

“Attached to life again” Esther Summerson’s Struggle for Identity and Acceptance in *Bleak House*

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## Introduction

In the preface to *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens wrote that he “purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things” (xxxv). This simple sentence hints at the narrative outline of the book, establishing a third-person omniscient narrator of “familiar” things, and the first-person narrative of Esther Summerson, whose task it was to write about the “romantic” side of things. Although not universally the case, most critics consider the omniscient narrator to be a powerful, compelling voice, but find Esther’s voice to be somehow ineffective.

I will argue that it was Dickens’s intent to provide a contrast between the two narrators, but not in the traditional sense viewed by many critics, which is that the omniscient narrator portrays a realistic, “familiar” view of the world, while Esther portrays a simple “romantic” view of the world. The “familiar” or realistic view offered by the omniscient narrator is that of a world coming apart and disintegrating, a nightmare world that has been discussed in numerous scholarly articles and books. It is generally agreed that the omniscient narrative is effective in portraying the external world of the novel. On the other hand, the “romantic” view of the world offered by Esther presents problems for critics. I will argue that Esther’s perspective view is not that of conventional domesticity, but that of a confused, unsure and unstable young woman who at critical times in her narrative enters a fugue state, which is only somewhat removed from the nightmare of the omniscient narrator’s. By my reading, Esther is hardly an ineffective narrator, but rather succeeds as a deeply troubled narrator whose psychological complexity makes her unique among Dickens’s female characters. In my view, the narration of Esther is not only effective, but necessary for the novel to be successful.

Ultimately, the conclusion drawn within the novel is that there is no escape possible, either from the “familiar” nightmare world of the omniscient narrator or the “romantic” world of Esther’s fugue states. By the end of the novel, the reader concludes that the “bleakness” of *Bleak House* has become both externalized in the “familiar” or real world, and internalized in the household or “romantic” world.

In my first chapter, I will address scholarly views of the narration of Esther Summerson. The first discussion deals with the two distinct views of Esther’s narrative technique: one view holding that Esther is ineffective as a narrator, the second view holding that her narrative is effective. The second series of critical viewpoints deals with Esther’s narrative of the “romantic” side of things and the portrayal of home and hearth that is Esther’s counterpart to the detached role of the omniscient narrator.

In the second chapter, I will discuss critical views developed within the last thirty years of the psychological portrait of Esther. These views have led to an increased appreciation of Dickens as a writer of some psychological complexity and understanding.

Chapters three through five develop the thesis of the paper. Chapter three focuses on the structure and themes developed within Esther’s narrative. In chapter four, I explore the role that emotions play in the makeup of Esther’s psyche, and also present a reading of her character grounded in psychological theory. Chapter five examines the dream sequences that permeate Esther’s experience—her early years, sickness and travels with Inspector Bucket. In this chapter I draw on Freud’s theories of dream interpretation to arrive at an understanding of her personality and character.

Chapter six summarizes my conclusion: character is a psychological portrait necessary as a complement to the omniscient narrator’s objective portrayal of the external world.

## Chapter One: Critical Views of Esther's Narrative

Critical commentary on Esther's narrative is broadly divided into two camps: those who believe that Esther's narrative is ineffective; and those who see Esther's narrative as an effective counterbalance to the third-person omniscient narrator.

The view that Esther's narrative is ineffective developed shortly after the novel was completed, and was based on Esther's portrayal as being too sentimental and sweet, and lacking in self-awareness. According to this view, Esther's portrayal does not hold up when opposed to the worldly, ironic view of the omniscient narrator, and the novel suffers as a consequence. John Forster, Dickens's friend and early biographer, believed that Esther's character was too naively unaware to be believable, and that Dickens's decision to use her as one part of a dual narrative was not effective. Writing about Esther in *The Life of Charles Dickens, Vol. II*, Forster notes:

To represent a storyteller as giving the most surprising vividness to manners, motives, and characters of which we are to believe her, all the time, as artlessly unconscious, as she is also entirely ignorant of the good qualities in herself she is naively revealing in the story, was a difficult enterprise, full of hazard in any case, not worth success, and certainly not successful. (137-138)

The *Spectator*, in a review dated September 24, 1853, describes Esther in more unflattering terms than Forster, noting that her portrayal is affected and not true to life. The full extent of the failure of Esther's character, according to the *Spectator*, is revealed thus:

His heroine in *Bleak House* is a model of unconscious goodness; sowing love and reaping it wherever she goes, diffusing round her an atmosphere of happiness and a sweet perfume of a pure and kindly nature. Her unconsciousness and sweet humility of disposition are so profound that scarcely a page of her autobiography is free from a record of these admirable qualities. With delightful naïveté she writes down the praises that are showered upon her on all hands; and it is impossible to doubt the simplicity of her nature, because she never omits to assert it with emphasis. This is not only coarse portraiture, but utterly untrue and inconsistent. Such a girl would not write her own memoirs, and certainly would not bore one with her goodness till a wicked wish arises that she would either do something very 'spicy,' or confine herself to superintending the jam-pots at Bleak House. (Dyson, 57)

A review in *Putnam's Magazine*, appearing in November 1853, continues the attack on Esther Summerson, noting that Esther's habit of denigrating her own worth, while developing a flattering portrait of herself in the novel, is both disconcerting and inconsistent.

But nothing can be more palpable than the strange contrast between the character of this estimable lady, and the manner in which she narrates it herself, confessing that she never was good for any thing, that she is awkward and so on, and then going deliberately to work to draw her own portrait in the most flattering manner, all the time perfectly conscious, too, that she was doing it. Esther is a perfect character, and naturally developed, with the sole exception that her picture of herself is an unnatural contrivance. (Dyson, 79)

The views of Esther as cloyingly sweet, sentimental, and lacking in self-awareness linger to the present day. Critics continue to see Esther as a representation of the role expected to be played by a traditional Victorian woman. In "The Two Worlds of *Bleak House*," Ellen Serlen argues that Esther's role as recorder of the "romantic" side of the novel leads to a portrayal that distorts reality:

The popular critical view of Esther as affected, irritating, and offensive is derived from her romanticism, which leads her to adopt the role of Victorian 'angel of the hearth.' But even Dickens did not adore her unqualifiedly. The existence of two narratives is not alone a qualification of his regard for Esther. . . . Romanticism is an obfuscation of reality and, as such, Dickens suggests, is a morally invalid attitude in a world permeated by fog and mystery, a world in which clarity is a supreme virtue. (552)

Fred W. Boege argues that the heroine of the work, Esther Summerson, is hampered by her "simpering affectation of innocence," and asserts that the hero of the novel, Richard Carstone, is "colorless." The combination of a "colorless" hero and "simpering" heroine presents problems for the novel which, he notes, nevertheless provides at least an interesting contrast:

Esther Summerson proves that the conventional heroine is worse; for the hero is hardly more than colorless, whereas she has positive bad qualities, such as the simpering affectation of innocence. With a different medium the device might have had brilliant results. As it is, the point of view is not an unmitigated failure. Esther's personality,

shadowy though it is, is traceable in her parts of the story, and the novel provides a certain amount of that interest which results from seeing the same events or persons through different eyes. (94)

Critics who see Esther's narrative as ineffective interpret her character as devoid of internal motivations or psychological drives. Such critics tend to perpetuate the notion that Dickens is at his best when describing external events or a character's idiosyncrasies, but that he suffers when trying to describe internal motivations or drives. Perhaps the most damning criticism of Dickens as an observer of the external world, but unable to accurately portray the inner life of his characters, comes from his contemporary, George Eliot. She notes:

We have one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population; and if he could give us their psychological character—their conceptions of life, and their emotions—with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies. (194)

The second major school of thinking about Esther holds that her narrative acts as a counterpoise to that of the omniscient narrator, presenting a “romantic” view which is opposed to the “realistic” view of the third-person narrator. According to these critics, the portrayal of Esther is psychologically realistic, and the “cloying sentiment” noted by many readers is a device which she adopts to mask her powerlessness and low social station.

Doris Stringham Delespinasse argues that the dual narrative presents the same world of London, but from different perspectives. According to Delespinasse, Esther's narrative is more human, and therefore, more realistic than the omniscient narrator's: “Her narrative is more convincing as a representation of real humanity than is the omniscient narrator's and therefore is more novelistic at least in its characterization” (258).

Graham Storey writes in *Landmarks of Literature: Dickens Bleak House* that the use of a dual narrative requires that Esther's role be opposed to that of the third-person narrator. This



opposition takes the form of an internal, subjective description of human events, and that in portraying Esther from the inside Dickens achieved his first character presented in a psychological manner.

But it is essential—as with any novel—to remember the novelist's 'point of view.' Esther is deliberately subjective, deliberately absolute. Formally, the alternation of the double narrative compels her to be so: her subjectivity is the opposite swing of the pendulum from the omniscient, detached, confident voice of the impersonal narrator. And, psychologically, she is presented from the inside: the first of Dickens's heroines to be so. Q.D. Leavis, one of her strongest defenders, has stressed how accurate and acute a pre-Freudian study of an emotionally starved, illegitimate young woman Esther is; particularly in her self-abnegation, self-criticism, need of others' good opinion, and fear of sexuality. Such a person must constantly assuage her 'guilt,' commit acts of exaggerated self-sacrifice. (23)

Merritt Moseley stakes out a similar position. She argues that Esther's narrative provides a point of stability in the novel, a sort of human touchstone of goodness which acts to counteract the dark world of the omniscient narrator:

Alongside this, and alternating with it, Esther's narrative gives us 'stability.' a point of rest in a flickering and bewildering world, the promise of some guidance through the labyrinth. . . . It further provides us, Harvey argues, with a moral touchstone in the good Esther; and finally, by intertwining the two narratives Dickens compels us to a double vision of the teeming, fantastic world of Bleak House. We—and Esther—are within; we—and the omniscient author—are outside. (152-153)

Critics suggest that Esther's character develops during the course of the novel, from the orphaned child presented in chapter three, into a mature, fully developed young woman by the end of the work. James Broderick argues that “Although Esther herself started from an equally romantic role as a waif, she has grown into a socially defined and personally mature character. . . . For by the end of *Bleak House* the romantic and sentimental frame of the narrative does not distort Esther's serious portrait” (258).

