SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION, STARVATION, AND CHAGRIN:
DISEASE AND MATERIALITY IN BLEAK HOUSE

BY

Stephanie Erin Higgs

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Jay Clayton
Kathryn Schwarz
In his 1880 essay “Fiction, Fair and Foul,” a pithy John Ruskin enumerates the “varieties of method” by which characters in *Bleak House* expire:

- One by assassination . . . . Mr. Tulkinghorn.
- One by starvation, with phthisis Joe.
- One by chagrin . . . . . Richard.
- One by spontaneous combustion Mr. Krook.
- One by sorrow . . . . . Lady Dedlock’s lover.
- One by remorse . . . . Lady Dedlock.
- One by insanity . . . . Miss Flite.
- One by paralysis . . . . Sir Leicester.

Besides the baby, by fever, and a lively Frenchwoman left to be hanged. (Ruskin 159)

The chart operates as evidence that what Ruskin calls “the Divinity of Decomposition, has established itself” in the literature of his day (Ruskin 157). He laments that, as the result of life in the “smoking mass of decay” that is the city, the “thoroughly trained Londoner” has turned not to “dreams of pastoral felicity” but rather to the putrescence “to which he has been accustomed, and asks for that in continually more ardent or more virulent concentration” (Ruskin 158).

Charles Dickens, according to Ruskin, is one of the worst offenders in pandering to his readers’ desires for ever more filth, disease, and death, and *Bleak House* serves as Ruskin’s case in point:

In the single novel of *Bleak House* there are nine deaths (or left for death’s, in the drop scene) carefully wrought out or led up to […] with as much enjoyment as can be contrived in the anticipation, and as much pathology as can be concentrated in the description. (Ruskin 159)

“And all this,” Ruskin continues, “not in a tragic, adventurous, or military story, but merely as the further enlivenment of a narrative intended to be amusing; and as a properly representative average of the statistics of civilian mortality in the centre of
London” (159). In other words, all these deaths serve the ends of what purports to be realism but is really “the pathologic labour of the modern novelist” turning a pretty penny by reveling in the physical and moral degeneration of the city and its inhabitants (Ruskin 166).

Whether his critique was warranted or not, Ruskin was right to point out the staggering number of deaths in *Bleak House*, many due to bodily malfunction and disease. Bodies in the novel are constantly compromised and breached, though not always fatally. Characters suffer from gout, stroke, smallpox, tuberculosis, Ménière’s disease, and even spontaneous combustion arising from the bodily humors.¹ In almost every case, except for Sir Dedlock’s gout, Dickens does not name the specific illnesses that afflict his characters. Nevertheless, his careful descriptions, rendered with as much “pathology as can be concentrated” therein, have enabled medical professionals writing on *Bleak House* to conjecture diagnoses.

By contrast, literary critics considering disease in *Bleak House* have been inclined to read it as a metaphor for systemic and systematic societal ills such as economic disparity. The interchangeability of biological and economic rhetoric invites such a connection; the Victorians, Dickens included, frequently deployed the language of the body to talk about systems external to the body and, inversely, a vocabulary borrowed from economics to talk about human biology. While disease in *Bleak House* certainly does function on a metaphorical level, Dickens is also

operating on a more literal level that registers both in the plot and theme. He fashions an etiology, not just a trope. What happens when the metaphorical rot in the economic system has real biological effects on individual bodies? Does Jo, to take one example, die to represent economic disparity, or does he die because of economic disparity? Focusing on disease as metaphor, critics insist on an opposition between the metaphorical and the literal that simply does not exist for Dickens. In so doing, they underplay the direct causal relationship the novelist posits between the improper or failed circulation of capital, both in the form of money and property, and the manifestation of disease. Dickens already grasped what social medicine teaches today, that economic conditions have a direct impact on health.

This paper will examine the inherence of the literal and material in Dickens’s descriptions of disease, beginning with an exploration of the function of circulation in Jo’s contraction of smallpox and his resultant death. As the flipside of the same coin, Krook’s infamous death by spontaneous combustion is the logical fallout of his role as a hoarder, a blockage in the economic system. And while Krook hoards, Richard Carstone, a profligate with a faulty financial sense, spends excessively. The discussion will culminate in a consideration of Richard’s death by consumption, a

