

Discussion Questions

- 1 The novel opens with considerable description of the fog and impenetrable mire that surround the High Court of Chancery and much of London. The film also paints a picture of a dreary, rain-soaked England. How does weather help convey Dickens's social commentary? What do the constant fog and mist represent? The atmosphere of *Bleak House* sits in stark contrast to the gloominess of other locales; why do you think the author chose to portray it this way?
- 2 How does *Bleak House*, which is warm and welcoming, deserve its ironic name? What other names (of characters, locations) in *Bleak House* seem to have special significance? How do names reinforce and even enhance Dickens's social critique?
- 3 The matter of Jarndyce and Jarndyce has dragged on for years. Who stands to benefit from its protracted litigation? How are lawyers portrayed in the book and on screen? Is this different from how we view the legal profession today? What drives the lawyer Tulkinghorn in his relentless pursuit of the truth? Are his motivations the same on the page and in the film? Is Dickens's critique aimed at individuals or the system as a whole? According to Dickens, does the law have any redeeming qualities?
- 4 In Dickens's England, we begin to witness the rapid emergence of the middle class and a gradual loosening of strict class divisions. How is this represented in *Bleak House*? Where do we see examples of characters striving to improve their positions? What does the author's portrayal of nobility, particularly his treatment of Sir Leicester Dedlock, say about his views on the subject? Do you see a difference between how class is represented in the book and in the film? How are the class differences in *Bleak House* played out in our society today?
- 5 *Bleak House* the novel is recounted by two separate people, Esther Summerson and a nameless, third-person narrator. The film chooses to skip this narration and lets the plot unfold on its own. Which style of storytelling do you prefer? Does one or the other make the tale more powerful? In the book, what kinds of chapters are narrated by Esther, and which by the impersonal narrator? Is there a pattern to the division? Why might the author have chosen to split up the book this way? Like most of Dickens's popular works, *Bleak House* was initially published as a serial, with many installments ending in cliffhangers that kept readers coming back for more. How do you think this might have affected their thoughts about the novel's theme, or their feelings about its characters? Would serial publication work for a major novelist today?

- 6 Though outwardly she projects an air of boredom with her day-to-day existence, Lady Dedlock guards a secret that will eventually lead to her ruin. What does Esther Summerson represent to her? Why is she so desperate that her former life never be revealed? Does she act out of concern for others, or is she driven by more selfish motives? What is the nature of her relationship with her lady's maid, Rosa? How would Lady Dedlock's situation be different today? Would she be free to make different choices, or would modern conventions still restrain her? In what ways does Lady Dedlock's struggle mirror those faced by contemporary women?
- 7 Harold Skimpole continuously refers to himself as a child, someone simple and naïve who understands nothing of business or the affairs of men. How do his actions undermine this claim? Is your image of Skimpole in the novel different from how he appears on screen? Why does his relationship with Mr. Vholes arouse the suspicion of Esther Summerson? What responsibility does Skimpole bear in Richard Carstone's undoing? Why does John Jarndyce overlook and even indulge Skimpole's blatant manipulations?
- 8 John Jarndyce has been Esther Summerson's benefactor for many years. As she matures and they begin to get acquainted, he hopes their relationship will develop into something deeper. Discuss the nature of romance in *Bleak House*. What effect does Jarndyce's love for Ada Clare have on Richard Carstone's increasing obsession with the Chancery Court? Why is Dr. Allan Woodcourt so slow to declare his love for Esther? Is it merely a sense of duty that keeps Lady Dedlock tethered to Sir Leicester? Why does John Jarndyce tell Esther his proposal of marriage was unfair to her? Is the author satirizing romantic love, or does he ultimately think it has a positive role to play in human affairs?
- 9 Toward the end of *Bleak House*, the eccentric Miss Flite sets free her entire collection of birds. How are the birds important to this story? What do they symbolize? Throughout the novel, she repeatedly claims that all will be right on judgment day. Is she vindicated when that day finally comes, and Jarndyce and Jarndyce is at last put to rest? Does justice prevail in *Bleak House*? Or are its protagonists merely cogs in a machine gone haywire?

Bleak House, by Charles Dickens, was first published in 1858. For more about the MASTERPIECE film *Bleak House*, visit <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/bleakhouse/index.html>. See also *Teaching Dickens: A Masterpiece Guide* at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/dickens/dickens_teachersguide.pdf and the *Dickens Book & Film Club* at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/bookclub/index.html>.



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