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## Literary Epistemification: Tracing the epidemiological and medical metaphors in the Nineteenth century European novel

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### Abstract

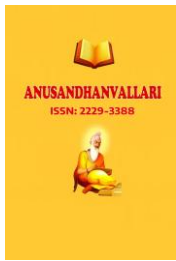
This article explores the intersection of medical and literary discourses in nineteenth-century literature by examining key texts such as Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and Balzac's *The Country Doctor*. Through close textual analysis, the study highlights how literary representations of disease function as both reflections and critiques of contemporary medical epistemologies. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of supplementation, the article argues that the literary deployment of disease metaphors extends beyond narrative aesthetics to contribute to the broader ontology of medical knowledge. By foregrounding the autonomy of literary form, the paper suggests that authors engage with medical discourse in ways that are interpretive, fragmented, and deeply personal, thus positioning literature as a site of cultural knowledge production. Furthermore, the metaphorical language surrounding illness and diagnosis becomes a tool for epistemic reform within the literary domain, enabling alternative modes of meaning-making that are fluid and idiosyncratic. The article also investigates the autoethnographic dimensions of Dickens's writing in *Bleak House*, tracing how social, medical, and literary registers converge to produce a complex, interwoven discourse. Ultimately, this study emphasizes literature's role in shaping, supplementing, and occasionally unsettling dominant medical narratives of the nineteenth century. The paper further allows to see how literature's epistemificatory function produce sporadic possibilities through fungibility of metaphors. Further by tracing the complex network of autoethnographic tendencies of Dickens in *Bleak House*, we try to analyze the relationship between the social, literary and medical discourses at play.

**Keywords:** Epistemology; Metaphors; knowledge; literature; supplementation; epidemiology; Literary improbable.

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### Introduction

This article examines the reciprocal relationship between the nascent field of epidemiology in early nineteenth-century Europe and the metaphorical strategies through which both medical and literary discourses articulated the phenomena of disease. At a time when epidemiology lacked a coherent scientific etiology and remained methodologically unstable, it frequently drew upon metaphorical frameworks—many of them derived from literary and cultural traditions—to conceptualize contagion, transmission, and public health. These metaphors, often embedded in moral, sensory, and social registers, were not merely illustrative; they were constitutive of how disease was understood, communicated, and narrativized. Simultaneously, literary texts of the period appropriated



and reconfigured such metaphors, allowing novelists to incorporate emerging medical concerns into their narrative structures and thematic preoccupations.

This article contends that the metaphorical language employed by early epidemiological discourse did more than facilitate scientific explanation; it provided a symbolic grammar through which Victorian authors reimagined the novel's epistemological and formal capacities. Rather than suggesting a seamless integration of science and literature, the argument presented here emphasizes the epistemological distinction between these domains. While scientific discourse aspires to empirical precision and generalizability, literary discourse foregrounds affect, ambiguity, and the socially situated production of meaning. To conceptualize this distinct literary function, the paper draws on the notion of *epistemification*—here understood as the process by which literature generates, reshapes, and destabilizes knowledge objects through figural, sensory, and cultural mediations. This term, adapted from the lexicon of knowledge modeling, is employed to underscore literature's capacity to produce forms of understanding that resist reduction to scientific rationalism.

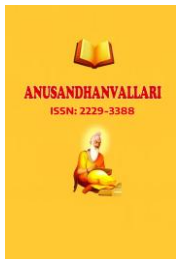
Through its epistemificatory function, literature enables a mode of inquiry that is both interpretive and affective, offering an alternative framework for apprehending disease as a complex, multi-scalar phenomenon. Literary metaphors of illness function not merely as narrative devices, but as vehicles for interrogating the social, legal, and political dimensions of health. By locating disease within broader cultural matrices, literature complicates the reductive binaries of self/other, clean/contaminated, and healthy/sick that often underpin medical paradigms.

Focusing on the metaphorical economy of early epidemiological discourse, this study turns to *Bleak House* (1852–53) as a paradigmatic case. Charles Dickens's deployment of the “fog” metaphor, often read as an emblem of environmental decay or bureaucratic inertia, is here reinterpreted as a narrative strategy that renders visible the latent structures of contagion within the Victorian social order. The fog, as an epistemologically unstable signifier, dramatizes both the diffusion of disease and the opacity of institutional response. In tracing such metaphors, this article positions the novel not as a passive reflector of scientific developments, but as an active participant in the cultural production of medical knowledge, a medium through which the social imaginary of disease is configured, critiqued, and reimagined.

### **Metaphorical Intresections In Victorian Epidemiology And Literary Realism**

Scholars have delved into the nebulous nature of mid-nineteenth-century epidemiology to understand its resonance within social and cultural narratives. They illustrate how the metaphorical deployment of terms like “contagion” across genres, from public health treatises to novels, crafted distinct notions of health and societal vitality. Debolina Dey investigates how these metaphors permeated the cultural imagination, blurring the boundaries between scientific clarity and literary expression. This convergence of epidemiological metaphors in literary and scientific realms often obscures precise explanations of disease outbreaks, sparking discussions about the inherent uncertainties in medical knowledge of the era. However, such metaphoric intersections can lead to problematic uses when leveraged as supplementary evidence in historical accounts of epidemics and urban deprivation. For example, Christopher Hamlin cites passages from Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* to substantiate claims about slum conditions, treating the novel as though it were a piece of social documentation rather than fiction. Literary critics amplify this issue; Mary Poovey, in *The Making of a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), constructs historical knowledge by weaving together sanitary reports and novels by Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens, and Elizabeth Gaskell. This tenuous epistemological grounding of epidemiology is reflected in a Victorian physician's letter, where he, with a hint of apology, reassured a friend that the discipline's lack of rigor should not be misconstrued as a detachment from scientific roots.

