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**Literary Theories**

### Thematic Contours of Courtroom Scenes across the Ages in Select Masterpieces in English Literature

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**Abstract:** Courtroom scenes in literary writings are a popular trope, often used to explore themes of justice, morality, and human nature. In the long history of literature, courtroom scenes bring about the most memorable and dramatic moments. Consequences for bad behaviour, an opportunity to behave heroically, a chance to turn a plot around, and send it rocketing in a different direction— the courtroom is a gift to any writer. Many well-known novels and plays feature dramatic and legal battles, from classic works to legal thrillers. In this context, this paper attempts at foregrounding the courtroom scenes in select literary masterpieces. It focuses on *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare features a famous courtroom scene where Portia, disguised as a lawyer, cleverly defends Antonio against Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh. *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens satirizes the British legal system through its depiction of the lengthy and convoluted Jarndyce and Jarndyce case. In *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee the iconic courtroom scene is central to its exploration of racial injustice in the American South. *The Trial* by Franz Kafka has a surreal and unsettling novel that depicts a man's nightmarish experience with a Kafkaesque legal system. *Anatomy of a Murder* by Robert Traver provides a realistic and detailed portrayal of a murder trial. *A Time to Kill* by John Grisham is a legal thriller focusing on a lawyer defending a Black man accused of killing the men who attacked his daughter. *The Caine Mutiny* by Herman Wouk includes a court-martial scene where a young officer is tried for mutiny. *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo features multiple courtroom scenes, including the trial of Jean Valjean. It is no wonder that authors depict them, whether the writings are legal thriller or not, there is something inherently thrilling about life-or-death, win-or-lose as the outcomes of courtroom battle exhibiting the magic of language over the intricacies of plot.

**Keywords:** Courtroom scenes, legal battles, legal thrillers, life-or-death, win-or-lose, courtroom battle.

## Introduction

Courtroom scenes are thematically highly sensitive and lead to dramatic turns. In literary narratives, as well as in plays across the world, such dramatic settings bear a special position. For this craft of delineating court scene, famous writers such as William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Franz Kafka like famous authors have achieved wider acclaim. In this context, some well-known literary pieces can be taken for thematic analysis to see the changing patterns and contexts that abound the dramatic twist of such work of arts. “In essence, fictional courtrooms are designed to be ‘mirror-reflections’ of societal anxieties about justice, yet they often distort the legal process into an entertaining, albeit inaccurate, dramatic showdown.” (Singh, 2025). Thus, courtroom scenes in literature and fiction excel at driving conflict resolution and moral insights, yet they typically favor intense drama over authentic legal accuracy.

When the matters of court of law comes in, one has to examine multiple levels of linguistic representations to see how language constructs, maintains, and exercises legal power. At the micro-level, lexical and syntactic functions; at pragmatic level, the utility of speech acts and intent; and at macro-level, the courtroom interaction and power dynamics are interpreted. (Jone, 2024).

### 1. Court Scene in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*: An Embroidery of Human Attributes

In Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* (1600), Act 4, scene -1, at the court at Venice, Shylock insists on enforcing the bond's conditions. Portia arrives disguised as a legal expert, bearing a recommendation from Dr. Bellario. She rescues Antonio by ruling that the bond permits Shylock only a pound of his flesh—no blood allowed. She then declares Shylock guilty of conspiring to kill a Venetian, making him liable for estate forfeiture and execution. Antonio persuades the Duke to lighten the punishment, and a broken Shylock accepts the revised terms.

Bassanio offers the disguised Portia the 3,000 ducats he'd brought for Shylock, but she insists on the ring she gave him. He hesitates, so she leaves, pretending offense. Antonio urges Bassanio to hand it over, and Bassanio dispatches Gratiano to catch up with her and deliver it. Thus, Antonio says,

“I do oppose

My patience to his fury, and am armed

To suffer with a quietness of spirit.” (Act-4, Sc-1, Lines-26-28)

Shakespeare's skill in fusing moral stance with rhetorical poise and antithesis, evident in the juxtaposition of "my patience" and "his fury." or "am armed" which introduce a military metaphor. Words such as "patience," "suffer," and "quietness" belong to a lexical field of stoic endurance. / calm resistance. Then, Portia as Balthazar starts establishing argument.

"PORTIA, as Balthazar

The quality of mercy is not strained.

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes

The thronèd monarch better than his crown.

