the concept which it represents – namely, the legal constitution of England. As poststructuralist critics have been eager to point out, the concept of the law is literally impossible to grasp. Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s parable ‘Before the Law’ is particularly attractive in emphasising how the ‘guardians’ of the law mediate all access to this institution that is no more than an ‘axiomatic presupposition’, and that has neither essential ‘authority, structure nor status’.14 If the law is therefore nothingness, Chancery only exists in this novel as a physical, linguistic space. The reams of paper, letters, documents, oaths and bills that J. Hillis Miller has identified as the true focus of the text cannot hope to fill this blank. Its centralising power is undeniable, as the characters and action continuously circle around this black void. But when they venture too close, as in the case of Richard Carstone, the only conceivable result is destruction. For, as can perhaps be argued, humans cannot face the existence of the possibility of metaphysical nothingness without crumbling under its weight. Chancery is after all no more than a ‘scarecrow’, a ‘lantern that has no light in it’. (p. 6)

But for all its stress on institutionalised spaces and the poisonous centrality of Chancery to London life, there is simultaneously a noticeable movement away from such centres throughout the text. Steven Conor has put forward the idea that this is a world where, like Jo, everyone and

14 Derrida, ‘Before the Law’, p. 188.
everything is made to ‘move on’, where there is no firm sense of self-identification or security of environment. Indeed, Dickens’s imagination seems consistently uncomfortable with the notion of a stable nucleus for his characters. Just like Wemmick’s highly pointed message to Pip – ‘Don’t go home!’ – there is a clear forewarning that such refuge will similarly be denied to Tulkinghorn. On the lawyer’s final journey home the houses and street clocks appear as omens, silently insisting ‘Don’t go home!’ (p. 583). (Again we are forced to face the problematic knowledge of the omniscient narrator, who seems to actively invade, if not influence, his/her subjects’ consciousness.) Yet the concept of a resting-place is fundamentally alien to the novel as a whole, which, like Tulkinghorn, does better for itself in constant state of peregrination and deferral. In this context, the significance of Jo the crossing-sweeper should not be underestimated. To Dickens Jo was both the metaphorical embodiment and most tragically realistic result of the Victorian system of neglect and impoverishment. The force of the author’s social conscience is filtered through this pathetic character without a home, who personifies the ‘perpetually maintained, disciplined itinerary to nowhere’ that characterises the novel’s activity. Jo must also have held a particular significance for a Victorian audience, judging by the titles of earliest stage adaptations of Dickens’s work which focused most of their attention on his plight. In ways he does carry much of the novel, lurching and slouching throughout all its locations (especially doorways and boundaries) while infecting the spatial centres of civilised society. It would be an interesting project for another essay to map the respective paths of Tulkinghorn and Jo, both transgressing the limits of authorisation in their constant movements away from one another and through the structural hearts of the novel.

This restlessness of style and content may, however, have had its foundations in Dickens’s state of mind. The genesis of Bleak House came about at a time when the author was embroiled in protracted efforts to construct a new family residence at Tavistock Road in London. Writing from his home in Broadstairs, correspondence from the time conveys an exasperation arising from the combined imaginative and practical strain on his energies. “Still the victim of an intolerable

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16 D.A. Miller, ‘Discipline in Different Voices’, p. 139.
reslessness” he wrote to John Forster in August 1851, “I sit down between whiles to think of a new story, and as it begins to grow, such a torment of a desire to be anywhere but where I am . . . takes hold of me, that it is like being driven away” 17. Some weeks later he vented his passions to another friend, describing how “I am three parts distracted and the fourth part wretched in the agonies of getting into a new house . . . Pending which . . I can not work at my new book – having all my notions of order turned completely topsy-turvy”. 18 The frustrated expectations and constant displacements of focus are transcribed onto the structural frame of the book itself, and reflected in Dickens’s seemingly incessant experimentation with the title. Little wonder, then, that the resulting novel displays a strong measure of what Lukacs termed ‘transcendental homelessness’. This is a form of representing the unanchored nature of actions and value within the novel, strongly allied to Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness’. 19 We can see these dynamics played out across much of the author’s work. In the preceding David Copperfield, for instance, the central figure is one who is ‘not there’; a character whose endless displacements from spatial centres mirror the role of author within a quasi-autobiographical text. 20 Dickens, as far as critics are concerned, has always resisted assimilation into totalising linguistic or imaginative structures. His creations are far from being static, displaying a troubling propensity to shift or change in our peripheral vision. This is nowhere more evident than in the intangible, baffling nature of the law in Bleak House that makes us frequently question our own security of interpretation.