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2 Even historical texts on the period have not extensively dealt with disease as a material reality. Texts treating disease explicitly tend to turn toward the metaphorical; take, for instance, Sander Gilman’s Disease and Representation and Susan Sontag’s Illness as Metaphor. Most medical histories on the Victorian period focus on the rise of the medical profession, (see, for example, The Medical Profession in Mid-Victorian London by Jeanne Peterson) and many literary critics have followed suit, directing their attention to representations of medical men in the literature or the ways the impact of the developing profession resonated in the literature (see Janis Caldwell, Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain).
narrative event that has been largely ignored in the criticism because it does not lend itself to allegory as explicitly as do Jo and Krook’s highly wrought-out deaths. As a rhetorical device, metaphor uses the diseased body as a vehicle, dematerializing and sanitizing it in the process. But the diseased bodies in Bleak House are not just metaphors; Dickens counts on readers taking illness literally too. It is only by evoking disease as a material condition that Dickens can realize his goals for achieving social reform through his fictions.

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In a letter to his brother-in-law, Henry Austin, dated February 27, 1850, Dickens confesses to “dream[ing] of putrefaction generally” after reading the Report on the General Scheme for Extramural Sepulture with which Austin, in his role as Secretary to the General Board of Health, had supplied him (Letters 47). Dickens was not alone in having dreams haunted by putrefaction; many Victorians entertained a lively obsession with the buildup of filth in the streets and the consequential threat of contamination, and sanitary reform was one of the leading causes of the day. At this point in the development of the medical profession, public health had not yet been demarcated as the exclusive realm of trained medical professionals. In 1826, Dr. William Buchan wrote in his book Domestic Medicine: “The cure of disease does not depend so much on scientific principles as many imagine. It is clearly the result of experience and observation” (Buchan 98). Reliance on keen observation over training still held sway at mid-century, with both
laymen and doctors participating with equal enthusiasm and authority in debates about sanitary reform. Edwin Chadwick, one of the biggest names in the movement after publication of his *Report ... from the Poor Law Commissioners, on an Inquiry into the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain ... July 1842*, felt authorized to make pronouncements about public health despite having no medical training himself: “anyone in the possession of half one’s senses, Chadwick assumed, could manage to identify the bad smells and visible filth which caused disease” (Gilbert 31).

Dickens was another such keen observer who placed his insight and acute observational skill in service to the cause of sanitary reform. His expertise and involvement were widely recognized, as was his public appeal, making him a powerful ally. As Dickens was finishing up *American Notes* in 1842, Edwin Chadwick sought the novelist’s support, writing:

> Mr. Dickens will have the ear not only of America but of Europe, and whatever he may say on the importance of a better scientific attention to the structural arrangements for promoting the health and pleasure and moral improvement of the population cannot fail to produce extensively beneficial effects. (qtd. in Fielding and Brice 118)

Dickens wrote extensively on the subject of sanitation, professing a “hope to be able to do the Sanatory [sic] cause good service, in [his] new periodical,” *Household Words*, in which there always appeared a section titled “Social, Sanitary, and Municipal Progress” (*Letters* 18-19). Nor was he ignorant of the medical advances of his day. His library contained a number of medical and scientific texts from the

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3 Dickens’s investment in sanitary reform has been well documented and is frequently mentioned in Dickens criticism. J. K. Fielding and A. W. Brice were among the first to recognize the extent of his involvement in their 1970 article “Bleak House and the Graveyard.”
1840s and early 1850s, including G. A. Walker’s *Lectures on the Conditions of the Metropolitan Graveyards* (1846-49) and Andrew Ure’s *The General Malaria of London* (1850) (Schwarzbach 25).

Dickens was doubtless aware of the prevailing miasmatic theory of disease, which held that noxious vapors containing particles from decomposed matter were the cause of illness, through his friendship with one of the theory’s leading proponents, Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith. Dickens’s adherence to the miasma theory underwrites his speech to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association on May 10, 1851, in which he gives voice to fears about the impossibility of containing the foul airs carrying disease. He holds forth upon the certainty that “the air from Gin Lane will be carried by an easterly wind into Mayfair, or that the furious pestilence raging in St. Giles no mortal list of lady patronesses can keep out of Almack’s.” The only way to combat miasma is to get to the source: filth. Dickens’s speech is grounded in the material, for “no man can estimate the amount of mischief grown in dirt,—no man can say the evil stops here and stops there, either in its moral or physical effects” (*Speeches* 127). Describing a typical candidate for disease, “the miserable man condemned to work in a foetid court,” Dickens proclaims: “He is so surrounded by and embedded in material filth, that his soul cannot rise to the contemplation of the great truths of religion” (*Speeches* 128). The material and the spiritual, the moral and the physical, are not separable for Dickens; they are contingent. The same is true of the literal and the metaphorical as manifested through what Ruskin called the “pathologic labour” of *Bleak House*.

