

# The Nature of Self-Damaging Women in Charles Dickens' Novel *Bleak House*

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This study intends to explore and analysis the portrayal of self-damaging behavior, which encapsulates two female characters: Lady Dedlock and Mademoiselle Hortense in one of the most famous novels of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1854). An evaluation of these two female characters shows and reflects that their self-damaging behavior emerges from low self esteem, which results from a number of reasons. The self-damaging behavior introduced by these women involves: self-imposed isolation, women madness, purposive accidents, physical self-abuse, and most consequently, conscious pursuit of destructive relationships with men. Although Dickens clearly means no maliciousness to women in his works, the great Victorian marital upheaval of June, 1858, is illustrative of Dickens's ambivalent attitude towards women, especially towards strong women.

*Keywords:* self-damaging, destructive relationships, victimization, isolation, deformities

## Introduction

It makes sense to place Charles Dickens in his proper literary ambience. The whole work of Charles Dickens is attributed to the humanitarian movement of the Victorian period, which contributes indeed, to one of the largest spheres of literature, and that is the sphere of fiction. Dickens sprang suddenly into fame with *Pickwick Papers* and at 25 found himself the most popular of English novelists. Dickens has the double distinction of being the best story-teller of his time and the most versatile and amusing creator of characters. It is not merely that his plots are well managed in the interest of mystery and suspense; more essential is that something is always happening on his stage whether or not any progress is actually made with the plot. Among writers of weight Dickens allots the least space of explanation and comment.

In any consideration of Dickens's themes, we cannot overlook the early circumstances of his own life that haunted him to the end. The unforgettable experience of his early youth—that humiliating phase of his life—became one of the decisive elements in the formation of his personality. Even when those hardships had been left behind, Dickens could never forget them.

The art of Dickens has a deep human quality. The chief instruments of this art being tears and laughter, and above all the poignancy and flavor of their fusion, Dickens is a prominent figure in the line of English humorists. Among the English novelists Dickens is neither the most consummate artist, nor the finest psychologist, nor the most accomplished realist, nor the most seductive of story writers; but he is probably the most national, the most

typical and the greatest of them all. In this own sphere, there is none in his time who can approach him. It has to be admitted that the principle qualities of Dickens's novels are his irresistible humor, his unsurpassed descriptive power, and the astonishing vitality of his characterization.

There is no doubt in our minds that most of Charles Dickens' characters, and the way he portrayal them emanates as suffering individuals infected with a certain multi-dimentional damaging patterns. Some are victims of crippling impairments; others suffer from physical illnesses and deformities; while others are attacked by stunted growth. However, masochistic or self-damaging behavior is a product of twisted psychological development. This nature of behavior is so skillfully presented by Dickens in two female characters in one of his later novels.

In fact, most of these self-damaging women possesses a certain number of qualities, which drives them into ambivalent relationships with other characters, and they are quiet perceptive and capable to recognize and considers the principles and the sources of their dilemma, in addition to understand the complex nature of this serious symptoms. In spite of their consciousness and intelligence, the stubbornness these women showed, results in self-isolation and endeavored destruction of all prospect for ordinary, average, and loving human relationships. Their self-torture may take the form of self-decreed confinement, repudiation of efforts by others to build and consist relationships or display kindness, negative consent of being tampered by others.

A survey of the most essential literary works about Dickens's women, with regards to these two charming female characters, will expose in general the unsuccessful attempts of the critics and their failure to realize and observe the psychological perplexity of these women and that those who have identified aspects of this type of self-damaging conduct have either flopped to admit its prevalence or have flapped to understand the psychological coherence with the essential intention of Dickens' when he depicted these women. These research, then, has a tripartite goal: to institute Dickens' prevalence attempt and endeavor to define and anatomize self-damaging merits in women, to investigate and to study carefully the salient cohesion of Dickens' depiction of this character pattern, and to reveal Dickens own realization and understanding for the psychological forces that imposes a women across self-damaging behavior.