Suzanne Graver, commenting on Esther's saccharine personality, sees Esther consciously adopting an attitude of reticence and obliqueness in an attempt to establish an identity in a

society that valued rigidly proscribed behavior in women. In “Writing in a ‘Womanly’ Way and the Double Vision of *Bleak House*,” she says that Dickens’s use of this “oblique” form of writing in the person of Esther is

nothing short of brilliant. Subterfuge is a strategy commonly used by the powerless, which Esther surely is, as a result of both her personal history and outer social conditions. Moreover, as recent feminist criticism has shown, it is also a strategy characteristic of many women writers. For them and for their characters, as for Esther, concealment and disguise are strategies for managing actions, thoughts, and feelings deemed ‘unwomanly.’ Such strategies function also as aesthetic counterparts to the paradoxical ways in which woman’s nature and role have been defined in given cultures. (3)

As I have already noted, Esther’s role in the novel is to present the “romantic” side of things. An argument can be made that by “romantic,” Dickens intended to portray a story of love and marriage, which in Northrop Frye’s terminology, would characterize the work as low mimetic, or novelistic. The third-person narrative presents a world that is indifferent and cruel, and in Frye’s terminology might be classified as “anatomy.” This indeed, is the premise of Doris Stringham Delespinasse’s paper “The Significance of Dual Point of View in *Bleak House*.”

Leonard Deen believes that the narrative of Esther Summerson points to a “locus” of good within an otherwise “evil” world. He argues that

The division of the story between Esther and an anonymous narrator segregates good from evil, and gives the good a specific locus—in such people as Esther Summerson, and in *Bleak House*. . . . while Esther keeps herself apart from it, refusing to submit herself from any organization, class, or abstract theory—whether it be Chancery, the fashionable world, or ‘telescopic’ philanthropy. (53)

Not only does Esther point to a specific “locus” for good, she also acts as a moral compass within the work. She is opposed to those morally reprehensible characters such as Grandfather Smallweed, Krook, and Tulkinghorn who inhabit the world of the third-person narrator. Deen points to the portrayal of Esther in the novel “both as registering consciousness and as an ideal

standard of moral values (the great ones being selflessness and energy in doing the duty which lies nearest)” (54).

Alexander Welsh, in *Dickens Redressed*, notes that the personal viewpoint offered by Esther allows the reader to see that the lives of ordinary people are destroyed by the external forces of Chancery. He notes that the viewpoint of Esther Summerson “is personal. The people and things and actions she encounters are experienced and reported up close; hence sympathy or discomfort can be registered” (126).

Yet, whether the “romantic” narrator presents a low mimetic, essentially good world view, or a destructive view of the world, critics agree that Esther’s narrative presents an alternative to the view of the external world of the omniscient narrator. Suzanne Graver notes that

The narration of *Bleak House*, that unconventional division between an omniscient third-person satiric narrator and a first-person, self-sacrificing heroine who writes her own life-story, produces an often-noted double vision. . . . In *Bleak House*, double vision signifies social disorder, figured by inequality of tone, content, and point of view in the two narrations that yoke the novel together. . . . In this and other ways, the double vision fostered by the dual narrative of *Bleak House*, most readers have agreed, aims to be corrective: the values by which Esther Summerson lives affirm the human connections that are for the most part absent from the world the omniscient narrator depicts. (3)

There is another element that figures strongly in the split narratives: gender. Critics have noted that Esther’s narrative deals with the different spheres of life assigned to men and women within Victorian society. Suzanne Graver points out that

The dual narration of *Bleak House* replicates the nineteenth-century ideology of a male public and female private sphere. The values of the heart—sympathy, love, selfless care for and commitment to others—which were identified with woman's domestic sphere, were to counteract the negative psychic and moral effects of aggressive, competitive, marketplace individualism. (12-13)

The theme of the division of life between a private sphere symbolized by the home, and a public sphere symbolized by Chancery and Tom-all-Alone's in the novel, is the subject of Kevin McLaughlin's "Losing One's Place: Displacement and Domesticity in *Bleak House*." There he argues that Chancery seeks to replace the home as the source of value in the novel, and that in so doing Chancery undermines the order of society:

As in economics and politics, in novels the home is a source of definition and order. *Bleak House* opens with the threat posed to the institution of the home by the radical disorder of official legal institutions, specifically Chancery Court (itself 'at the heart' of an indefinite 'fog' and 'mud' in which even the most basic physical elements—earth, water, air—have lost their identity). Most damaging about the Court's challenge to domestic order, it seems, are the consequences it holds for individual subjects, who turn to the Court, rather than to hearth and home, for order; throughout the novel, we are introduced to characters who are effectively destroyed as subjects by the disorder of the Court. (876-877)

The division of roles between men and women in Victorian society influenced Dickens's characterization of Esther as protectress of the home. In *Dickens and the Politics of the Family*, Christine Waters argues that Dickens's novels helped establish the notion that the domestic sphere was the domain of the women, and that

Frugality, neatness and cheerfulness are the qualities which make the domestic woman 'superior' to those who feel obliged to parade the signs of status in the manner of aristocratic women. This woman is valued for the domestic virtues which she embodies, rather than for her family name or social connections, and her representation helps to define the middle-class idea of family in opposition to the values and practices held to characterize other social groups. (20)

Jeremy Tambling takes the concept of the division of roles between men and women even further. He argues that Esther conforms to the norms prescribed by Victorian society and represses her own desires to live up to societal expectations:

Esther's subjectivity is thus especially one of deprivation, and her narrative may be seen as the sign of her need to conform to that law (i.e. of patriarchy), which means repressing her difference from it, and trying to speak and to act consciously in reference to it—hence her will to cheerfulness and to duty. (14)

Brenda Ayers usefully complicates this traditional notion of Esther as embodying the ideals of Victorian womanhood. While she acknowledges that Esther has moments when she is portrayed as the embodiment of traditional Victorian values, she believes that Dickens added an element of uncertainty to Esther's character. Esther's uncertainty imparts a sense of realism which allows her character to become more fully developed. Ayers says that:

Esther is clearly a woman divided into images of who she should be and who she wants to be. Though the lesson of the narrative is that discipline is expected of women, to deny themselves, the narrative itself suggests that self-denial is no natural behavior for women. It is a trait imposed or urged by domesticity that women must exercise. That self-denial is a constant struggle for Esther also suggests a lack of acceptance of such behavior, which is mandatory not only for her but for all women. (152)

The world in *Bleak House* is dichotomized between the external and internal. The dichotomy is apparent in the narratives of Esther and the omniscient narrator, and in the roles played by men and women in Victorian Society. The dichotomized nature of the work is extended to the roles played by parents and children in the novel. The book is populated with orphans: Esther, Ada, Richard, Jo, Guster, Charley and Caddy (who although not literally an orphan is made so by the indifference of her mother). The parental figures that we see in the novel provide no sense of stability or order: examples of deficient parental models include Mr. Turveydrop, Mrs. Pardiggle, Mrs. Jellyby and Lady Dedlock and her former lover, Captain Hawdon. The lack of parental guidance itself presents a stark view of Victorian society, and offers little hope of a positive change. The breakdown of the family, as depicted in the novel, offers another example of the emotional distress experienced by Esther and those she befriends. Leonard Deen addresses the lack of positive parental influence in *Bleak House* when he states:

Esther's story is primarily about parents and children and their impoverished relationships. Her narrative begins with her 'escape' from a cruel aunt-stepmother and her absorption into the fairy-tale simplicity and security of *Bleak House*, where John

Jarndyce has established a cozy inviolable retreat, and surrounded himself by children. (46)

Esther's upbringing by a cruel godmother causes her to feel a sense of hopelessness and lack of self worth. Alex Zwerdling makes this case most emphatically in "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated." He comments on Esther's lack of a loving environment, and notes that "Esther's first memories of her aunt (the 'godmother' who brought her up) obliquely record both the withholding of love and the overwhelming sense of failure it imprints on the child" (429). Miss Barbary's strictness, coupled with her lack of love and a barren world view, leaves a sense of shame and guilt upon Esther; a permanent scar on her psyche. Zwerdling sums up Esther's sense of shame and guilt:

All the guilt and shame are taken upon herself. Such self-denigration becomes Esther's essential life-style. Deprived of the sense of her own merit from earliest infancy, she is never sure that she is worthy of love and respect. The innumerable compliments on her wisdom, shrewdness, affectionate nature, and beauty she compulsively records and compulsively dismisses as absurd. She has an insatiable hunger for them, yet they are never the right food, for the damage to her sense of self-esteem has been permanent. The complex behavior is what critics of the novel have usually called her 'coyness.' (430)

Esther's lack of self worth leads, in turn, to a habitual reaction to stressful situations, resulting in Esther's denial of her emotions and her distorted sense of reality. Christine Van Boheemen-Saaf, notes that Esther's "manner of coping with the social and emotional isolation of her position is to deny that deepest, most natural part of herself, which in her childish understanding merely seems to keep the 'wound' of the day of her birth open" (55).