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In many ways, Dickens’s 1851 speech to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association predicts *Bleak House*. His mention of Gin Lane and the most notorious of London slums, St. Giles, together with descriptors like “foetid court” and “noisome, loathsome place” evoke Tom-All-Alone’s, a “black, dilapidated street” of “tumbling tenements” containing a “swarm of misery” in the heart of *Bleak House*’s London. With stinging sarcasm, Dickens tells his reader: “This desirable property is in Chancery, of course. It would be an insult to the discernment of any man with half an eye, to tell him so.” (257). For Tom-All-Alone’s is just one of many homes and lands that have fallen into ruin as “the property of Costs” in a Chancery suit (120).

Dickens figures the Court of Chancery as a money-guzzling machine that works not to protect the interests of “the weakest members of the land-owning part of the community,” as was originally intended, but to provide for the financial support and success of its lawyers (Hamer 342). In his economic tract “Unto This Last,” Ruskin minces no words in detailing the ends of improper or failed circulation of money and property: As wealth becomes concentrated in fewer hands, the inverse result is the spread of poverty and destitution. Ruskin writes that men of business know not “what other losses and gains, far away among the dark streets, are essentially, though invisibly, dependent on theirs in the lighted rooms” (132). In *Bleak House*, Dickens makes it his task to trace out these invisible threads running from glittering parlors down into the filthy, vermin-infested streets.

It is thus that Jo, a lowly crossing-sweeper and one of the many “human wretches” to take up his abode in Tom-All-Alone’s, is connected to Sir Leicester
Dedlock, one whose “monied might [is] the means abundantly ofwearying out the right” in Chancery even as he sits warming his gouty legs before a fire at Chesney Wold (256; 15). In an oft-cited passage, Dickens elaborates on the connections between “monied might” and destitution:

[Tom] has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom’s corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. [...] There is not an atom of Tom’s slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. (710)

“Revenge” and “retribution” are strong words, words with revolutionary overtones. But Dickens does not imagine that Tom will take his revenge for the poverty that has been foisted upon him by means of a violent uprising of the oppressed. Rather, Dickens endeavors to show how disease, which knows not the difference between a crossing-sweeper in the slums and a baronet in his ancestral mansion, can work as a retributive force. Dickens sheds light upon the process of unequal distribution by which economic disparity creates the city slums, those blighted loci of fear and disgust like Tom-All-Alone’s that represented, in the Victorian imaginary, the diseased portions of the social body.

The Victorian sanitarians were instrumental in creating both the public horror of and the fascination with slums. To quote Peter Stallybrass and Allon White: “‘Contagion’ and ‘contamination’ became the tropes through which city life was apprehended. It was impossible for the bourgeoisie to free themselves from the taint of ‘the Great Unwashed’” (Stallybrass and White 135). Cholera, previously considered a class-bound disease of poverty and vice, was a leveling force during the
outbreaks in London in the 1840s and 1850s; according to one Londoner, “at one
leap [it] passed from the squalid abodes of poverty into the houses which were
rejoicing in their comforts, and the streets which were high and clean” (qtd. in
Gilbert 96).

Increasingly, doctors and sanitarians researching disease in the face of such
outbreaks were locating its source not inside the body, but outside the body in the
filth piling up in the streets and stagnating in fetid pools of water, filth being a
blanket term to denote mud and dirt as well as human wastes like feces and corpses.
“Wastes were no longer simply by-products of the life process, but animated and
hostile filth that would, given the chance, attack the body itself” (Gilbert xii). A
corollary to the miasmatic theory of disease, the zymotic theory of German chemist
Justus von Liebig held that “putrefaction itself [was] the quintessential pathological
process:”

In a gangrenous wound, the colon of a cholera victim, or the lungs of a
consumptive, a similar process of the decay of the fabric or fluids of the
living body was occurring. This internal decay was thought to have been
induced by material outside the body undergoing an identical form of decay.
(Hamlin 382-383)

Exposure to materials decomposing outside the body and blocking up the city
streets would trigger a corresponding internal decomposition. The notion that all
bodies might be equally susceptible to disease led not to a less essentialist vision of
class differences, but instead to the equation, via metonymy, of the poor with filth;
they were not just living in filth—they were filth.