### **Thematic Concern**

A review of Dickens' female characters, shows that there are a certain number of merits that are participated by the party of self-damaging women that are not seen to any considerable range in most of Dickens' other women characters. In fact, some of these evident characteristics might refer to their interest and desire on the side of these women to establish relationships with other characters who are undoubtedly going to fetch them humiliation, rejection, pain, and frustration. There is also a strange, almost terrifying, ideological and mental strength on the side of these women to canvass and objectively dissect the technique or the style in which they are ruining the chances for their happiness. This entire consciousness of the sentimentally painful ramification of their activities is the essential strain of what Poe (1956) called "the imp of the perverse", the inclination to do a specific thing because it is known to be wrong. Thus, there is no doubt in our minds that these women are obviously Dickens' most superior intellectual female characters. In fact, many of these self-damaging women show either a true real or presumed apathy toward their destiny, particularly towards any emotional anguish or personal frustration from their deeds or, in some issues, privation of initiative. This apathy, in turn permits some

of these women to be passive victims of the manipulations and intrigue of a host of unsavory or, at best imprudent characters. Mainly their parents, who Dickens observes, resort to be the essential origin and root of their daughter's decadent self-respect and subsequent self-damaging inclination.

Depending on his false deceptive of apathy, and mostly masked by it, is a covered dissatisfaction versus the forces and people which have participated in the emotions of disappointment, distress, humiliation, and sense of infidelity practiced by these women. This dissatisfaction takes the form of man-hating, as in the case of lady Honoria Dedlock and Mademoiselle Hortense Eventually, at the origin of the self-damaging behavior most of these women personify what Dickens actually considers as a bad nurture by egocentric or ignorant parents or guardians.

### **Lady Honoria Dedlock**

Lady Dedlock as she describes herself, "bored to death" (Dickens, 1984, p. 56), although her boredom is supposedly indicative of her having achieved her ambition (Dabney, 1967), conquered her world, and must now endeavor to maintain her conquest from the fluctuation of time. However, she is not afraid of the future, but the past. Attending the age of 50, wedded to Sir Leicester Dedlock for many years, and "at the top of the fashionable tree" (Dabney, 1967, p. 57), Lady Dedlock is unexpectedly shocked out of weak equanimity by identifying the handwriting on a few legal sheets brought in by Tulkinghorn, a reality which does not go unrealized by that shrewd lawyer. The handwriting might belong to Captain Hawdon, Lady Dedlock's past lover and the father of her daughter Esther Summerson. Lady Dedlock's life from this moment on, was now influenced by a new conflict, a life that includes two paradoxical impulses. The first impulse forces Lady Dedlock to keep her past a secret, from both Hawdon and Esther because the confession might destruct not only her actual present situation with its fortune, honor, society, stability, and prestige, in fact it also would destruct the gladness of Sir Leicester, dullness, snobbishness, arrogance and complacency, whose love for Honoria is faithful. Nevertheless, Esther's illegitimacy would become the issue of depute in urbane circles and the demotic discussion which perhaps destroy her plans for happiness. In addition, and besides Lady Dedlock's selfless motives, she is mostly afraid of the humiliation and shame that would result from exposing her past. In fact, Lady Dedlock was quiet aware of the fact that she does not have the formidable intended strength to forget the past that causes her to misprise herself as a weak-willed, cowardly person living in a lie. As for the second impulse, it refers to the fact that Lady Dedlock's heart is hanging up with her past love that involves Esther and Hawdon, whom she considers in her evaluation, renegade by her intention to save the status quo.

Whatever the choice Lady Dedlock takes, she is sure her choice will influence the stability and the happiness of the others. Thus, she decides not to take any decision for the present time, she storms in her anger and shows several signs of great frustration. Her hesitation, tiredness, and anxiety, impatience and tedium, all these indicative aspects evidently show a great degree of frustration that refers to her sense of self-disrespect and guilt.

Lady Dedlock's sense of iniquity is reinforced to certain level, as a result of her marriage, she has formidable physical resources at her command that could be used to raise the welfare and gladness of those for whom she cares. However, she is totally aware that these resources result from what she understands as her dishonesty and that all her power, wealthy, or prestige cannot truly be used. Thus, this fact motivates a good deal of anger and depression in her, and many of these feelings emerge as dissatisfaction and disrespect pointed towards her husband and his family, essentially since they are representatives of the whole class whose values she

