

A JUSTIFICATION OF THE NARRATIVE PRESENCE OF ESTHER SUMMERSON
IN CHARLES DICKENS'S BLEAK HOUSE

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A Thesis Submitted to the
University of North Carolina at Wilmington in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Arts

Department of English
University of North Carolina at Wilmington

2004

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Dean, Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

Esther Summerson's presence as a narrative force in Bleak House has long been a source of debate and object of disdain for many critics. Over time her voice has grown to be defined as weak, self-absorbed, and, most importantly, a mistake. Far from being a mistake, however, Esther's voice is the most appropriate fit for the novel. Although admittedly self-important and sometimes infuriating, Esther's narrative is crucial both thematically and structurally in the novel. Hers is the voice of innocence, a shelter from the harsh words of her counterpart, the other voice. Her voice is artless, the eye-witness to the other voice's artful judge. Furthermore, she represents the voice of the lost children that run, dirty-faced, throughout the novel: she speaks for Jo, Charley, Peepy, Caddy. The novel's two voices are essential to maintaining mystery and suspense, and Dickens needed find a voice to counterbalance the knowing, worldly spokesman with which he begins. For this purpose Bleak House requires a narrator of little knowledge, one who is a relative ignorant, after examining the other candidates in the novel we must acknowledge that Esther is the only pragmatic choice. Esther Summerson's narrative is not without its flaws, most notably her self-aggrandizing, but ultimately she is the right voice to tell the story of Bleak House.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Dr. Walker, whose veritable wealth of knowledge I merely feed from. Thank you, sir, for your time, your patience, your insight, and your belief. I am happy to acknowledge that impact made by Dr. Montwieler, without whom I may never have become a Dickens, and Bleak House, fanatic. Thanks Kate, I treasure your insight. Also, without the help of Dr. Gould I might never even have made it to graduate school.

I am forever in debt to all the teachers who have shown infinite patience for an admittedly difficult student: Dr. Ashe, Dr. Reilly, Dr. Atwill, Dr. Noland, Dr. Ellerby, Dr. Hollingsworth, Devon White, and many others; thank you.

I must thank my friends Matthew Foreman, Jeff Benton, Matt Sharpe, Wade Plummer, John Lothes, Mark Ridley, Chris Neville, and Jon Ball; without these gentlemen, university, and life for that matter, would have been a far more troublesome enterprise. Jenny; thank you.

Special consideration to Cass Chapman, who must have thought I would never shut up! Continue to believe in your own abilities.

Finally, I would like to thank the Graduate School and the English Department for such a terrific opportunity.

DEDICATION

Mam and Dad, without your support and unwavering belief in my ability this chance would have disappeared a long time ago. I will forever be in your debt. Jodie, I love you more than I have ever been able to show. This is for you, my family, my foundation, my friends.