The Dickensian benefactor: Complication and change in Oliver Twist and Bleak House

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The Dickensian benefactor: Complication and change in *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House*

by

Logan Heim

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Specialization Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Sean Grass, Major Professor
Jeremy Withers
Richard Crosby

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2018

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DEDICATION

To everyone in my family, including my good friends, but especially to my mother, Audra Heim, and my grandmother, Diane Stone.

Mom, you have been the most vocal about supporting me through this program. With your encouragement, you helped me keep working when I lost my confidence. Thank you for never giving up on me, even though I was close to giving up on myself. I guess you never stopped cheerleading. Love you, mom.

Grandma, because of our many hours on the phone and your inquisitive listening, I was able to better focus, shake off the things that bothered me, and was forced to learn about myself. This MA program taught me a lot, but you helped teach me to be a better person. Without your support and our long conversations, I doubt I would have made it this far. Thanks for keeping me sane. I love you, grandma.
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ABSTRACT

Dickens often features orphans in his fiction, including at least one orphan in every novel. These orphans frequently serve as protagonists, garnering much critical attention; however, many of these orphans have at least one benefactor: an older man like Oliver Twist’s (1838) Mr. Brownlow who seemingly blesses the orphan with an adoptive family, a fellow impoverished sufferer like Bleak House’s (1853) Nemo, or even the orphan herself, like Bleak House’s Esther Summersonn. With the significant role of caring for Dickens’s many orphans, these benefactors warrant some critical attention, but the scholarly discussion is shockingly sparse. Most of the current discussion either only mentions these benefactors or characterizes them as “[dei] ex machina” (Smith 22). Bruce Robbins, one of the few scholars to examine benefactors closely in Great Expectations (1861) and Bleak House, even questions “why should the benefactors offer their assistance?” (Robbins 181).

Using this question as a platform for my analysis of benefactors in Oliver Twist and Bleak House, my first chapter defines the benefactor-beneficiary relationship to answer this question and to broaden the understanding of just what makes a benefactor in Oliver Twist. This includes analysis of the obvious generous benefactors, Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies, but also some characters most would hesitate to call benefactors due to their obligatory view of their relationship with Oliver. I then observe the stark differences between Dickens’s portrayal of successful generous benefactors in Oliver Twist with his portrayal of very unsuccessful ones in Bleak House, in which the more selfish benefactors prosper. My research seeks to broaden the discussion of these significant characters of Dickens novels and to provide examples of how this work could supplement the field.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Dickens has a reputation as a writer for the people. When he died in June 1870, according to John Forster, his grave was left open for five days after the funeral because droves of people visited his final resting place in Westminster Abbey to toss flowers and shed tears. Flowers were left in such excess that workers had to be employed to clear them out of the way to make room for more (Forster 544). His works appealed to the masses through the inclusion of an exhaustive list of characters that the lower class can identify with; orphans such as Oliver Twist, Little Nell, David Copperfield, Esther Summerson, and Pip “compris[e] the largest single group in his novels” (Adrian 72). Dickens writes prominent orphans into Oliver Twist (1838), Nickolas Nickleby (1839), The Old Curiosity Shop (1841), Barnaby Rudge (1841), Martin Chuzzlewit (1844), Dombey and Son (1848), David Copperfield (1850), Bleak House (1853), Little Dorrit (1857), A Tale of Two Cities (1859), Great Expectations (1861), Our Mutual Friend (1865), and the unfinished The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870). In truth, Dickens included at least one orphan in every novel he wrote, and in most of these the orphans play a significant role. Alongside these orphans Dickens writes other working-class characters, but the orphan stands apart, not just because of the frequency with which he or she features as protagonists, but also due to their inclusion in every one of his novels.

Much of the critical discussion of Dickens revolves around the use of his characters, especially his orphans, to bring attention to the criticisms he has of the Poor Laws, the Court of Chancery, or the general filth of London. Emily Heady, for example, notes Dickens’s use of “familiar critiques of utilitarian and traditionalist ideologies to attack the mother of all Victorian metanarratives: the narrative of progress,” some of these strategies including
examining Jo’s inequity or Dickens’s intentional omission of the Crystal Palace in his description of London (312; 315). James Buzard insists that Dickens uses “the later-day English martyrs of Nemo and Jo” to “insist that ‘everyone’s Nemo’,” thus proving Dickens’s point “that culture constitutes not only of the nation but the system of internal differences that delineates meaningful roles and identities” (30-31). Cates Baldridge argues that *Oliver Twist* is “not so much a revelation of Dickens' personal psychology as a demonstration of how certain contradictions within bourgeois ideology create, in Oliver Twist, a protagonist and a narrative in conflict with each other and—at times—with the formal requirements of the novel as a genre” (184). Each of these authors dissects how Dickens uses his characters to accomplish an authorial goal or complete a message; however, in so doing, many of these characters receive short shrift and written off as simple or one dimensional.

Orphans that exist as pieces of the large-scale arguments that critics like Baldridge, Buzard, and Heady engage in dominate much of the critical discussion of Dickens’s work, especially since these orphans are either protagonists, narrators, or both in the novels in which they appear. For instance, scholars have “emphasiz[ed] Oliver’s inborn integrity” or argued that his virtuousness in the face of adversity is even iconic, so that it has become “firmly embedded within our contemporary consciousness and . . . has shaped the popular and critical afterlives of Dickens’s novel” (Adrian 72, Fong 219). This critical consensus provides the foundation upon which Ryan Fong pursues his thesis that “Oliver’s flat characterization [is] a narrative problem,” being better characterized in movie adaptations of the unfortunate orphan. A common trend among scholars takes a critical eye to Oliver’s purity, one which Baruch Hochman and Ilja Wachs reinforce in their chapter “*Oliver Twist*”. Their entire examination of *Oliver Twist* describes the novel as centering on “a protagonist
who must be so passive and so good that he is denied anything approaching a credible life,”
going on to say that there is “no stain on Oliver’s character” (33). Esther similarly bears heavy scrutiny, as Alex Zwerdling notes, “The critics have not been kind to Esther Summerson,” accusing her of being a mask that Dickens tires of, being too coy, and being too simple (429). As the *Spectator* states in its original review, “It is impossible to doubt the simplicity of her nature, because she never omits to assert it with emphasis” (qtd. in Zwerdling 429). However, since these orphans are the main characters of the novels in which they appear, there has been plenty of scholarly discussion devoted to the complication of their characters.

But what of the characters who care for Dickens’s orphans? What of the innumerable benefactors—the aunts and grandfathers and godmothers and other patrons who care for, or at least profess to care for, the unloved, unwanted, uncared for waifs who populate Dickens’s novels? Surely if these outcast children warrant such thorough discussion, their benefactors also warrant consideration, even if only as another way in which to examine the very orphans they care for. Dickens’s orphans receive plenty of attention while their benefactors are written off as “satisfactory [dei] ex machina” when they resolve action through their defense of their charges, or as “Satanic figure[s]” when they instigate conflict via miscommunicated or misunderstood intentions weakens the current academic discussion of both benefactors and orphans (Smith 22; Surgal 34). Even when scholarship pays more critical attention to these benefactors due to their more complicated portrayals in Dickens’s later works, like John Jarndyce in *Bleak House*, whom Phoebe Poon calls “a model of benevolent guardianship,” these benefactors still function just as another way to understand the novel, the orphans they care for, or Dickens himself (Poon 6). Some of the characters that serve as
benefactors are not even acknowledged as such, like Mr. Gridley who is only referred to as “the Chancery suitor” in critical scholarship (Vanden Bossche 7). Noticing this opportunity to broaden the discussion of Dickens’s benefactors just a bit more, I hope to complicate the understanding of these pervasive characters of Dickens’s work, who are too often written off as plot devices.

The current sphere of discussion involving analysis of benefactors occurs most prominently in analyses of *Great Expectations*, since the identity of Pip’s benefactor, being withheld for the majority of the narrative, serves as quite a shock for first-time readers. However, the conversation concerns his benefactor, Abel Magwitch, as largely a plot twist without going into a detailed analysis of the complications of the prisoner-gone-benefactor as a character. The same holds true for Miss Havisham, who Pip believes patronizes him and facilitates his transformation from country boy to gentleman. Due to this confusion, Miss Havisham is placed in a pseudo-benefactor position. For Bruce Robbins, the confusion surrounding Magwitch and Miss Havisham “points the upward mobility story toward a more capacious if still historically limited social vision,” since these characters allow for development within the genre of the upward mobility story to occur. These two benefactors receive much more attention than any other of Dickens’s benefactors, who are usually placed in a fairytale dichotomy of either “fairy godmothers” or “wicked step-parents” (Surgal 17).

Even while recognizing the important impact Magwitch and Miss Havisham make on the upward mobility story, Robbins cannot justify their motivations as benefactors, at one point asking, “*why* should the benefactors offer their assistance?”, a question I seek to answer in my first chapter (181).
Robbins also draws attention to “early-Dickens fairy godmother[s]”, Franco Moretti’s complaint that early Dickens novels contain “so many ‘monsters,’” and George Orwell’s that these same novels seem always to have “a superhumanly kind-hearted old gentleman who ‘trots’ to and fro, raising his employee’s wages, patting children on the head, getting debtors out of jail, and, in general, acting the fairy godmother” (qtd. in Robbins 180). But little else has been written of Dickensian benefactors, despite the monumental roles they typically play in the lives of the novels’ protagonists. In an unpublished dissertation, Katherine Ghiselin writes, “In many Dickens novels, the ‘reception’ of a child leads to blessings for a family: Mr. Brownlow, the Gradgrinds, even Miss Havisham, experience some degree of either happiness or reconciliation or peace as an end result of their interaction with and/or adoption of a child” (61). Ghiselin thus touches upon an issue that both responds to Orwell and informs my inquiry in this thesis: that the relationships of orphans and their benefactors have a transactional nature, and that understanding the transactions that undergird these relationships helps to make sense of a great many of Dickens’s novels. Indeed, Ghiselin notes, “Fagin led the boys into crime—incidentally saving their lives . . . and used and perverted them to his own purposes” demonstrating that even the villainous benefactors’ relationships with their beneficiaries share transactional nature with the successful relationships of the fairy godmother benefactors (62). William T. Lankford reinforces this association between successful and unsuccessful benefactors in his examination of *Oliver Twist* when he establishes that “Fagin and Brownlow shelter Oliver and feed him, Sikes and Grimwig mistrust and intimidate him, and Mrs. Bedwin, Nancy, and Rose pity and defend him,” revealing that while readers regard Fagin as a villain, he still cares for Oliver, also making him a benefactor (22). The issue of benefactor relations is not so black and white;
therefore, a lens must be employed to better understand these dynamics—gift theory is that lens.