His scepter shows the force of temporal power,

The attribute to awe and majesty

Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;

But mercy is above this sceptered sway.

It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;

It is an attribute to God Himself;

And earthly power doth then show likest God's

When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,

Though justice be thy plea, consider this:

That in the course of justice none of us

Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,

And that same prayer doth teach us all to render

The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much

To mitigate the justice of thy plea,

Which, if thou follow, this strict court of Venice

Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.

SHYLOCK: My deeds upon my head! I crave the law,

The penalty and forfeit of my bond." (Act-4, Sc-1, Lines-180-200)

The speech calls for true justice “seasoned” with compassion, benefitting both the giver and the receiver proving itself nobler than the royal power. The tone is emphatic, motivational, and advocate higher order thoughts beyond the normal social dealings. Words such as quality, attribute, temporal, majesty, enthronèd, salvation, mitigate create a dignified, almost theological register. This Latinate diction distances the speech from everyday conversation and gives it the tone of a sermon or royal proclamation, appropriate to the gravity of the trial scene. Shakespeare clusters words from the semantic domains of kingship and religion such as ‘thronèd,’ ‘monarch,’ ‘crown,’ ‘scepter,’ ‘majesty,’ ‘kings/ God,’ ‘heaven,’ ‘salvation,’ and ‘prayer.’

The expression equates mercy with divine and royal authority, subtly suggesting that Shylock’s insistence on strict justice lacks these higher qualities. Stylistically, the speech blends poetic imagery, balanced syntax, religious diction, and rhetorical progression to elevate a courtroom plea into a moral discourse on the nature of justice. Shakespeare uses language here not only to persuade Shylock but to instruct the audience on the ethical ideal that mercy must temper justice.

### **The Depiction of Social Reality in Court Scene in Dicken’s *Bleak House***

The court scenes in Dickens' *Bleak House*, primarily focused on the interminable Jarndyce and Jarndyce case in the Court of Chancery, depict a labyrinthine, foggy, and corrupt legal system that consumes lives and estates, featuring endless paperwork, bureaucratic delays, and lawyers growing rich as parties go bankrupt, symbolizing societal decay through the pervasive fog and the case's generational absurdity. Key elements include the Chancellor presiding amidst thick London fog, the old woman Miss Flite haunting the court, and characters like Mr. Tangle and Mr. Guppy involved in the case, showcasing how justice is lost in endless procedure.

The central case, an inheritance dispute that has dragged on for generations, becoming a legal joke, consuming fortunes, and ruining families, with lawyers as the only winners. The court is shrouded in literal and metaphorical fog, symbolizing confusion, obscurity, and the stifling nature of the law, as described in Chapter -1, "In Chancery". The Lord Chancellor presides over the court, seemingly detached from the human cost. Miss Flite, an old, mad woman who attends court daily, a victim of the case, representing the ruined lives. Lawyers and clerks are represented by characters like Mr. Tangle, Kenge, and Mr. Guppy, who profit from the endless proceedings. Cases take decades, with countless counsel appearing; records are immense; and the only outcome is increased costs.

Dickens uses these scenes to satirize the Chancery system's focus on procedure over justice, highlighting its absurdity and destructive power, a criticism echoed in the novel's preface.

Chapter -1 ("In Chancery") establishes the setting, the pervasive fog, and the endless Jarndyce and Jarndyce case. Chapter -24 ("Esther's Narrative") features the tragic climax for Richard Carstone, a beneficiary, who dies amidst the legal chaos, with Mr. Bucket present, as noted in the Online Literature Network snippet. Chapter- 37 ("Jarndyce and Jarndyce") delves deeper into the history and hopelessness of the case. The Court of Chancery is not just a setting; it is a character in itself—a fog-shrouded, soul-crushing machine. Dickens uses the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce to satirize the Victorian legal system's inefficiency and decay. Here are the most significant textual quotations describing the court scenes, categorized by their focus.

The novel opens with one of the most famous descriptions in literature, linking the physical fog of London to the metaphorical fog of the law.

"London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth..... Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds this day in the sight of heaven and earth.".... On such an afternoon, if ever, the Lord High Chancellor ought to be sitting here—as here he is—with a foggy glory round his head, softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains..."

This opening passage of *Bleak House* establishes, in concentrated form, the novel's central critical theme: the moral and social rot at the heart of the English legal system, especially the Court of Chancery, which Dickens presents as a stagnant, dehumanizing machine that corrupts everything it touches. The "implacable" November weather, the mud "as if the waters had but newly retired," and the "fog too thick" are not just atmospheric details but symbolic of confusion, delay, and moral decay in a society whose highest institutions fail the people they are supposed to serve.