The presence of this problem pertaining to the metaphoric overlaps also leads to some unfortunate consequences of being used as supplementary knowledge production in the process of documentation if we see it from the point



of view of historical works done on slums and epidemics. For example, Christopher Hamlin invokes passages from Dickens' *Bleak House* as a supplementary document to corroborate what he has to say on the condition of slums as if it were not a novel but a piece of social reportage.<sup>i</sup> This problem from the side of literary critics is even worst in our understanding, literary critics like Mary Poovey in her work, *The Making of a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), attempt to produce a sort of a historical knowledge based on the intersection between sanitary treatise and novels of Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens, and Elizabeth Gaskell.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, this low epistemological profile of epidemiology is reflected in a letter that a Victorian physician half apologetically wrote to a friend that the lack of rigor should not be seen as a lack of rootedness in science he writes,

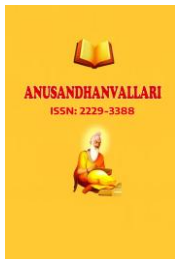
I should be upset if you took what is called the vagueness of medicine as a reason to condemn or accept it, upset your judgment, medicine is a science of relation of analogy of judgment and of experience. It is not on that account less positive or less useful.<sup>iii</sup>

Here the vagueness to which the physician refers was evident in the investment that Victorian medicine made in the miasmatic theory of infectious disease and in the consequent uncertainty that this investment caused in locating precise vectors which carried infection, the ambiguity of which is played out in proliferating ways through *Bleak House*. One might infer that the physician, by framing medicine as a science of analogy, sought to claim for it a broader interpretive scope than would be possible through the more rigid framework of analysis, identification, and qualification described by Michel Foucault. This analytical shift, which Foucault associates with a move from metaphor-driven to evidence-based knowledge, did not fully take hold in epidemiology until the 1880s, when bacteriology provided a scientific foundation, grounding the discipline in precise causal mechanisms.

However, the epidemiological discourse did not sever completely its relationship with metaphors even after it had made its transition into what is in common parlance called the hard sciences. It continues to draw on the historical patterns of images found within the aesthetic tradition.<sup>iv</sup> There is a repository of metaphors that medicine continuously draws upon but for Victorian epidemiology as metaphors of disease were not signs of continuing cultural bias or a means of making the medical discourse simpler but rather they were a means of supplementing for the authenticity of scientifically unverified explanations by aligning them to a set of cultural, moral, sensory and social dimensions which eventually gave rise to the Public Health Act 1848.<sup>v</sup> Miasmatic theory, a speculative paradigm around which Victorian England organized its campaign against infectious disease, was based entirely on arousing moral and sensory revulsions against any putrid matter that could infuse the atmosphere with disease-causing myosin.<sup>vi</sup>

The epistemological fluidity of mid-nineteenth-century epidemiology, characterized by its reliance on the miasmatic theory of disease transmission, engendered considerable ambiguity in identifying precise vectors of infection. This uncertainty finds vivid expression in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, where metaphorical representations of contagion proliferate, reflecting the era's medico-cultural anxieties. One may posit that Victorian physicians, by conceptualizing medicine as a science of analogy, sought to claim for it an expansive interpretive domain, one that resisted the reductive transition to what Michel Foucault delineates as knowledge derived from analysis, identification, and qualification. Such a shift toward analytical rigor, as Foucault articulates, remained nascent in epidemiological discourse until the 1880s, when bacteriology emerged as the discipline's foundational paradigm, anchoring it in empirical causality.

Victorian epidemiology, in its preoccupation with the sensory repugnance of urban slums and the moral valorization of sanitation, paralleled the thematic concerns of the nineteenth-century social novel. Consequently,



it is unsurprising that historians of epidemic diseases frequently invoke Dickens's narratives to document the squalor of urban environments, while also gesturing toward the cultural and moral attitudes that often eclipsed the quantitative methodologies of physicians such as John Snow and William Farr, who employed statistical mapping to elucidate disease etiologies. Implicit in these historical narratives is a dynamic interplay between the sanitary novel and the historiography of epidemiology. Yet, such accounts often overlook the internal autonomy of literary signification within these novels, which strategically appropriate medical metaphors to generate aesthetic and affective effects exclusive to the domain of imaginative literature, distinct from the empirical objectives of medical science.