Marcell Mauss’s theory of the gift describes the transactional dynamics underlying the benefactor-beneficiary relationships in *Oliver Twist*. In *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1967), Mauss examines the traditions of various Native American, Aboriginal, Pacific Islander, and African tribal societal customs related to the giving and receiving of gifts. His major conclusions include that a gift is a “potlatch”, or “an agonistic type of total presentation” meaning that the receiving of a gift comes with a sense of obligation, that the giver must return something of equal or greater value to the giver (4, 5). Georges Bataille expands on this definition of the potlatch by stating that “[t]o give is to lose, but the loss apparently brings a profit to the one who sustains it,” meaning that one loses wealth in the giving to gain power over the recipient, ultimately resulting in a situation where “receiving prompts one—and obliges one—to give more, for it is necessary to remove the resulting obligation (71). Both Bataille’s and Mauss’s definitions reveal that because of this sense of obligation, while receiving a gift puts the receiver at an advantage in terms of physical wealth, it also places the receiver into social debt to the giver. Mauss illustrates this concept in his first chapter:

Suppose you have some particular object, *taonga*, and you give it to me; you give it to me without a price. We do not bargain over it. Now I give this thing to a third person who after a time decides to give me something in repayment for it (*utu*), and he makes me a present of something (*taonga*) . . . The *taonga* which I receive on account of the *taonga* that came from you, I must return to you. It would not be right of me to keep these *taonga*. (8-9)
While Mauss’s example involves a third party in order to demonstrate how the reciprocal power of the gift persists through multiple exchanges, this understanding reflects the nature of a beneficiary, especially that the giver gives the gift “without a price” (9). This specific example comes from the Maori people, but in subsequent chapters Mauss shows that other cultures ranging from Melanesians to North-Western Native Americans have similar constructions of the gift, albeit with varied terminology and intricacy. Bataille’s example is much more extreme than Mauss’s, involving the giving of dog teams between warring tribes. In Bataille’s example these slaves and dogs are given from one tribe to another, then the receiving tribe returns a larger quantity to the original giver to counter the obligation the gift creates and thus generating “a surplus of resources” (67-68; 72). The original giver then slaughters the people and animals, “the squandering of this surplus itself becom[ing] an object of appropriation [with] what is appropriated in the squander [being] the prestige it gives to the squanderer” (72).

Using a standard model of gift giving, Mauss explains not only how gifts are given and received, but also how commonly these exchanges occur in politics and private affairs even in western civilizations. A bride’s family giving a wedding dowry, which creates an “obligatory force of the bond, the Angebine, constituted by exchange, the offer, the acceptance of the offer and the obligation to repay,” serves as an easily recognizable example of the gift in action in western culture (Mauss 59-60). Bataille applies this idea more broadly as a strategy used by the wealthy in a society to squander their ample resources in order to gain prestige. However, neither of these structures outlines clearly what happens when a person gives a potlatch to a recipient who cannot possibly repay it. Both of the structures represented imply that the recipient is now under the giver’s power, but neither Mauss nor
Bataille gives any examples. This situation is exactly where Oliver finds himself with Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies, and the exploration of this situation could provide for examples of when a potlatch “fails.”

While most of Mauss’s work surrounds the exchange of physical wealth, he pays specific attention also to how the gift applies to familial relationships, specifically between parent and child. In his examination of Samoan culture, he identifies two types of gifts: *oloa* and *tonga*. Mauss defines *tonga* as “indestructible property” or “real property” such as marriage mats, talismans, or trinkets, and defines *oloa* as both “masculine” property and “foreign” property. However, the *oloa* is also a child under the care of his aunt and maternal uncle—the typical fostering structure for the Samoan people (6-9). These definitions provide the specific framework through which I pursue my examination of benefactors. Reflecting on Dickens’s benefactor-beneficiary relationships, the benefactors provide their beneficiaries with physical wealth, or “real property,” while the beneficiaries, who lack physical wealth, can only repay these gifts through bonds of loyalty, the same bonds of loyalty that make a fostered child *oloa*. I call these bonds of loyalty social wealth, since they originate from the obligatory nature of the *oloa* social interaction. However, my use of the term social wealth includes respect, elevated social standing, and loyalty in a more general sense, since the giving of a gift, in addition to forging an obligation on the part of the receiver, increases the giver’s social standing in a community through the recognition of the generous act of giving, making the giver’s return on a gift two-fold while the receiver’s obligation remains singular. As Ilana Blumberg points out in her study of Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*, Collins himself invoked the peculiar status of the gift when he criticized Dutch magazine publishers
for their proposed payment of a subscription to the magazine in return for printing his novel within it (162).

Jacques Derrida comes to a different understanding of the gift when examining its role in history and religion in *The Gift of Death* (1992). He claims that death is “[an] experience of absolute decisions made outside of knowledge of given norms, [and] a venture into absolute risk” (5). One’s responsibility to experience death when combined with her or his faith in confronting it results in “[t]he gift of death that puts [one] into relation with the transcendence of the other, with God as selfless goodness” (6). Derrida’s understanding of the spiritual gift here differs greatly from the gift that Mauss and Bataille describe and leads to the troubling question: if death is a gift, would it not be best to let these orphan benefactors die, or worse, to kill them? Barring this as a possible interpretation, Derrida’s understanding of the spiritual gift could be best understood through the situation that the generous benefactors of *Oliver Twist* create for the boy. Mr. Brownlow’s generosity opens the door for Oliver to demonstrate his faith, both revealing his responsibility to take action and his faith in doing so. Derrida’s description of those who should receive the gift as those who “fear and tremble before the inaccessible secret of a God who decides for us although we remain responsible to assume our life and our death” (56). Before Mr. Brownlow takes in Oliver, the boy is worn ragged and collapses. Before the Maylies take him in, he is bloody and trembling on their doorstep. Even before Fagin takes him in, the Artful Dodger finds him shivering in the cold. Each time a benefactor rescues Oliver he is trembling and on death’s door, which makes him the perfect recipient of a gift according to Derrida.

Derrida also provides for an interesting interpretation of a counterfeit gift that handily parallels the philanthropists of *Bleak House*. Derrida features the use of tobacco as his
primary example for understanding a counterfeit gift because using tobacco consumes it and breaks the cycle of wealth that a gift creates. Mauss establishes that when giving a gift, the recipient becomes wealthier and has an obligation to pay that wealth forward. However, when the gift is tobacco, that wealth burns up because “it is the object of pure and luxurious consumption [that] does not meet any natural need of the organism” (107). For this reason, Derrida argues that the recipient gains nothing, creating a false sense of obligation. He even pits this interpretation against one of Mauss’s examples of a gift exchange between Indians in which visitors offer gifts of tobacco and apologize for being poor, which the host then forgives them for. Assuming the position of the host, Derrida states “I cannot give him my forgiveness, in truth I do not owe him this forgiveness, I ought even to refuse to give it to him . . . because by not really giving to this poor man, he has not given to me” (120). This counterfeit gift mimics the situations we see with Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby of Bleak House who benefit through their gifts to the poor, while the poor receive no benefits from them, but also serves as a model for what Oliver’s relationship with Mrs. Corney or Mr. Bumble might have looked like had they been successful.

Chapter 2 addresses Bleak House, finding in the later novel a more nuanced and complex presentation of benefactors and beneficiaries, in relationships ranging from John Jarndyce’s guardianship over Esther, Ada, and Richard to Mrs. Jellyby’s and Mrs. Pardiggle’s ill-conceived philanthropic projects. As a result of this more nuanced presentation, scholarly discussion surrounding these characters goes beyond labelling any of them as simple fairy godmothers or evil step-parents. Olga Stuchebrukhov examines both Esther’s and John Jarndyce’s roles as benefactors concluding that Esther, in becoming a benefactor to Charley and Jo, “learns to rectify chancery’s [sic] iniquity and inefficiency with
equity and efficiency,” making her, through John Jarndyce’s guidance, the vehicle by which “Dickens uses Bleak House as an architectural metaphor for [a middle-class] nation” (147; 150). Similarly, Robbins pays critical attention to Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle as examples of Dickens’s “pains to associate professional passion with violent inhumanity” through an examination of the disorder and resentment of their families due to their philanthropic pursuits (218).

As the description of this thesis suggests, Dickens’s sense of benefactors and beneficiaries seems to have changed dramatically in the years between Oliver Twist and Bleak House. Where Dickens’s early orphans would eventually find a kind benefactor to take them in and provide them with a happy family (at least in the case of Dickens’s orphan protagonists), the orphans of later Dickens suffer, losing money, their childhood, and even their lives. Similarly, the success of kind benefactors and failure of selfish ones is reversed. Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle achieve their goals of garnering respect within their communities, while the selfless Nemo, who shares meals with Jo, and Mr. Gridley, who looks after Charley’s siblings while she works, come across the hardships of opium and chancery, leaving the orphans that they cared for orphans once again.

Chapter 2 closes by asking: why did Dickens’s benefactors and their relationships to the orphans they cared for change so radically in his later novels? The answer may have to do with incidents in Dickens’s life. While he was writing Bleak House, he experienced a number of hardships from a constant need to be on the move, he experienced a number of hardships from the deaths of his father and daughter to a restlessness resulting in frequent intercontinental travel. These hardships altered his writing of Bleak House, especially compared with the eagerness with which he approached the writing of Oliver Twist. Sylvère
Monod describes *Oliver Twist* as “[Dickens’s attempt] to prove that he could write a true novel, construct a real plot,” which Forster echoes in his characterization of *Oliver Twist* as “simply but well-constructed,” Claire Tomalin also notes that “*Oliver* [Twist] was tightly plotted and shaped from the start [and Dickens] considered [it] to be the best subject he had ever thought of” (115; 146; 74-75). In writing *Oliver Twist* with such rigid structure, Dickens breaks from his more extemporaneous work in other early novels such as *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) and *Nickolas Nickleby* (1839). Michael Slater suggests that this self-imposition of more structured story writing for *Oliver Twist* stems from his “not want[ing] to be thought of as *primarily* a comic writer . . . but rather as an effective satirist and a master of pathos, crusading on behalf of the poor and the powerless” (113). With this goal in mind, during the spring of 1838 Dickens “went on working at Oliver with cheerful pertinacity and devoted his evenings to the effort,” even while “planning the new periodical for Chapman and Hall, and the regular grind of editing Bentley’s [and] agree[ing] to edit . . . a long rambling manuscript containing the memoirs of the recently-deceased prince of clowns Joey Grimaldi” (Monod 130; Slater 111). Beginning work on *Oliver Twist*, the novel that set out to elevate him from comic to satirist, while managing a monstrous workload demonstrates the zeal with which Dickens approached his work on *Oliver Twist*, an enthusiastic labor that “he never did again for any of his later novels,” including *Bleak House* (Monod 130). Dickens wrote *The Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist, and Nickolas Nickleby* when he “was gradually finding himself, through trial and error as well as through trial and triumph” (126). This youthful, twenty-five-year-old Dickens, full of excitement and a willingness to experiment with his writing, bears little resemblance to the much different forty-year-old Dickens who wrote *Bleak House* amid family troubles and an unshakable urge to keep
himself moving. In the conclusion, I suggest ways in which this understanding of Dickensian benefactors and beneficiaries might be used productively to read his later novels, where scholars have already found much to say.
CHAPTER 2. THE GENEROUS AND OBLIGATORY BENEFAC'TORS OF OLIVER TWIST

Mr. Brownlow fills the role of benefactor quite nicely in *Oliver Twist*. Although he chases Oliver through the streets of London after mistaking him for a pickpocket, he becomes quickly endeared towards the honest orphan. In fact, Mr. Brownlow changes so suddenly from pursuer to protector that critics have called him “poorly realized [and] completely unbelievable” or a “fairy godmother” figure, since he seems to rescue Oliver from Fagin’s cabal of orphan pickpockets before the young boy has a chance to be corrupted (Kincaid 63; qtd. in Robbins 180). From that point on, he treats Oliver with so much love and respect that he saves him from the clutches of Fagin and the machinations of Monks while simultaneously adopting him and providing him with a nurturing environment to grow into the gentleman he was—apparently—always meant to be.