In developing a reading of Esther Summerson as an effective narrator I share the view that her portion of the narrative provides an internal worldview that complements the external world of the omniscient narrator. I also agree that Esther's portrait combines elements of psychology and motivation to help in understanding her character. I do not believe, however,

that Esther's character presents a "stable" point of view which is opposed to the "flickering, bewildering" world of the omniscient narrator, nor do I believe that Esther's character "grows" in terms of gaining added insight into her own motivations and drives. Rather, Esther's world is as pessimistic as that of the omniscient narrator, and Esther's psychological makeup prevents her growth as a person.

Furthermore, while I agree that Esther can be seen as an essentially good person who serves as a contrast to the evil presented by the omniscient narrator, I do not agree that her portrayal successfully counteracts the pernicious effects of the external world. Esther's portrayal, while seeming to reinforce the Victorian stereotype of the woman of the house, shows her to be both uncertain and emotionally scarred, leading to the conclusion that Dickens was not trying to depict her as a "perfect" heroine. I also agree with those critics who contend that Esther's emotional scarring causes her to react with shame and guilt, and leaves her with a sense that she is unworthy of love or respect.

## Chapter Two: Dickens as Depth Psychologist

Charles Dickens has generally been regarded as an author who is at his best when describing external events or the unusual characteristics in his characters. He is not generally considered adept at describing the inner workings of his characters, nor concerned with shaping their emotional makeup. And yet this attitude has been slowly undergoing a change; within the last thirty years, Dickens scholarship has begun to focus on the psychological complexity of his characters, and on his ability to use external events to strengthen his psychological portraits.

In this section, I want to focus on the psychological portrait of Esther Summerson, addressing specifically her early life and her subsequent tentativeness and uncertainty, as well as her adolescent and early adult development. Finally, I will engage some recent feminist criticism, which sees Esther as reacting at some level against traditional Victorian notions of women's roles.

Esther's reticence has been noticed by critics since *Bleak House* was first published. The early critics attributed this reticence to a flawed portrait of Esther Summerson: she was too good, too placid, unbelievable, and unconscious. More recently, critics have examined her personality in light of various psychological theories that might account for this passivity and goodness. As I have noted, these critics see Esther's reticence as a form of self protection, as a strategy of concealment which results from her blighted upbringing. In "Through a Glass Darkly": Esther Summerson and *Bleak House*," Lawrence Frank adopts the view that the portrait of Esther Summerson is a study in psychology:

The current, and I think legitimate, emphasis on Esther's story as a complex psychological study reveals not only the needs of the modern reader, forever in search of such tales to engross his attention, but that element of Dickens's art, his psychological awareness, which seems still to be the least readily accepted part of his achievement. (64)



Esther's strategy of self protection is often interpreted to extend beyond concealment from others, and is extended to concealment of her motives and feelings from herself. Lawrence Frank, continuing his discussion of Esther's personality, notes her habit of concealment:

Esther's 'silent way of noticing what [passes] before' her is peculiarly her own. The silence which so often accompanies the retelling of her story suggests, not simply a coyness bordering on the vacuous, but a failure to understand, a failure not fortuitous, but, in some way, willed. (65)

Esther's silence is the result of her childhood, a childhood which leads her to block her innermost needs. As Frank observes later in his essay, "The years of oppression take their toll, *she chooses*, or she is reduced to, immobility, and silence" (66, italics mine). Yet Esther's attempts at concealment, coupled with the disclosures she reveals in her narrative, produce strange ambiguities in one's responses to her. Joseph Fradin, notes that, "We continue, I think, to be uncomfortable about Esther even when we are willing to recognize that her need to be loved and to report the praises which are the signs of *love is itself one of her scars*" (97, italics mine).

Esther's psychological portrayal indicates one of the ways in which *Bleak House* can be viewed as a precursor to the modern novel, and her divided personality, i.e., her simultaneous desire to be loved and fear of being loved, is only one of the many dichotomies in the novel. The play between these dichotomies, some of which have been previously mentioned, is what makes the novel so appealing to modern readers: in *Bleak House* there are no absolutes, only a series of fractured glimpses into shattered lives. Joseph Fradin convincingly develops this perspective:

In a word, the double narrative technique, which carries the dialectic between self and society, between Esther's subjective vision and the nervous chaos-without-meaning that is the third person world, is not a gratuitous device. . . . It is rather, the embodiment of the radical dilemma which informs the novel. This is the conflict between intelligence and feeling or, here, between denial and affirmation, where denial has behind it the weight of

intellect and dispassionate observation, and affirmation the whole complex of human need, hope, and feeling. The form of *Bleak House*, that is, becomes a metaphor of the divided modern consciousness, and the problem implied by the form is poignantly contemporary. (95)

Despite Esther's upbringing, and subsequent emotional scarring, several critics believe that she "grows" as a person through the course of the novel. In "Esther's Will," Timothy Pelatson acknowledges Esther's initially barren upbringing, but believes that the novel shows her eventual growth and self-discovery:

At its most extreme and self-censoring, Esther's inability to take things for herself verges on an inability to express any desire, or even to want anything. . . . But the story of Esther's narrative is the story of her progress in healthy self-love, and one function of her narrative is to express by whatever means the desires that she cannot otherwise acknowledge. (673)

Alex Zwerdling shares Pelatson's belief that Esther develops as a person during the course of the novel, and he notes that it "has often been recognized [her aunt's lack of love]; what has not so generally been understood is that Dickens creates, in Esther's narrative, a detailed life pattern that records both the long-range effects of this childhood trauma and the stages of an attempt to triumph over it" (430).

Echoing the readings presented by Pelatson and Zwerdling, Ian Ousby in "The Broken Glass: Visions and Comprehension in *Bleak House*," sees Esther as overcoming the effects of her early childhood, and eventually triumphing over the fog and chaos that permeate the landscape of *Bleak House*:

Esther's development is signified by moments of progressively clear vision of the world around her. If she begins with a muddled and unclear view of her surroundings, typical of the characters in the novel, she quickly begins to transcend this condition. At the end of the book the inner and outer disorder of the world still remains, but Esther herself has become a testament to the power of the individual to achieve a clear-sightedness which is at once literal and metaphysical. (589)

Recent feminist criticism has emphasized Esther's psychological portrait in terms of her emerging femininity, as well as her reaction against the patriarchal society of the Victorians.

Helena Michie notes that Esther's narrative is not only concerned with the emotional scars wrought by her early childhood, but also about her difficult passage into womanhood:

This is indeed a calendar of distress, as Esther's verbal echoes remind us. It is also, of course, a passage through puberty into womanhood, a resurrecting of the palimpsest that is Esther's sexual development, and a foregrounding of the suppressed bildungsroman crowded out by other people's experiences. (205)

Michie argues that through pain, similar to that endured by Esther during her illness, Victorian women were able to "register" their presence in society, and that, by implication, recognition was often denied to Victorian women in a patriarchal society:

As feminist social historians have explained, for Victorian leisure class women, illness could serve as a means of control over body and family, as a time and space where conjugal and familial duties were suspended and the body, usually inaccessible to the language of society, could be articulated in and through the discourse of medicine. (199)

Suzanne Graver argues that Esther's psychological scarring is part of a larger disorder, a disorder that causes Esther to deny not only her own emotional hurt, but to create a form of passive acceptance to her lot in life. Graver makes explicit the connection between Esther's past and her acceptance of her role in society:

Dickens's complex portrait of Esther dramatizes individual guilt and repression, but it does more than that. I want to argue that no less significant than the psychological scars that make Esther a special case is the conventional code of social behavior she adopts in response to her blighted past. (6)

The effects of Esther's guilt and repression lead to a denial of her emotions; Esther's denial is not only personal, but a result of social repression as well. In Graver's reading of the novel, Esther is unable to express her disappointment at her own situation, or the social positions of the people she befriends in the book. Her inability to record these multiple disappointments

results not only from her upbringing, but from a society which does not allow such disappointment to be voiced. Graver continues her argument by attesting that “Details such as these [Esther’s final act of looking in the mirror] suggest that the need to conceal blight and disappointment, 'rather than blame the real cause of it, or disparage or depreciate any one' is as great at the close (of the novel) as it ever was” (Graver 11).

These psychological readings of Esther’s character have yielded valuable insights which help explain Esther’s cautious and tentative behavior. According to these critics, Esther is psychologically convincing and not just a caricature or a one-dimensional character. Feminist readings of Esther’s character enhance this psychological reading. Esther can be seen as reacting to the limits imposed by a patriarchal society on the “accepted” role of women in the Victorian era. An added dimension to Esther’s portrayal is provided by her emerging sexuality, which compounds the distress she experiences as a result of her neglected childhood. However, some critics see Esther’s passage through the novel as a sign of her growth as a person, there doesn’t seem to be much evidence for this interpretation. I will argue that Esther’s emotional growth is impeded by the damage inflicted by her godmother, and unfortunately, as a result, Esther does not grow as a person, but repeats the patterns of behavior she adopted as a child.

## Chapter Three: Structure and Theme in Esther's Narrative

In understanding a person, we look to their actions and written words to help develop a picture of who they are and what they stand for. In the same way, the characters in a book can be understood by their actions and written words; but in “reading” a character in a book, we often have direct access to their thoughts, which helps round out their portrait. In an attempt to understand Esther Summerson, I want to look to certain recurring structures and themes in *Bleak House* that appear in Esther's narrative and which help to explain her character.