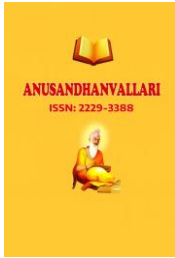
Here, an intervention is important to establish the preceding point, that in the nineteenth century even when the human anatomical sciences are drawn into the European realistic novels such as of Balzac, Dostoevsky and Gustave Flaubert, it does not conflate but rather separate the junctures of literature and medicine as these authors work with their own distinctive internal protocols for objectives that are not necessarily similar. The paper disagrees with what Lawrence Rothfield sought to explain about the nineteenth-century realist authors like Balzac and George Eliot as having a sort of commensalistic relationship by feeding on the episteme of medical anatomy.<sup>vii</sup>

Rothfield while working with anatomical pathology rather than epidemiology in the 1990s predicates that the medical knowledge produced by anatomy and physiology provides the underpinning to literary realism.<sup>viii</sup> He states that,

“this epistemological grounding of clinical medicine not only provides Balzac, Zola, Flaubert, Eliot, a professional exactitude, but also a sense of ethos to picture themselves as self-sufficient professional”.<sup>ix</sup>

He contends that novelists like George Eliot drew inspiration from the objective clinical gaze of the anatomist, whose ability to dissect the body's fabric and reveal the interplay of internal organs sustaining life offered a model for literary realism. This physiological paradigm, with its emphasis on the unseen networks of interactions animating organisms, provided a framework for Eliot to explore the intricate, often invisible connections that animate social and individual lives in her narratives, mirroring the interconnectedness observed in biological organisms.<sup>x</sup>

Rothfield convincingly demonstrates the relationship between the Bichatian sub-language of webs and tissues and the sorts of plots and connections that both Balzac and Eliot seek to make in their novels especially in *The Country Doctor* (Balzac, 1833) and *Middlemarch* (Eliot, 1871) respectively. He opines that the whole range of disparate social activities are brought together to an organic whole just as the body gains life through the arrangement of cells and organs. However, Rothfield's argument flounders at the very moment when he follows Balzac in invoking the rhetoric of scientific precision. Therefore, the real problem for him lies in Balzac's qualification that underlines both realism and anatomical physiology. The word that Balzac becomes very concerned with is exactitude. He like the doctors is trying to write a novel that guarantees exactitude like the rhetoric of scientific precision, but “the author did not thereby mean to incur the obligation of giving the facts one by one, dryly, and in such a way as to show how far one could make a story resemble a skeleton whose bones have been painstakingly numbered”.<sup>xi</sup> Balzac acknowledges the epistemological scientific mapping of the bones that undergoes numbering with painstaking precision of identification and remembrance and yet he is attracted to the exactitude that an underlying skeleton like an amateur of facts might give to a story that he is about to tell. He is immediately aware that replicating the procedures of medical anatomy and giving the facts one by one dryly will condemn his story to ‘eternal repetition’ because a skeleton can only be built in one way. Thus, vehemently repudiating the exercise done by Rothfield who reduces literary work to its mere need to assert charismatic authority and professional



legitimation.<sup>xii</sup> We argue that even if exactitude remains an essential element in literary realism as it is in medical anatomy, Balzac is deeply conscious that novel writing is not the same as giving the lesson on anatomy, its use of metaphors as a theoretical tool aims at effects that differ profoundly from the perpetuation of medical knowledge.

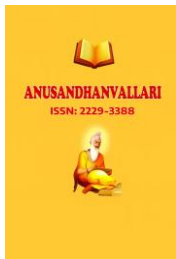
It is interesting to note that more than any other novel in England it is George Eliot's *Middlemarch* that demonstrates for Rothfield how nineteenth-century realism was predicated on "the epistemological superiority of the medical gaze" to claim the truth. Rothfield argues that Eliot got from medicine, the epistemological underpinning of knowledge that desires to be taken seriously.<sup>xiii</sup> However, the critical moment invoked by Rothfield himself when the discourse of medical anatomy intersects and energizes the work of a realistic novel, demonstrates even more dramatically the incommensurability between the literary and the medical. It is the moment when Lydgate finds his vocation to become a doctor, his initiation into pathological anatomy as he opens the volume of an old encyclopedia, and turns to the page under the head of anatomy,

"(...) the first Passage that drew his eyes was on the valves of the heart. He was not much acquainted with valves of any sort, But he knew that valvae were folding doors and through this crevice came a sudden light startling him with his first vivid notion of finely-adjusted mechanism in the human frame...But the moment of vocation had come, and before he got down from his chair the world was made anew to him by a presentiment of endless processes feeling the vast spaces planned out of his site by that wordy ignorance which he had supposed to be knowledge".<sup>xiv</sup>

There is no doubt that this passage celebrates an epistemological shift and not what Rothfield calls an epistemological superiority when ignorance masquerading as knowledge gives way to a medical and more generally, a scientific explanation of how the heart really works. The 'unseen folding doors' that mediate between the encyclopedic entry and George Eliot's novel turn not only blood into the light but also triggers a revelatory shift into a completely transformative experience that is registered deep within young Lydgate's inner life, which should have been the extended explanation of how the heart works. This passage draws our attention to the second metaphorical valve that is beyond the one Lydgate encounters in the volume on anatomy. It turns the knowledge of the circulation of blood into something that has nothing to do with the medical but with a transformative experience, a moment of revelation where he finds his vocation. So unlike Balzac who had pointed to what would not work in the novel, Eliot uses the encounter between Lydgate and medical knowledge to demarcate precisely the domain for not only her novels but novels in general of a certain kind. It is neither a naive realism nor a skeptical constructivism.<sup>xv</sup> Following this, one could argue that the 'exactitude' a novel strives for, has to do with the intricacies of the inner life rather than exploring the aetiology of medical mappings/knowledge. It is not that Eliot traverses through the Foucauldian eye which pierces the obscurity of the medical knowledge to detect the process and growth as Rothfield claims, but rather develops on how metaphors can be novelized and absorbed within the internal expressive economy of the novel to produce effects.