While Mr. Brownlow’s role as benefactor cannot be denied, other characters in *Oliver Twist* who sometimes care for Oliver hardly seem to fit the benefactor role. Mrs. Corney, for example, runs the workhouse where Oliver stays for a time. While there, Mrs. Corney disciplines Oliver harshly and denies him, along with the other orphans, proper nutrition. The novel thus villainizes her. But Mrs. Corney, like Mr. Bumble and Fagin, functions as a benefactor to Oliver and other beneficiaries. Just as Mr. Brownlow takes Oliver in, so does Mrs. Corney. The difference between these two characters is the understanding that Oliver has with each. Mr. Brownlow understands that Oliver has little to offer him besides his gratitude and loyalty; however, Mrs. Corney and the others expect more of a return on their investment in Oliver, whether it be harder work or stolen goods. This miscommunication between benefactor and beneficiary causes these relationships to break down and results in the portrayal of these benefactors as villains. Scrutinizing the relationships that Oliver has
with his benefactors—reevaluating both the alleged flatness of the generous “fairy godmother” benefactors and the alleged villainy of the benefactors who believe Oliver has failed in his obligations to them—reveals that these relationships are more complicated than they appear.

**Obligatory Benefactors:**

By using the relationship of the gift between benefactor and beneficiary, the villainous benefactors of *Oliver Twist* do not appear as villainous as the narrator makes them seem. The reason that Oliver’s relationships with Mrs. Corney, Mr. Bumble, and Fagin fail results from a misunderstanding of the terms in which Oliver must repay each benefactor’s gifts. These benefactors treat Oliver harshly because they feel that his obligation to them has not been paid in the expected manner, resulting in my terming them obligatory benefactors.

**Mrs. Corney**

Mrs. Corney seems little more than the harsh matron of the workhouse where Oliver lives when he is eight. Her status as a minor character and her depiction by the narrator makes it easy to accept this as the case. She feeds her charges barely enough to keep them from starving, speaking of them and to them with contempt. She does this all the while skimming money given to her from the government for the boys’ care to provide for her cozy room with a “small round table: on which stood a tray of corresponding size, furnished with all necessary materials for the most grateful meal that matrons enjoy,” and of course, the “silver spoon (private property)” she used to scoop her tea (146). This is all in stark contrast to the “[b]leak, dark, and piercing cold” that her orphans had to endure (146). Without a doubt, nearly starving children while living in relative comfort herself makes Mrs. Corney
villainous. However, analyzing her behavior and applying the lens of gift theory complicates this interpretation of her as a selfish child-abuser.

Mrs. Corney did not treat her charges differently than most Victorian workhouse matrons, which is exactly what Dickens aims to criticize about the New Poor Laws in his writing of *Oliver Twist*. Caretakers and parents treated children as small adults and believed that eight-year-olds were old enough to begin working full time. Adrian discusses the dreadful work performed by children in cotton mills, coal mines, and chimneys due to their small stature. Children could reach and maneuver things that many adults could not because their hands or bodies were small enough to reach the desired part or fit in a tunnel. Those who cared for children expected them to work diligently for their daily bread as an adult would, or face the prospect of eternal damnation for their wicked laziness (Adrian 55-56).

It makes sense, then, that a superior whose staff was taking advantage of her would punish that staff. When visiting with Mrs. Corney, Mr. Bumble describes his day interacting with the poor: “[W]e have given away a matter of twenty quarter loaves, and a cheese and a half, this very blessed afternoon; and yet the paupers are not contented,” going on to say, “ma’am is he grateful? Not a copper farthing’s worth of it! What does he do, ma’am, but ask for a few coals . . . [to] toast his cheese with ‘em, and then come back for more” (147). Mrs. Corney then “express[es] her entire concurrence in this intelligible smile” communicating that she has personal experience with ungrateful paupers: namely her orphans (147). Therefore, Mrs. Corney punishes the extortionist orphans by taking away or reducing their pay, that is, their meals. This subpar performance also explains her contempt for these orphans, which she clearly expresses when she says, “I’m sure we have all on us a great deal to be grateful for – a great deal, if we did not know it. Ah!” then “shak[ing] her head
mournfully, as if deploring the mental blindness of the paupers who did not know it,” the
“great deal to be grateful for” referring to the care that she provides the orphans of the
workhouse with (146). The ingratitude of the orphans she cares for provokes Mrs. Corney’s
contempt for them. To Mrs. Corney, her beneficiaries are nothing more than lazy workers
who need to be punished to rectify their behavior.

Mrs. Corney’s view of the situation conflicts with the primary position of a successful
benefactor. This misunderstanding of the situation results in Mrs. Corney’s neglect and abuse
and her beneficiaries’ consequent view of her as a tyrant. She expects physical wealth and
some social wealth in return from her beneficiaries after providing them with physical
wealth. Specifically, she expects the orphans she cares for to generate as much profit from
their work as the government gives her to care for them, and she also expects gratitude from
the orphans for the care she provides. Since she feeds the orphans poorly, reducing the
physical wealth they are able to produce through their labor and eliminating their ability to
demonstrate their gratitude, the orphans cannot provide either the social or physical
dividends that Mrs. Corney expects. Therefore, she further punishes them by continuing to
feed them poorly, continuing the cycle. Just as the original gift exchange relationship creates
an endless loop where both parties slowly gain social wealth through the exchange of
physical wealth, this flawed relationship between Mrs. Corney and her orphans creates an
endless loop of disappointment on each end, resulting in a relationship where both sides feel
that the other has not fulfilled its obligations.

Mr. Bumble

Mr. Bumble’s relationship with Oliver resembles Mrs. Corney’s, but from a different
position of power. Bumble earns a reputation as a villain for the cane he uses to beat
children. As the parish beadle in the beginning of the novel, Bumble "come[s] [to the workhouse] upon parochial business connected with the parochial orphans" (5). Since he lords his parochial affiliations over the workhouse matron, he must value the respect he garners—or perceives himself to have garnered—as a parish officer, while making clear his purpose to serve the children as a religious benefactor. Adrian claims that another form of discipline benefactors and parents used for children was to protect their children’s eternal soul by “acting in God’s place, [and] instruct[ing] them to be truthful, obedient, punctual, and respectful toward their elders” (51).

Where Mrs. Corney abuses the children primarily by denying them food and working them hard, Bumble favors beating his beneficiaries. According to Adrian, “If [putting an undisciplined child on a diet of bread and water] failed, cuffings and floggings usually produced the desired result,” (51). That is, teaching a beneficiary honesty, obedience, punctuality, and respect would keep them in good Christian standing. When divine purpose justifies physical punishment, it makes sense that Bumble would carry a cane for floggings to better conduct his “business”. However, Bumble expresses concern for Oliver outside of corporal punishment, however, when he leaves the workhouse to drop off Oliver at Mr. Sowerberry’s funeral home. After Oliver asks for “some more,” resulting in his ejection from the working house, Oliver laments that “’Everybody hates me. Oh! sir, don’t, don’t pray be cross to me!’” and Bumble “look[s] in his companion’s face, with tears of real agony . . . [and] hem[s] three or four times in a husky manner . . . once more taking his hand, [and] walk[s] with him in silence” (23-24). Bumble’s hesitation and silence in response to Oliver’s despair, while not the warmest response, reveals that he cares for Oliver on some emotional level. Since Bumble has a reputation for not responding to any emotion other than anger, this
break from character by soothing Oliver and even shedding a few tears becomes more impactful. This scene reveals that Bumble struggles to express his care for his parochial charges outside of the contemporary practice of stern treatment. If Adrian is correct in arguing for the place of harsh discipline in cultivating right religious feeling in children, we might read Bumble’s harsh treatment of Oliver and the children as an effort to protect their Christian souls. Physical punishments serve as a tool for Bumble to help discipline and ultimately save the children. While this does not excuse him from his readiness to abuse the children he cares for, it does complicate the common interpretation that he acts brutally for the sake of being brutal, making him no simple villain.

Again, comparing Bumble’s relationship with Oliver to the normal benefactor-beneficiary relationship reveals that a misunderstanding between Bumble and Oliver causes his perception as simple villain. Bumble, unlike most benefactors, does not provide his beneficiaries with physical wealth. However, he does not expect any sort of physical wealth in return for the care he provides, removing this aspect of the relationship from the equation. Instead, he works in terms of religious wealth. Like Mrs. Corney’s version of the benefactor-beneficiary relationship, Bumble’s version results in his perception that the children do not repay his contribution adequately. He expects to receive social wealth in the form of gratitude from the children in this relationship. Since Bumble’s most common interaction with these children ends with them being beaten, the children are not grateful to him. This results in his feeling that they remain obliged to him for his service. When Oliver pleads with Bumble to not be cross with him, Oliver inadvertently shows that he values his connection to Bumble. Whether this comes from his sense that “Everybody” hates him, or from the possibility that Oliver truly values Bumble, means little to the beadle. Bumble values the
return of social wealth on his investment in Oliver, which ultimately allows him to soften towards the boy for this brief moment. Essentially, this scene acts as the only example where this benefactor-beneficiary relationship functions, but due to it functioning based on Oliver’s loneliness rather than his actual appreciation for Bumble, it soon fails again.

Bumble’s honest belief that he helps children through his abuses again demonstrates a breakdown in communication between him and his beneficiaries, much like the misunderstanding present in Mrs. Corney’s relationship with her beneficiaries. However, where the misunderstanding between Mrs. Corney and her beneficiaries centers around an expectation for more of a return from her investment in the orphans’ care, the misunderstanding between Bumble and his beneficiaries results from their failure to understand that he invests in them by treating them harshly to give them a chance at going to heaven.

**Fagin**

The subtlety of Fagin and Oliver’s miscommunication makes it more difficult to see how their relationship fails compared to the more obvious cases of Mrs. Corney and Bumble. In fact, a combination of slight miscommunications combines to form the larger misunderstanding that undermines their relationship. Fagin takes for granted that Oliver knows he must steal to provide his share for the new “family” that he finds himself in, while Oliver remains completely oblivious to this fact because of his naivety. The first miscommunication that occurs when Oliver first hears about Fagin from the Artful Dodger. The Dodger describes Fagin as “a ‘spectable old genelman . . . wot’ll give [him] lodgings for nothink, and never ask for the change” (48). The Dodger then “smile[s] as if to intimate that the latter fragments of discourse . . . were playfully ironical” (48). Based on this observation,
Oliver thinks that only the final part of the Dodger’s description was “playfully ironical,” whereas the entirety of what he says is ironic. Fagin possesses no gentlemanly qualities and he certainly does not give “lodgings for nothink, and never ask for the change” because he requires the children to steal for him to keep food on the table and a fire in the hearth. Oliver does not know this, however, and thinks of Fagin as a gentleman before ever meeting him.