I begin by examining the structure of Esther's narrative, and what the format, tone, and method of the narrative tell us about her. Next, I focus on the tension between guilt and shame on the one hand and innocence and blamelessness on the other, and how this conflict shapes Esther's character. The third area I will explore is Esther's deflection of praise and love, recalling that the “goodness” of Esther has often been perceived as being unbelievable and mawkish.

Esther's narrative begins in chapter three of *Bleak House* with the observation that “I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write *my portion* of these pages, for I know that I am not clever” (16, italics mine). In this simple opening sentence Esther shows awareness that she is writing a portion of a story, a narrative, and that her attitude is one of deflection, as noted in her acknowledgement that she “is not clever.” Throughout her recitation, Esther sprinkles the acknowledgements of writing a portion of the narrative. At the beginning of chapter nine she wonders, “I don't know how it is, I seem to be always writing about myself. I mean all the time to be writing about other people, and I try to think about myself as little as possible . . .” (112), but write about herself she does, even as she tries to disguise the fact.

Dickens's portrayal of Esther shows a young woman who is both aware of her narrative, and who seeks to disguise her writing at the same time. This apparent contradiction has caused earlier critics, such as the anonymous reviewer in *Putnam's Magazine*, to consider the portrayal as an "unnatural contrivance" (79). But through Esther, Dickens was able to establish immediacy to the narration that is not available to an omniscient narrator. Esther is able to internalize the problems raised by the third-person narrator, and shows how those problems affect the people who populate the book. Similarly, Esther's human touch allows Dickens to engage the emotions of the reader: through Esther, the reader is able to register pathos, empathy, and sympathy—emotions not engendered by the omniscient narrator. Esther's narrative, written in the first person, allow Dickens to focus his wrath and indignation not on abstracts (which he does with the third-person narrator), but on the evil or indifferent characters that populate the book.

Merritt Moseley raises the issue of Esther's conscious writing of her portion of the book, and the implications arising from her narrative:

The more interesting implication of Esther's words is that Esther knows that she is writing part of the pages which follow. In all the discussions of the dual point of view in *Bleak House* with which I am familiar, no one seems interested in, or sufficiently surprised by, Esther's knowledge of it. She knows she shares the duties of narrating this story with another. (39)

In order to understand Esther's reticence in narrating her portion of the book, we must consider her central internal conflict: namely, the tension between guilt and shame on the one hand, and innocence and blamelessness on the other. Just as Esther informs us of her writing of a portion of the narrative, she tells us that she was different from other children. "Why am I so different from other children, and why is it my fault, dear godmother?" (18). In response, she is told by her godmother that, "You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not

born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart” (19). Esther is unsure why she should be set apart and retires to her room where she confides to her doll that she would try “to repair the fault that I had been born with (*of which I confusedly felt guilty and yet innocent*), and would strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and to win some love to myself if I could” (19, italics mine).

Within the first few pages of her narrative, Esther reveals the conflicts that haunt her throughout the remaining eight hundred plus pages: the blame and guilt, the source of which she is unaware; the lack of love and compassion exhibited by her aunt; the desire to repair her guilt—whatever it was—by doing good and being industrious. These conflicting desires produce in Esther a need to confess and conceal at the same time. Anny Sadrin, writing in *Parentage and Inheritance in the Novels of Charles Dickens*, testifies to Esther’s sense of shame and worthlessness and concludes that Esther’s narrative serves as a commentary on events that occur in the novel. Thus, Esther has a need to relate the events in her life, but at the same time conceals the effects of these events:

This, her 'inheritance of shame,' is all she has been endowed with, the burden she must bear throughout her journey from girlhood to womanhood, the 'fault' she has to atone for. Convinced as she is of her unworthiness and insignificance, she has agreed to be no more than a reporter, an eye and ear witness who has been entrusted with a 'portion' of the narrative and ought to remain in the background, with no life-story intruding on the report. (64)

Esther’s narrative serves another important function in the work: she stands as a representative for the other disaffected characters in the novel. In a sense, Esther stands in place of Jo, Charley, Guster, Jenny the brickmaker’s wife, and to a certain extent, Ada and Richard, as well. Each of these people is an orphan, and each suffers as a result of the neglect and emotional vacuity of the parents or prior upbringing. As Zwerdling points out, Esther “is the unconscious

representative of the many characters in *Bleak House* who have not known parental love—Jo, the Jellybys, the Pardiggles, Guster, Prince Turveydrop, Richard, Ada. The breakdown of the parent-child relationship is one of the major themes of the novel” (432).

The tension between guilt and innocence is informed by a religious subtext within the work. On one hand Dickens presents an Old Testament notion of guilt and reprisal, which is epitomized by Esther’s godmother, and is associated with the evils of the external world. When Esther inquires about her mother in Chapter Three, Miss Barbary admonishes Esther “to pray daily that the sins of others be not visited on your head. . .” (18). This quotation paraphrases the Old Testament warning in Deuteronomy that “I the Lord am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children” (5:9). Against this Old Testament notion of guilt and punishment is a New Testament concept of forgiveness epitomized by Esther.

The concept of forgiveness and redemption is introduced in Esther’s reading to her godmother of St. John’s gospel regarding the adulteress who seeks Christ’s forgiveness: “I had come down at nine o’clock, as I always did, to read the Bible to her; and was reading, from St. John, how our Saviour stooped down, writing with his finger in the dust, when they brought the sinful woman to him” (20). Dickens adds an ironic twist here, since the notion of the “fallen” woman applies to Lady Dedlock, just as it did to the adulteress in the gospel of St. John, yet Esther is not yet aware of her mother’s past.

The clash between the Old and New Testament reading of sin continues throughout the novel. During one of Richard’s career changes, when John Jarndyce becomes exasperated and looks to Ada and Esther for support, he notes that, “I think that it must be somewhere written that the virtues of the mothers shall, occasionally, be visited on the children, as well as the sins of the father” (232). Later in the same sequence, Esther asks Jarndyce for some clues to her



upbringing; he replies by telling Esther a portion of what he knows about Miss Barbary and “the distorted religion which clouded her mind with impressions of the need there was for the child to expiate an offence of which she was quite innocent” (235). It is ironic that the wish, expressed by John Jarndyce, that the “virtues of the mothers” be visited on the children, does not apply to Esther: her mother, Lady Dedlock, is as guilty of transgression as is her father.

This religious subtext adds a further element of confusion to Esther’s consciousness: she is not only troubled by the lack of affection she received from her aunt; she is also subjected to a notion of sin and shame that somehow attach to her, without understanding her contribution to the shameful actions. The only saving grace that Esther can see, the only way of escape from this burden, is “to be industrious, contented and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and to win some love to myself if I could” (19). The names that Jarndyce, Ada, and Richard call Esther—“Dame Durden, Old Woman, Mother Hubbard, and Little Old Woman”—all testify to the busy demeanor that Esther adopts when she is troubled, or when things bother her.

Alexander Welsh develops this aspect of Esther’s character when he comments that “As Robert Newsome has speculated, the very irritating quality of Summerson's 'busybody cheerfulness' and jingling of her household keys to reassure herself may be 'a reaction against mourning and grief' and an 'effort to overcome them’” (26).

Esther’s habit of industriousness, along with her deflection of praise, is one of the primary objections to her portrayal in the novel. Sympathetic critics have argued that Esther’s deflection of praise is a result of her early upbringing, and is associated with her feelings of worthlessness brought about by guilt and shame. The pattern of her reaction to guilt is established early in the novel, in response to her godmother’s condemnation. Esther resolves to work hard and win some love for herself. During her trip to Greenleaf, an upsetting time after

her aunt's death, Esther recalls the "resolution I had made on my birthday, to try to be industrious, contented, and win some love if I could; and indeed, indeed, I felt almost ashamed to have done so little and have won so much" (26). Later in the book, when Esther and Caddy inform Mrs. Jellyby of Caddy's engagement, Esther muses that night that "I might always be so blest and happy as to be useful to some one in my own small way" (330).

Esther's energetic nature is perceived by several characters in the book. She personally takes on the schooling of Caddy and Charley, and tends to Ada, Richard and John Jarndyce as "Dame Durden," while at the same time denying that she has helped any of them. Harold Skimpole recognizes Esther's sense of duty in a sort of detached amazement when he declares:

'Now when you mention responsibility,' he resumed, 'I am disposed to say, that I never had the happiness of knowing any one whom I should consider so refreshingly responsible as yourself. You appear to me to be the very touchstone of responsibility. When I see you, my dear Miss Summerson, intent upon the perfect working of the whole little orderly system of which you are the centre, I feel inclined to say to myself—in fact I do say to myself, very often—that's responsibility!' (521-522)

Inspector Bucket echoes this observation during the journey to find Lady Dedlock. He says,

'I never see a young woman in any station of society—and I've seen many elevated ones too—conduct herself like you have conducted yourself, since you was called out of your bed. You're a pattern, you know, that's what you are,' said Mr. Bucket warmly; 'you're a pattern.' (785)

Part of the pathos invoked in Dickens's treatment of Esther is that she does not fully realize the effects that she has on the other characters in the novel. She is aware of the help that she renders Charley, Guster, Caddy, Jo, Ada and Richard, but the awareness is always tempered with an acknowledgement of her own lack of worth. Esther provides ready assistance to a number of characters in the novel, but whenever an acknowledgement of her good deeds is offered, Esther is quick to deflect praise. While some critics find this behavior false or cloying, I believe that it is consistent with Esther's makeup, forged by childhood experiences.