#### THE EPISTEMEIOLOGICAL FLUIDITY OF VICTORIAN EDIDEMIOLOGY: THE MEDICAL ARTISTRY OF DICKENS'S DIAGNOSTIC GAZE IN BLEAK HOUSE

How true to Nature, even to their most travel details, almost every character and every incident in the works of the great novelist whose dust has just been laid to rest, really were, is best known to those whose tastes or whose duties led them to frequent the paths of life from which Dickens delighted to draw. But none, except medical men, can judge the rare fidelity with which he followed the great Mother through the devious parts of disease and death. In reading *Oliver Twist*,



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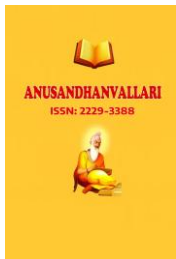
Bleak House, Dombey and Son, the chimes, or even No Thoroughfare, the physician often felt tempted to say, 'What a gain it would have been to physic if one so keen to observe and facile to describe had devoted his powers to the medical art.'<sup>xvi</sup>

The anonymous review of Charles Dickens's works in June 1870 praises the novelist's "rare fidelity" in depicting the pathways of disease and death, suggesting that his keen observational skills rival those of a physician. This reviewer posits that Dickens's novels, particularly *Bleak House*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Dombey and Son*, reflect a diagnostic precision that could have enriched medical science had he pursued it professionally. Social historians of medicine have seized upon this perspective, noting Dickens's ability to weave medical symptoms into his characters' narratives, positioning him as a complementary figure to the medical practitioner. Dickens according to the reviewer is attributed a certain ability to reflect truth, especially in his ability to read medical symptoms through his characters, as a complimentary figure to the physician or the medical man with a diagnostic gaze.<sup>xvii</sup> John Ruskin too in his review on *Bleak house* calls it a pathologic labor of the modern novelist.<sup>xviii</sup>

However, Sambudha Sen goes deeper into the sociological resonance of Dickens's aesthetic use of knowledge of disease by calling it a 'radical heritage' that provides a mode of social satire through the novelization of the metaphors of disease which cannot be described as realistic (S. Sen 2012). Thus, in the context of Victorian epidemiology, *Bleak House* can be seen as a fundamental breakthrough in tradition of disease narrative.<sup>xix</sup> The novel in its complex and very productive relationship with the medical discourse on infectious disease transforms the medical metaphor into a novelistic device, "a complicit vehicle that at once suggests the complementary nature of the medical discourses, but also as discourses that are far removed in their expressive modes" by moving vertically and horizontally into ruptures through non-linear juxtapositions of social and urban spaces, through individualization of pauper, through the idea of connexion.<sup>xx</sup> This device of 'connexion' stands in stark contrast to the traditional and contemporary association of contagion with the sanitary reformers to map the disease.<sup>xxi</sup> This is what so many essays on the relationship between the sanitary movement and *Bleak House* don't understand and. They often see Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* as an ally of the sanitary movement.<sup>xxii</sup>

Now, this seems to us a good direction to take for two reasons, firstly because *Bleak House*, unlike a novel of inner life as *Middlemarch*, throws into relief a kind of novel form that has as its objects transindividual entities such as cities and institutions to explain the connexion between spaces and secondly, *Bleak House* as a novel stimulates a line of thought about the relationship between literature and medicine. The very metaphoric use of 'scientific terms' like contagion in *Bleak House*, in its most sophisticated articulation, worked with distinctive internal protocols for different objectives-

In a ruinous space known to the like of him by the name of Tom-all-Alone. It is a black, dilapidated Street, avoided by all decent people, where the crazy houses were seized upon. When their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants who after establishing their own possession took to letting them out in lodgings. Now these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As the ruined human vermin parasites appear, these ruins shelters have bred a crowd of existence that cross in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coil itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever and sowing or evil in its every footprint that Lord Coodle, and Sir Thomas Doodle, and the Duke of Foodle, and all the fine gentlemen in office, down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years- though born expressly to do it. Twice lately there has been a crash and a cloud of dust, like the springing of a mine, in Tom-All-Alone's; and each time a house has fallen. These accidents have made a paragraph in the newspapers and have filled a bed or two in the nearest hospital. The gaps remain, and there are not unpopular lodgings among the rubbish.<sup>xxiii</sup>



Now, several historians have demonstrated the ‘vagueness’ that lay at the heart of the nineteenth century, as a miasmatic theory of infectious disease.<sup>xxiv</sup> No one doubted that the source of all disease was putrefying matter, rotting vegetables, animal carcasses, human corpses, buried in out-stuffed graveyards of cities and above all human excreta. Putrefaction produced the notorious disease-causing miasma in Victorian London, but it could also present itself as a pestilential slang that overlaid slums and clung to the walls and gates of the city graveyard. What many sanitarians like Thomas Southwood Smith and highly respected doctors resisted was doing research that proved scientifically that it was a specific bacterium rather than some general lack of hygiene or cleanliness that caused diseases like cholera to spread. Dickens reflects on the extremely uncontrolled pauperism through his metaphoric valence and repudiates the ways in which the system uses the pauper's body as a means of navigating and utilizing it for different interests.