must subscribe to, in a superficial way at least. The eventual conclusion is that Lady Dedlock, in a gradual increasing degree, regards herself as a coward and a hypocrite, as she experiences, in consideration to her sense of contempt, worthlessness and disgust. These feelings reach its climax when Lady Dedlock does not spare any chance to conserve her maid Rosa from any potential profanity influences of the former's impending dishonor, extort by Tulkinghorn to continue lying to make it possible to protect Sir Leicester, his family, and the structure of the whole class. This compulsion by Tulkinghorn exposes unexpected result, which in turn clarifies what Lady Dedlock has been doing to herself. Regardless of being molded by the society values she has achieved, she is quiet aware that she has abandoned and deceived the only two persons she ever truly loved. In fact, Tulkinghorn's knowledge leaves her with the feeling that it would never be possible to try again to reconcile the present and the past and that it is time to make a final decision. As a matter of fact, all her efforts to be loyal to her comprehend true self without destructing the world of Chesney, a world such as her dressing in Mademoiselle Hortenses's clothing to visit Hawdon's grave in the Pauper cemetery with Jo, her secret visit to Hawdon's room at Krook's, and her tearful meeting with Esther in the woods is a very good example to illustrate the former attempts.

Ross Dabney raises the question of which is the greater sin on Lady Dedlock's part, deceiving Sir Leicester in not telling him about her affair with Captain Hawdon or marrying for social status and wealth. It would appear that Dickens is more concerned with Lady Dedlock's inner turmoil resulting from a mercenary marriage than he is with her past sexual indiscretions. This dose creates a tension in the reader between conventional values and the values which Dickens suggests are important in the novel. Her youthful offense is not what makes Tulkinghorn attempt to control her; rather, it is his realization that Lady Dedlock's capacity for love and her sense of commitment outweigh her loyalty to the values and lifestyle of Chesney world. (Dabney, 1967, pp. 82-83)

It is almost the case with most of Dickens' other self-damaging women, Lady Dedlock's efforts, to protect an innocent young individual from iniquity, suffering, and sham. Her inability to do much for Esther motivates her to adopt her maid girl Rosa, who, as the future bride of Watt Rouncewell, becomes a thorn in the great conflict with Tulkinghorn. In fact, the maternal sympathy and kindness of Lady Dedlock towards Rosa provide confidence to the lawyers belief that selfless loyalty of this type is strange to the style of Dedlock's life and even threaten to its values, specifically that self-continuity at an ambience of glacial aloofness. Despite the warnings from Tulkinghorn, Lady Dedlock's decision to over joy Rosa, might be the reason behind her sense of guilt over neglecting Esther, which might also be attributed to a kind of re-newing of Lady Dedlock's experience with her first love, an alternative second opportunity for her to reconfirm her belief in real love by using all her power to affirm Rosa's attainment of what Lady Dedlock once owned and still cherishes. It is Lady Dedlock's solid obligation to Rosa that establishes the pier where Lady Dedlock seeks to return to the human fold from her isolation.

It is true that she does seem to forsake the frustration and restlessness that indicted her former conduct; she does not seem to have the ability to take any relief in having her isolation and practicing beneficial deeds of decency and kindness. In fact, once abetted to action, her self-damaging impulse occupies full domination, for she gives up all the victory awards that she has gained through her marriage to Sir Leicester.

Her flight from the Dedlock town house in the dead of winter is a clear indication of her intention to seek death through what has been described as a passive search for a method of committing suicide without having to take direct responsibility for one's own death. (Menninger, 1938, p. 51)

A peculiar merit mostly links with great frustration. Her discontent feeling to Tulkinghorn, Sir Leicester, and his family, and their value system does not vanish due to her decent decision to help Rosa. Actually, it surfaces to eventually win over any feelings of kindness or sympathy that she does have for her husband. She has always treated him with inquisitive blend of respect and disrespect throughout the whole novel. In fact, Sir Leicester love for Lady Dedlock is clearly stated at the very opening of the novel, who marries her just for love; since she enters the marriage without family name or even fortune, but it might be her beauty, or even if she practices some of her charms on Sir Leicester, but the reader is still not convinced and even confused to link between the lovable qualities in a wife and Lacy Dedlock pride and her permanent fatigue. In addition, no indication in the novel shows clearly if Honoria in one way or another even dreamed to marry this man. But even if she married him without any internal or external excitements, was she entirely aware of the diversities that might varnish their relationship unequal? Or she might love Sir Leicester eventually with the length of time? We can only appraise that her strive of fortune and reputation or name is her great concern, and all her feelings regarding her self-disgust have been converted into loathing and dissatisfaction to the Dedlocks. "In any case, her feelings for Sir Leicester may be described as, at best, ambivalent, and this love-hate mixture has been considered an important component of depression that can become self-directed and, if intense enough, result in suicide tendencies" (Freeman, 1969, pp. 80-81). Lady Dedlock's flee is a brutal stroke to Sir Leicester, though declaring her innocence of Tulkinghorn's murder, is loaded with self-recrimination:

Believe no other good of me, for I am innocent of nothing else that you have heard, or will hear, laid to my charge... may you, in your just resentment, be able to forget the unworthy women on whom you have wasted a most generous devotion—who avoids you, only with a deeper shame than that with which she hurries from herself – and who writes this last adieu. (Dickens, 1984, p. 816)

Lady Dedlock's eventual choice to reject the artificial faked value system of the rank to which she has soared destructs the insularity which has saved her from unkind things as disease and destitution. Sir Leicester has used all his authority and even did his best to protect her from the knowledge of other people's anguish and misery, but this act to shield her has only motivated the sense of iniquity and dissatisfaction in Lady Dedlock's mind. In fact, there was no indication in her note to Sir Leicester that shows if she is entirely quite aware of the suffering she might cause to her husband by departing him. Her failure to understand Sir Leicester's ability for understanding and forgiveness, and her self-disgust and iniquity make it difficult for her to convince herself as worthy of Sir Leicester's love; actually, her own view on this matter, she considers herself as a person without any significance and she is only an appropriate decoration for Chesney world, an ornament that can be neglected without causing any significant damage to the Dedlocks' style of life. Lady Dedlock thus starts her suicidal trip with Inspector Bucket in pursuit. Her disguise in the clothing of Jenny brought to her mind the memory of her former disguise in her visit to Hawdon's grave led by Jo, when she dressed as Mademoiselle Hortense. In Fact, the idea of disguise serves a multidimensional points: First of all, it is purposed to defeat any pursuit form the side of Inspector Bucked; secondly, it symbolically returns Lady Dedlock to the human family with its poverty and pain to which she has been indifferent; thirdly, it is a symbolic rejection of the ill-gotten riches Lady Dedlock has achieved with her marriage to Sir Leicester; eventually, the casting off of her fine clothing is rooted in Lady Dedlock's mind, and a symbolic damaging that satisfies the necessity that Lady Dedlock yet has to be penalized for her unfaithfulness to her husband Hawdon.

It is difficult to confirm sufficiently that Dickens does not intend to penalize Lady Dedlock for her contravention of Victorian sexual morals. In fact, there is no doubt in our minds about the availability of many different options for Lady Dedlock to make it possible to solve her problems. But she would be more satisfied with any alternative that could damage herself, even if it fails to satisfy some kind of ambiguous romantic notion of love.

Dickens' intention was not to force his readers to be convinced blindly with Lady Dedlock's idea of victory in death, attributed to her flee from her dilemma, thus he devotes much attention to the suffering and the virtues of Sir Leicester's. It is obvious that the actual cause which forced Lady Dedlock to pursue death, is her concepts of honor, faithfulness, and truth. In fact, Lady Dedlock's results on comfort to any one, because finally all the values she dies for, is almost as faked as those of the Dedlocks. Most of Dickens' self-torturers have the chance to live, but in the case of Lady Dedlock, Dickens allows her to go as far as possible with the implications of her guilt feelings and deformed self-image. "In Lady Dedlock's magnanimous treatment of Rosa, Dickens depicted the tendency of depressed individuals to be overly generous to have an exaggeratedly high regard for other people" (Lobitz & Post, 1979, p. 39). "In her unhealthy preoccupation with her own unworthiness, amounting almost to a kind of distorted narcissism, Dickens successfully dramatizes the more important aspect of Lady Dedlock's depression" (Becker, 1974, P. 8).

