

“Reinforcing the Continuum: Homoerotic Desire in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*”

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Daniel B. Davis

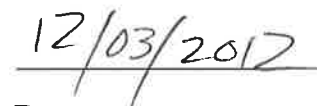
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Daniel B. Davis

Honors College Scholar

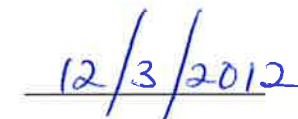


Date



Melissa Schaub, Ph.D.

Faculty Mentor

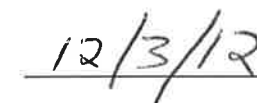


Date



Mark Milewicz, Ph.D.

Dean, Esther G Maynor Honors College



Date

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Abstract

This paper examines the homoerotic relationship shared between the primary heroines—Esther Summerson and Ada Clare—of Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*. Their friendship, though seemingly platonic, is definitely suggestive of something deeper.

While this relationship cannot be definitively defined as lesbian, this paper will argue that their friendship is sexually suggestive. In order to accurately define the relationship shared between Esther and Ada, this paper will borrow from a number of literary theorists—namely Eve Sedgwick and Sharon Marcus.

“Reinforcing the Continuum: Homoerotic Desire in *Bleak House*”

Charles Dickens's ninth novel, *Bleak House*, was published serially over the course of 1852 and 1853. The novel itself has provided an enormous source of material for scholarly analysis. Much of the available criticism on *Bleak House* focuses on the novel's unique narratorial structure (meaning the novel's dual narrators), or seeks to analyze Dickens's portrayal of Victorian London's flawed legal system. While it perhaps goes without saying that critics have addressed several other issues related to the novel, many critics have (surprisingly) neglected to assess the homosocial—and intensely homoerotic—relationship shared between *Bleak House*'s primary heroines, Esther Summerson and Ada Clare.¹

Certainly, a plausible explanation for the lack of sufficient criticism on this subject is the problematic nature of sexual categorization, especially during a time in which labels demarcating sexual preference were not yet readily available—an issue that will be addressed later in this paper. Also complicating this discussion is the somewhat vague correlation between female homosociality, homoeroticism and lesbianism. Unlike male homosociality, which was clearly defined in opposition to male homosexual behavior in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's vastly influential *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), both female homosociality and homosexuality have been described in terms of a continuum (a theory advocated by both Sedgwick and Adrienne Rich), making it difficult to separate one concept from the other. However, Sharon Marcus's recent study on homosocial female behavior and lesbianism during the

¹ In her article on the theatrics of sexuality in *Bleak House*, Kimberle L. Brown agrees that the novel is marked by a “dash of lesbian eroticism,” and insists that “[t]he debate between whether the novel portrays lesbianism or Victorian female friendship has persisted to this day” (2). However, Brown neglects to cite any sources engaging in this debate.

Victorian era, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007), seeks to disrupt the continuum in order to respectively define the categories of homosocial, homoerotic, and lesbian. In respect to *Bleak House*, I believe that the continuum is necessary to prove a relationship between the female homosocial and homosexual. Additionally, Marcus's definition of what constitutes a lesbian relationship during the Victorian era reinforces the continuum (at least in relation to a reading of this particular novel), creating a definite link between the homosocial and homosexual. While the intense homosocial relationship shared by Esther and Ada can never be truly defined as definitively lesbian in nature, there are various elements of their bond that certainly hint at sexual attraction.

The term "homosocial," as it is used in this paper, was first made popular by *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential study of male homosocial desire. In the introductory chapter to her book, Sedgwick states that:

'Homosocial desire,' to begin with, is kind of oxymoron. 'Homosocial' is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual.' (1)

Sedgwick maintains that most see male homosocial ties as theoretically opposed to homosexual bonds, even though she later argues that the concepts of male homosocial bonds and homoerotic desire are much more closely related than others may claim. Since Sedgwick's primary focus in *Between Men* is male homosocial desire, she neglects to expound upon female homosocial behavior. Sedgwick maintains that "the diacritical

opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men" (2). Female heterosexuality, according to Sedgwick, is not as concerned with setting itself distinctly apart from female homosexuality as male heterosexuality is. Since lesbianism has been linked with "other forms of women's attention to women" (2), Sedgwick chooses not to discuss the concept of female homosocial behavior in her book.