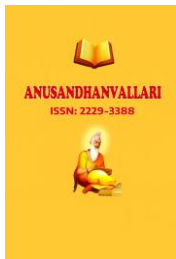
The fact is that, there was so much of a moral investment<sup>xxv</sup> in the miasmatic theory of infection at an economic and infrastructural level<sup>xxvi</sup> that makes it completely resistant to the work of scientific mapping of bacteriology. And it's not as if the nineteenth century did not know the existence of bacteria which remains vehemently resisted by those who invested massively in the miasmatic theory of infectious disease.<sup>xxvii</sup> Thus, what we have instead is a coexistence of two theories of disease namely miasmatic [epidemic] that has its source in the filthy matter, human excreta, and secondly, a contagious disease that is from a living matter which passes from one person to another and therefore causes disease.<sup>xxviii</sup>

#### MIASMA, METAPHOR, AND THE SOCIO-LEGAL CRITIQUE THE MORAL AND SENSORY DIMENSIONS OF THE MIASMATIC IMAGINATION

The miasmatic theory, central to Victorian epidemiology, attributed disease to putrefying matter—rotting vegetables, animal carcasses, and human excreta—producing a pestilential miasma that permeated urban spaces. This theory, resistant to the emerging science of bacteriology, was deeply moralistic, emphasizing hygiene as a societal virtue. Physicians like Thomas Southwood Smith resisted bacteriological research, prioritizing sensory and moral revulsion over empirical precision. In *Bleak House*, Dickens engages with this miasmatic framework not to endorse its scientific validity but to harness its metaphorical potential. The novel's depiction of uncontrolled pauperism critiques the systemic exploitation of the poor, whose bodies are navigated as sites of disease for institutional gain.

Charles Darwin in *Bleak House* doesn't take sides of medical theories, he has no stakes in the scientific veracity of either miasmatic or contagion-based theory of disease. Dickens' relationship to both theories is determined by what they can do through its metaphoric usage for the purpose of generating novelistic effects, that is by the possibilities they might offer for the internal dynamics of the novel form and by their potential to expand the range of situations in the world outside where his novel might make an impact.<sup>xxix</sup>

Fog everywhere, Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls deified among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollution of a great and [dirty] city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish Heights, fog *creeping* into the cabooses of collier-brigs; Fog *lying* out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the *eyes and throats* of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; Fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, *down in his close cabin*; fog *cruelly pinching* the toes and fingers of



his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds. Gas *looming* through the fog in diverse places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest near the leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of the head-leaden old corporation, Temple bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.<sup>xxx</sup>

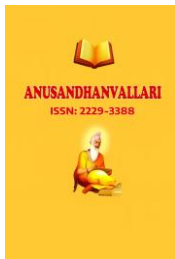
This is the famous opening paragraph of *Bleak House*, where Dickens finds a discursive space of the novel. In fact, the word contagion appears only five times in the entire novel, what he does deploy is rather a metaphor of connexion-- that metaphorically represent the communicability of contagion, between the juxtaposed spaces of urban and rural, between the anonymous pauper and the law of chancery, between the often-seen dicotes of his transindividual spaces of Tom-All Alone and Chesney World. He takes this opportunity to bring together the element that could have no connection in the medical treaties or in the Sanitary Committee report.

The Description of fog, in the discourse of epidemiology can only have one connotation signifying a metaphor for miasma hanging over the city of London that is making London sick. But in Dickens, this thick yellow fog is most commonly understood to denote the obscuring effect of unreformed court of law in the law of Chancery. The metaphor of fog here is not only disease bearing connotation but also a powerful means of articulating the obfuscation of laws. The refusal of laws to clearly state its position stagnates any possibility of convalescence for petitioners who remain endlessly trapped into the daunting thick fog of chancery.

Through this, Dickens highlights that the amorphousness of legislation, legal hearing, also embodies and manifests a sympoetic nature of parasitism. A pathological modality of court qualifies parasitism to twine at the macro level in which the vast migrated orphaned population is reduced to reciprocate a symptomatic horizon of contagious uncertainties in the form of challenges, sickness, poverty, moral and physical corruption. So, the concentration of the sewage, contaminated fog around the high court of Chancery, thus draws in the later into the landscape of contagion, enabling Dickens to add the metaphoric connotations of obfuscation, amorphousness and delay around the workings of law [a second set of ideas around which he might develop the criticism of the law of equity].

This metaphoric valence of fog drawn on parasitism and contagion does not however shut off the possibilities of loading the fog with more metaphorical connotations.<sup>xxxii</sup> What Pamela Gilbert in her work *The Citizen's Body* has described as a 'fungibility of metaphors' in relation to disease was not confined to novel writing alone but was rampant in all artistic forms of nineteenth century England, deployed freely by both establishment and anti-establishment publicists. It therefore makes little sense to argue for or against metaphors that equated reading with low penny dreadful of contacting infections or with the succession of bank failures with the spread of epidemics.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The fungibility of metaphor in Dickens's *Bleak House* enables the transference of disease connotations onto the process of law. By overlying his representation of chancery with connotations of disease, Dickens was able to produce diachronic possibilities capable of playing themselves out across the entire length of the novel. For example, the medical metaphor of a subtle infection used in relation to every character who gets seriously involved with chancery, provides an impetus for a form of work that only a novel with its stretched canvas can do, the unfolding across time of several intermeshed stories of lives in madness and death. The medical metaphor of infectious disease once gets into the fog, produces possibilities to chart the deteriorating lives of those who get entangled in the process of unreformed laws.