The next miscommunication comes from his actually meeting Fagin for the first time. The moment Oliver meets Fagin should sew mistrust in him as the “‘spectable old genelman’ is “dressed in a greasy flannel gown” surrounded by “several rough beds made of old sacks . . . [and] four or five boys . . . smoking long clay pipes, and drinking spirits, with the air of middle-aged men” (50). If this was not a clear enough signal, the secretive way in which “[t]hese [boys] crowded around [Artful Dodger] as he whispered a few words to the Jew” should have revealed that nothing “‘spectable” goes on in Fagin’s home (50; 48).

Communication breaks down between Oliver and Fagin when Oliver sees the many handkerchiefs hanging around the room. Fagin notices his staring and says, “Ah, you’re a-staring at the pocket-handkerchiefs! Eh, my dear? There are a good many of them, ain’t there? We’ve just looked ‘em out, ready for the wash; that’s all, Oliver; that’s all. Ha! Ha! Ha!” (50). Oliver takes Fagin at his word that the handkerchiefs are out for a wash rather than recognizing the irony Fagin employs, an irony that garners “a boisterous shout from all [his] hopeful pupils” (50). Everyone involved in the situation, from Fagin to his pupils, clearly understands his meaning except for Oliver.

Finally, Oliver again misunderstands Fagin’s irony the next day when he asks Oliver, “You’d like to be able to make pocket-handkerchiefs as easy as Charley Bates, wouldn’t you, my dear?” to which he replies “very much indeed, if you’ll teach me, sir” (54). Oliver
remains oblivious to Fagin’s intentions. He believes that when Fagin describes making handkerchiefs, he means crafting them, whereas Fagin clearly means stealing them. Each of these instances contains details showing the reader that either Fagin or his pupils employ irony, but Oliver cannot understand that. In this case, Oliver misunderstands the relationship rather than his benefactor.

In theory, Fagin and Oliver’s relationship could work. Both sides’ expectations balance, and each have a way of providing the required forms of wealth. However, the misunderstanding comes from Oliver believing that he will be able to provide the physical wealth that Fagin expects from him through honest means, by sewing handkerchiefs, whereas Fagin expects him to steal the handkerchiefs. Oliver, who cannot provide physical wealth through dishonest means, especially after being conditioned by Bumble that a beating follows dishonesty, fails in his obligations to his benefactor, creating yet another obligatory benefactor relationship. The benefactor-beneficiary relationships in Oliver Twist are only successful when the benefactor and beneficiary both understand the relationship and are willing to accept its terms.

**Generous Benefactors:**

Rose, Harry, and Mrs. Maylie, and Mr. Brownlow serve as the major generous benefactors in Oliver Twist, but critics have paid very little attention to their generosity. This generosity results in them being considered little more than de ex machina, ignoring the question of why these characters should offer their assistance. We can see how the Maylies and Mr. Brownlow benefit from their relationship with Oliver. While these benefactors receive no financial return on their investments in Oliver, they receive social dividends in the form of loyalty and obedience from him, which they value highly. While Oliver’s first
relationship with a generous benefactor comes when Brownlow rescues him, my discussion of these benefactors begins with the Maylies. Since their relationship with Oliver spans a shorter amount of time than Mr. Brownlow’s, and Mr. Brownlow ultimately adopts Oliver, the Maylies take a less prominent role and offer a more convenient start to the discussion.

The Maylies

Rose and Mrs. Maylie take Oliver in after he turns up on their doorstep with a bullet wound he received the previous night. Although Oliver was shot in the process of trying to rob the Maylies, Rose and Mrs. Maylie do not want to see him die. The doctor, Mr. Losberne, warns them not to trust Oliver too much because “[v]ice . . . takes up her abode in many temples; and who can say that a fair outside shall not enshrine her?” (191). As they look on the injured Oliver, though, they quickly forget these words of caution. Rose has no intention of turning Oliver away, which Mrs. Maylie reinforces by soothing the sobbing Rose and asking Losberne, “What can I do to save him, sir?” (192). This lack of reservation in deciding to care for Oliver, reinforced by a favorable description of his apparent innocence while he slumbers, demonstrates that the Maylies show some characteristics of fairy godmother characters, especially since Losberne attempts to make them reserve judgement until Oliver has had a chance to “shew to the satisfaction of your cool reason, that he is a real and thorough bad one” (193). However, their altruism can be seen as a demonstration of guilt, since their servant shot the young boy, causing them to feel obliged to care for him.

We can see the Maylies’s sense of guilt through their agreement to let Losberne treat Mr. Giles poorly. After Giles relays his embellished version of getting up to “save [Brittles] from being murdered in his bed,” he receives praise from the maids (184). This high regard and praise quickly turn to shame, however, when the robber is revealed to be a child. In fact,
“[s]uch accommodations had been bestowed upon [Giles’s] bravery, that he could not, for the life of him, help postponing the explanation for a few delicious minutes” (190). Once discovered, however, Mrs. Maylie and Rose agree to allow Losberne “full and unlimited commission to bully Giles, and that little boy, Brittles,” in order to achieve Oliver’s full recovery (192). By making Giles and Brittles scapegoats, Rose and Mrs. Maylie attempt to relieve their own guilt. The Maylies, feeling guilty, feel obliged to aide however they can in Oliver’s recovery. However, their agreeing to the harsh treatment of Giles illustrates the obligation they feel. By allowing Giles to be so harshly treated in tandem with their providing the means for Oliver to make a recovery, the Maylies simultaneously initiate the exchange of a gift, the physical wealth of food, medicine, and shelter they provide Oliver with, but also confront their own guilt.

Once Oliver returns to health and the Maylies absolve themselves of their guilt, all debts should be resolved, but Oliver remains under the Maylies’ care. Oliver’s relationship with the Maylies does not oblige him to them because he is a victim, not a beneficiary. However, Oliver views the care he receives from the Maylies as a gift from a benefactor, rather than as reparations for an assault. Since Oliver feels obliged to the Maylies for care they provide him, a sense of obligation develops when it should not. This sense of obligation combined with the guilt that he feels for intruding on the Maylies’ home in an attempt to rob them prompts Oliver to repay the Maylies in the only form available to him, the exchange of social wealth. In this case, Oliver’s feelings of obligation, similar to the Maylies’ sense of obligation, initiates a benefactor-beneficiary relationship through another misunderstanding.

The Maylies, of course, allow him to repay them through these social means because Losberne’s attempt to reveal Oliver’s corruption fails. In fact, it inspired pity for him. The
initiation of the benefactor relationship then begins the cycle of debt and repayment in order for Oliver and the Maylies’ relationship to function. Oliver, even before his recovery, begins repaying the Maylies through “the blessings which [he] called down upon them, [sinking] into their souls, diffusing peace and happiness” (205). These payments of peace continue throughout the remainder of the novel, but each member of the Maylie family benefits differently from Oliver, apart from the general blessings just described.

Harry Maylie has perhaps the most straightforward relationship with Oliver. Harry, being the only male among the Maylie benefactors, serves Oliver mainly in chasing after Fagin and Monks when Oliver awakes to see them watching over him in his sleep. This positions him as a protector. Harry does, however, benefit the most clearly from his relationship with Oliver by having Oliver agree to write him “once a fortnight” to tell him “how [his] mother and Miss Maylie are” (237). Although Oliver only sees this as keeping up a pleasant correspondence with a new friend and benefactor, Harry uses Oliver to keep him informed of Rose’s activity while he is away to better court her when he returns. Oliver eagerly provides Harry with gratitude and obedience by writing Harry “every alternate Monday,” which gains Harry social wealth both from Oliver and the knowledge he gains of Rose.

Mrs. Maylie benefits from her relationship with Oliver in a less obvious way. When she first discovers Oliver, she chooses to care for him because “[her] days are drawing to their close; and may mercy be shewn to [her] as [she] shew[s] it to others!” (192). While the investment of physical wealth that Mrs. Maylie makes in Oliver comes back in social wealth, this specific line shows that there will also be religious or divine dividends paid as well. These forms of return are similar. Mrs. Maylie’s quote describes that she believes God will
show her mercy if she shows Oliver mercy. Therefore, Mrs. Maylie knows that providing
Oliver with care, which will not inconvenience her much, benefits her in her mortal life and
stands to pay spiritual dividends for her in the afterlife.

Rose breaks from the standard benefactor relationship by not offering Oliver any
physical gifts, but she still effectively benefits him while receiving benefits herself. Rose and
Oliver’s relationship involves them exchanging gifts of social wealth. Rose gives Oliver
companionship and emotional support, receiving the same from him in addition to his
obedience. This places Rose in a sibling role compared to the other Maylie benefactors. The
two share a companionate bond, spend a lot of time with each other, and form a strong
emotional connection over the later chapters of the novel.

Each of the Maylies’ relationships with Oliver differs, with each member of the
family providing Oliver some different gifts that a benefactor would provide. Mrs. Maylie
provides him with money, Harry provides him with protection, and Rose gives him
emotional support. Each of these characters helps to care for and nurture Oliver in his time
under their care resulting in “Oliver gradually thriv[ing] and prosper[ing] under the united
care of Mrs. Maylie, Rose, and the kind-hearted Mr. Losberne” (205). This combined care
allows Oliver to enact the upward mobility of a typical orphan protagonist.

**Mr. Brownlow**

Brownlow enters into his benefactor relationship with Oliver much the same as the
Maylies. Brownlow mistakes Oliver for a thief and chases him through the streets of London
and to the magistrate’s office. Once arriving there, however, Brownlow notices that Oliver
“‘has been hurt already . . . And [Brownlow] fear[s] . . . that he is very ill’” (64). As the
magistrate tries Oliver, the poor boy eventually collapses. After the case, Brownlow sees the
sick Oliver laid on the pavement pale and trembling. He bends over him and says, “‘Poor boy, poor boy! . . . Call a coach somebody, pray. Directly!’” (66). Brownlow clearly pities the unconscious and abused Oliver and feels responsible for his compromised state, since he falsely accused Oliver of theft. Like the Maylies, Brownlow’s guilt results in his decision to nurse Oliver back to health. He continues to pity Oliver as “[his] heart . . . force[s] a supply of tears into his eyes” upon seeing Oliver during his recovery (71). Brownlow could send Oliver on his way after nursing him back to health, absolving him of his guilt by restoring Oliver to the condition he was in before the chase and subsequent beating. However, he continues to care for him.