## Chapter Four: “Set Apart”: Esther’s Psychological Development and “Attachment Theory”

Although Esther’s emotional deprivation has been mentioned by several critics and has been accepted as an explanation for her actions, I am unaware of any detailed analysis of her behavior in terms of specific psychological theories. One critic, in fact, seems to dismiss the need for further study in this area. In her essay “Double Vision and the Double Standard in *Bleak House: A Feminist Perspective*,” Virginia Blain argues that:

The case for the psychological 'truth' of her presentation as a young woman of some emotional retardation, springing from an early childhood deprived of love and esteem, and warped by her inturned sense of social guilt, has been sufficiently well-documented to need no further elaboration here. (66)

Blain’s assertion is premature. As I want to argue in this chapter, the insights gained by an exploration of Attachment Theory can give a more nuanced grasp of Esther’s specific behaviors.

Esther’s early childhood, brought up by an unloving, repressive godmother, contribute to her feelings of shame and inadequacy. Early in her narrative, Esther attests to the lack of love she felt, and the effects on her notion of self: “I felt so different from her (Miss Barbary), even making every allowance for the differences between a child and a woman; I felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off: that I could never be unrestrained with her—no could never even love her as I wished” (17). Esther’s feelings of neglect extend back to her earliest remembrances as the recollection of her birthday attests:

It was my birthday. There were holidays at school on other birthdays—none on mine. There were rejoicings at home on other birthdays, as I knew from what I heard the girls relate to one another—there were none on mine. My birthday was the most melancholy day at home, in the whole year. (17)

This isolation contributes to Esther's belief that she was "set apart," as Miss Barbary frequently reminds her. The combination of derision and isolation is heightened in Miss Barbary's admonition to Esther that "Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come—and soon enough—when you will understand this better, and feel it too, as no one save a woman can" (18). But for Esther, the understanding does not come soon enough; her aunt dies before revealing the secret of her mother's birth. Esther is left with an inchoate sense of shame, isolation and guilt, without understanding the reason for these feelings.

Esther's resulting confusion, unsettled feelings, and guilt are noted by Alexander Welsh when he states: "Yet to a good many readers the psychology seems right: Esther propitiates those she meets because she lived in terror as a child; she longs to be loved because she was abandoned as a baby" (31). While the psychology "seems right," it begs the question of whether there is a basis in psychological theory which supports the notion that lack of love in early childhood can cause a child to become emotionally stunted in later life. A theory of early childhood, known as "Attachment Theory," was developed in the latter half of the twentieth century by British psychoanalyst John Bowlby. This theory holds that early childhood deprivation can cause feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy, and results in a series of actions, known as avoidant behavior, that prevent people from forming emotionally attached relationships later in life.

Melanie Klein, a psychoanalyst studying children during the nineteen twenties and thirties, was one of the early contributors to the development of "Attachment Theory." In *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love*, Robert Karen notes that Klein believed a child's relationship with its mother is essential to later

childhood development. He states “that the child’s early relationship with its mother lives within the child and that it becomes a template for future relationships” (41).

Klein’s nascent theories of attachment attracted the interest of a young English research scientist named John Bowlby who noticed that children who were separated from their mothers for any length of time exceeding several weeks seemed anxious or disturbed when they were reunited. These children had a tendency to exhibit aberrant behavior that could not be attributed to any specific cause. According to Robert Karen, Bowlby continued to do research in the area of mother—child separation and found that

separations, even long separations, do not in themselves cause a child to become a psychopathic personality. It’s the depriving separation that’s so calamitous, where the child never has the chance to develop a true attachment; where there’s no alternative mother figure to take up where the first mother left off. (58)

Continuing his studies, Bowlby decided to observe mother-child attachment bonds in animals, specifically, birds. After completing his studies in ethology, Bowlby applied his findings to the field of child psychology, and developed a theory of attachment needs, which Karen lists in his book:

He now proceeded to define a new series of developmental stages based upon the maternal bond. During the first year, the child is gradually able to display a full range of ‘attachment behaviors.’ . . . The formation, maintenance, and renewal of that proximity begets feelings of love, security, and joy. A lasting or untimely disruption brings on anxiety, grief and depression. (90 -91)

The effects on the child were exacerbated if the mother was indifferent or rejecting:

“When the mother figure is massively rejecting or totally absent, attachment behaviors may fail to mature or become totally repressed—the condition that Bowlby himself had seen in the affection-less thieves and assumed to be at work in adult psychopaths” (98). This observation, while pointing out the effects on children of mothers who reject them, would seem to indicate

that children rejected by their mothers will become psychopaths. But obviously this is not always the case, as Karen points out later in the book:

In less severe cases, a prolonged and depriving separation in infancy will not lead to such profound character disorder. But the pathological mourning process will show up when the child faces separation or losses later in life and, as many classical analytic case studies have shown, predispose him not only to separation anxiety but to depressive episodes as well. (100)

Bowlby also studied the effects of improper attachment, or loss of a parent, on older children. He demonstrated “the disturbing consequences—the primitive defenses, the failure of subsequent development, the formation of phobias and other hysterical symptoms, the depression, the extreme mental disorders”(111) that resulted from improper attachment.

Bowlby termed children with this type of behavior “avoidant children.” In one of his studies, he visited families whose children had early separations from their mothers. In one family, he noted the similarity of response for multiple children:

The avoidant response suggested not only that the infant and the older child had experienced a similar sense of rejection, but that they were using the same *defense to cope with it when placed in a situation of higher stress—an emotional cutoff that disguised their hurt and anger, even from themselves.* (Karen 154, italics mine)

Two graduate students at the University of Minnesota, James Elicker and Michelle Englund, participated in a follow-up to a study conducted at the University of Minnesota, which examined the lives of children identified with early attachment disorders. They sought to determine if these disorders affected later behaviors and found that “They [avoidant girls] tend to internalize their feelings more—blaming themselves, becoming depressed, or feeling ashamed as opposed to fighting off such feelings by striking out at someone or through other behavioral strategy” (Karen 196).

Bowlby continued his work on attachment theory, and attempted to determine the effect of improper attachment in later life. He corroborated the findings of the Minnesota study, and according to Robert Karen, concluded that adolescent girls who experience inadequate attachments in early life often develop feelings of shame:

But built into the very nature of shameful self-feelings is a desire to ignore or hide them. Indeed, we often construct our lives in such a fashion as to keep them out of consciousness and away from the view of others. So it is not uncommon, even in adulthood, to be burdened with unexamined and hateful self-concepts first incorporated at a young age. (206)

The shame developed by adolescents continues into adulthood, as the unloved or unattached child, who has no basis for a secure relationship, struggles with intimacy: according to Karen, “These unconscious fantasies about what happens in close relationships will haunt the growing child’s sense of self, making him feel shamefully unworthy of being close to others without quite knowing why” (223). He goes on to say:

The child whose needs are not met, who feels ineffective in his efforts, or who, even worse, is rejected or put down in various ways, according to Bowlby, builds up a negative set of assumptions about himself. He is not worthy of love or respect. He is, in effect, ashamed of what he is. (238)

The concept of shame, so evident in children who have not had proper emotional attachment, leads to another pernicious effect: the inability to display proper emotional reactions. Karen observes, “Chicago analyst Michael Basch, who has integrated shame and infant studies into psychoanalytic thinking, has argued that these highly charged moments are critical, for, as he puts it, ‘Shame is the response to emotion that is not being dealt with effectively’ (241).

The insights developed by attachment theorists are helpful in understanding Esther’s personality. She was raised at a young age by a godmother who was distant, unemotional and repressive. She was reminded that her mother was her “disgrace,” and that she was her

mother's "disgrace." She was made to feel guilty, but was unaware of the reason for her guilt, so that she developed an ambivalent feeling toward her shame, being "guilty and yet innocent" at the same time. Esther's reticence and concealing behavior is similar to that of adolescent girls in the Minnesota study, as is the sense of shame which she displays in the novel. Unable to find a suitable person to love, she transfers feelings of longing and love to her doll: "My dear old doll! I was such a shy little thing that I seldom dared to open my lips, and never dared to open my heart, to anybody else" (16). Her inability to transfer love to another person in an adult manner (recall her treatment of Ada, which strikes so many critics as being insincere), will follow Esther throughout her life, and will leave her unable to accept romantic love. In her mind, she is convinced that she is unworthy of love, a conviction reinforced by her godmother. Whenever Esther attempts to respond to romantic attention, or to piece together her life history, she pursues avoidant strategies to hide the truth from herself, as well as from others.

Consider Esther's efforts to avoid the truth of her parentage as an example of the process of denial. The reader is given several hints of Esther's parentage early on in the book. Mr. Kenge, of Carboy & Kenge, visits Mrs. Rachel and Esther to attend to Miss Barbary's estate. Early in the proceedings, Mrs. Rachel has a slip of the tongue and says "now that her aunt is dead—" to which Mr. Kenge replies "Aunt in fact, though not in law" (21). This statement can have only one meaning, which is that Esther is not related to Miss Barbary in the eyes of the law, that is, she is illegitimate. This fact is glossed over by Esther, and her narrative continues. Miss Flite, upon meeting Esther, Ada, and Richard, confers names upon them all, as is her wont. To Ada and Richard, she delivers the appellation of "The Wards in Jarndyce." To Esther, she gives the name "Fitz-Jarndyce." Esther, for her part, originally believes that Miss Flite has



given the appellation to Caddy: “‘Fitz-Jarndyce, my dear,’ she had bestowed that name on Caddy, it appeared, and always called her by it; ‘a double welcome’” (196).