As noted in the introduction, there is a considerable amount of difficulty in attempting to define Victorian sexual relationships in terms of modern sexual categorization. In fact, in the introduction to *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction* (1988), Tess Cosslett argues that "we must beware of trying to read Victorian representations of female friendship" as indicative of female/female desire, and that these friendships "are not anticipatory images of modern feminist solidarity or lesbian consciousness" (3). According to Cosslett, we cannot assume that depictions of intense female friendship—such as the one shared between Esther and Ada—in Victorian literature are homoerotic or evidence of suppressed lesbian desire. In *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, Richard Dellamora notes that "the first use of [the term] lesbianism in English" was by Algernon Charles Swinburne in 1870 (231). The fact that the term was not developed until late in the nineteenth century seems to prove Cosslett's theory—that the Victorians had no conceptual understanding of women who were sexually attracted to other women.

Indeed, the fact that homoerotic behavior between women seems to have been accepted (perhaps even encouraged) during the Victorian era further complicates the

possibility of distinguishing female/female desire from female friendship. In *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, Herbert F. Tucker maintains that it is: difficult to gauge ... understandings of transgressive sexual desire outside 'official' discourse. This has proved a special challenge with regard to lesbian relationships, which were more readily confined within traditionally feminine privacies, and thus amenable to greater circumspection under the guise of 'romantic friendship' or spinsterhood. (134)

Tucker is essentially arguing against Cosslett here, by maintaining that "romantic friendship" possessed lesbian potential, but he nevertheless consents to the fact that it is nearly impossible to differentiate between intense friendship and lesbian relationships. Richard Dellamora further accedes to this point, arguing that "attempts to articulate [female] homosexual existence are shadowed by the difficulties involved in finding ways of representing it as different from 'normal' life" (223). According to these critics, we cannot deem Victorian women's behavior homoerotic, or indicative of lesbianism, because these behaviors were encouraged by dominant society and firmly embedded in nineteenth-century female culture.

However, the reluctance to define an intense female friendship as homoerotic, or lesbian in nature, poses a veritable threat to the history of lesbianism itself. In her enormously influential essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich argues that scholarly writing is marked by "the erasure of lesbian existence" (1591). Rich asserts that the primacy given to heterosexuality by dominant culture has effectively "rendered invisible" the lesbian experience (1593). In order to counteract what she deems "unexamined heterocentricity" (1591), Rich argues for

adherence to the concepts of “lesbian existence” and the “lesbian continuum” (1603).

Lesbian existence, according to Rich, “suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence” (1603), while the lesbian continuum refers to a “range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (1603).

The concept of “lesbian existence” is undoubtedly important to our understanding of any period’s sexual history because it affirms the existence of lesbians, even during periods in which that label would not have been readily available. As Richard Dellamora notes in one of his later books, *Victorian Sexual Dissidence* (1999), the fact that lesbians do not “wield the visibility, or invoke the surveillance” that gay males do in academic studies should be “the subject of ongoing inquiry” (250). Readers should actively seek to uncover proof of “lesbian existence,” whether it is blatantly obvious or not. The idea of a “lesbian continuum” is problematic in that it subsumes the lesbian identity under the broad spectrum of “woman-identified experience,” thereby making it more difficult to identify individual instances of genuine lesbian experience. However, the term is useful because it implies a direct relationship between the homosocial and the homosexual, reinforcing the idea that these two categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The idea of a lesbian continuum, in which the homosocial and homosexual are undeniably linked, is exactly what Sharon Marcus sets out to argue against in her book *Between Women*. Marcus acknowledges that her “skepticism about the transhistorical truth of gender and sexual categories owes a great deal” to a number of theorists, including Sedgwick (13). Opposing the concept of a lesbian continuum, Marcus argues

that “female friendships reinforced gender roles and consolidated class status” (26), instead of providing women with the opportunity to openly express homosexual desire. According to Marcus’s model, female homosocial relationships were expected to facilitate heterosexual marriage, rather than undermining it. In *Bleak House*, Esther and Ada’s relationship certainly supports this assertion—both of the heroines find themselves in a heterosexual marriage over the course of the novel (although one of them fares better than the other). In this sense, Esther and Ada support Marcus’s definition of female homosociality.