One solution to the threat of being “tainted” was to attempt to police the
bodies of the poor, both literally and figuratively, physically and morally.
Stallybrass and White write: “[Policemen] penetrate the dark, public realm with its disease and danger so as to secure the domestic realm from danger. They [are] the agents of discipline, surveillance, purity” (Stallybrass and White 134). Another solution, as proposed by certain Victorian sanitarians, was to circulate human waste from the city out to the country, where it could be turned to good use in fertilizing the soil. The treated land would then yield more crops with which to feed the laboring masses, thereby avoiding the Malthusian crisis of overpopulation and food shortage. The idea was, in the words of one nineteenth-century sanitarian, to “remove ALL refuse matter . . . and utilise it so as to ‘make it pay’” (qtd. in Hamlin 383).

Dickens, in his depiction of Jo’s impoverished existence and heartrending demise, demonstrates the misapplication of these solutions and the tragic results. Jo is the primary figure in Bleak House around which anxieties about filth and the spread of disease swirl. Alias Tough Subject, or Toughy, Jo is one of “a thousand children who have no names whatever, or only nicknames like dogs,” as a police superintendent described orphan children living in the streets to Edwin Chadwick when the latter was compiling his Report (qtd. in Stallybrass and White 126). Jo, industrious little crossing-sweeper that he is, acts as an agent of circulation, clearing away dirt and excrement from underfoot and better enabling pedestrians to wend their way through the London streets. Yet his body is metonymically associated with the filth he in reality helps to contain and dispel. On a symbolic level, he himself is that which must be swept away, or “moved on,” to allow for others’ safe passage through the city. The gross error on the part of Mr. Bucket and his fellow
law enforcers of regarding this human boy solely on a figurative level as filth embodied results in his living body being put into circulation. At their repeated injunctions to take his contaminating influence elsewhere, anywhere that isn’t within Mr. Bucket’s beat, Jo drags his fevered body out of the city into the country. The consequences are disastrous, for Charley, for Esther, but most of all for poor Jo. While Charley and Esther receive proper care and recover from the smallpox Jo communicates to them, Jo, with nowhere else to go, completes his circuit back to London, there to die, he being just one of many “dying thus around us, every day” (734).

Even as Dickens shows the devastating effects of using the figurative to reduce a living, breathing human like Jo to a subhuman embodiment, he himself employs Jo on a metaphorical level to dilate upon the trope of circulation, in this case a circulation without end and without meaning. Though dead, Jo's body has not finished circulating. He requests to be buried in the same putrid burial ground from which he supposedly contracted smallpox, and, according to the miasma theory, his body will continue to circulate in the form of further contagion long after his soul has departed. Although Dickens figures disease as the means for Tom to wreak his just revenge against “the proudest of the proud” and “the highest of the high,” the events of the novel would indicate otherwise. It is not the Boodles or the Coodles or even the Sir Leicesters who fall prey to Jo’s contagion, as would be only right by the logic of vengeful justice, but innocents like Charley and Esther. Disease strikes arbitrarily, not to any moral purpose. The events in Dickens’s narrative thereby strip disease of the symbolic function Dickens himself sometimes assigns it.
Jo’s endless and meaningless circulation parallels that in the Court of Chancery. Although the flow of money into Chancery is a one-sided, linear movement without a reciprocal outward motion, the court does successfully generate another form of paper that circulates *ad infinitum* to no purpose: bags upon bags of legal documents. “While the documents are meant to represent, and thus guarantee, the circulation of property,” Gordon Bigelow asserts, “the legal papers simply create a circulation of their own, one which moves chaotically, never progressing toward a solution to the case” (Bigelow 590). Dickens teasingly holds out the possibility to his readers at the end of *Bleak House* that meaning will be restored and redeemed through the will discovered at Krook’s shop, but he dashes those hopes when Jarndyce and Jarndyce suddenly evaporates into thin air along with the funds that were sustaining it. The court documents are empty signifiers, and as such they represent anxieties that currency is also naught but an empty signifier circulating to no end. Although “it would not reduce Dickens’s politics absurdly to say that he was for circulation and against stoppage” (Trotter 103), Dickens was nevertheless aware that circulation, in some circumstances, might be mere repetition without progress. Circulation, then, can sometimes be synonymous with stagnation, a circuit with no *telos* to drive toward and therefore no meaning.