This apparent mistake by Esther would not be so egregious, were it not for the fact that “Fitz-Jarndyce” means illegitimate child of Jarndyce. Esther’s appellation continues through the first six hundred pages of the novel, and Miss Flite repeats the name over and over when referring to Esther; yet each time, Esther continues to believe that the appellation refers to someone else. This is quite an extraordinary feat of avoidance (it is interesting to note that Miss Flite stops calling Esther “Fitz-Jarndyce” after Lady Dedlock is revealed as Esther’s mother). The connection between Jarndyce and Lady Dedlock is, of course, central to the novel, and the reader recalls that Lady Dedlock herself is part of the suit of Jarndyce versus Jarndyce (hence the fitting name for Esther, who is both illegitimate and not legitimately a party to the lawsuit, of “Fitz-Jarndyce”).

But self-deception is only one of the effects that her early deprivation has on Esther. Another, perhaps equally pernicious effect is that Esther is unable to react with an appropriate emotional response in times of crisis. Esther reacts in a similar manner whenever a “crisis” occurs in her life: she becomes confused, and fails to distinguish fact from illusion. Consider Esther’s narrative when leaving Mrs. Rachel after the death of her aunt, as she journeys to Greenleaf: “Our speedy arrival at our destination, before I had time to recover myself, increased my confusion; and I never shall forget the uncertain and unreal air of everything at Greenleaf. . . .” (25-26). Several years later, at her arrival in London, Esther relates her state of mind while sitting in the offices of Kenge & Carboy:

Everything was so strange—the stranger for its being night in the day-time, and the candles burning with a white flame, and looking raw and cold—that I read the words in

the newspaper without knowing what they meant, and found myself reading the same words repeatedly. (29)

When Guppy proposes to Esther in a scene made memorable by its comedic effects,

Esther retires to her room after his departure and relates:

I surprised myself by beginning to laugh about it, and then surprised myself still more by beginning to cry about it. In short, I was in a flutter for a little while; and felt as if an old chord had been more coarsely touched than it ever had been since the days of the dear old doll, long buried in the garden. (127)

In this remarkable passage, Esther proceeds from laughter to tears, and is unsure how to react.

She then remembers her doll, the only person to whom she could express love, at the precise moment that someone has expressed a romantic interest in her. Esther rejects Guppy, just as she will be unable to accept Allan Woodcourt, because she feels herself unworthy of love. Her inability to express her feelings for Woodcourt is highlighted after she learns that he will depart for an assignment in India:

For I was so little inclined to sleep, myself, that night, that I sat up working. It would not be worth mentioning for its own sake, but I was wakeful and rather low-spirited. I don't know why. At least I don't think I know why. At least, perhaps I do, but I don't think it matters. (243)

This passage points out several important elements of Esther's character: her attempt to hide the truth about her feeling for Woodcourt from herself and the reader; her inability to acknowledge Woodcourt's feelings for her; and her lack of self-worth which prevents her from acknowledging that she is worthy of Woodcourt's attention. This passage has been cited by a number of critics as an example of Esther's vacuity, when in fact it reveals the extent of her emotional debility.

Several other examples can be given of Esther's exaggerated emotional response in times of crisis. One such example would be Esther's first glimpse of her mother at the church near

Chesney Wold. At first reading, it seems as if Dickens's main objective is to convey a sense of premonition or danger in the meeting and to foreshadow the relationship between Lady Dedlock and Esther. When the reader reflects that Esther's narrative was written seven years after the events of the book, a secondary consideration is raised that Esther still has not come to grips with the revelation that Lady Dedlock was her mother. A similar exaggerated emotional response occurs when Esther receives John Jarndyce's letter proposing marriage. Instead of reacting joyfully, she acts with reticence and cries. She notes that she felt as if "something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me" (599). The "indefinite" something which is lost to her is Esther's chance of a romantic union with Allan Woodcourt, which she feels unworthy to accept.

The final example I wish to use to demonstrate Esther's exaggerated emotional response occurs toward the end of the novel, when Esther thinks she detects a sense of reserve on the part of Ada. Esther attributes Ada's reticence to a disapproval of her marriage to John Jarndyce. Esther becomes almost obsessed with Ada's rejection of her marriage to Jarndyce, as she relates in her narrative:

At length, feeling sure that Ada suppressed this something from me, lest it should make me unhappy too, it came into my head that she was a little grieved—for me—by what I had told her about Bleak House.

How I persuaded myself that this was likely, I don't know. I had no idea that there was any selfish reference in my doing so. I was not grieved for myself: I was quite contented and quite happy. Still, that Ada might be thinking—for me, though I had abandoned all such thoughts—of what once was, but was now all changed, seemed so easy to believe, that I believed it. (673)

The reader is struck by the fact that Esther is once again denying her love for Woodcourt, while attributing her feelings of loss and denial to Ada. She is also engaging in a familiar behavioral response in times of crisis: concealment. She repeats that she "does not know" how she

persuaded herself that Ada was concerned about her marriage to Jarndyce, when in fact, it is Esther who is unsure of the marriage. Esther's reaction during her detachment from Ada is also typical: she engages in industrious activity. "So I went about the house, humming all the tunes I knew; and I sat working and working in a desperate manner, and I talked and I talked, morning noon and night" (673). Of course, this learned behavior is designed to "make herself useful and win some love for herself."

When Esther learns the true reason for Ada's detachment, namely, that Ada has married Richard and is afraid of the consequences of her action to Esther and John Jarndyce, the whole incident is forgotten. Esther's frenetic activity and denial of her emotions are put on hold for a later time when she and Inspector Bucket journey to find Lady Dedlock.

## Chapter Five: Esther's Dream Life

Sigmund Freud, in the early part of the twentieth century, developed the theory that the interpretation of dreams is a key element to understanding the psychology of a person. His work *The Interpretation of Dreams* has become a classic in psychoanalytic literature, helping to form the basis of dream interpretation. In this chapter, I will examine Esther's dreams as a way to further develop an understanding of her character, as well as her struggle for identity and acceptance.

Esther recounts her dreams and dream experiences throughout the book, beginning with her early childhood recollection of growing up with her godmother, extending to dreams during her illness, and culminating in the fugue sequence during her journey with Inspector Bucket. Early in her narrative, she relates her experiences at Greenleaf and states that she felt as if she had "almost to have dreamed, rather than to have really lived, my old life at my godmother's" (26). Later, during her trip to Mr. Boythorn's, Esther relates a dream sequence that she had after learning of Mr. Boythorn's broken engagement during his youth: "But I fell asleep before I had succeeded, and dreamed of the days when I lived in my godmother's house. I am not sufficiently acquainted with such subjects, to know whether it is at all remarkable that I almost always dreamed of that period of my life" (121).

Dickens is doing two things in this reference to Esther's dreams of her earlier life. First, he is making sure that the reader notes the recurrent nature of Esther's dreams of childhood. The reader is mindful of Esther's troubled past, and that recollection of Miss Barbary triggers unpleasant memories in Esther. And second, he is working to set the stage for the revelation that Mr. Boythorn's fiancée was Miss Barbary. The explicit link between Miss Barbary, Mr.

Boythorn, and Esther's dreams is made clear later in the book, when it is revealed that Miss Barbary and Lady Dedlock are sisters.

After Jarndyce's proposal of marriage, Esther takes several weeks to respond to his offer. During this time, she reflects on her prior life, and we find her daydreaming while contemplating Jarndyce's letter: "I began with my overshadowed childhood, and passed through those timid days to the heavy time when my aunt lay dead, with her resolute face so cold and set; and when I was more solitary with Mrs. Rachel, than if I had no one in the world to speak to or to look at" (598). As this sequence of observations demonstrates, Esther has recurring dreams of her childhood.

What does this pattern of recurring dreams mean? In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud states that:

In still another case it may be definitely ascertained, without the aid of dream interpretation, that the dream contains elements from childhood; that is, if it be a so-called *perennial* dream, which being first dreamt in childhood, later appears again and again after adult age has been reached. . . . In another series of dreams we learn from analysis that the wish itself, which has given rise to the dream, and whose fulfillment the dream turns out to be, has originated in childhood—until one is astonished to find that the child with all its impulses lives on in the adult. (166 -167)

Freud concludes his discussion of recurring dreams by saying that, "The deeper one goes into the analysis of dreams, the more often one is put on the track of childish experiences which play the part of dream sources in the latent dream content" (173).

It is apparent that Esther Summerson has a series of recurring dreams whose content is based on her childhood experiences. What is not yet apparent is the triggering agent for these dreams. Freud notes that a relatively innocuous event from current experience may trigger an association with earlier childhood memories, given the right set of circumstances:

Concerning this series, it is further notable that the element which is psychologically valuable, but not recent (a train of thought, a recollection) may be replaced, for the purposes of dream formation, by a recent, but psychologically indifferent, element, if only these two conditions be observed: 1. That the dream shall contain a reference to something which has been recently experienced; 2. That the dream stimulus shall remain a psychologically valuable train of thought. (161)

We can note several key elements in Esther's account of her dreams. In the dream sequence at Greenleaf, Esther is upset because she feels isolated and alone; this gives rise to the feelings of inadequacy and isolation which she experienced during her youth under the tutelage of her aunt, hence, the troubled recollection of her early life. Esther's dream during her trip to Boythorn's house is somewhat more difficult to explain. The relation of Boythorn's breakup with his fiancée has little applicability to Esther at this point in the narration, other than the fact that she confesses that she was interested "in this old love story" (121). When looked at in relation to other events that happened at this time in Esther's narrative, it begins to make more sense. Immediately preceding the journey to Boythorn's house, Esther and Ada journey to the brickmaker's where they witness the death of Jenny's child. The death of the child affects both Ada and Esther profoundly, and recalls in Esther her own blighted childhood, thus acting as a triggering agent for her dreams.