Dickens uses the image of London under perpetual fog and mud to suggest that England is spiritually and socially diseased, with Chancery as the “most pestilent of hoary sinners” whose endless litigation poisons lives and blocks justice. The passage frames the law not as a guardian of order but as an obscuring, grinding bureaucracy that traps individuals in interminable cases (like Jarndyce and Jarndyce), mirroring the “groping and floundering” of those caught in its web. There is symbolic landscape, moral indictment, and highly stylized prose to launch a sustained critique of institutionalized injustice, making the fog-bound, mud-choked London of the opening a permanent emblem of the novel’s bleak vision.

Dickens describes the court as a place where life and money are consumed without end.

"This is the Court of Chancery; which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard..." (Chapter-1, )

The Chancellor is depicted as the weary, detached center of this legal storm.

"The Lord Chancellor, with his eyes on the fire at the other end of the hall, says, 'Mr. Tangle, have you nearly concluded?' 'Much-languished Dan-gel,' says Mr. Tangle, 'I am—h—exhausted....The Lord Chancellor (who is not supposed to know anything about it) asks, 'What is the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce?' and the counsel on both sides, and the solicitors, and the very clerks, look at him as if he were a joke." (Chapter-1)

In the final scene, that is “The End of the Suit” (Chapter- 65), the case ends not with a judgment, but with the total consumption of the estate by legal fees.

"The suit is ended! ... There is no more money. The whole estate has been absorbed in costs." The preciosity of the clients and the reality of justice stand ironical.

### **Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*: An Example of the Plight of the Marginalized**

The court scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird* centers on Tom Robinson's trial for raping Mayella Ewell, where Atticus Finch masterfully proves Tom's innocence using evidence like Mayella's red-handed injuries (inconsistent with Tom's left-handed disability) and Tom's genuine pity for Mayella, but despite the irrefutable proof, a racist jury convicts him, highlighting themes of racial prejudice, injustice, and the painful loss of childhood innocence for Jem. Mayella Ewell accuses Tom Robinson, a Black man, of rape, a crime she initiated but was interrupted by her father, Bob Ewell. Atticus demonstrates that Mayella's injuries (bruises on the right side of her face) were inflicted by a left-handed person, but Tom's left arm is crippled.

He also reveals Mayella's loneliness and loneliness, and that Tom felt sorry for her, which was a grave social offense in the racist South. Despite Atticus's compelling defense, the all-white jury convicts Tom, showing that racial bias overrides truth in Maycomb. Scout and Jem observe the trial, with Jem's faith in justice shattered as he realizes the jury's prejudice.

The trial exposes the deep-seated racism of Maycomb, where a Black man's word is worthless against a white woman's, regardless of evidence. Atticus embodies moral courage by defending Tom, but the conviction shows the futility of justice in a prejudiced system. For Jem, the verdict is a devastating lesson about the unfairness and hypocrisy of the adult world, contrasting with his earlier beliefs.

The court scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird* spans multiple chapters, primarily Chapters-16 through 21. "The courtroom was still, and again I wondered where the babies were. Judge Taylor's cigar was a brown speck in the center of his mouth; Mr. Gilmer was writing on one of the yellow pads on his table, trying to outdo the court reporter, whose hand was jerking rapidly." "Shoot," I muttered, "we missed it." Atticus was halfway through his speech to the jury. He had evidently pulled some papers from his briefcase that rested beside his chair, because they were on his table. Tom Robinson was toying with them. In Chapter- 17, "Jem," I said, "are those the Ewells sittin' down yonder?" "Hush," said Jem, "Mr. Heck Tate's testifyin'." Mr. Tate had dressed appropriately for the occasion. His plain business suit made him blend in with every other man—no more high boots, lumber jacket, or belt loaded with bullets. From that instant, he no longer frightened me. He leaned forward in the witness chair, hands clasped between his knees, listening intently to the circuit solicitor. In Chapter 18, a young girl approached the witness stand. As she raised her hand and swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help her God, she appeared fragile. But once seated facing us, she revealed her true self: a sturdy, thick-bodied girl hardened by demanding physical work. Subsequently, Thomas Robinson reached around, ran his fingers under his left arm and lifted it. He guided his arm to the Bible and his rubber-like left hand sought contact with the black binding. As he raised his right hand, the useless one slipped off the Bible and hit the clerk's table. He was trying again when Judge Taylor growled, "That'll do, Tom." Tom took the oath and stepped into the witness chair. Atticus paused, then he did something he didn't ordinarily do. He unhitched his watch and chain and placed them on the table, saying, "With the court's permission—" Judge Taylor nodded, and then Atticus did something I never saw him do before or since, in public or in private: he unbuttoned his vest, unbuttoned his collar, loosened his tie, and took off his coat.