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Whereas Jo’s compromised body gets pulled into a ceaseless circuit devoid of signification, which serves only to gesture toward the equally meaningless
circulation of documents in Chancery and of money in the larger economic system, the opposite is true of Krook’s body and the way it acts in the novel. The owner of a Rag and Bottle Shop, Krook, dubbed the Lord Chancellor by his neighbors because of his collection of “parchmentses and papers,” is an unrepentant hoarder, openly delighting in copious and purposeless accumulation of goods and capital (70). That his notorious death by spontaneous combustion is an appropriate one is immediately apparent, on the symbolic level at least. As the representative of stoppage, Krook “suffers the fate of the terminally blocked: he blows up” (Trotter 111). Dickens is quick to draw an allegorical parallel: “The Lord Chancellor of that Court, true to his title in his last act, has died the death of all Lord Chancellors in all Courts, and of all authorities in all places under all names soever, where false pretences are made, and where injustice is done” (519). Yet, even as Dickens makes this deliberate shift into allegory, he immediately thereafter insists on Krook’s death by spontaneous combustion as a biological reality that is “inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself” (519).

Most critics accept Krook’s death as purely symbolic⁴, but George Henry Lewes was disturbed enough by the competing literal register in the passage to devote space in his weekly “Literature” column in the December 11, 1852, issue of the Leader to a refutation of spontaneous combustion as having no scientific basis whatsoever. He criticized Dickens for such a lapse, maintaining that spontaneous combustion is “only admissible [in literature] as a metaphor” (qtd. in Hack 49).

⁴ For a refreshing exception, see Daniel Hack’s chapter on Bleak House in his book The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel.
Dickens responded to Lewes in multiple forms: in personal letters, in the novel’s subsequent number, and in his 1853 Preface, asserting that he had thoroughly investigated the subject. Dickens’s intense investment in spontaneous combustion as a biological fact belies acceptance of Krook’s death as plainly symbolic.

The coexistence of the symbolic and the material in Krook’s death is visible in his hoarding practices. Accumulating commodities, Krook is symbolically accumulating death. According to both Malthus and Ruskin, labor is “life expended,” and the commodity, as the product of that life expended, carries the burden of exhausted vitality: “the humane critics of political economy present the commodity, the bearer of value, as freighted with mortality, as a sign of spent vivacity, in order to demand all the more strenuously that it have a recuperative potential” (Gallagher 90). For Ruskin, the commodity’s life-giving potential, or value, can only be realized in the hands of an individual capable of using the commodity such that it “avails toward life,” in which case “wealth, instead of depending merely on a ‘have,’ is thus seen to depend on a ‘can’” (“Unto This Last” 168; 170). Should the possessor of the commodity be incapable of putting it to good use, the commodity becomes “illth” rather than “wealth.”

Whence it appears that many of the persons commonly considered wealthy, are in reality no more wealthy than the locks of their own strong boxes are; they being inherently and eternally incapable of wealth; and operating for the nation, in an economical point of view, either as pools of dead water, and eddies in a stream (which, so long as the stream flows, are useless, or serve only to drown people, but may become of importance in a state of stagnation, should the stream dry); or else, as dams in a river, of which the ultimate service depends not on the dam, but the miller; or else as mere accidental stays and impediments, acting not as wealth, but (for we ought to have a

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5 For a discussion of filth in Our Mutual Friend and Ruskin’s ideas about “illth”, consult Catherine Gallagher’s book The Body Economic.
correspondent term) as ‘illth,’ causing various devastation and trouble around them in all directions; or lastly, act not at all, but are merely animated conditions of delay, (no use being possible of anything they have until they are dead). ("Unto This Last" 171)

This passage is worth quoting at length for it provides a helpful lexicon with which to assess Krook’s relation to the commodities he amasses. Since he is illiterate and thus unable to read the documents in his collection, their potential usefulness is lost to him. They remain the products of “illth” and death. Dickens renders it clear that the documents are signs of human mortality by repeatedly referring to the parchments as “skins” (parchment was made from sheep’s skin). As Ruskin would have it, Krook, as a bad consumer, thus becomes a “pool of dead water,” “a dam in a river,” or a “stay and impediment” to the national economy.

With Ruskin’s economic theories in mind, Krook’s combustion starts to seem rather less spontaneous in nature and instead more an inevitability, less a metaphor and more a physical reality. Without use-value or exchange-value, the things in Krook’s shop only have death-value. Dickens gruesomely literalizes this aspect of Ruskin’s theory when he describes the contents of Krook’s shop. Krook collects products that are literally, not just symbolically, the products of spent human vitality, like human hair and bones. Dickens describes the eve of Krook’s passing as “a fine steaming night to turn the slaughter-houses, the unwholesome trades, the sewerage, bad water, and burial grounds to account, and give the Registrar of Deaths some extra business” (506). For Daniel Hack, the mention of “sewerage, bad water, and burial grounds” explicitly locates the spontaneous combustion episode in this context. Indeed, whatever its exotic overtones, spontaneous combustion itself is also a version—albeit a vastly accelerated one—of the corruption, decomposition,
and dissemination that the narrator angrily describes as originating in the ‘pestiferous and obscene’ graveyard in which Nemo is buried. (Hack 50)

Yet, surrounded by skins, hair, and bones, Krook already lives amongst corruption and decomposition; his shop is literally a burial ground.