Undoubtedly the actual ultimate deficit which destroys the personality of Lady Dedlock is her lack of self-knowledge. Her self-verdict and introspection do not lend her any support to recognize herself as a victim due to the conflict between the two value systems, she is trying to improve in her heart. Evidently she would never be able to entirely give up her own past, although she gains all the material advantages she achieves from the aristocratic world. Lady Dedlock's stress results from the ache she suffers and creates discontent against Sir Leicester and his family, but does not reduce her feelings about Captain Hawdon. However, it only deforms her perceptions of self-worth and raises her senses of dishonesty and guilt:

"To bless and receive me", groaned my mother, "it is far too late. I must travel my dark road alone, and it will lead me where it will. From day to day, sometimes from hour to hour, I do not see the way before my guilty feet. This is the earthly punishment I have brought upon myself. I bear it, and I hide it". (Dickens, 1984, pp. 565-566)

Lady Dedlock's experiences and her state of self-imposed isolation expose from senses of loathing at having, in her own assessment, abandoned Esther. Lady Dedlock's shame and reaction are in the same scene, she hides her face in self-disgust and shame from Esther's embrace. She continually keeps repeating the word "never" in her own misery, in attempt to depict her future relationship with Esther, while insisting upon her daughter to consider her "as dead", "beyond all hope", "beyond all hope", and asks Esther to forbear from shedding tears, for she is in her own estimation states, "I am not worthy" (Dickens, 1984, pp. 566-576). In her own mind, Lady Dedlock's final judgment to devastate herself, is not only for her own sense of faithfulness to the past, a reassurance of her love for Hawdon, and a recognition of her daughter, it is also a well-worthy and most appropriate punishment that has the influence of relieving the load on crushing guilt born of her low self-respect and nebular code of morality.

### **Mademoiselle Hortense**

Right from the very beginning of the novel, Dickens gives us the impression about Mademoiselle Hortense,

Lady Deadlock's maid, as a hate-loaded, inordinate person who seems to finally blow out sorely against those who might offend her:

My Lady's maid is a Frenchwomen of two-and thirty, from somewhere in the southern country about Avignon and Marseilles—a large-eyed brown women with black hair; who would be handsome, but for certain feline mouth, and general uncomfortable tightness of face, rendering the jaws too eager, and the skull too prominent. There is something indefinable keen and wan about her anatomy; and she has a watchful way of looking out of the corners of her eyes without turning her head, which could be pleasantly dispensed with—especially when she is in a ill humor and near knives. Through all the good taste of her dress and little adornments, these objections so express themselves, that she seems to go about like a very neat she-wolf imperfectly tamed. (Dickens, 1984, p. 209)

Dickens' intention is not portray her as a fully-developed figure or character, yet we are certain that she belongs to the same party of Dickens' self-damaging women.

Lady Deadlock's sudden kindness and sympathy towards her maid Rosa, motivates her husband Hortense to respond violently, with reference to the way she treats him, coolly since five years, as she patronizes with others. Stimulated by his bad-treatment and his sense of jealousy towards Rosa, he finally decides to dismissed her from Lady Deadlock's service:

Missal from Lady Deadlock's service. Having assisted Tulkinghorn by appearing before Jo dressed as Lady Deadlock, Hortense returns to him after her dismissal and requests that he find her another position or, if he cannot, that he employ her to assist in ruining Lady Dedlock. (Dickens, 1984, p. 644)

Unaware of the fact that after Lady Dedlocks mortification, Tulkinghorn will not be in an instant need for Lady Dedlock, thus, when Tulkinghorn tells her about his intention not to pay her, concerning her early service, because she is paid by him for that service, Mademoiselle Hortense becomes very angry. When she promises to come back "many times again" (Dickens, 1984, p. 645), Tulkinghorn vows that he will imprison her for a long time. Entirely furious, Hortense does not yield any ground in this battle of wills but repeats, "I will prove you" (Dickens, 1984, p. 646). Later she comes back and murders the lawyer, after that she is arrested by Inspector Bucket. "Her vindictive nature is never so apparent as when she is arrested by Bucket in Sir Leicester's presence and taunts the old gentleman about his wife's honor" (Dickens, 1984, p. 799).

Mademoisella Hortense's hate is so all-including that she immolates even her own preferable interests to it. Her discontent of Rosa is indicated not in her invective only towards the girl but expresses also in her repeated grouchy into Lady Dedlock's mirrors. In another scene she takes off her shoes and walks barefoot over the wet grass, stimulating Mr. Jarndyce to ask, "Is that young woman mad?" (Dickens, 1984, p. 312).