A jury never looks at a defendant it has convicted, and when this jury came in, not one of them looked at Tom Robinson. The foreman handed a piece of paper to Mr. Tate who handed it to the clerk who handed it to the judge... I shut my eyes. Judge Taylor was polling the jury: "Guilty... guilty... guilty... guilty..." I peeked at Jem: his hands were white from gripping the balcony rail, and his shoulders jerked as if each "guilty" was a separate stab between them.

### **Kafka' *The Trial*: Looking for Justice in Absurdity**

Franz Kafka's court scenes in *The Trial* depict a surreal, labyrinthine bureaucracy where the Court operates secretly, its processes are illogical, and the accused (Joseph K.) is assumed guilty, facing endless, opaque proceedings in dusty attics and official offices, revealing a system designed for confusion, not justice, where defense is impossible and influence, not truth, matters. Key scenes include K.'s initial interrogation, visits to the court painter Titorelli, and the harrowing whipping scene, all highlighting the oppressive, circular nature of his unexplainable trial and the Court's arbitrary power.

The Court's procedures are hidden; K. doesn't know the charges or evidence, and the highest courts are inaccessible. Proceedings are a maze of looping reports, endless delays, and circular logic, exemplified by the court painter Titorelli's advice to seek deferred acquittal. The system assumes guilt, making defense futile and viewing defense counsel as explanations rather than advocates. While influenced by bribery and favors, its deeper corruption lies in its unaccountability and internal consistency that remains unknowable to outsiders. Courtrooms are often squalid attics, filled with dust, bureaucratic clutter, and oppressive heat, reflecting the case's suffocating nature.

Memorable Court Scenes takes place as in Chapter- 5), K. discovers his arrested warders being brutally whipped in a lumber room for his complaint, a shocking display of the Court's power and indifference that tortures K. and makes him complicit in the senseless cycle. Titorelli's Studio (Chapter -9): K. visits the court painter, who explains the limited options for acquittal (deferred or apparent), emphasizing that the Court cannot be beaten but can be influenced, a lesson in navigating the system's absurdity. K. wanders through crowded, stifling attics where clerks and petitioners mingle, a chaotic bureaucratic underworld where the Court's machinery grinds on, utterly indifferent to K.'s pleas. The chaplain tells K. the parable of the man from the country seeking entry to the Law, suggesting K. should accept the court's necessity, not its truth, a bleak commentary on accepting absurd authority.

The Trial captures the absurdity, opacity, and accusatory nature of Josef K.'s judicial ordeals. These primarily come from Chapter- 2's interrogation and related encounters, emphasizing bureaucratic farce. The event of examining Magistrate's rebuke can be one example as he says, "You arrive over an hour late.' 'We thought you had instructions to appear at nine o'clock.'" The magistrate highlights K.'s tardiness in the chaotic attic courtroom. Then, he says, "Silence! I forbid you to make a speech like that!" Issued as K. begins his defense, underscoring the court's control. K. accuses the hidden machinery of justice.

### **Robert Traver's *Anatomy of a Murder***

The court scene in Robert Traver's *Anatomy of a Murder* is a brilliant, detailed courtroom drama focused on the murder trial of Lt. Frederic Manion, accused of killing a man who allegedly assaulted his wife, Laura, with defense attorney Paul Biegler strategically using a temporary insanity defense stemming from Laura's assault, featuring intense legal maneuvering, realistic settings, and exploration of human motivations within the Upper Peninsula's small-town dynamics. The novel, based on a real case, meticulously details the defense's strategy, culminating in dramatic cross-examinations, particularly of Laura Manion, to prove her husband's inability to form intent due to the traumatic experience, making it a classic legal thriller.