This continued care for Oliver acts as the first exchange of a gift between them—a gift predicated upon Brownlow realizing that his caring for Oliver would be a sound investment rather than simple charity. The way Oliver conducts himself through his recovery demonstrates his gratitude. Mrs. Bedwin notices the “grateful little dear” by his “anxious[ness] to obey” which made it “impossible [for Brownlow] to doubt [his honesty]” (68, 72). Brownlow notices this grateful behavior and eagerness to please and tells Oliver:

I do not think you ever will [need to be afraid of my deserting you]. I have been deceived, before, in the objects whom I have endeavored to benefit; but I feel strongly disposed to trust you, nevertheless; and I am more interested in your behalf than I can well account for, even to myself. The persons on whom I have bestowed my dearest love, lie deep in their graves; but, although the happiness and delight of my life lie buried there too, I have not made a coffin of my heart and sealed it up, for ever, on my best affections. Deep affliction has but strengthened and refined them. (85)
This monologue puts Oliver at ease and explains Brownlow’s interest in him, but it also reveals his motivations for accepting Oliver as a beneficiary.

Firstly, “I have been deceived, before,” establishes that Brownlow has experience acting as a benefactor and has learned when his trust should be reserved or given. This complicates the view of him as a fairy godmother, since a simple fairy godmother would freely give her trust without a second thought. This statement demonstrates that Brownlow has considered Oliver’s trustworthiness before coming to the conclusion that “he is strongly disposed to trust [him].” Oliver has been recuperating for days and Brownlow has had several opportunities to extend an official invitation to become his benefactor. Brownlow’s prudence in evaluating Oliver’s trustworthiness before entering into a benefactor relationship with him demonstrates a level of thoughtful reservation that a fairy godmother would not possess.

The second portion of this monologue establishes how Brownlow will benefit from his relationship with Oliver, whom he treats as a loyal companion. Brownlow says, “The persons on whom I have bestowed my dearest love, lie deep in their graves,” demonstrating Brownlow’s loneliness. After all, the persons he has loved most in life are dead. Brownlow also establishes his desire to have a close relationship with someone because “[he] ha[s] not made a coffin of [his] heart,” implying that he still wants to forge these close relationships. If Brownlow were simply a fairy godmother, he would act as Oliver’s benefactor simply because that would be the most kindhearted thing to do. The fact that he has a clear motive to act as Oliver’s benefactor, however convenient to Oliver’s situation, demonstrates that he acts in his own self-interests as well as Oliver’s. Although Oliver’s abduction by Nancy and Sikes leaves Brownlow thinking Oliver has abandoned him, he still rejoices in his reunion
with him later in the novel. Once Rose reveals that Oliver is waiting for Brownlow in the coach outside his door, he cries, “At this door!” and “hurrie[s] out of the room, down the stairs, up the coach-steps, and into the coach without another word,” clearly demonstrating his enthusiasm to reunite with Oliver (citation). Here Brownlow demonstrates how much he values his relationship with Oliver. However, Brownlow outwardly demonstrates his appreciation for the return of his friend and beneficiary only after he demonstrates his prudent reserve by controlling his excitement until Rose provides proof that she knows Oliver’s location, since Brownlow had scoured London for him before his trip out of the country. While this reserve is short-lived, it harkens back to the reserve he displays earlier by not immediately becoming Oliver’s benefactor. This second display of prudence continues to distinguish Brownlow from the typical fairy godmother because he demonstrates reservation.

Brownlow also brings something unique to the discussion of generous benefactor characters in *Oliver Twist* in that he embodies each of the aspects demonstrated by the Maylies simultaneously. Reflecting on Oliver’s relationship with the Maylies and Brownlow reveals that striking similarities exist between the two. Just as Harry provides Oliver with protection from Fagin and Monks, Brownlow provides Oliver with protection from Fagin when visiting him in prison and Monks through negotiating a way for Oliver and his half-brother to split the will. Just as Mrs. Maylie provides Oliver with physical wealth through the care she provides him, Brownlow provides Oliver with material support and significant care. Just as Rose provides Oliver with companionship throughout the later chapters of the novel, Brownlow provides Oliver with companionship when he first takes care of him. Even Dr. Losberne’s initial skepticism and eventual embrace of Oliver are embodied in Brownlow. Whereas the Maylies collectively preform the many aspects of an ideal generous benefactor,
Brownlow accomplishes all of these functions himself. By performing himself all of the functions that the Maylies perform for Oliver, and by having complicated motivations for adopting Oliver, Brownlow establishes himself as perhaps the most complicated generous benefactor in *Oliver Twist*.

Though the benefactors of *Oliver Twist* do not receive much attention due to their perceived simplicity, both the generous and obligatory benefactors contain more depth than the prior scholarship has suggested. The miscommunications between Mrs. Corney, Bumble, and Fagin and their shared benefactor, Oliver, prevent a reading of these characters as benefactors like one would imagine a benefactor. The motivations for The Maylies and Brownlow providing for Oliver and the benefits they receive from their relationships with him demonstrate that they do not give their gifts entirely selflessly. These generous benefactors do benefit from their relationship with Oliver, providing motivation for establishing their benefactor relationships with him and making it more difficult to label them as dei ex machina.
CHAPTER 3. REFLECTIVE REPRESENTATION: DICKENS’S SHIFT IN HIS BENEFACTORS’ EFFICACY

The first *Bleak House* philanthropist we are introduced to, Mrs. Jellyby, has “very remarkable strength of character, who devotes herself entirely to the public,” certainly a feat to be respected (44). Mr. Kenge, the man who provides this description of Mrs. Jellyby, goes on to say “[s]he has devoted herself to an extensive variety of public subjects,” the most current of these being Africa (44). John Jarndyce, noticing her work, has a “very high opinion of Mrs. Jellyby” (44). She has earned such respect that Mr. Kenge does not “know that [he] can describe [Mr. Jellyby] better than by saying that he is the husband of Mrs. Jellyby,” meaning that Mrs. Jellyby’s reputation has eclipsed her husband’s, quite the feat for a Victorian woman (44). After such an introduction, the utter mess of a home “strewn with papers and nearly filled by a great writing-table covered with similar litter” must no doubt startle Ada and Esther (47). Mrs. Jellyby is as unkempt as her home. She has “handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off,” Esther writes, and she has “very good hair, but was too much occupied with her African duties to brush it” (47). Mrs. Jellyby’s daughter, Caddy, seems to be the only member of the family that notices the poor state of their living conditions, confessing to Esther, “The whole house is disgraceful. The children are disgraceful. I’m Disgraceful. Pa’s miserable, and no wonder!” (56). She blames this miserable state of affairs on Mrs. Jellyby’s interests in Africa, demonstrating that these interests are wreaking havoc on the Jellyby family.

Mrs. Jellyby is just one of *Bleak House*’s innumerable benefactors. Her fellow philanthropist Mrs. Pardiggle gives her children’s money to a variety of causes, from the Tockahoopo Indians to the Superannuated Widows. Nemo, though he is poor, shares is money with Jo. Mr. Snagsby also give Jo money, accompanying each half-crown with his
sympathetic cough. Mr. Gridley, the salty old victim of Chancery, spends time with Charley’s siblings while she works to support them. Esther herself even tries her hand at caring for Jo, albeit briefly. And, of course, John Jarndyce plays a significant role as the quintessential benefactor of *Bleak House*, adopting Esther, Ada, and Richard.

Scholars have had relatively little to say about *Bleak House*’s benefactors, focusing most of their attention on official philanthropists like Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. For instance, Bruce Robbins examines specifically the philanthropists Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, specifically the disorder of their families in relation to their foreign interests. Olga Stuchebrukhov focuses instead on Esther, calling her “the national norm exemplified … [an epitome of] the balance between duty and personal happiness, self-respect and self-sacrifice, intuition and reason” (147). One part of her analysis goes into detail about Esther’s propensity for “administer[ing] her help regardless of social status by taking care of sick Jo and Charley and, in so doing, becomes the guardian of the socially weak” (151). These examinations of benefactors in *Bleak House* take a much more critical eye to benefaction than the scholarship on *Oliver Twist* does.

Dickens’s treatment of benefactors clearly takes a dramatic shift from *Oliver Twist* to *Bleak House*, a shift that reflects some of the occurrences of his life before and during the writing of *Bleak House*. The successful, generous benefactors of *Oliver Twist* find their *Bleak House* counterparts suffering greatly, often as a direct result of their involvement with their orphaned beneficiaries, like Esther who is infected with Jo’s illness. Meanwhile, the unsuccessful obligatory benefactors of *Oliver Twist* engage in philanthropy in *Bleak House*, receiving all of the social benefits a benefactor would have while not actually providing for their beneficiaries, like Mrs. Pardiggle whose work with the poor earns her respect, but
whose gifts of Christian readings do not benefit the hungry and filthy brickmakers she preaches to.

The changed outcome for philanthropists in *Bleak House* may reflect Dickens’s growing experience in philanthropic work, particularly with Miss Angela Burdett-Coutts. Anne Isba analyzes the personal relationships between Dickens and his philanthropic partner Miss Coutts, noting that the two had been good friends starting in 1840 and “worked indefatigably on . . . Miss Coutt’s charitable projects” (90). These projects included “the Ragged Schools for the free education of destitute children – indeed, education of the poor, generally; urban sanitation; affordable housing for the disadvantaged of society; and vocational training schools for girls” (Isba 90). The London poor benefitted from each of these projects, while Mrs. Jellyby’s and Mrs. Pardiggle’s projects result in no benefits to her beneficiaries whatsoever. These differences position the work of Dickens and Coutts as a foil to that of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. However, these differences extend to the personal characteristics of each pair of philanthropists. As Isba notes, “Miss Coutts was said to be reserved by nature; in fact, extremely shy,” which starkly contrasts to Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle who are both extremely vocal about how diligent they work for their philanthropic pursuits (147). The fact that these differences between Coutts and the *Bleak House* philanthropists even extends to their personal characteristics helps to create a more complete foil. Despite these differences, the philanthropists of *Bleak House* succeed in gaining respect for the work they do; however, their family lives suffer, where Coutts’s does not, allowing Dickens to write these philanthropists as successful without leaving them flawless.