Appropriately, then, Krook’s body dissolves to become materially part and parcel of the diseased atmosphere. The emphasis on the persistence of his remains in the form of “a dark greasy coating,” “a smouldering suffocating vapour,” “a thick, yellow, liquor,” and “a stagnant, sickening oil” mires the reader in the material, the physical, the literal.6 Dickens’s nauseating descriptions linger even as he suddenly moves to tidy up the mess he made into a nice, clean metaphor. As an actual “pool of dead water,” Krook not only lives amongst putrefaction, he himself is a putrefying force. He no longer represents blockage—he is a blockage, just as Jo is filth, at least according to some of the less humane reformers in the sanitation movement.

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Richard Carstone is an altogether different breed of consumer from Krook. While Krook is a hoarder, prompting Esther to observe that “everything seemed to be bought, and nothing to be sold” at his Rag and Bottle Shop, Richard is a spendthrift; he derives pleasure from the act of spending in and of itself (65). Early in the novel, the ever-responsible Esther comments: “Richard had a carelessness in his character that quite perplexed me—principally because he mistook it, in such a very odd way for prudence. It entered into all his calculations about money in a

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6 These quotes are all drawn from Chapter 32 of Bleak House.
singular manner" (138-139). When Mr. Jarndyce reimburses Richard the ten pounds he had laid out to pay Mr. Skimpole’s debt, Richard chalks it up as a profit, despite Esther’s reminder that he has merely made up the same ten pounds: “‘That has nothing to do with it!’ returned Richard. ‘I have got ten more pounds than I expected to have, and consequently I can afford to spend it without being particular.’” Esther disapprovingly notes the “number of little acts of thoughtless expenditure which Richard justified by the recovery of his ten pounds” (139).

Similarly, when he is persuaded against giving five pounds to the drunken brickmaker, he delightedly, if erroneously, concludes: “‘I have saved five pounds out of the brickmaker’s affair; so, if I have a good rattle to London and back in a post-chaise, and put that down at four pounds, I shall have saved one. And it’s a very good thing to save one, let me tell you: a penny saved, is a penny got!’” (139). As instanced by Richard’s leveraging of his capital for the purposes of a joy ride in a post-chaise, rather than to purchase an object, the pleasure in spending for Richard resides not in the commodities to be obtained thereby, but in the simple act itself. If the telos of consumerism for Krook is the commodity, the telos for Richard is instead the activation of his purchasing power. Unsurprisingly, he is hugely in debt by the novel’s end, convinced by his convoluted financial reasoning that he is saving his and Ada’s property through his exorbitant outlay of money to retain Mr. Vholes as his lawyer. In direct proportion to the waning of his financial resources, Richard’s health declines. In the novel’s final moments, he dramatically, and appropriately, dies of the “wasting disease,” consumption.
Richard’s death is not surrounded by the same explicitly allegorical apparatus as are the deaths of Jo and Krook, which might explain the dearth of scholarship on Richard. For the most part, critics are dismissive of him, mentioning him only in passing, if at all. Robert Garis scathingly writes:

None of Richard’s ‘errors’ is allowed the dignity of being made to seem worth following in detail, as the twisted distortions of an inner life in conflict; pity rules out the possibility, and the necessity, of reproach. But the possibility of taking Richard seriously as a moral being is ruled out too: he is merely a victim, and he takes rather a long time dying. (Garis 136)

Even for Beth Herst, who does treat Richard seriously, albeit briefly, his death is a straightforward metaphor, a “spiritual infection” reflexive of the fact that “the possibility of immunity in, and to, the world of Bleak House is becoming increasingly limited” (Herst 72).