However, Marcus also maintains that there are “two types of relationships [which are] often confused with friendship,” (44) by those who study Victorian England. Marcus notes that these relationships were “often called friendship,” but that they were “significantly different from it” (44). The first of these relationships is that which Marcus deems “unrequited passion and obsessive infatuation” and the other “life partnerships, which some Victorians described as marriages between women” (44). Marcus is clear in separating the homosocial from the homosexual, claiming that “it is reasonable to determine that sometimes women who called each other ‘friends’ had sexual relationships with each other” just as it is equally sensible to claim that some women “were simply friends, despite writing of and to each other in the language of love” (54). In order to denote a lesbian relationship during the Victorian era, Marcus provides a specific set of qualifiers: only “in iterated, cumulative, hyperbolic references to passion, exclusivity, idealization, complicity, private language and mutual dependence” do we begin to “locate a tipping point that separated Victorian women’s ardent friendships from the sexual relationships they also performed with one another” (54). In applying these

qualifiers to *Bleak House*, one can easily see how the homosocial often lends itself to the realm of the homosexual.

According to Marcus, the first indicator of a female homosexual relationship is “iterated, cumulative, hyperbolic references to passion.” Esther’s narrative is full of references that fit this description. Throughout the course of her narrative, Esther constantly refers to Ada as “my darling” (Dickens 39), “my pet” (40), or “my love” (43). Esther herself remarks on these repeated statements by telling the reader that “it is so natural to me now, that I can’t help writing it” (Dickens 39). Furthermore, these affectionate nicknames adhere to the concept of “private language” that Marcus also uses to denote a lesbian relationship. Since these names are used solely in reference to Ada, they develop a sense of private intimacy. As the novel progresses, Esther’s usage of affectionate nicknames for Ada also substantially increases. Additionally, the affection that develops between Esther and Ada seems to continuously grow stronger throughout the course of the novel. When Esther and Ada are forced to part (after Ada has married Richard), Esther remarks that “[i]t almost seemed to me that I had lost my Ada for ever” (Dickens 729-30). Of course, Esther has not lost Ada forever, but this incident certainly hints at the element of hyperbole that Marcus uses in order to identify feelings of homosexual attraction.

Perhaps the most sexually suggestive repetition occurs, however, in the numerous kisses that Esther and Ada share. Much like the constant usage of affectionate names shared between the two girls, the instances in which Esther and Ada are kissing each other occur persistently throughout the entire novel. In fact, their first kiss occurs immediately after Esther and Ada have initially met. Esther tells us that Ada “came to

meet me with a smile of welcome and her hand extended, but seemed to change her mind in a moment, and kissed me” (Dickens 38). This scene itself is indicative of homoerotic desire because, as Esther tells us, Ada was initially going to shake her hand, but immediately changed her mind after getting a closer look at Esther. Ada’s sudden desire to kiss, instead of shaking hands, may be read as her initial attempts to become more intimate with Esther. This scene sets the homoerotic tone for the multiple kisses that Esther and Ada will later share.

As Marcus also notes, the idea of exclusivity is also an important qualifier of Victorian lesbian relationships. According to Marcus, homosocial female behavior differentiates itself from the homosexual in that it allowed for “ardent physical appreciation for multiple female friends” (58). Since Esther serves as one of the novel’s two narrators, she gives a significant amount of commentary on the appearance of *Bleak House*’s other characters. While Esther does comment on the appearance of most of the characters with whom she comes in contact, the only instances of “ardent physical appreciation” come when Esther discusses Ada’s appearance. The first time Esther sees Ada, she remarks that she was “such a beautiful girl” with “such rich golden hair, such soft blue eyes, and such a bright, innocent, trusting face” (Dickens 38). While Esther does comment upon the appearance of other female characters—including Caddy Jellyby, Miss Flite, Lady Dedlock, and Esther’s maid, Charley—Esther never discusses their appearances in the same idealized manner in which she does Ada’s. For Esther, exclusivity is found in her appreciation for Ada’s “remarkably beautiful” appearance (Dickens 63).