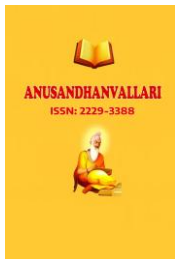
What is equally interesting here is Dickens's 'organizational orientation' of a metaphor connexion, by using the idea of purification [which is very central to Victorian discourse on infectious diseases], to discursively build a bridge between the court of Chancery rotting under the burden of ignorance [its accumulated cases] and the horrific conditions of slums. Tom-all-Alone is so overwhelmed by its own decomposing debris, that those compelled to live in slums subsist as parasites in a diseased body of the parasitic court of law. Specifically, it is through the mock chancellor, the illiterate alcoholic Krook and his waste hoarding dragon bottle shop which mirrors the court of Chancery and above all the disgusting details that surrounds Krook's death by spontaneous consumption that Dickens links the Chancery to London's slum. It is through this metaphoric fungibility that Dickens in a magnificently inventive maneuver produces a figure of Krook as a mirror image of Lord chancellor, who accumulates rubbish in court as Krook does. Krook's strange death of spontaneous combustion chokes the atmosphere with emissions suggestive of slaughter house, sewage, contaminated waters, burial grounds which are the precise source that doctors attributed to the disease-causing miasma.

In *Bleak House*, miasmatic theory does not limit the novel's rich engagement with ideas of contagion. The metaphorical fungibility of disease permeates the text, linking decaying slums to the rotting bureaucracy of the Court of Chancery. Fog, as a recurring metaphor, captures this "state of conglomeration", a chain of suffering, confusion, and institutional decay. Unbound by scientific constraints, Dickens uses these metaphors to produce a fluid system of meaning, where disease becomes a vehicle for broader social critique.

I have suggested above, the possibility that microscopic living bodies could act as vectors for infection remains suppressed through most of the nineteenth century by the moral, political interest that propelled miasma theory, yet no one doubted the presence of animated microscopic bodies in fluid ever since it becomes possible to observe a drop of water under the microscope. Under these circumstances it is not at all surprising to encounter the 'embodied microbe'.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

This form of representation which persists in many cultures till date, conflates the patient, his poverty and the disease through the metaphor of contagious. The metaphor of contagion as a noun is adjectivized as contagious.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Thus, the victim whose utterly unhygienic environment has caused him to fall ill, itself becomes a vector, a germ that may be studied under the microscope, scrutinized, controlled and monitored. The propensity to understand the patient as both victim and vector generate a major fault line in Dickens' representation of Jo's character in *Bleak House*. Jo, a street sweeper catches a deadly infection from a slum dweller in the slum where he lives and spreads to several people and then dies at the end of the novel. Throughout the novel, Dickens's attitude towards Jo is deeply sympathetic. Indeed, when Jo dies, Dickens uses that moment to make a public address to the queen herself, asking her to pay attention to the people like Jo dying around everywhere. Jo is an example of how the vast migrated population, dwelling slums with bare minimal subsistence are invariably reduced to parasites. Yet Dickens describes these slum dwellers with whom Joe cohabits the slum, as 'vermin parasites', who crawl in and out of gaps in walls and boats; and coils to sleep in their maggot number.<sup>xxxv</sup> And indeed, Jo himself is always shown to occupy that liminal space between human beings and animals that ends up as an embodiment of germ.

The critical point here is that a character in a novel like Jo can be moved across time and space in which a static figure of punch cartoon cannot or unnamed slum dwellers [mere numbers] of Chadwick's sanitary reports gets restricted to the thick fog, as a potent threat of contagion, an 'internal other'. Thus, movement is indeed the underlying condition of Jo's existence, from the moment he is introduced, he is held to move on until he moves into his own burying grave. And as an active vector who spreads infection to various people he randomly encounters, Jo is of course a means of realizing the central social medical message of the novel. And that there can be no sanitary cordon to protect the 'well-to-do' section from infection that 'originates' in the slums. Jo's



unrestricted movement through London and beyond have an active implication for the direction in which Dickens was taking this English novel. For it brings the landscape of the diseased- the slum, the pauper, the graveyard dweller into the network of more socially homogeneous interiors in which the novel was traditionally embedded. The unthinkable social juxtaposition that Jo forces on the novel would open up major formal possibilities ranging from how time and space could be organized within the novel to the types of plot connections, that it could affect and above all to a new form of characterization that would develop horizontally across social space rather than reproduce the internal interiority of the canonical English novel. Thus, what we get in the figure of Jo is a mode of novel writing that is different from the novel writing we encounter in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. It is not a novel where a character is going to develop slowly through time but here is a type of character that has to be fabricated in ways to enable it to move across spaces.