Few scholars, if any, have thought to question Esther and Allan Woodcourt’s assertion that Richard suffers from an illness of the mind, despite his manifesting many of the classic symptoms of tuberculosis, including emaciation, lethargy, and, most notably, the spitting up of blood. Yet critics have been careful to identify characters suffering the ravages of consumption elsewhere in Dickens’s oeuvre. Meegan Kennedy, for one, in her study, Revising the Clinic, recognizes both Paul Dombey and Little Nell as consumptives.7 Investigating the symbiotic relationship between the clinical and the sentimental manifest in Dickens’s work, Kennedy argues that there is enough clinical detail provided in the descriptions of Paul’s and Nell’s illnesses “to suggest consumption, but not quite enough to realize, rather than

7 See also Byrne, Katherine, “Consuming the Family Economy: Tuberculosis and Capitalism in Charles Dickens’s Dombey and Son,” Nineteenth-Century Contexts (March 2007), Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 1-16.
spiritualize, the disease” (Kennedy 164). She calls attention to the lack of clinical
detail during their deathbed scenes, allowing Dickens to grant “his protagonists Paul
and Nell a death bathed in the soft focus of Victorian sentiment” as they slowly fade,
life blending imperceptibly into death.

Dickens delicately avoids mention of some of the uglier symptoms of
consumption in describing the progression of Paul’s and Little Nell’s diseases,
including the characteristic but brutal hemorrhaging that often occurs. Contrast
this lack with his depiction of Richard in the penultimate scene before Richard’s
death. When it is revealed that the funds sustaining the suit of Jarndyce and
Jarndyce for decades have run out, Woodcourt discovers Richard “sitting in a corner
of the court […] like a stone figure:” “On being roused, he had broken away, and
made if he would have spoken in a fierce voice to the judge. He was stopped by his
mouth being full of blood” (976). Immediately following this graphic account,
Richard does get his clean, sentimentalized deathbed scene, as he lays his head on
Ada’s bosom and “with one parting sob [begins] the world. Not this world, O not
this! The world that sets this right” (979). But the purity of Richard’s final moment
is not quite enough to cancel out the vivid, material vision of Richard spewing blood
from his mouth.

Why might Dickens’s depiction of consumption have changed from his earlier
portrayals of Paul Dombey’s and Little Nell’s illnesses to that of Richard? To answer
this question, a glance at the history of consumption, both as a malady and an
economic practice, is useful. Not until 1882 when Robert Koch identified the
bacillus that causes tuberculosis was consumption recognized as a contagious
Rather, in the eighteenth century and throughout most of the nineteenth century, it was thought that individuals were hereditarily predisposed to tuberculosis and that certain personality types or personal practices made one more prone to manifest the disease. Roy Porter documents how the multiple valences of the word consumption influenced its supposed etiology in the eighteenth century, with physicians first focusing on alimental practices of consumption as they related to the malady. With the rise of commodity culture at the turn of the century, however, their focus shifted to the consumption of material goods as a potential cause of the disease. In the Romantic era, popular conceptions of the disease underwent a transformation due in large part to media reception and mythologizing of the tragic death of John Keats. Alan Bewell contends: “[Keats’s] death in Rome in 1821, not from poetry but from consumption, exerted a powerful hold on the imaginations of Victorians and occupies a central place in the history of nineteenth-century European representations of disease” (Bewell 184). Representations of death by consumption became highly aestheticized and spiritualized, and the consumptive personality was characterized by recklessness and passion; “all the evidence indicates that the cult of TB was not simply an invention of romantic poets and opera librettists but a widespread attitude, and that the person dying (young) of TB really was perceived as a romantic personality” (Sontag 30).

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8 According to the article on tuberculosis in *The Cambridge World History of Human Disease*, autopsies have shown that “close to 100 percent of some urban populations, such as those of London, Paris, and other major industrial cities, had at some point in their lives developed the disease” in the eighteenth century and early part of the nineteenth century (1063).

Dickens does give Richard a stylized, romantic death, and he certainly does propound a link between Richard’s physical degeneration and his recklessness. However, Richard’s recklessness manifests itself primarily through his financial practice of consumption, hearkening back to notions about the causal relationship between the inappropriate consumption of goods and disease at the turn of the century. Still, the picture is not yet complete, for, as previously mentioned, Richard does not consume to acquire things—he consumes to spend. Dickens began serializing *Bleak House* in March of 1852, only a few short months after the termination of one of the major events in the Victorian period: the Great Exhibition of 1851, described by Thomas Richards as “the first world’s fair, the first department store, the first shopping mall” (Richards 17). Although none of the commodities on display at the Great Exhibition were for sale, the event nevertheless served to tantalize visitors with their potential purchasing power. Richards argues persuasively for the centrality of the commodity to the exhibition, but he also states that “the Great Exhibition of 1851 actually helped to create the sense of surplus that it is so often cited as evidence for. It palpably embodied the vehement hope that one day there would no longer be not enough, but too much, and too much for everyone” (Richards 29). When there is surfeit, the commodity drops away, and consumption becomes a practice of buying for the sake of buying and spending for the sheer pleasure of spending.