The outcast Dickens who wrote *Bleak House* differs greatly from the zealous Dickens who wrote *Oliver Twist*, and his orphans and their benefactors see similar change.
Oliver Twist, Dickens wished to elevate his status from comic to satirist, in his later books “he was to attempt nothing less than an anatomy of modern society [with] Bleak House articulat[ing] its institutions, from government and law to philanthropy and religion,” a dreary task that caused Dickens’s “old high spirits [to] gleam less frequently” and to be replaced with “a new intensity and integration, rich, dark, sulphurous, that weights every observation and cuts like a knife” (Johnson 743-744). On April 14th, 1851, two weeks after his father’s death, Dickens’s baby daughter died (Monod 366). Added to these deaths were his friends, Richard Watson, the Count D’Orsay, and Thomas Talfourd, all in their fifties and all in 1852 (Tomalin 238). By the June following his father’s and daughter’s deaths, Dickens began losing interest in his family and his friendship with Forster. Upon the birth of another child, Una Pope-Hennessy writes, Dickens wrote to Mark Lemon, “I don’t congratulate you on the Baby, because I can’t bear to be congratulated on my own Babies” (qtd. in Monod 367). Becoming estranged with Forster, he developed a friendship with Wilkie Collins. Dickens’s suffering culminated in his compulsion to keep on the move. In 1851 he wrote to Forster:

Still the victim of an intolerable restlessness, I shouldn't be at all surprised if I wrote to you one of these mornings from under Mont Blanc. I sit down between wiles 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; and to be going I don't know where, I don't know why; takes hold of me, that it is like being driven away. (Forster 441)

Dickens’s escape, his keeping occupied with the work of writing, a work that the younger Dickens reveled in, eluded him during his later years. He even needed to delay his writing to move to Tavistock House, a filthy decrepit old house that “drove Dickens almost to frenzy”
trying to repair it and make it livable; 380,000 words into *Bleak House* he “had a severe recurrence of kidney trouble . . . and spent six painful days in bed” (Johnson 747, 757). All of this loss, suffering, and agitation appears in *Bleak House* from the far-flung attentions of Mrs. Jellyby to the sheer number of bodies which claims some children and leaves others fatherless. The dismal tone of *Bleak House* conflicts with Oliver’s hopeful ending and the punishment the obligatory benefactors receive.

**The Socially-Motivated Philanthropists**

The first manifestation of Dickens’s changed benefactors we see in *Bleak House*, Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, fill their days by working as professional philanthropists in an effort to advance their social capital. Mrs. Jellyby strives to serve the people of Africa and Mrs. Pardiggle sets her sights on impoverished citizens of London along with various charitable organizations. Ultimately, these beneficiaries do not benefit from these impotent benefactors, since they need food and healthier living conditions or to not be colonized, not the Christian preaching that the poor receive or the money the Indians and Africans receive. This means Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle are the only ones who benefit from their work, principally by gaining respect and admiration from their peers for their “selfless” contributions to their beneficiaries. This sort of benefactor relationship would result in a failure for the benefactor in Dickens’s earlier novels, but in *Bleak House* benefactors like this gain social acclaim.

This change presents itself when comparing Mrs. Corney to Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. Mrs. Corney’s work supporting orphans in the workhouse closely relates to philanthropy, since she works to help the disenfranchised orphans under her care. In *Oliver Twist*, Mrs. Corney’s improper feeding of the children she cares for and her displeasure for
how little they appreciate her make her a villain. Meanwhile, in *Bleak House*, Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle achieve social acclaim for their philanthropy while they do very little to help. These slight differences result in a complete reversal of fortune for these characters.

Dickens’s work with Coutts and the philanthropic work of Mrs. Jellyby differs through Mrs. Jellyby’s relationship with her beneficiaries, the Africans. Before Esther meets Mrs. Jellyby, Mr. Kenge describes how Mrs. Jellyby’s work with the tribes of Africa has earned her respect amongst her peers. Clearly Mrs. Jellyby reaps the rewards of her benefactor relationship with the people of Africa, since the members of her community respect her for her generosity. While this may initially indicate a healthy benefactor-beneficiary relationship, these tribes have no interest in learning to cultivate the coffee berry for the express concern to export it to England and elsewhere, making them just another colony under Britain’s control. The failure to provide her beneficiaries with something that they actually need creates a flawed relationship, one that perversely benefits the benefactor over the beneficiary.

Mrs. Jellyby’s deeply flawed home life and relationship with her family provides a physical manifestation of her corrupt practices. Mrs. Jellyby’s house, “not only very untidy, but very dirty,” her husband, constantly working to afford her philanthropic donations, her literate daughter slaving away until she “[is] in such a state of ink,” and her younger children running wild, all culminate in Caddy telling Esther that she “wish[es] Africa [were] dead!” (47; 55). The utter contempt that Caddy feels for Africa clearly illustrates how Mrs. Jellyby’s philanthropic work wreaks havoc on her family life, tearing it to shambles. It has consumed all of her attention and the wellbeing of her family, demonstrating the flaws within this
relationship but ultimately unheeded by Mrs. Jellyby, who is blinded by the respect she receives.

Mrs. Pardiggle similarly devotes her time and energies to philanthropic interests both in London and in the new world to the disadvantage of her family. Like Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle’s reputation precedes her. According to Esther, Mrs. Pardiggle is chief “[a]mong the ladies who were most distinguished for . . . rapacious benevolence . . . almost as powerful a correspondent as Mrs. Jellyby herself” (113). However, where Mrs. Jellyby can be compared to a telescope due to her philanthropy in Africa, Mrs. Pardiggle takes the form of a loudspeaker. Mrs. Pardiggle has “a loud voice” and “knock[s] down little chairs with her skirts,” making both her voice and her presence disruptive (113). Like Caddy, Mrs. Pardiggle’s children also hate her. Where Caddy hates her mother for her neglect, Mrs. Pardiggle’s children hate her because she, as her eldest son says, “make[s] a sham . . . pretend[ing] to give me money, and tak[ing] it away again” leading him to “[demand] a shilling of [Esther], on the ground that his pocket-money was ‘boned’ from him,” and to ask “Why do you call it my allowance, and never let me spend it?” (118). This sham allowance, another aspect of her philanthropy, results in her children being as unpleasant as Mrs. Jellyby’s, but because they are hateful and mean rather than simply filthy.

While Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle similarly devote themselves to their roles as philanthropic benefactors to the detriment of their families, their philanthropic interests fail for different reasons. The nominal beneficiaries in both of these relationships—the Africans, the Native Americans, and the brickmakers—do not actually benefit from these relationships. The Africans do not need to learn to “the general cultivation of the coffee berry”, the Tockahoopo Indians do not need Egbert’s five-and-three-pence, and the brickmakers do not
care about Christianity (44). All of these beneficiaries have more pressing concerns, like access to food and clean water or safer living conditions. The brickmaker demonstrates this best in his address to Mrs. Pardiggle when she visits them with Esther and Ada and he says, “Look at that water. Smell it! That’s wot we drinks . . . An’t my place dirty? Yes, it is dirty—it’s nat’rally dirty, and it’s nat’rally onwholesome” (121). The brickmaker shows here that his naturally dirty and unwholesome home takes precedence over more spiritual concerns. Basic human needs always come before things like love, education, or faith. He goes on to say, “No, I an’t read the little book wot you left. There an’t nobody here as knows how to read it; and if there wos, it wouldn’t be suitable to me” (121). By showing his concern for healthier living conditions and lack of interest in learning about Christianity, he attempts to communicate to Mrs. Pardiggle that the book she leaves him does not solve any of their problems and, in fact, deeply annoys him. If these books and the time that she spends with these people serve no purpose, what do these beneficiaries stand to gain? Nothing. Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby both expend enormous amounts of time, money, and effort to the point that these philanthropic pursuits have encompassed their entire lives and damaged their families, but their beneficiaries receive nothing from the relationship.

Why then do Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle engage in these pursuits? Because they selfishly gain social esteem from these interactions. In the standard benefactor-beneficiary relationship, the benefactor provides physical wealth to his or her generally impoverished beneficiaries. Those beneficiaries in turn repay that physical wealth with social wealth. But in the cases of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, they reap the benefits of increased social status in their community without ever providing anything of real value to their beneficiaries. These benefactor-beneficiary relationships are broken, not due to any miscommunication or
misunderstanding about the terms, as in *Oliver Twist*, but because of the selfishness of the benefactors. The brickmaker clearly communicates to Mrs. Pardiggle that she provides nothing he or his family needs when he points out that the book she leaves is only “fit for a babby” and declares “I don’t never mean for to go to church. I shouldn’t be expected there” (121; 122). Because Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle get what they want from the relationship whether it helps the beneficiaries or not, the benefactor relationship’s corruption reveals itself. Dickens portrays these philanthropists as unstable and unhelpful.

Mrs. Jellyby’s and Mrs. Pardiggle’s selfishness as benefactors contrasts sharply with the quieter philanthropic activities of Dickens’s friend Elizabeth Burdett-Coutts. Mrs. Pardiggle’s boastfulness and constant insistence that she is “incapable of fatigue”—though she never seems anyway to do anything particularly difficult—reveals an aspect of her philanthropy that runs counter to Coutts’s (116). Isba describes Coutts as “reserved by nature; in fact, extremely shy,” the exact opposite of Mrs. Pardiggle (91). Robbins’s reading of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle also points to this boastful behavior as an issue when he stresses the pains that Dickens took “to associate professional passion with violent inhumanity,” an inhumanity that manifests itself in the rude children of these respected philanthropists (218). Mrs. Jellyby’s and Mrs. Pardiggle’s philanthropic contributions also differ from Coutts’s. Where both Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby provide their beneficiaries with precious little money they have no use for, train them to cultivate goods for export, or preach to them while they are starving and dying, Coutts participates in projects that will actually benefit her beneficiaries, like the founding of Ragged Schools for the education of the poor and the Urania Cottage project for fallen women, dedicated to rehabilitating and training of former prostitutes (Isba 90-92). Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle oppose Coutts in
everything but title. By positioning the clear failures of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle opposite to the proven success of Coutts, we can see how Dickens may have drawn from his own experience with Coutts to create these sham benefactors while also making the statement that philanthropy should resemble Coutts’s variety.

The Generous Failures

*Bleak House*’s second group of benefactors, the generous failures, each try but fail to care for the novel’s quintessential orphan: Jo. This “know nothink” street-sweeping orphan comes across several benefactors over the course of the novel who attempt to help him out of the goodness of their hearts (235). The first of these is Nemo. Jo tells us that Nemo would try to provide for him by “[giving] him the price of a supper and a night’s lodging” on a cold winter night, each sharing his loneliness (163). Then Mr. Snagsby, who gives the orphan half-crown after half-crown every time their paths cross with only one exception, tries his hand at keeping the orphan in money and out of trouble for both their sakes. Finally, Charley and then Esther herself try to care for Jo when Jenny calls for her help with the sick little urchin. All of these relationships have two things in common: the benefactor in each instance can only provide minimal care, and each benefactor suffers serious consequences either as a result of or after he or she interacts with Jo. Nemo dies shortly afterward, Mr. Snagsby’s wife becomes incredibly suspicious of him after observing the strange interactions he has with the boy, and Charley and Esther both contract the same disease that Jo carries, nearly killing them both and leaving Esther’s face scarred.

Nemo’s position as the most generous of Jo’s benefactors marks significant a change in the generous benefactor from *Oliver Twist*. Unlike those earlier benefactors, who tended to be wealthy, or at least situated comfortably in the upper-middle class, Nemo has almost
nothing. He lives in penury, and even owes immense sums to Grandpa Smallweed and other creditors, as the novel eventually discloses. In the beginning of *Bleak House*, all we know about Nemo comes from the circumstances of his death, an opium overdose, and Jo’s disregarded testimony:

That one cold winter night, when he, the boy, was shivering in a doorway near his crossing, the man turned to look at him, and came back, and, having questioned him and found that he had not a friend in the world, said, “Neither have I. Not one!” and gave him the price of a supper and a night’s lodging. That the man had often spoken to him since; and asked him whether he slept sound at night, and how he bore cold and hunger and whether he ever wished to die; and similar strange questions. That when the man had no money, he would say in passing, “I am as poor as you today, Jo;” but that when he had any, he had always (as the boy most heartily believes) been glad to give him some. (163).