Chancery is, of course, one endless deferral of meaning and (dis)closure. Instead of acting as a centrifugal force of the book, it is an insubstantial representative agent that constantly points beyond itself to lead its subjects (and readers) through a dizzying linguistic maze. John Jarndyce describes it as ‘an infernal country-dance of . . . nonsense’ (p. 88). But it raises problematic questions for our

17 As quoted in Dickens, Bleak House, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod, p. 887.
reading of the world of the novel. The law must determine all discursive practises here, since if there is no palpable essence or ‘inside’, how can there truly be an escape (or ‘outside’)? D.A. Miller has argued that instead of criticising them, *Bleak House* in fact ‘trains us to abide in Chancery-like structures’.\(^{21}\) It is an interesting assertion in the context of Victorian disciplinary society. Despite all of the decaying structures in this book that fail to confine or isolate the restless movements, quests and contagion, it would seem the tropes of prison and escape are no more than hegemonic artifices to pacify our desire for release. Architecture works to undercut the possibility of true escape by constantly pushing us away from ‘home’. We never find ourselves on secure footing in this world of eternal substitution – every shop front dissolves into text, like Krook’s. Esther may perceive the physical exterior of the rag and bottle warehouse, but her most vivid memories centre around the inscriptions on its windows: ‘Dealer in Marine Stores’, ‘Waste-Paper Bought’ (p. 48).\(^{22}\) Meanwhile Vholes’s offices are, rather alarmingly, ‘whitewashed beyond the memory of man’ (p. 482). Even the uprightness of Chesney Wold is not what it appears, populated as it is by ghosts and cousins and whose only child is an illegitimate, unrecognised one.\(^{23}\)

We can further track the impulses away from centralising unification through the narration of the novel. Narrative language and perspective are generally where one might hope to find stability, yet the very concept of restlessness is integral to the famously imbalanced voice of *Bleak House*. The perplexing omniscience of the third-person narrator has already been discussed here, but Esther proves an equally unreliable narrative medium. The silences and voids that pepper her share of the chapters are reminiscent of the perpetually deferred meaning at the heart of the law. We may be aware of some of the more obvious avoidances relating to her feelings for Woodcourt, but this is only helpful in flagging up the uncertainty that looms over the rest of her narrative. Her place is undefined: she is the almost-mistress of a house that isn’t bleak, yet isn’t reassuringly safe either. Like the book’s title, she is only one part of moving ring of substitution (as imagined in her feverish dreams) where

\(^{21}\) Miller, ‘Discipline in Different Voices’, p. 143.


names assume a dangerous figurative quality that subverts any approach at a ‘final’ meaning.\textsuperscript{24} Bleak House is a centre that is not a centre, only a symbol. It is a signpost that is constantly referring away from itself, in a version of the novel’s more general displacement of knowledge and responsibility.\textsuperscript{25} Most strikingly, it signals away to such an extent that in the end it creates a duplicate of itself, forcing its inhabitants to ‘move on’ to the promised land of a new domestic haven. It is a deeply uncomfortable moment when Esther confronts the doubling of her new/other Bleak House. For the reader it adds a final, overwhelming layer of metaphorical density to the spatial systems of the book, where, in the words of one critic, ‘our perception of space has been transformed into a sense of placelessness: there is no there \textit{there}.’\textsuperscript{26}

It is the final, forceful gesture of Dickens against the institutional ideology of nineteenth-century society. The prevailing view of mid-Victorian times was that Britain had reached the zenith of civilisation, where architecture in all its forms was the physical manifestation of such perfection. \textit{Bleak House} not only attacks this on the level of social critique, but works to deconstruct its most basic assumptions. On a fundamental level, the architecture of containment simply doesn’t work here. Structures that are meant to contain the good and protect from the outside world are either penetrable (as with Chesney Wold) or entirely worthless (in the case of Bleak House, where smallpox infests and Richard is lost). Meanwhile, those built to contain social evil and contagion are equally ineffective – most strikingly in the example of Tom-all-Alone’s. Both types operate to undermine the authority and integrity of society’s institutional structures. The law is no more a rock of society than Jo is, and Chancery little better than a gilded birdcage. Through the very deconstruction of such physical structures (and they are strong metaphors to attack), Dickens purposefully reveals the hollowness and instability at the base of the institutional and societal fabric of Victorian Britain.

If such containment is essentially fruitless, then, issues of displacement and naming are ultimately the most important considerations throughout the novel. This essay has attempted to depict

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} J Hillis Miller, ‘Introduction’ to Charles Dickens, \textit{Bleak House} (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 25
\item \textsuperscript{25} Jaffe, \textit{Vanishing Points} [no pagination].
\end{itemize}
how narratives and naming are utilised in the same deconstructive way to highlight the decentring impulses of *Bleak House*. Just as he was doing figuratively to the physical edifices of the book, Dickens – or at least some omniscient being – persistently intrudes on the stability of the narrative and our confidence in definitive titles. The ensuing restlessness is more than merely a product of personal circumstances, but a more fundamental means of disturbing the equanimity of the reader. Displacement of location, meaning, power and structural focus is all part of the authorial grand plan to deliberately unsettle our most basic convictions. There is no core of the law, no security in domestic space or walled buildings, and, finally, no centrality to the appellation of *Bleak House*. It is this sense that perhaps once moved D.A. Miller to pronounce ‘this House – neither wholly blackened by the institutions that make use of its cover, nor wholly bleached of their stain – irresolvably Bleak’. 27

**Word Count: 4,969**

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27 Miller, ‘Discipline in Different Voices’, p. 147.
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