The interpretation of Esther's daydream, which is associated with Jarndyce's proposal letter, is easier to decipher. As demonstrated in the prior chapters, Esther believes that she is unworthy of love; her receipt of a letter professing love, causes her to think back upon her childhood experience, which is filled with reminders of her shame and insignificance. The current event, in the form of Jarndyce's letter, triggers the association of her loveless childhood, and feelings of worthlessness.

Esther's dreams during her illness reveal aspects of her character, and are, I believe, most critical to understanding her psyche. The dream sequence during her illness actually starts as she and Charley travel to the brickmaker's residence outside of St. Albans to find Jo. Esther is not yet sick, but notes that as she and Charley approached St. Albans, she enters into a reverie where she

. . . had for that moment an undefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was. I know it was then, and there, that I had it. I have ever since connected the feeling with that spot and time, and with everything associated with that spot and time, to the distant voices in the town, the barking of the dog, and the sound of wheels coming down the miry hill. (421)

Dickens is foreshadowing an event in this passage: that of Esther's sickness. But notice the intentional backward look of this passage, made explicit by the statement, "I have ever since," which indicates that Esther is interpreting an event with the perspective of seven years of hindsight. Note also the surreal quality of the narration, where the senses of hearing and sight are joined together in her relation of the story. The narrative technique of reverie will be employed later during Esther's sickness and her journey with Inspector Bucket. There is also a continuation of the theme of being set apart; Esther recalls a feeling of "being something different from what I then was."

The actual narration of Esther's dream sequence occurs some fifty pages after the journey to St. Albans, once her illness takes effect. She begins the description of the sequence by noting that she was again "set apart" from others: "Before I had been confined to it [her room] many days, everything else seemed to have retired into a remote distance, where there was little or no separation between the various stages of my life which had really been divided by the years" (479). This passage also recalls Esther's childhood, and her recollection of the ill treatment accorded her by Miss Barbary. The time dilation, whereby Esther is unable to distinguish



passages in her life, is a feature in several of Esther's dreams. The distortion of time and the recollection of her childhood continue:

While I was very ill, the way in which these divisions of time became confused with one another, distressed my mind exceedingly. At once a child, an elder girl, and the little woman I had been so happy as, I was not only oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station, but by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them. (479-480)

The dream sequence then begins in earnest, as Esther describes the components of her dream:

. . . when I labored up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in the garden path, by some obstruction, and laboring again. . . . Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which *I* was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing! (480)

Before we can arrive at an understanding of the nature of the dream, we can usefully return to Freud for guidance on disagreeable events in a dream. Freud was aware that many of his patients had disagreeable dreams, but that in some way, these dreams seemed to fulfill some unconscious wish or desire. He relates that,

We should then assume in each human being, as the primary cause of dream formation, two psychic forces (streams, systems), of which one constitutes the wish expressed by the dream, while the other acts as a censor upon this dream wish, and by means of this censoring forces a distortion of its expression. . . . Keeping in mind our assumptions in regard to the two psychic instances, we may now proceed to say: disagreeable dreams, as a matter of fact, contain something which is disagreeable to the second instance, but which at the same time fulfills a wish of the first instance. (130 - 131)

We need only to add one final element from Freud to complete the analysis of Esther's dream: an explanation of what the staircases signify in her dream. Freud states unequivocally that "Staircases, ladders, and flights of stairs, or climbing on these, either upwards or downwards, are symbolic representations of the sexual act" (251).

To proceed to a dream interpretation, recall that Esther has just been visited with an illness that she suspects will disfigure her. She has rejected a proposal for marriage from Guppy, and has seen the man she would love (“would court”—Woodcourt) ship off to India. She has been made aware of her illegitimacy, and her prospects in life never looked less promising. In her dream, she is symbolically made aware of her sexual feelings, as represented by climbing the staircase, but is thwarted in her efforts, by the worm in the garden. The worm is a symbol of blight and destruction, as well as being a surrogate for the male genitalia. Esther knows that she cannot proceed in sexual love, because she is blighted, i.e. illegitimate, and hence not worthy. There is also an underlying element of fear—a fear of sex itself—which is manifest in the image of the worm. The secondary dream sequence of the necklace confirms Esther’s suspicions. In this sequence, Esther is part of the necklace, that is, part of humanity. It pains her to become part of the larger group, because she is unworthy to be considered as such. She longs to be “taken off,” or set apart from the rest. The wish to be “set apart” is a fulfillment of her aunt’s childhood warning that she was different from other children who were born in “common sinfulness and wrath.” It is therefore apparent that although the dream sequence is disagreeable, it contains a wish element—Esther’s desire to be “set apart” because she is unworthy. The dream sequence may also contain a wish for romantic love and sex, which Esther has chosen to repress in her waking life.

Thus, in this dream sequence we have the entire record of Esther’s life and psychology revealed. She has been conditioned since childhood to think of herself as unworthy and “set apart.” When she tries to pursue that which she longs for, i.e. romantic love, she is once again reminded of her unworthiness. She is afraid that by trying to “win some love for herself,” she will wind up damaging the loved one through her fault of illegitimacy.

After her illness subsides, Esther relates that she becomes “attached to life again” (481), but unfortunately, the pattern of self-doubt and self-reproach continues through the novel, and the pattern of distorted reality plays out in the fugue sequence during her trip with Inspector Bucket.

During the trip with Inspector Bucket to find her mother, Esther returns to the pattern established during her periods of crisis in the novel: she becomes increasingly distraught, confused, and emotionally volatile. She relapses into reveries and has trouble distinguishing reality from fantasy. Early on in the trip sequence, Esther relates that “I was far from sure that I was not in a dream. We rattled with great rapidity through such a labyrinth of streets, that I soon lost all idea where we were . . .” (756). Upon reaching the river with Inspector Bucket, and seeing the visible realities of death at the riverside, Esther says:

And still it was like the horror of a dream. A man yet dark and muddy, in long swollen sodden boots and a hat like them, was called out of a boat, and whispered with Mr. Bucket, who went away with him down some slippery steps—as if to look at something secret that he had to show. (756)

These two sequences, cast in darkness and shadows, paint the picture for the events that follow. Esther gives us some indication of her state of mind during this trip when she says, “We appeared to retrace the way we had come. Not that I had taken note of any particular objects in my *perturbed state of mind*, but judging from the general character of the streets” (758, italics mine). Inspector Bucket notes Esther’s agitation and troubled state of mind when he says “‘You was what you may call stunned at first,’ he returned, and ‘Lord! No wonder’” (759). As Esther’s confusion continues, Bucket reverts to a stratagem of diverting her in order to calm her down, as Esther notes in her narrative: “Although I remember this conversation now, my head

was in confusion at the time, and my power of attention hardly did more than enable me to understand that he entered into these particulars to divert me” (760).

In all three of these excerpts, we see Esther trying to deal with her emotions, yet failing to do so. The reader is also aware of the fact that Esther is interpreting events from the vantage point of the future, and trying to make sense of them. It is apparent that she continues to have problems even relating the events in an understandable manner. Esther’s confusion continues to build until the scene in the cemetery, where she continues to “mistake” the events leading up to the discovery of Lady Dedlock. The reader is reminded of Esther’s ability to “mistake” events, as noted in her continued mis-application of the appellation “Fitz-Jarndyce,” and in her earlier efforts to disavow her illegitimacy.

The final dream sequence bears reviewing in detail, since the pattern of “mistakes” made by Esther is revealed in this sequence in Chapter 59.

‘Miss Summerson, you’ll understand me, if you think a moment. They changed clothes at the cottage.’

They changed clothes at the cottage. I could repeat the words in my mind, and I knew what they meant of themselves; but I attached no meaning to them in any other connexion.

‘And one returned,’ said Mr. Bucket, ‘and one went on. And the one that went on, only went on a certain way agreed upon to deceive, and then turned across country, and went home. Think a moment!’

I could repeat this in my mind too, but I had not the least idea of what it meant. I saw before me, lying on the step, the mother of the dead child. She lay there, with one arm creeping round a bar of the iron gate, and seeming to embrace it. She lay there, who had so lately spoken to my mother. She lay there, a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature. . . .

I saw, but did not comprehend, the solemn and compassionate look in Mr. Woodcourt’s face. I saw, but did not comprehend, his touching the other on the breast to keep him back. I saw him stand uncovered in the bitter air, with a reverence for something. But my understanding for all this was gone. (796-797)

During this sequence, we see Esther’s pain, confusion, and incomprehension, the result of her life as an unloved, blighted child who has grown up trying to do good, be industrious, and

“win some love to herself.” When realization of the truth of the scene at the cemetery comes, it does so with shattering consequence: “I passed on to the gate, and stooped down. I lifted the heavy head, put the long dank hair aside, and turned the face. And it was my mother, cold and dead” (797).