His reply to Hortense's action strongly proposes that the maid's walking barefoot over wet grass is regarded extremely insanity. Even so her act of murdering Tulkinghorn is only a sterile sign also, as she has achieved nothing by it. And eventually, "While in Bucket's custody she displays a total disregard for her own welfare, first, by preparing to throw herself out of the window" (Dickens, 1984, p. 796), secondly, she keeps criminalizing herself after the inspector frequent warring and by expressing the impetuous remark: "Then you can do as you please with me. It is but the death, it is all the same" (Dickens, 1984, p. 799).

The repeated utilize of the mirror imagery linked with Lady Dedlock and Mademoiselle Hortense, the dressing of Mademoiselle Hortense in the clothes of her Lady's and the suspicion placed on Lady Dedlock by Hortense's murder of Tulkinghorn serve to provide confirmation to the controversy that Hortense is the

incarnation of Lady Dedlock's less admirable qualities: "her sense of self, her pride, and her potentially savage resentment" (Kelly, 1969, p. 39). A further illustration for the influence of this mirroring, refers to the fact that Dickens often "distorts" a character into two contrasting persons instead of one "round" individual, a procedure referred to as "Surrogating" (Miyoski, 1969, p. 269). "Frank interprets the frequent use of mirrors as Dickens' attempt to show that Lady Dedlock's inner feelings are revealed to her not only in her looking glass but also in the eye of Mademoiselle Hortense" (Frank, 1975, p. 91). "Collins' dismissal of Hortense are merely a way for Dickens to cast suspicion on characters we are closer to is based on what he feels is a weak motive for her crime" (Collins, 1965, p. 80). "Smith likewise contends that Tulkinghorn has done little to provoke Hortense and that the maid would have possessed more psychological consistency in murdering Lady Dedlock" (Smith, 1968, p. 129). But the reader is already prepared by Dickens for Hortense's murder of Tulkinghorn:

She has been likened by Dickens to a she-wolf and a tigress; her fury has been directed towards herself, towards Rosa (who, like Tulkinghorn, has done her no real injury), and even towards the mirrors in Lady Dedlock room. She is as unstable as any character in Dickens' novels, and her capacity to commit murder seems quite established. It hardly seems appreciative of Dickens' efforts for the reader to demand a logical motive for Hortense's pathological behavior. Even her attempts to cast suspicion for the murder on Lady Dedlock are self-destructive if we consider the fact that Mademoiselle Hortense is at first under no suspicion herself and could have very easily escaped detection if she had managed to restrain her maniacal hatred. It is when she sees the opportunity to destroy Lady Dedlock that her fury leads her to all ill-advised acts that convince Bucket and his wife of her guilt. (Dickens, 1984, pp. 796-798)

Unlike Dickens other self-damaging women, Mademoiselle Hortense's self-damaging is very simple to reveal in this study, due to two important reasons, the first is Dickens' failure to support her character with the a good essential ground, such as education, upbringing and parents. Secondly, it refers to her specific role in the story of this novel. Thus, then reader may, like Bucket, be too ready to impute her range, which is puzzling with reference to the action and the events of the novel, to her being a Frenchwoman.

### Conclusions

Dickens' growing concern in social matters in the 1850s synchronizes with the publication of his famous novel *Bleak House* (1852-1853) in which he examines the personality type with special reference to his two female characters, Lady Dedlock and Mademoiselle Hortense. In his earlier female characters, although Dickens forms and creates women who are pioneers of the self-damaging women, it is not until *Bleak House* that Dickens displays what seems to be the well-developed self-damaging person or character.

Dickens suggests a certain conditions that predisposes a person to accept redemptive experiences. One of these important conditions is honest self-knowledge integrated with realistic self-evaluation. Another condition might refer to the capacity to understand other people's love for one's worthiness to be loved. The eventual result of these conditions reflects the characters ability to produce a new self-concept.

Dickens self-damaging characters presents a certain number of personality merits, but in different ranks. They are, for the most essential trait, very impatient with others, very intelligent and articulate, they shows a great degree of fatigue, boredom, and extremely uncertain and passive, as well as careless, concerning their own futures.

The two female characters in this study demonstrate a great deal of self-damaging behaviors. Provocative aggression is evident in Mademoiselle Hortense's murder of Tulkinghorn, and Lady Dedlock's freezing to death is an apparent suicide.

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