The Case is that Paul Biegler defends Lt. Manion, who murdered Barney Quill, the man who allegedly raped Laura Manion. Biegler's core strategy hinges on proving temporary insanity, arguing Manion's actions were a result of profound psychological trauma from his wife's assault. The trial features Biegler's skillful, sometimes unconventional, defense against the prosecution, led by the ambitious Claude Dancer, and the complex, often unreliable, testimony of Laura Manion. Traver (Michigan Supreme Court Justice John Voelker) infused the novel with genuine legal procedures, jargon, and the atmosphere of the Upper Peninsula, giving it remarkable realism. The narrative delves into deceit, passion, the nature of truth, and the intricacies of the legal system, all set against the backdrop of a small, interconnected community. The courtroom scenes are renowned for their depth, showcasing Biegler's meticulous preparation, the dramatic unraveling of testimonies, and the strategic placement of evidence, making it a landmark in legal fiction.

The key court scene in *Les Misérables* is the trial of Champmathieu, a man mistaken for Jean Valjean, where the mayor, M. Madeleine (Valjean in disguise), dramatically confesses his true identity to save the innocent man, causing shock and disbelief among the jury and authorities, even leading to Madeleine's hair turning white from the stress. This pivotal moment highlights Valjean's moral struggle and sacrifice, as he chooses to reveal his past as an ex-convict to protect Fantine's child (Cosette) and uphold his newfound integrity, defying the unjust system that seeks to condemn him.

Context of the trial is that the accused, a poor man named Champmathieu, who resembles Valjean, is on trial for theft (a fresh offense) but also faces charges as an escaped convict (Valjean's old crime). The Witnesses are three former galley slaves (Cochepaille, Brevet, Chenildieu) unanimously identify Champmathieu as Jean Valjean, reinforcing the mistaken identity. Mayor Madeleine (Valjean) wrestles with his conscience: expose himself and risk returning to prison (abandoning Fantine's legacy) or remain silent and let an innocent man suffer.

The climax comes as Valjean's confession as the witnesses identify Champmathieu, M. Madeleine steps forward and interrupts the proceedings. He tells the jury, "It is I: I am Jean Valjean," proving his identity by recounting specific details of the convicts' lives that only the real Valjean would know. A profound silence falls; the district attorney requests a physician for the pale Madeleine, and Javert leaves the courtroom. The jury, convinced by Valjean's undeniable proof, frees Champmathieu, who leaves in bewildered silence. Valjean, having fulfilled his duty, walks out of the court, knowing he must now face the consequences of his confession and pursue Cosette, marking a tragic turning point in his life.

### **Critical Discussion and Conclusion**

Court scene in *Merchant of Venice* brings about a turn in the thought of justice seasoned with mercy and deep humanitarian attributes and that was presented as a sample of advice to the human society at large. Its oratorical presentation and rhetorical devices happen to be a brilliant manifestation justice. But, with the changing time and situation, Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, court scenes are often presented ironically because of the constraints of reality of the court of law. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is yet another new testimony of social plights exhibiting social realities owing to racial discrimination where court of law is again taken notice of biased verbal duel.

Franz Kafka's *The Trial* reflects court scene to be an example of absurd and some sort of bureaucratic farce, whereas contemporary narratives are surrounded with plot twists owing to suspicious murders, and unexpected court matters owing to human relationship, wealth and power.

Some more well-known writings can be placed here in this context. *Witness for the Prosecution* by Agatha Christie in which Leonard Vole is accused of murdering a wealthy woman; *Strong Poison* by Dorothy L. Sayers, 1930 mystery novel talks about a young woman Harriet Vane' trial for murdering her lover; *Presumed Innocent* by Scott Turow in which the trial of Rusty Sabich takes place for the murder of his colleague Carolyn Polhemus; John Grisham's *A Time to Kill* in which the jury deliberations in the trial of Jake Brigance; *The Lincoln Lawyer* by Michael Connelly typically involve Mickey Haller defending clients in high-stakes cases, often involving complex legal dilemmas; *Thirteen* by Steve Cavanagh, a legal thriller involves a movie star accused of murder; *Nine Minutes* by Jodi Picoult, *Pleasantville* by Attika Locke, *Apple Tree Yard* by Louise Doughty and *Anatomy of Scandal* by Sarah Vaughan are some of the interesting narratives presenting matters of diverse interest relating to court of law.

Such literary masterpieces bear the courtroom testimonies by giving us evidences of structural analysis of arguments and questioning techniques to identify potential biases or misinterpretations in legal proceedings which can be very interesting case studies and sample analysis in forensic discourse analysis.

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