Esther's constant focus on Ada's appearance also reinforces Marcus's idea of "idealization" as a qualifier for lesbian relationships. As noted in the preceding paragraph, the only character that Esther routinely appreciates physically is Ada. For Esther, Ada is a virtual paragon of beauty. Ada's beauty is often so striking, that Esther has trouble paying attention to anything else. During their first encounter with Krook, a merchant and landlord, Esther mentions that he "darted ... a sudden look, which even called my attention from Ada, who, startled and blushing, was so remarkably beautiful" (Dickens 63). Although Esther's attention is briefly diverted from Ada, it is her surprise that her attention could be diverted that is most telling. Krook's "sudden look" is so surprising that it is "even" able to redirect Esther's attention from Ada's "remarkable beauty." Ada's beauty has such a powerful draw, that it is difficult for Esther's attention to be diverted elsewhere.

In keeping with this theme, Esther makes sure to mention that the novel's other female characters fail to live up to the idealized standard of beauty set by Ada. On the day of Caddy Jellyby's wedding, Ester tells us that "Caddy was perfectly charming. But when my darling came, I thought—and I think now—that I never had seen such a dear face as my beautiful pet's" (Dickens 443). Although it is Caddy's wedding day, Esther cannot help contrasting her beauty with Ada's (much to Caddy's disadvantage). In Esther's narration, Ada sets the standard of idealized beauty, and none of the novel's other female characters are able to live up to these standards. Although Caddy is "perfectly charming" on her wedding day, she fails to achieve the totally unreachable standards set by Esther's "beautiful pet."

In contrast, Ada's idealization of Esther comes in her vast regard for Esther's "goodness" (Dickens 52). This regard is most evident after Esther and Ada visit the Jellyby household for the first time. When Esther notices that Mrs. Jellyby has neglected her children, she begins to console them. After this occurs, Ada "put her arm about" Esther's neck, telling her that she "was a quiet, dear, good creature, and had won her heart" (Dickens 52). Ada continues in her praise, stating that Esther is "so thoughtful ... and yet so cheerful" and remarking that Esther "would make a home out of even this house [Mrs. Jellyby's]" (Dickens 52). Ada has come to regard Esther as the idealized representation of "goodness" and selflessness. As Ada states, Esther's "thoughtful" and "cheerful" nature has "won her heart." Whereas Esther views Ada as the epitome of idealized physical beauty, Ada regards Esther as a representative of idealized inner beauty. For Ada, it is Esther's actions, rather than her physical appearance, that the novel's other characters fail to live up to; for although we are not able to gain much insight into Ada's personal feelings, this statement nevertheless remains true, because it is only Esther that Ada praises as exhibiting uncommon "goodness" throughout the course of the novel.

Returning again to the idea of exclusivity, it is more difficult to assess this particular concept as it relates to Ada, since she does not serve as one of the novel's narrators. However, the importance placed on the exclusivity of the relationship is revealed—on both sides—when Esther is forced to confine herself with Charley in a bedroom after they have developed a contagious disease (most likely smallpox). Upon discovering that Esther has removed herself from the rest of the house, Ada begins "crying at the door, day and night" (Dickens 514). Esther tells us that she heard Ada

“calling to me that I was cruel and did not love her; I had heard her praying and imploring to be let in to nurse and comfort me, and to leave my bedside no more” (Dickens 514). Esther’s secluded removal to a room with another female has threatened the exclusivity of her relationship with Ada. Now that Esther has confined herself in a bedroom—an area heavily suggestive of sexual activity—with another female, Ada’s position has suddenly become compromised. Ada’s constant complaints that Esther does “not love her” anymore imply that some sense of exclusive connection has been threatened by Esther’s physical distancing of herself from Ada. Again, Ada’s desire to “leave [Esther’s] bedside no more” has vague sexual implications. Ada desires a return to Esther’s bed, so that their exclusivity can be renewed. Upon realizing that she cannot enter the bedroom, Ada feels as though Esther does “not love her” anymore. Nevertheless, their exclusive relationship is once again reinstated when Esther heals and is reunited with her “angel girl” (Dickens 544).