In this passage we see that Nemo, though poor himself, “glad[ly]” gives Jo money when he can (163). While Nemo already distinctly differs from the benefactors of *Oliver Twist* in his destitution, he shares the same generous spirit of Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies, who help Oliver as kindheartedly as Nemo helps Jo.

This major difference between *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House* manifests itself with nearly every generous benefactor character in the novel, redefining what it means to be a generous Dickensian benefactor. These benefactors with very little physical wealth to give to their beneficiaries would seem to run counter to the purpose of a benefactor, since the benefactor should primarily give gifts of physical wealth. With very little physical wealth,
how could these benefactors expect to succeed like Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies? *Bleak House*’s beneficiaries simply return the meager gifts of physical wealth with similarly meager social wealth. Of course, Jo and Nemo keep each other company at times, but Nemo only receives this comradery as recompense. Meanwhile, Jo benefits from this comradery as much as Nemo does, meaning that the nature of their benefactor-beneficiary relationship favors Jo. Finally, where Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies were ultimately successful in caring for Oliver, Nemo fails in caring for Jo. He cannot provide for Jo reliably and fails to take proper care of himself, resulting in his death and the inability to further provide for Jo. While Nemo and Jo never officially acknowledged their status as benefactor and beneficiary, Jo’s testimony that Nemo was “wery good to me” suggests that Nemo looked after Jo as much as he could (163).

Mr. Gridley occupies a similar position to Nemo in the way he tries to help Charley and her siblings. Although he is “always gruff”, the children regard Mr. Gridley as a friend (228). These children seem to be the only soft spot for the self-described man “of a quarrelsome temper” and serve as the only reprieve Mr. Gridley gets from his drawn-out case in the Court of Chancery (229). Oddly, this man who must “resent [his wrongs], and [revenge] them in [his] mind, and . . . angrily demand the justice [he] never gets” also resolutely protects three orphaned youngsters like a guard dog (230). Even stranger yet, the children trust him completely. Mr. Gridley demonstrates the children’s trust in him by asking Tom, “You’re not afraid of me, Tom; are you?” to which Tom replies, “No! . . . you ain’t angry with me” (232). This interaction, reinforced by his carrying the youngest child, convinces the reader that these children represent the one thing that makes the hard Mr. Gridley go soft, even though his expression remains rigid when taking care of the children.
Dickens’s introduction of well-intended but failed generous benefactors also illustrates the drastic difference in wealth between benefactors in *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House*. Where Oliver’s generous benefactors were successful in not just caring for Oliver but bringing him out of his poor situation and into a place of security where he could progress as a gentleman, the first generous benefactors we see fail their orphans. This depiction of what an orphan can expect in a benefactor takes a dark turn from *Oliver Twist*. While *Oliver Twist* suggests that the problems that orphans faced in Victorian England—poor working conditions, worse living conditions, and the possibility of resorting to crime in order to survive—might be overcome through the kind and timely intervention of benefactors, *Bleak House* reveals that not every orphan has a happy ending like Oliver. Jo’s death from illness and poverty illustrates this failure. Benefactors like Nemo and Mr. Gridley cannot do much for the children they want to care for, illustrating that, like these characters, there may be people in London trying to care for orphans like Jo, but fail just as these generous benefactors do.

Snagsby does not have immense wealth at his disposal, either, although he earns enough to be comfortable, setting him apart from these other two benefactors. This allows him to give Jo money and food more reliably than Nemo can. Since the first time Snagsby gives Jo money he essentially buys Jo’s silence, the nature of their relationship appears at first strictly transactional. However, during their second encounter, “before [Jo] goes downstairs, Mr. Snagsby loads him with some broken meats from the table, which he carries away, hugging in his arms” (290). This generosity could be an extension of his initial bribe, through which he asked Jo not to mention their acquaintance “[i]f ever [he] see[s] [Mr. Snagsby] coming past [his] crossing with [a] little woman” (163). But since he does not
request more silence from Jo, Snagsby generously gives him the meat. Furthermore, when Mr. Bucket asks Mr. Snagsby where to find Jo, he does not offer Jo’s location until Mr. Bucket tells Mr. Snagsby “Don’t you be afraid of hurting the boy . . . we shall only bring him here to ask him a question or so I want to put to him, and he’ll be paid for his trouble, and sent away again. I’ll be a good job for him” (328-329). Mr. Snagsby’s hesitation to bring Jo to the detective could originate from a desire for Jo’s continued silence, thus keeping himself safe. However, since Mr. Snagsby only agrees to find Jo once assurances are made for the boy’s safety, he reveals that he values Jo’s safety over his own. When Mr. Snagsby does meet with Jo on his deathbed, the narrator says, “Jo is very glad to see his old friend; and says, when they are left alone, that he takes it uncommon kind as Mr. Sangsby should come so far out of his way on accounts of sich as him” (674). Mr. Snagsby’s feelings for Jo can actually be measured in this scene, because each time Jo’s happiness in the face of death touches him, “the stationer softly lays down another half-crown,” which he does three times before agreeing to write Jo’s will (674). While Mr. Snagsby and Jo’s relationship appears transactional at first, it either develops into or reveals itself to be a benefactor relationship the entire time.

Snagsby, like Nemo and Mr. Gridley, ultimately fails Jo and suffers the consequences of his association with the boy. He tries to keep Jo safe, but his wife becomes increasingly suspicious of his interactions with the boy. After seeing him with Jo on several occasions and finally seeing him give Jo a half-crown, she feels her suspicions that Mr. Snagsby has had an affair resulting in a son, Jo, are all but confirmed. This misunderstanding eventually leads to Mr. Snagsby’s declaration to Mr. Bucket, “You couldn’t name an individual human being—except myself—that my little woman is more set and determined against than Jo” (673). Not
only does this lead to Mr. Snagsby’s punishment for his involvement with Jo, but it also lends strength to the interpretation of Jo and Mr. Snagsby having a benefactor-beneficiary relationship. If an outsider could observe the interactions between these characters and assume that they are father and son, it demonstrates that there was a recognizable pattern of care similar to a benefactor-beneficiary relationship between the two.

Again, seeing Jo’s benefactor being punished for showing him any kindness shows the bleakness of these orphans’ situations. While these two benefactors both suffer for their involvement with Jo, what makes Nemo and Mr. Snagsby different hinges upon Mr. Snagsby’s accessibility. Where the successful benefactors of *Oliver Twist* had sizable wealth to facilitate the care of their orphan beneficiary, these upper-middle-class people would rarely come into contact with the outcast and destitute street orphans. People like Mr. Snagsby, a man of modest means with a good heart, would more likely come into contact with and decide to care for orphans like Jo. Showing a more relatable benefactor for these orphans better illustrates the theme of *Bleak House*: that people of this suffering class rarely receive help, and when they do it is often unsuccessful in the long term.

This observation of Mr. Snagsby also creates an opportunity to contrast the clearly local interest of his generosity against the telescopic interests of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. As we saw earlier, Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle are apparently benefactors but fail because they do not understand the needs of their beneficiaries, which complicates whether they truly are benefactors. Mr. Snagsby, however, appears to have a transactional relationship with Jo, but upon further examination has more of a benefactor-beneficiary relationship. Also, Mr. Snagsby’s and Jo’s relationship does not fail due to any misunderstanding of Jo’s needs but rather due to outside influences who are either searching
for Jo or suspicious of him. This positions Mr. Snagsby as a foil to Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. John Jarndyce describes this contrast to Esther when he explains: “there [are] two classes of charitable people; one, the people who [do] a little and [make] a great deal of noise; the other, the people who [do] a great deal and [make] no noise at all” (113). The noise in this metaphor clearly indicates Mrs. Jellyby and especially Mrs. Pardiggle, since both are incredibly vocal about how charitably they act. Perhaps Jarndyce himself acts generously when he says that these ladies are doing “a little”, considering their contributions towards their beneficiaries have near to no positive impact. Conversely, Jarndyce describes Mr. Snagsby as doing “a great deal”, when he really does not provide Jo with much money or food. Mr. Snagsby does, however, provide Jo with a final will, something that “makes [Jo] more cumfbler nor [he] was afore” on his deathbed (675). This comparison demonstrates that Mr. Snagsby’s sort of focused local generosity provides a greater benefit than the telescopic philanthropy practiced by Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle.

Analyses of *Bleak House* quite often center on Esther, especially in her capacity as an orphan. However, Esther differs from Oliver when she herself adopts the role of a benefactor in *Bleak House*. Stuchebrukhov argues that *Bleak House* shows how Esther “learns to rectify Chancery’s iniquity and inefficiency with equity and efficiency” (147). She accomplishes this equity and efficiency by caring for the poor, represented by Jo and Charley. While Esther does also care for and on many levels mentor Charley, Charley is still employed as Esther’s maid, making their relationship explicitly transactional. Esther’s relationship to Jo, however, has no transactional nature whatsoever. Although Esther does not do much to care for Jo once he arrives at Bleak House, she instigates John Jarndyce’s and Charley’s care for the orphan when she tells Charley “we must not leave the boy to die”
Esther’s decision to care for Jo also mirrors the Maylies’ restoration of Oliver. Both of these beneficiaries nearly die, and their wealthy benefactors (or soon to be benefactors) attempt to recover them. Unlike the Maylies in *Oliver Twist*, Esther’s ultimate failure signifies a drastic change from *Oliver Twist* to *Bleak House*, resulting in the death of a child rather than his resurrection. Where Oliver feels obliged to the Maylies’ kindness in attempting to facilitate his recovery, Bucket undermines Esther by sending Jo to a hospital and telling him to “‘Hook it! Nobody wants you here . . . Don’t let me ever see you nowheres within forty mile of London, or you’ll repent it’” once he gets better (663). Jo has no problem with this, since where Oliver trusts the Maylies, Jo fears Esther, stemming from his confusion regarding her identity. Having already met Lady Dedlock, to whom Esther bears a strong resemblance, and mistaking her for Hortense whom he has seen earlier in the novel, Jo wonders “If [Esther] ain’t t’other one, she ain’t the forrenner, Is there three of ‘em then?” (453). This confusion and bad experiences with “t’other one [Lady Deadlock]” and “the forrenner [Hortense]” cause what could have been a promising benefactor relationship with Esther to fall apart (453).

Again, like Nemo and Snagsby, Esther fails Jo as a benefactor, and again she suffers the consequences of her interaction with him. In her attempts to care for Jo, Charley contracts Jo’s illness and passes it on to Esther. This disease confines her to her bed, temporarily blinds her, nearly kills her, and ultimately leaves her face covered with scars, at least for a time. These are high prices to pay for trying to help an orphan recover from a disease, but people who try to help Jo cannot seem to do so without consequences. However, this links Esther, Mr. Snagsby, and Nemo as some of the most generous benefactors in *Bleak House*. Each one
practices the sort of local generosity that Dickens wants to reinforce based on his portrayals of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle.

