

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

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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.

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DEDICATION

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