Esther’s confinement is also important because it serves to highlight the “mutual dependence”—particularly in regard to Ada—that Marcus uses to denote lesbian relationships during the Victorian era. When Ada first learns that she is not to have contact with Esther, we are told that she “came very often to the door, and called to [Esther], and even reproached [her] with sobs and tears” (Dickens 459). Ada’s sorrow and anger stem from the fact that she has been effectively denied access to Esther. Highlighting Ada’s dependence on Esther, this scene serves to show the reader how Ada reacts when she is unable to reach someone on whom she has become reliant. Ada’s later complaints that Esther “was cruel and did not love her” link their association with emotion. Since the “mutual dependence” of their relationship has been effectively

severed for the moment, Ada also feels as though the love shared between them has been similarly disconnected.

However, the ultimate threat to their relationship comes when Ada secretly marries Richard Carstone, her cousin and fellow ward in the Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce court case, threatening the overall sense of “exclusivity” shared between Esther and herself.² When Esther is told of their marriage, she appears genuinely happy, but later exclaims “O how I cried!” (Dickens 729) after she has left their lodging. Esther then remarks that “[i]t almost seemed to me that I had lost my Ada for ever” (729-30). Esther’s word choice is very telling; she tells the reader that she felt as though she had lost “my Ada,” subtly implying a possessive relationship. Before this point in the novel, Ada has belonged solely to Esther—as is evidenced by her persistent references to Ada as “my darling” (Dickens 126), “my pet” (Dickens 40), “my angel” (Dickens 544), and “my love” (Dickens 43). Now that Ada has broken the exclusivity of their relationship by marrying Richard, Esther feels as though her Ada is gone “for ever.”

Esther’s sorrow at the broken exclusivity of their relationship is further highlighted when she tells us that “[i]t was only natural that I should not be quite accustomed to the loss of my darling” (Dickens 730). Again, Esther refers to Ada in the possessive; although Esther knows that she must come to terms with Ada’s marriage to Richard, she still cannot help referring to Ada as belonging to her. Esther tells us that she “so longed to be near her, and taking some sort of care of her” (Dickens 730), heavily implying that she wishes to switch places with Richard. Although Marcus argues that

² Although Ada’s marriage to Richard may seem to negate all possibilities of a sexual attraction to Esther, this is not necessarily the case. As Holly Furneaux notes, “[t]hroughout Dickens’s work prohibited desire for a member of the same sex is often quite transparently redirected or extended to an opposite-sex sibling” (154). Read in this context, Ada’s marriage to Richard could simply be her attempt to redirect her homosexual attraction to Esther onto a male subject.

“family and marriage provided models for sustaining” female homosocial relationships (40), this idea proves inapplicable to *Bleak House*. Esther and Ada’s relationship has been threatened by the prospect of heterosexual marriage, thereby giving more credibility to the theory that their attraction is far more sexual in nature. Esther tells us that she was only able to console herself by returning to Ada and Richard’s home and putting “my lips to the hearse-like panel of the door, as a kiss for my dear” (Dickens 730). The “hearse-like” door reminds us that this is the very place where Esther and Ada’s exclusivity has effectively died, while the kiss again reiterates their sexual connection. However, since Esther is examining these events retrospectively, she is able to note that it only “seemed” as if she had lost Ada “for ever”—Esther is fully aware that Ada’s marriage to Richard will be short-lived, and that she will effectively replace Richard as one of the “two mamas” (Dickens 913) to his young son.