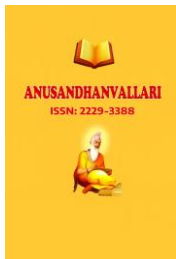
Thus, it's a strongly suggestive subliminal line of thought, that the idea of contagious/contagion is important in *Bleak House* not in itself but because it becomes a means of breaking the great tradition of novels from Jane Austen to Henry James- the turn is towards the urban modernity, from the novels which are totally antiseptic, spic and span, to explore the social history of medicine that provokes not just the study of interiority as I have shown through Lydgate's character of *Middlemarch*; a vocation that evokes a moment of revelation but also to explore the superstructure of the society. It is only through the novelistic development of a metaphor contagion as a theoretical tool that breaks the homogeneity of the middle class by bringing in the characters of slums and disease, court of chancery into the middle class, producing many effects as a result. With Dickens's *Bleak House*, the idea of diseased is oriented towards uncovering the dynamics of pathological conceptualization of the poor's body as a site of parasite which demands a form of estrangement, a mode of cohabited knot with the host institution [court of chancery] that produces [individualized units] and functions on *it* in the ecology of parasitism. The epidemiological metaphor here evokes the bad functioning of the institution, of slums, the large mobile population, its demographic strategy and dehumanization.

## Conclusion

This study explores the dynamic interplay between Victorian epidemiology and literary realism, focusing on Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* as a text where metaphors of contagion, miasma, and fog transcend medical discourse to reconfigure the novel's form and social critique. Through the lens of epistemification—the literary production and reconfiguration of knowledge—we argue that Dickens's use of epidemiological imagery serves as a transformative narrative strategy, linking urban geographies, institutional inertia, and marginalized lives. Unlike George Eliot's introspective realism in *Middlemarch*, Dickens deploys fungible metaphors to traverse disparate social terrains, from Tom-all-Alone's to the Court of Chancery, exposing the systemic entanglements of poverty, law, and disease.

Figures like Jo function as both victims and vectors, illustrating how disease operates as a social condition as much as a biological one. In privileging affective and symbolic registers over medical empiricism, *Bleak House* asserts literature's autonomous epistemological power and redefines the Victorian novel as a site for negotiating urban modernity and social complexity.

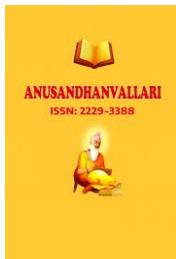
Notably, the courtroom fog in *Bleak House* finds resonance in Kafka's *The Trial*, suggesting the broader literary utility of medical metaphors in articulating institutional opacity and alienation. The persistence of such metaphors in both literature and public health discourse invites further inquiry into their interdisciplinary significance. Ultimately, this study affirms the novel's capacity to reframe scientific knowledge and deepen our understanding of the socio-political dimensions of disease.



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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> (Hamlin 1985) Also see, Christopher Hamlin's *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick, Britain 1800-1854*, Cambridge Studies in the History of Medicine, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Ref. to (Poovey 1995)

Poovey is hugely investing in putting together the Edwin Chadwick's 1842 Report on sanitary condition in the laboring population of Great Britain and diary notes of physicians like James Phillips Kay's who draws on social ailments like Asiatic cholera through body metaphor or to describe population as a single entity.

Also, ref to (Poovey 1995, 115) for more in the context of pauperism as cultural formation and new poor law.

<sup>iii</sup> (Otis 2002, 18-20)

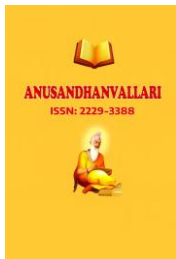
<sup>iv</sup> (Gilman 1988)

<sup>v</sup> (E. Chadwick 1843, 128, 133, 157, 182, 261.)

The significant aspect here was that by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, disease acquired a new status as a metaphor in the light of reform. Metaphors of disease symbolized a public dimension and came to be a politicized site through which other discourses got space and legitimacy. Edwin Chadwick developed a predisposing cause and connection between pauperism, disease, contagion, morality and fever. "The state of the districts which the working and poorer classes inhabit, and their unwholesome, damp, and ill-ventilated dwellings, is another powerful cause of the disease and mortality among them, and consequently of their poverty and destitution" (E. Chadwick 1843, 181)

(...) "the destitution and irregular mode of life, connected with the destitution, of many of the lower ranks in this as in others of the great towns in Scotland, are the chief cause of the frequent diffusion of epidemic fever in them, and that this is not merely owing to the filth which is always found in connexion with such a mode of life" (E. Chadwick 1843, 25)

<sup>vi</sup> (Smith 1825, 134) for more on the distinction between the contagion and epidemic made by Dr. Thomas Southwood.