**Unpunished Generous Benefactors**

Mr. Gridley, like Nemo, Snagsby, and Esther, ends off worse than he began in the novel, but unlike these characters, Gridley’s demise comes from his involvement with Chancery, not from his relationship with Charley and her siblings. From his first appearance Gridley appears “tall [and] sallow [sic.] with a careworn head, on which but little hair remained, [having] a deeply lined face, and prominent eyes” (225). His physical appearance reveals that he has already suffered much, which he attributes to his “be[ing] dragged for five-and-twenty years over burning iron . . . [in] the Court of Chancery” (230). Since Gridley makes it clear from the beginning that his suffering comes from his trials in Chancery rather than as a consequence of his involvement in caring for Charley and her siblings, what effect does his interaction with these children have on the man? Up until this point, it has been clear that involvement with orphans has negative consequences for their benefactors, but Gridley has been suffering all along. In fact, being around Charley and her siblings makes the man soften (as much as he can, anyway).

Just as Gridley was previously angry because of his trials in Chancery, Chancery causes his demise. Gridley has lost and he knows it when he says “I made a fight for it, you know I stood up with my single hand against them all, you know I told them the truth to the last, and told them what they were, and what they had done to me; so I don’t mind your seeing me, this wreck” (372). Gridley resigns himself to death, but unlike the other generous benefactors, Charley and her siblings served to dull Gridley’s pain rather than cause it. Because Gridley’s death results from his anger with Chancery, it would seem that his caring
for Charley and her siblings results in his own situation improving rather than diminishing. Having time with the children for him to relax his anger benefits him since those flames of anger consume him in the end. However, John Jarndyce hires Charley as Esther’s maid, her brother goes off to school, and her sister is adopted. Gridley’s one and only outlet, the only thing that allowed him to relax disappears.

Would his continued relationship with the children have saved his life? Probably not. Given Chancery’s ruthlessness, it was only a matter of time before it wore Gridley down and he met the fate he did. However, having that outlet around longer would have likely bought him more time. Not only that, but being less angry implies that he benefits from his interactions with the kids, rather than suffering like the other generous benefactors. Therefore, Gridley’s benefactor relationship with Charley and her siblings would not have only prolonged his live, but increased the quality of it, resulting in a large overall benefit to him.

John Jarndyce similarly acts as an exception to the rule that generous benefactors are punished for their efforts on behalf of their beneficiaries. Jarndyce cares for three orphans, has ties to many other benefactors in the novel, seems to be the only survivor of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, and acts as a central character in the novel. Without Jarndyce, there would be no Bleak House and no *Bleak House*. His acceptance of and continued responsibility for his three charges drives some of the action of the plot and also acts as a major connecting force for all of the characters in the novel. But above all, Jarndyce takes the role of each type of benefactor. He fails in providing Richard with direction, succeeds in raising Esther to become a successful Victorian woman, and more or less leaves Ada unchanged, making him both a successful and unsuccessful benefactor, but also a neutral benefactor. This unique
position results in Jarndyce being the only benefactor who remains at the end of the novel in the same state in which he began.

However, perhaps the most interesting part of John Jarndyce is how utterly unchanged he remains throughout and even before the novel. The Jarndyce and Jarndyce case cannot kill or ruin John Jarndyce, nor can any of his philanthropic acquaintances corrupt him. His treatment of Esther, Ada, and Richard remains largely unchanged, as even after he and Richard quarrel he affirms that Richard would still be “heartily welcome [in Bleak House]” (548). He even insists that if Esther were to refuse his proposal of marriage he would be unchanged by it. In fact, the only time when he does show a change is when he is in the isolation of the Growlery, where only Esther ever intrudes upon him.

John Jarndyce conforms to the pattern of suffering generous benefactors with his relationship towards Richard as he suffers along with him. Like Esther and Mr. Snagsby, who suffer with Jo, Jarndyce suffers from Richard’s decline. John Jarndyce steers Richard away from the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case saying “I must do my duty, Rick, or you could never care for me in cool blood; and I hope you will always care for me, cool and hot,” which creates a division between the two as Richard is determined to pursue the case (358). This division creates the source of John Jarndyce’s suffering as Richard’s anger and refusal to communicate with him results in him feeling like he has lost a son. When John Jarndyce forgives Richard as he lies dying, the benefactor says “the clouds have all cleared away, and it is bright now. We can see now. We were all bewildered, Rick, more or less” (903). Jarndyce also suffers from Richard’s errors, though of course this suffering amounts to much less than Richard’s, who dies.
Where Jarndyce is unique among the novel’s benefactors is in his relationship to Esther; in this one instance both parties benefit from their relationship. Esther rises from her abused childhood with her godmother to the respected and appreciated head of Bleak House to a happily married mother, all of which Jarndyce’s intervention on her behalf facilitates. Even his marriage proposal, while unconventional and inappropriate, comes from a position of care for her wellbeing. Recovering from the illness that leaves her face scarred, Esther has lost much of her capital as a Victorian woman. Jarndyce, as her benefactor, wants to allow her some sort of social capital through marriage to avoid life as a spinster. However, Jarndyce does not make this offer from a purely selfless position, since he will gain a wife in the process. However, since the two do not marry and Jarndyce’s relationship with Esther remains unchanged, Jarndyce was being generous in his offer to Esther and did make it as an attempt to offer her security. Even if Esther and Jarndyce were to marry, his repeated insistence that “nothing can change [him],” suggests that his role as benefactor would always trump any other role (637).

John Jarndyce also benefits from his relationship with Esther by welcoming her into the Growlery, the only place where Jarndyce is transparent with his thoughts. The fact that the only people allowed in the Growlery are Esther and Jarndyce demonstrates that Jarndyce has a high degree of trust and respect for Esther, reinforced by his saying she has a “pleasant, trusty, trusting face” (38). He begins demonstrating his trust in Esther when he asks for her advice on what to do with Richard. He tasks her to “talk it over, with [her] tact and in [her] quiet way, with him and Ada, and see what [they] all make of [Richard’s choice of profession]” (111). Esther’s introduction to the Growlery leads Jarndyce to benefit greatly from her insight into Richard and Ada’s situation and to have someone to talk through his
problems as an equal which results in the only instance in *Bleak House* of a standard generous benefactor relationship succeeding like they do in *Oliver Twist*.

Dickens’s construction of benefactors from *Oliver Twist* to *Bleak House* clearly shifts. Where in *Oliver Twist* he established generous benefactors who “accomplish a great deal” in a sustainable manner that yields benefits to both the benefactor and beneficiary, the generous benefactors of *Bleak House* who have the same good intentions suffer greatly. Similarly, the obligatory benefactors of *Oliver Twist* fail in their relationships with Oliver, but the philanthropists that “make a great deal of noise” successfully in benefit from their relationships, unlike their beneficiaries. These differences show that Dickens has grown to be more pessimistic about the successes and failures of these opposing types of benefactors.

This change in benefactor successes and failures combined with the odd cases of Gridley and John Jarndyce add a new dimension of complexity to the benefactor relationship, demonstrating that there are varying degrees of success for benefactors. While this theme is present in *Oliver Twist*, it is much more pronounced in *Bleak House* because of the inclusion of these more ambiguous benefactors.
CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

The lens of gift theory that I apply to *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House* in this thesis exposes critical dynamics of benefactor relationships—dynamics that not only shed light on Dickens’s evolution between those two novels but also might help to explain certain elements of *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Both of these novels use foundational themes of debts, obligations, transactions, and forms of value—physical, social, and otherwise—that lend themselves to gift theory. The concealment of Pip’s benefactor’s identity for the majority of the novel serves as both a plot twist and a foundation for concern, since he has no idea to whom he owes his gratitude and his education in the art of becoming a gentleman. Or it would serve in these ways, had he not incorrectly assumed that Miss Havisham was behind the effort put forth to make him a gentleman. Likewise, the entire plot of *Our Mutual Friend* revolves around old Harmon’s will, directing wealth through various legal channels and even through the Boffins, who create their own benefactor relationship with Johnny, an orphan they arbitrarily intend to adopt. With both of these novels so concerned with gifts and obligations, gift theory has an obvious application to provide for new interpretations of these characters or to reinforce the current understanding of them.

Aside from the great reveal, Miss Havisham and Magwitch have plenty of room to continue to be examined whether that be their role in the plot more generally speaking or an examination of their characters. First-time readers could possibly anticipate Magwich’s role as Pip’s benefactor, or at least better challenge Pip’s rationalization of Miss Havisham acting as his benefactor. Being able to debunk this assumption could have a significant impact on *Great Expectations* scholarship. We could also complicate critical readings of Joe and Mrs. Joe, who act as Pip’s sole benefactors during his childhood but lose their significance in
respect to their parental role as the novel follows him through his adult life. There is ample room for complication of Mrs. Joe, who resembles Mr. Bumble in the way she physically abuses Pip. She has historically been regarded in a largely negative light due to her enthusiasm for and pride in “raising Pip by hand,” but could be complicated and humanized by a more careful reading. After all, she has lost her parents along with Pip and is thrust into the position of caring for him as a young woman with, for all we know, no intentions of raising a child. At the very least, she has no intentions of raising one so soon, since Joe only marries her once he discovers that she has assumed guardianship of her younger brother.

*Our Mutual Friend* teems with benefactors, but they have hardly been addressed by scholars apart from Adrian, who notes only briefly Betty Higdon’s generosity to her minders, Sloppy, and her orphaned grandson (92). But, could there be something more to it, just as Mr. Brownlow’s and the Maylies’ generosity is more complicated than it first appears? The Boffins are ripe for critical attention as benefactors. They make a point to go out and find an orphan—practically any orphan—to adopt once they have access to the money from John Harmon’s will. This cavalier interest in adoption begs for further analysis. Not to mention the way that Bradley Headstone practically adopts Charley. Headstone both educates him once he makes it to Headstone’s boarding school and develops a close personal connection to the boy that results in a complete transformation from Charley loving, respecting, and identifying with his sister Lizzie, to becoming totally estranged from her. While he still loves and wants what is best for his sister, Charley identifies more with Headstone, viewing himself above his older sister and believing that he now knows better than she does because of his education. This could possibly even introduce a new dimension including educational wealth, which
could similarly apply to Pip, who receives education to become a gentleman, and Oliver, who both Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies educate in the same way.

Dickens’s work between *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House* could also be complicated and re-examined. An examination of the dynamics of the benefactor relationships within *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Dombey and Son*, or *David Copperfield* could complicate the perception of benefactors in these novels, but perhaps even chart a changing representation of Dickens’s benefactor characters. As it stands, my research examines two novels fourteen years apart in publication, making the stark differences between representations. Being able to contextualize these differences along the course of Dickens’s publications would serve to create a better understanding of those changes. Really, the study of Dickens’s benefactors has plenty of room for growth. I hope to have opened the door a bit further, perhaps sparking more interest and more discussion of these characters.
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