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The Great Exhibition thus gestured toward a new kind of consumer, the kind of consumer Dickens’s evoked shortly thereafter with his creation of Richard. Richard’s wasteful spending habits are part and parcel of his death by consumption. In her book *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag dilates upon tuberculosis as a metaphor. She writes: “Getting TB was thought to signify a defective vitality, a vitality misspent [italics added].” She continues:

Like Freud’s scarcity-economics theory of “instincts,” the fantasies about TB which arose in the last century (and lasted well into ours) echo the attitudes of early capitalist accumulation. One has a limited amount of energy, which must be properly spent. [...] Energy, like savings, can be depleted, can run out or be used up, through reckless expenditure. The body will start “consuming” itself, the patient will “waste away.” (Sontag 62) While Sontag’s insight is brilliant, her uncomplicated classification of such discussions of tuberculosis as metaphor is troubling.

When Richard’s mouth fills with blood, Dickens brutally literalizes the connection between spending money and spending vitality. Porter asserts: “Wealth was the life-blood, the vital spirits, of the incorporated nation. Hence its office was to flow” (57). Of course, it must flow in a specific pattern; it must circulate. The flow of Richard’s expenditure is outward and linear with no reciprocal backward movement to create a circuit. He is constantly hemorrhaging money, and in the end he fittingly hemorrhages his own blood. The linkage here of money with blood is not purely metaphorical. Dickens intends his readers to understand that Richard’s death by consumption is also the literal and material byproduct of his careless and destructive spending. The clinical and sentimental, material and spiritual, literal and metaphorical all inhere and merge in that moment when he opens his mouth
and spits up blood. With Richard, Dickens promulgates an etiology of consumption that finds its roots in the new consumerism inaugurated by the Great Exhibition.

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The sheer number of diseased bodies in *Bleak House* and Dickens’s care to pack as much pathology as possible into his descriptions of disease suggest that for Dickens the diseased body was a material fact, not just the metaphorical consequence of the junction between biological and economic rhetoric. Indeed, human biology and the economy in *Bleak House* are inseparable, both rhetorically and literally. Ineffective circulation of money and property has deleterious effects on real bodies. Even as Jo, Krook, and Richard act within the economic system with varying degrees of inefficiency, the economic system acts disastrously upon them.

The street-wise Dickens, walking through London and recreating it again and again in his fictions, from the filthiest alley on up to the most splendid of parlors, was hyper aware of the necessary connections between those disparate worlds, uncomfortably coexisting in the same urban space. He is no Marxist revolutionary; he does not recommend a total rending of the social fabric. But neither is he a proponent of the *laissez-faire* economics of Adam Smith. Just what he *is* a proponent of remains difficult to discern, for, in *Bleak House* at least, he proposes no solutions to the disease-inducing problems inherent within the economic system that his novel glaringly uncovers. Instead, Dickens seems to wave the white flag of defeat at the end of the novel as he contrives the removal of Esther, Allan Woodcourt, Ada,
and Mr. Jarndyce from the unsettled and unclean city to a pristine, “rustic cottage of doll’s rooms” in the “rich and smiling country” (962).

Ruskin, the same critic who lamented the lack of “pastoral dreams of felicity” in the fiction of his day, was nevertheless quick to label Dickens’ version of the country “Cockney,” indicating thereby that Dickens’s depiction of the countryside is no more than the unrealistic fantasy of the native city-dweller (very like Phil Squod’s fantastical vision of the country, which Dickens himself lightly mocks). The removal of Woodcourt to this idyllic space is particularly disappointing, for, with his combination of medical expertise and compassion, he is the perfect candidate to lead sanitary reform. The hasty retreat to the country signals a desire for the simplicity of the pre-industrial past and a denial of the dirty industrial present. This sudden turn accords poorly with the novel’s hard-hitting realism in the face of those who would deny the squalor which surrounds them and their part in creating it, or those who only deal with the filthy reality through the sanitizing and reductive lens of metaphor. Dickens the sanitarian wanted real, material transformation, not just the false sanitization of rhetorical transformation. Dickens the novelist settled for another form of false sanitization, literary convention, even as Esther’s disfiguring scars from her bout with smallpox fade in the novel’s final lines.
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