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

In the past three chapters, I have defined the structure and themes that recur in Esther's narrative, and have demonstrated the psychological underpinning behind my reading of her character through use of "Attachment Theory" and dream interpretation. I believe that the analysis of Esther's character demonstrates that she is an effective counterpart to the "familiar" role of the third-person narrator. At the same time, I believe that Esther's subjective narration presents a human face to the suffering and neglect that permeate the novel. The combination of the detached, third-person narrative, and the first-person, subjective narrative produces a vision which is greater than either narrative alone. Yet, while Esther's narrative is necessary for the work, her character is *not* that of a conventional Victorian woman. I believe that her character, as developed by Dickens, is a riveting portrait of psychological and emotional deprivation. Esther Summerson is a profound study in psychic dislocation..

And this psychological portrait of Esther seems complete, until we arrive at the ending of the novel, which grafts a "happy ending" onto what has previously been a "bleak" novel. Prior to the ending of the book, we are presented with a world of stunted psychological growth and pernicious evil represented by Chancery, "telescopic philanthropy," and religious cant. In order for the reading of Esther as an emotionally damaged, tentative, and confused narrator to be consistent, we must disprove the notion of a happy ending for the novel.

Critics have been quick to point out that the ending does not seem to follow the trajectory of prior events in the book. Alex Zwerdling points out the incongruity of the ending, given the entire progress of the book up till that point, when he states:

This conclusion to Esther's history seems to me to be sheer fantasy. Everything in her narrative has stressed the potent nature of her conflicts and the feebleness of her own will

in dealing with them. Indeed, she must not even allow herself to acknowledge them. Such a situation demands a tragic ending—or a *deus ex machina*. Dickens chooses the latter. Esther's decision is made for her by Jarndyce, who surrenders her to Woodcourt without even consulting her. The whole scene is dominated by magical and fantastic elements whose function is to dissolve the contradictions inherent in the situation. Where conflict was, there harmony shall be. (437)

Not only does the ending seem to give the lie to the sequence of events—the plot—of the book, it also tends to minimize the extent of Esther's psychological repression, as Zwerdling points out: “The treatment of Esther's internal conflicts has been so detailed, painstaking, and psychologically plausible that the sudden miraculous resolution, in which fantasy elements are presented within a realistic framework, seems totally unconvincing” (438).

The problem then becomes how to “read” this ending. The reader must ask whether Dickens intended to write a happy ending to this otherwise sober assessment of Chancery, philanthropy, religion, illegitimacy and repression. If the reader concludes that Dickens did not wish the ending to be taken at face value, then perhaps there are clues that the happy ending in fact disguises some deeper meaning.

Let's consider this possibility. As a first clue, the reader can look at the home that Esther and Woodcourt have established for them by John Jarndyce—it is named “Bleak House.” It is a duplicate of the original in every way, except in size. It is “given” to them by John Jarndyce, a principal in the failed case of Jarndyce versus Jarndyce, who despite being a good man, cannot in any way prevent the ruin and destruction of hope that the case brings to anyone touched by it.

Consider also the “happy” endings of each of the good characters in the novel: Jarndyce remains unwed; Ada is left a widow; Caddy's baby, named Esther, is deaf and dumb; Mr. Gridley and Jo are both dead, and Miss Flite has let her birds go free, though not with a feeling of gladness, but with remorse. The famous lawsuit has ended, not with “estates conferred,” but

with the death of Richard, and the funds, which are the basis of the famous suit, being dissipated by the costs of the parasitic lawyers. This is hardly the stuff of a happy ending.

Edgar Johnson, reflecting on the ending of the novel and the treatment of the “good” characters observes that:

Everywhere the honest, the generous, the helpless, the simple, and the loving are thwarted and crippled. John Jarndyce, the violently good master of Bleak House, can rescue only a distressingly small number of those he sets out to save. In a life of poverty and struggle imposed by a society where nature itself is deformed and tainted, poor Caddy Jellyby and her husband Prince Turveydrop can give birth only to an enfeebled deaf-and-dumb child. For *Bleak House* (like Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, of which it is a somber forerunner) is in its very core symbolic: Bleak House is modern England, it is the world of an acquisitive society, a monetary culture, and its heavy gloom is implied by the very adjective that is part of its title. (86 – 87)

So, we are left with a series of puzzles: is there escape from *Bleak House*? Can the well-meaning characters, such as Esther, Woodcourt, John Jarndyce, Mr. George, and Ada possibly hope to overcome the pestilence, ruin, and devastation portrayed in the novel? Can their good natures overcome the psychological damage that occurs in the external world; can they hope to “win some love” for themselves? Are the two worlds of the novel—the exterior “realistic” world of the omniscient narrator, and the “romantic” internal world of Esther—so far apart after all? I turn to an essay written by Taylor Stoehr, “*Bleak House: The Novel as Dream*” to supply part of the answer:

Dickens was fascinated with this idea, that secret, devious, multitudinous threads of connection run between the high and low in society. . . . The ultimate anatomist is Dickens, who regards his heroine's lineage as diseased to the core, and uses the metaphors of pestilence and contagion to convey a sense of the hidden channels of corruption which connect high and low, respectability and bestiality, Chesney Wold and Tom-all-Alone's. (238)

In the end, for Esther, as well as the other characters in the book, the blight of the past is irremediable; there is no escape from the two worlds of *Bleak House*.



## Appendix

One of the objections that can be raised to my reading of Esther's psychological make-up lies in the fact that Dickens's writing precedes Freud by some fifty years, and that he would not have had the benefit of dream theory to undertake a psychological view of Esther's unconscious. The dating of Dickens's and Freud's writing cannot be argued, but to say that Dickens was unaware of the effect of dreams is incorrect. In "Dickens and the Psychology of Dreams," Warrington Winters notes that Dickens and a medical practitioner, Dr. Stone, had a series of correspondences related to the nature of dreams:

In his letter to Dr Stone, Dickens emphasizes three points: first, that we do not ordinarily dream of recent events, or of problems recently occupying our waking minds, except, as he says, 'in a sort of allegorical manner'; and second that, 'taking into consideration our vast differences of mental and physical constitution.' our dreams have a 'remarkable sameness in them'; and third, that while we dream there is a waking part of the brain which knows that we are dreaming. (986)

Later, Dickens writes back to Stone:

Are dreams so very various and different as you suppose? Or, is there, taking into consideration our vast differences of mental and physical constitution, a remarkable sameness in them? Surely, it is an extremely unusual circumstance to hear any narrative of a dream that does violence to our dreaming experience or enlarges it very much. (Winters 989)

This sounds very much like Freud's theory of the commonality of the types and symbols of dreams. It also calls to mind Freud's theory that recent events act as triggering agents for dreams based on childhood events. It should come as no surprise to learn that in the first chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud lists common dream theories in place at the time of his writing, and notes that he owes a degree of gratitude to several authors whose works have influenced him. Freud does not mention Dickens as one of the authors to whom he is indebted, but does include Shakespeare as an author whose dream associations influenced him.

Shakespeare was one of Dickens's favorite authors and a constant source of material and associations in Dickens's works.

A similar objection may be drawn to the "Attachment Theory" which I use to explain Esther's trauma as a child. Dickens could not have been aware of this psychological theory, *per se*, since his work predated it by some one hundred years. But Dickens, like Esther, was a child who felt unloved and abandoned at an early age, as his biographical reminiscences to John Forster makes clear. It is not a stretch to imagine that Dickens could have grafted the feelings of detachment and loneliness he felt onto Esther in an attempt to make her portrayal seem more life-like. Dickens was also known for his keen powers of observation, and his knowledge of neglected and deprived children, as noted in such writings as "A Sleep to Startle Us," and "A Nightly Scene in London," is evident in his portrayal of Esther. In fact, it can be argued that Dickens's sensitivity to children and children's consciousness sets the stage for some of the twentieth century's explicitly child-centered psychological investigations.

In regard to speculations on Esther's narration, I have noted that she writes her narrative seven years after the actual events that take place in the novel. Even allowing for the lapses of memory that would be expected to occur in this interval, how can we believe that she is accurately recording every piece of dialogue, and every event as it occurred seven years removed? There is a second question that arises when we consider that she is writing at a remove from an action of the novel: to whom is she writing? Is it herself, in a journal; is it her children, so that she can preserve some sort of narrative of the event? Is she writing to Allan Woodcourt, who acts as a sort of proto-psychoanalyst to help sort out his wife's emotions? And finally, we must ask if Esther hints that she knows the other narrator himself?

This final question regarding Esther's narrative leads to speculation on the identity of the third-person narrator. Is the narrator known to Esther? Of course, the Dickensian omniscient voice need not have a character counterpart in the novel, but it is interesting to think so, and to supply the name of Tulkinghorn as one such possibility. Might the narrator be someone else in the story, perhaps Allan Woodcourt, or John Jarndyce, or one of the lawyers or another one of the officers in the Court of Chancery? Of course, we can never adequately answer these questions, interesting though they are to speculate upon. It remains one of the appeals of studying literature that we are able to ask these kind of questions.

In writing this paper and developing a theory about Esther Summerson's psychological makeup, I was struck how the alternation between Esther's first-person narrative and that of the omniscient, third-person narrator was similar to the process of psychoanalysis. One person, like Esther Summerson, speaks to another, "third-person" analyst. The analyst listens attentively, and attempts to help the person make sense of their problems. Ultimately, the narrative employed in psychoanalysis tries to resolve the sense of "otherness" and "wrongness" that pervades so much of life. In the case of *Bleak House*, the "otherness" ultimately informs both narratives, and much like the psychoanalytic process itself, the conclusion is neither straightforward nor expected.

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