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vii (Rothfield 1992, 47)

viii This is the time when Michael Mckeeon and Kathy Gallagher too are producing giant books and are part of a massive exploration that seeks to explain the causality of realism as a new form of writing experience in the mid nineteenth century. Lawrence in his famous book *Vital Signs; Medical Realism in the Nineteenth Century Fiction*, makes a huge influential explanation on a new form of writing, a realistic novel that functions not just as an allegory of general economy of power but a discipline that embodies quasi-medical knowledge through their characters to claim the authority of truth telling.

ix (Rothfield 1992, 128)

x Ibid p. 128 Rothfield offers both a compelling reinterpretation of the nineteenth-century novel and a methodological challenge to literary historians. Rejecting theories that equate realism with representation, He argues that literary history forms a subset of the history of discourses and their attendant practices. He shows how clinical medicine provided Balzac, Flaubert, Eliot, and others with narrative strategies, epistemological assumptions, and models of professional authority.

xi Ibid p. 75

xii (Rothfield 1992, 75-77)

xiii Ibid p. 88

xiv (Eliot, *Middlemarch, A study of Provincial Life*, Boston Little brown and Company 1871, 107)

xv (Caldwell 2004, 143-170)

xvi (Darwin 18 June 1870, 636)

xvii (Dey, *Reading Social Space: The Novel and the Blue Book* 2015)

xviii (Ruskin 1880-1881)

xix <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/376/376-h/376-h.htm>

Also See William Bullein's *Dialogue against the fever Pestilence* on the plague of 1564.

xx (Defoe 1722, 100)

xxi Debolina Dey in her thesis mentions that Dickens while upholds the contemporary sanitary movement, also deployed disease of contagion to produce the metaphoric effect between the social and urban space.

Also, Ref to (S. Sen 2012, 112-113) where Sen suggests that Dickens' response to contagion predicated on the connection between the urban and the social space, unlike in Edwin Chadwick's report of 1842 which is based on hypothesis of environmental determinism, and targets a specific section of population for disease origins. According to Sen, Disease in Dickensian novel is an expressive mode that has a determining influence on plotting and characterization of the novel.

xxii (Goodlad 2004, 89)

xxiii (Dickens 1852, 219-220)

xxiv An obsolete scientifically unproven theory which held that diseases such as cholera, Black Death and Chlamydia were caused by miasma or bad noxious air. And the epidemic's relation with this bad air causing fever has to do with the environment, filthy places and mapping the source of it in the body of the slum dwellers embodying the disease, thus has to be monitored and managed.

xxv

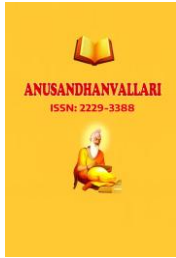
“ (Rosenberg 1979, 117)

Florence Nightingale through her 'Notes on Hospital' (Nightingale 1863) resist bacteriological research because it would take away her evangelical emphasis of cleanliness and hygiene. Also see, curiosity collections, Harvard Library education under the title, “Contagion, Historical Views of Disease and Epidemics; Florence Nightingale-1820-1910”.

The idea was that those who are dirty, unhygienic and do not practice cleanliness are diseased, the relationship between pauperism and disease is established.

xxvi Sanitary reformers like Chadwick and his followers invested a huge amount of capital in cleaning the drains, breaking the slums, and paving the streets. Numerous Parliamentary Reports on sanitary conditions of the laboring population were dramatically pointed out in Public Health Act 1848.

“The members of the Metropolitan Sanitary Commission were Chadwick, Southward Smith, Lord Robert Grosvenor, Richard Lambert Jones, and Professor Owen, all members of the early sanitary movement. Chadwick



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had the majority on his side, with the result that the reports emphasized all of the contentions, proposals, and plans of his London program. (Finer 1952, 309-310)

“The Commission was to investigate house drainage, main drainage, street cleaning and paving, water supplies, and scavenging; it was also to inquire into the best means of using the existing works and also of erecting new works. (Finer 1952, 509-510)

<sup>xxvii</sup> What Friedrich Gustav Helne in his essay on Miasma and Contagion in 1840 called “material of contagion” that is not only organic but alive indeed, endured a life of its own'- the idea that the possible source of a disease could be ‘animal matter’, a being endured with life is very close to the bacteria. And it has been known to Victorian epidemiologists ever since the invention of the microscope which made it possible to see a range of microbes. (Also see Wilkinson, Lise: Animals and Disease an introduction to the history of comparative medicine p - 136). However, this remains vehemently resisted by those who invested massively in the miasmatic theory of infectious disease.

<sup>xxviii</sup> (Smith 1825, 145)

Also, ref to (Dey, The common Milieu of scientific and the literary 2015)

<sup>xxix</sup> Dickens’s engagement with the epidemiological metaphor of contagion in the Nineteenth century has been argued by a whole range of literary critics to dig into pseudoscience and to find his positionality in the novel.

<sup>xxx</sup> (Dickens 1852, 1-2)

<sup>xxxi</sup> (Schwarzbach 1983, 21-27)

F.S. Schwarzbach argues that the fog we meet in the opening passage of Bleak House is an “infectious effluvia” mingled in the fog of the emanations from the raw sewage accumulated in the Essex marsh that is blown back by the raw East wind to the London cities. The sewage dumped into the East Essex once the wind starts to blow like stubble burning, makes it settle in the city of London.

<sup>xxxii</sup> These are the metaphors that were constantly used in Victorian nineteenth century England. Fog like clouds and even more has been used as a convenient tool by authors as well as artists in the nineteenth century, it is not static, but pervasive, shady and semi-revealing and has an undefined exposure, so it has unlimited possibilities as a metaphor of far-reaching magnitudes and magnified reach.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> (Punch 1858)

<sup>xxxiv</sup> (Sontag 1978, 57-58)

Susan explains how metaphor is mythologized beyond its material reality.

<sup>xxxv</sup> (Dickens 1852, 272)