Returning again to the idea of “mutual dependence,” this scene best exemplifies Esther’s need to depend upon Ada. Much like Ada, who was “crying at the door, day and night” when Esther was confined to her sickbed, Esther herself is fraught with emotion when she thinks that she has lost Ada “for ever.” Esther’s exclamatory “O how I cried!” tells us that she is emotionally upset at the prospect of parting with Ada “for ever.” While this statement may be indicative of general sorrow at the idea of parting with her friend, Esther’s later confession that she “so longed to be near [Ada] taking some sort of care of her” points to the idea that Esther is dependent upon Ada’s physical presence. In making this statement, Esther highlights her dependence upon Ada. Esther’s longing stems from her desire to be near Ada at all times—in short, Esther’s longing can only be relieved by being in close physical proximity to Ada, “taking some sort of care of her.” Esther needs

to take care of Ada in order to gain an overall sense of self-fulfillment, making her dependent upon Ada's physical presence.

Out of all of Marcus's qualifiers for a lesbian relationship, the last that this paper will address is the concept of "complicity." Perhaps out of all the concepts that Marcus uses to identify lesbian relationships, the notion of "complicity" is most easy to prove in relation to *Bleak House*. If this concept is defined as the opposite of active resistance, then we can easily see that all of the homoerotic activities that Esther and Ada engage in are marked by a degree of complicity. Early in her narrative, Esther mentions that she and Ada "read together, and worked, and practiced; and found so much employment for our time, that the winter days flew by us like bright-winged birds" (Dickens 126). In doing each of these activities, Esther and Ada spent a considerable amount of time alone with each other. Rather than negatively affecting the complicity of their relationship, the copious amount of time that they spend alone actually seems to enhance it. The time they spend together is obviously enjoyed by each of the girls because, as Esther makes sure to note, the days "flew by ... like bright-winged birds." Neither Esther nor Ada object to or actively resist spending large amounts of time together. Instead, each girl seems to take pleasure in constantly spending time alone with the other.

Additionally, the fact that Esther and Ada engage in a number of shared kisses evidences the overall sense of complicity that permeates their relationship. As mentioned earlier, when the two girls first meet, Ada initially intends to shake Esther's hand, but "seemed to change her mind in a moment, and kissed" Esther. Although Esther had been expecting a far more formal greeting, as is evidenced by Ada's "extended hand," she willingly consents to Ada's far more personal method of greeting. The frequent shared

kisses between Esther and Ada indicate that there is no active resistance on either side of their relationship. The complicity highlighted by these kisses is most evident during the kiss that the two girls share after Esther has healed from her illness. Narrating this kiss, Esther tells us that she was happy “down upon the floor, with my sweet beautiful girl down upon the floor too, holding my scarred face to her lovely cheek, bathing it with tears and kisses” (Dickens 545). Although Esther and Ada are “down upon the floor,” rolling around and kissing each other, neither girl actively tries to resist the advances of the other. Both Esther and Ada are complicit in their actions, even though kissing each other while rolling around on the floor would surely be deemed inappropriate behavior by any lookers-on. Disregarding all notions of propriety, Esther and Ada are willing to passionately embrace each other, despite the effect such an embrace might have on others.

While Esther and Ada’s relationship can never be certainly categorized as lesbian, there is a wealth of evidence that suggests their attraction to each other is more sexual, than friendly, in nature. According to Furneaux, “Charles Dickens’s fictional household famously provide ample space for the accommodation of so-called alternative families” (153). In *Bleak House*, the very house that gives the novel its name also provides “ample space” for the development of alternative sexualities. By using the specific set of qualifiers that Susan Marcus presents in *Between Women*, one can see how Esther and Ada’s supposed friendship could easily be defined as a lesbian relationship. Despite Marcus’s claims that the homosocial and homosexual did not frequently converge in Victorian England, Esther and Ada’s relationship proves her wrong—after all, Esther and Ada adhere to both the standards set for the female homosocial and the female

homosexual outlined in Marcus's book. In *Bleak House*, the homosocial and the homosexual frequently intertwine, making it entirely possible for a female friendship to also include elements of sexual desire.

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